

Chapter 2

A SPRING STORM PASSED OVER the mountains and surged toward the plain below. Rainwater cascaded down the cliff wall surrounding the dragons' lair and splashed the ledge beyond its entrance. Draako stretched his neck toward the brightening sky as he ambled outside.

"That last practice might truly have been the end of you," growled Aurykk as he followed Draako to the lip of the ledge. "You were lucky the winds carried you back here. Be careful this time. Let the currents flow under your wings and drop your legs a bit to get some lift."

Draako's front fangs scraped his lower lip as he dipped his head in respect. "I won't forget. Just watch me." He raised his head again, spread his wings, and jumped in the direction of the river valley that ran behind their mountain cave. Aurykk remained on the ledge, a grimace wrinkling his long jaw.

Overhead, clouds scudded toward the sunrise side. Draako felt the sun on his neck and back. His wings beat with the power of a dragon leaping into adolescence. Each flap thumped the air flowing around him: he reminded himself to work with the currents and not fight them. Soaring upward, he banked to the left and glided toward the river.

Draako began to feel uneasy as he dipped into the shadows of the river canyon. Muffled voices echoed from the rock walls on either side.

As he rode a downward current, he noticed small movements below and realized he'd found his weasel friends chasing each other on an island that sat midstream, splitting river rapids that churned around it. Draako could hear an argument. He hovered above them.

“Gúrmulo, you're wrong. It's time they knew.”

“Nuts and wood rubbish, Gormley. Leave it be.”

“It's time that who knew what, Gormley?”

Startled by Draako's deep voice, the two weasels screeched to a stop. They had not heard the young dragon land nearby. He ambled over to them and, with head held low to the ground, he looked deeply into Gormley's eyes. The little weasel's mouth fell open and she fell backwards.

Gúrmulo ran to her side and propped her up. “I suppose you're right. You tell him, sister.”

Gormley blinked her eyes and took a deep breath. “Very well. It's bad news. During these past few World-Turns, while you and 'Argo grew in size and strength, so did that ugly beast that so long ago forced the Orferans from the Cave of the Ancestors. Soon he will attack the Veiled Valley, maybe the Cave of Refuge, too.” She paused and scratched her whiskers.

Draako raised his head and looked up at the Cave of Refuge.

Gormley stood up on her hind legs. “In all directions, from Coldside to Warmside and from Sunriseside to Sunsetside, he has harmed the Valley folk. Gúrmulo and I have been among them and have seen the damage. The beast hates dragons but does not fear them. Only two creatures in the Valley make him tremble.” The two weasels puffed their furry white chests.

“You? Stop boasting. You're telling tales again,” Draako growled. “We are safe from him in the Cave of Refuge. And why should we care about the Valley folk? Let them rot. Isabella and Abulafria have told us about the Muktawls killing our kin. Besides, I like it here. I can fly and hunt and be with my family.” He paused and blinked away an annoying itch in his eye. “Except for Mother . . .”

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