

Prologue

Merlin emerged slowly from his trance-like state. It was a long time since he'd seen such clear pictures in his mind's eye – events that hadn't happened yet. He shivered, and not only from the cold that was seeping into his tower room as night fell. The wind howled around the stone turret, whistled through the cracks in the walls. Heavy rain lashed the little windows of the tower. But he could still hear the riders on their horses outside.

Merlin rose from his folding chair. He paused by the hearth and rubbed his hands together. Sparks formed between his palms, and he used them to light a fire. Then he picked up a roll of parchment, sat back down at the table and reached for a quill, which he dipped in a pot of ink. Another shiver ran down his spine as he began writing down the events of the future he had just seen – the prophecy that concerned his own clan of witches.

By the time he set down the quill, his fingers were aching. But he stood up again to get a second roll of parchment. He had seen more than just the future of his own clan. He knew the words he had written might prove a death sentence for a girl who was not even born yet. And yet these words could not be allowed to go unheard. There was too much at stake. This girl would bring about radical upheavals that would inspire great fear, for in the end only one clan of witches would survive. But that was not all: she would also bring about the downfall of the dragons' royal line. The dragons were Merlin's allies; he could not keep his knowledge of their future a secret from them. He had to tell them, or they would not be able to act in time.

Merlin had just sunk stiffly to his knees to reach for the second roll of parchment (he was growing frail: even he was not spared the effects of old age) when he heard footsteps behind him.

“Who comes to disturb my writing?” he asked. But before he could get to his feet or turn to face the interloper, he felt the draught of a sword thrust on the back of his neck.

Chapter 1

KAILEY

I spotted the dragon with the blue scales far too late, because he came hurtling out of the sea without any warning and flew right at me. Oh well – so much for my day off in the sunshine. As I leapt to my feet, I grabbed my knives from either side of my hip belt, and they immediately transformed into swords. I stayed where I was, planning to let the dragon get as close as possible and then drag him to the ground. When he was almost directly above me, his fanged mouth open wide, I raised my arms. I drove one of my swords into the dragon’s mouth and the other into his sensitive underbelly. I felt his warm blood raining down on me. As I withdrew my swords and rolled clear, the dragon came almost crashing to the ground, bellowing with pain. I leapt to my feet and onto his back. The scales there were tougher, but this way it was harder for the beast to defend himself. And I knew his weak spots. I thrust one of the swords into his neck and tossed the other like a ninja star at his flank, where it pierced his hide and stuck fast. The dragon’s screams of pain were deafening now – and they attracted another dragon. This red-scaled one was a little smaller than the blue one, who was now lying on the ground fighting for his life – a battle he would certainly lose.

I slid off the dragon’s back and pulled my sword out of his flank, landing silently on the soft grass. Meanwhile, the red-scaled dragon was speeding towards me, his mouth open wide to attack me with his fire. I snorted. Please – was that all he’d got? For me,

as a fireshifter, it was the work of a moment to transform the flames into smoke. The smoke obscured the dragon's vision – he had to rely on his other senses, whereas I could see through smoke easily. One of my swords pierced his eye, the other his throat. The dragon roared, flailing blindly with his claws and tail. He almost struck me, but I leapt aside just in time and rammed both swords into his flank as I landed. The pain drove the dragon to summon the last of his strength, but he was already too weak to be a threat to me. This was one of my simplest strategies: keep up the precision attacks until the dragon eventually gave up the fight. I remained in attack position, scanning the sky for more dragons. There were none.

The blue-scaled dragon evaporated before my eyes, and his red-scaled companion soon followed. The grass, blood-soaked a moment ago, became lush and green again. There was no trace of the battle that had taken place here a few minutes before.

Well, almost no trace: my close-fitting green dress had a rip at the waist on the right-hand side, where one of the dragons' claws must have caught it. And I was soaking wet from the water that had come streaming off the blue dragon when he flew out of the sea at me. But I couldn't complain. I was grateful that the blood, at least, had disappeared. Dragon blood was very difficult to wash out. I'd already had several dresses ruined that way.

My uncle Damian appeared in the meadow as if from nowhere, and gave me an approving nod. Under his open leather jacket, which was embroidered with the emblem of Fairyland – a sword fixed to a bow – I could see his own bow. (This bow, like my swords, shrank to a portable size whenever it was not needed). Damian seemed to be on his way somewhere.

“Are you going away?”

He nodded. “A mission for the Queen.”

I would have liked to hear more, for my uncle did not often leave Fairyland – although recently he had been doing so more than usual. He served as an advisor to the Queen, and that was precisely why I was never going to get any more detail out of him. He never talked about his work – he wasn't allowed to. Picking up the book I'd been reading before the first dragon had attacked, I flicked through it to find the page I'd been on when the dragon had interrupted me.

"I've lost my place in *Wuthering Heights*," I said. "You could have warned me what was coming."

"Then it wouldn't have been a spontaneous training session, would it?" Damian came closer. "That was really quite astonishing. Rarely have I seen a Faery defeat two dragons so quickly, especially out of the blue like that and armed only with two swords."

I couldn't help smiling. Damian didn't think much of swords – during his own combat training he'd opted for a bow and arrow. Many Faeries preferred these weapons, because they were better for keeping your enemy at a distance. But I loved a sword. The way it lay in your hand; the way it enabled you to lure your opponent out of their comfort zone and attack them at close range... Of course, I knew how to slay a dragon with a bow and arrow too. We were trained to use both types of weapon. But the Faery warriors with the most talent and fighting instinct would always go on to specialise in one type of weapon. That was what set us apart from all the other dragon hunters trained in Fairyland.

The fact that Damian had been nearby watching my training session all this time filled me with pride. After all, this had been one of my better battles, and my uncle didn't often take the time to watch me. He was usually far too busy with his work as an advisor. But every Sunday morning since my fifth birthday, rain or shine, we had

trained together in the meadow outside the house, and he'd taught me his tricks.

These training sessions were sacred to both of us.

"Yeah, well, it's just about knowing where their weak spots are," I said.

My uncle shook his head. "We all know where their weak spots are. We're prepared for these kinds of battles from a young age."

This was true, of course. As well as combat training with Damian I had other lessons, too. The teachers taught us many things. Not mundane skills like writing and arithmetic – that was basic knowledge we Faeries possessed from the moment we could walk. Instead, we learned all about the earth and the universe, about nature, about which herbs and plants were useful, about illnesses and how to cure them. But that was not all. As well as the kind of things that a people living close to nature needs to know, we were also taught how to defend ourselves and how to fight dragons. Last year, thanks to my combat skills, I'd been given extra subjects to study: observation, infiltration, reconnaissance. I now knew how to use various interrogation techniques, adapt quickly to different circumstances, and fit in easily among human beings.

"Is that it for training today?" I asked, and slipped my swords into my belt where they turned back into knives.

My uncle grinned, causing a dimple to appear in his left cheek. "Still trying to wriggle out of it, eh? Spontaneous training is just that: spontaneous. You never know where or when you're going to be attacked. It's the last stage of your education, and then you'll be ready to go out into the world. Although if you ask me, you're ready to do that already." His voice, as he spoke these last words, was not without pride. It made me smile in spite of myself.

Damian was one of the most important people in my life, for my parents had died eight years earlier. People who didn't know that Damian was my uncle always mistook

him for my father, because there were striking similarities between us: blonde hair, green eyes, dimples. We were both tall, which in itself wasn't unusual for a Faery – although neither my mother nor my father had been particularly tall – and I was in just as good physical shape as Damian. I was very curvy, though. Sometimes I wondered how that could be: I did eat well, but I also burned off a lot of calories with all the exercise I did. I was the best Faery warrior in my age group, and I wanted it to stay that way. How I kept my curves despite all this was a mystery to me.

Damian had always been there for me and my brother Sloan. After my parents had died in a dragon attack, he'd become a father and in some ways a mother to us. Damian was far from the maternal type, but he still tried his best to make sure me and my brother got at least one proper meal a day. I was grateful to him for that. And he'd always made sure we got the best possible education, too.

"Thanks, Uncle Damian. But you know I mainly have you to thank for my fighting skills?"

He shook his head again. "I watered you and gave you the fertiliser you needed to grow, but now you've surpassed yourself, and for that you can take all the credit. You should be proud of yourself." He buttoned up his leather jacket and winked at me. "Now I'm afraid I must be on my way. Keep training hard while I'm gone."

"Good luck!" I called after him as he set off across the meadow. He raised a hand in farewell without looking back.

Envious, I watched him go. It was an honour to be sent on a mission by the Queen – and it was also my greatest ambition. I'd get there one day, I was sure of it.

AIDEN

“What do you think Father wants to see us about so urgently?” asked Aiden as he hurried along the corridors with Sharni.

“It must be about the Faeries again,” replied his sister. “That cursed elven tribe. If only we could...”

“If only we could what?” Aiden cast a sideways glance at her.

Unlike him, she didn’t look as if she’d just been dragged out of bed – her strawberry blonde hair, unlike his dark locks, was not sticking up all over her head. She was a good-looking girl in general, thanks to her height, her figure and her long hair, which was an unusual colour for a human. Human boys of her age always seemed to find her very attractive, at any rate – and that was not a given, because when dragons took human form they were often distinctly average-looking. They tended to be neither particularly attractive nor particularly ugly, so as not to draw attention to themselves.

Sharni sighed. “No idea. I’ve just had it up to here with the Faeries.”

Aiden didn’t entirely disagree with his sister, although he wouldn’t have worded it that way himself. He was more prudent than Sharni, quieter and slower to anger. Within the family they’d always taken on these roles. This was partly due to their official positions. Aiden couldn’t afford to fly off the handle as quickly as his sister often did, although that didn’t mean he didn’t have feelings. If you provoked him enough... And the Faeries were definitely a source of provocation.

Now the brother and sister hurried past the two guards posted on either side of the door to the throne room. Aiden felt uneasy when he saw his father sitting on his throne, wearing his ceremonial robes with the royal insignia.

“Is it the Faeries?” asked Sharni.

Their father nodded.

“What’s happened?”

“I don’t know yet,” replied the king, rising from his throne. “I only know that an envoy from the Faeries is on his way and will be here any moment. Put your cloaks on.”

Aiden and Sharni exchanged a quick glance and allowed the servants to help them into their cloaks. Sharni slipped on an emerald green cloak with a hood, which she left down. Aiden’s cloak was burgundy.

Heavy footsteps could already be heard from the corridor outside the throne room as Aiden and his sister went to stand beside their father. Aiden’s heart began to beat faster. He didn’t like the Faeries any more than Sharni did, or his father or any other member of his people. He had not met many Faeries, it was true, but as a dragon it was in his nature to dislike them, and besides... But he didn’t want to think about that now.

Eight centuries had passed since the last war between the Draconis and the Faeries, but there had never truly been peace between them. They still hated each other and liked to make each other’s lives difficult, even if they seldom attacked each other. But recently the situation had changed. Violent attacks were still rare, but things had started to feel different. Faery hostilities were on the rise. Faeries were trying to provoke confrontations wherever they could. There was something menacing in the air, and the fact that a Faery envoy had come to speak to the king in person did not bode well. Not well at all.

One of the guards stepped forward and bowed to the king. “Your Majesty, an envoy from the Faeries, Damian Ainsley, seeks an audience with you.”

“Show him in,” ordered the king.

“At once, your Majesty.” The guard bowed again and took three steps backwards with his head lowered before turning around and walking the rest of the way to the heavy double doors of the throne room. He opened one of the four-metre-high bronze doors and declared: “The king will receive you now.”

Then he returned to his post, and an astonishingly tall man entered the throne room. Beneath his clothing – boots, trousers, leather jacket, all in varying shades of brown – he was far more muscular than you would expect from an ambassador. Aiden’s eyes rested for a moment on his pointed ears, which were barely hidden by his blonde hair. The Faery crossed the room with long, quick strides, stopped in front of Aiden, Sharni and their father, and bowed.

“King Roarke. Thank you for seeing me at such short notice.”

Aiden and Sharni returned his bow, although Sharni’s was less generous than Aiden’s. Her animosity hung in the air like a heavy perfume.

“What do you need to talk to me about so urgently?” asked the king once he’d seated himself on his throne once more. Aiden and Sharni sat down too.

“If I may, I shall keep it brief: some time ago, my people detected dragon activity in the British capital.”

Aiden gulped and forced himself to sit perfectly still. His father had no trouble doing the same. But with Sharni it was a different story.

“Dragon activity in London?” she exclaimed. “It can’t be! Do you think we have a death wish?”

“Certainly not – but unfortunately, the facts speak for themselves.”

Damian took something that looked like a remote control out of his trouser pocket, and pressed one of the buttons. Some images appeared in the air beside him – a Japanese-style park with a pond and a waterfall. There was not much left of the park,

however. Most of the trees were leafless and scorched, and the path and the badly burnt grass were covered with fallen branches, leaves and ash. Some of the bushes had been uprooted and the bridge across the pond was damaged, as were the stone sculptures in the water. It looked as though a dragon had gone on a rampage through the park, breathing fire at will. But who? And why? Aiden couldn't imagine it being one of the Draconis. Of course, it was possible that one of the independent dragons was responsible. There were some dragons who did not recognise the authority of the royal family, and who had left the Connemara National Park where the Draconis lived. They had settled in other uninhabited areas of Ireland, just north of Galway. They did not always obey the rules – they hated spending all day in human form, for instance. This was one of their main reasons for turning their back on the kingdom. But never before had a dragon left the west of Ireland, the area which had been allocated to the dragons after the war with the Faeries. And why would a dragon have flown to London and gone tearing through a park like a bull in a china shop? To make trouble for the Draconis, perhaps?

“This is Holland Park in London,” Damian went on. “As I said, the facts speak for themselves.” He pressed another button and the images disappeared. He put the remote control away.

Aiden's father shrugged. “It could just as easily be a fire that broke out in the park naturally.”

Damian shook his head with a regretful smile, which brought out a dimple in his cheek. “Impossible, I'm afraid. We've checked. There were no arsonists involved, and there was no storm. The police and the fire service in London are baffled. But we know better, don't we? We also have an eyewitness report of a dragon in the sky above Holland Park that night.”

“I see,” the king replied. “And when was this?”

“At the end of June.”

“The end of June?” Sharni cut in.

The king motioned to her to be silent. “Why have you only come to see me now, if this happened two months ago?” he asked Damian.

“We wanted to be absolutely certain of the facts before coming to you with such accusations, as I’m sure your Majesty will understand.”

Sharni snorted. She didn’t believe a word this Damian was saying, and neither did Aiden. The Faeries had their reasons for not having sent an envoy until now. Good reasons. Reasons of war. It was obvious. But still the king kept his counsel.

“Of course I understand,” he said, “but I assure you that none of my people are responsible for this destruction. Nevertheless, I will look into it, and if it turns out I am mistaken I will let you know, so that we can think about the consequences together.”

Damian did not move. “What about the independent dragons? If it wasn’t one of the Draconis, it can only have been one of them. Isn’t that right?”

This time the king tensed almost imperceptibly – but Aiden noticed it. The whole atmosphere had changed. “The independent dragons are no longer my subjects; I am no longer responsible for them nor for their actions.”

Damian sighed audibly. “We have discussed this many times, and your Majesty knows the Faery Queen’s position. Even if your Majesty no longer controls these other dragons, you cannot simply wash your hands of the issue.”

The king gritted his teeth. “Very well. I will find the dragon responsible for the destruction and tell you when I have done so.”

“I fear that will not be enough, King Roarke. Believe me, if it were up to me... But the Faery Queen’s other advisers are saying treaties have been broken and border

agreements violated. And they are not wholly wrong – which is why my hands are tied. I have been outvoted, I’m afraid.”

“I see,” the king murmured again, visibly struggling to retain his composure this time. “What are your Queen’s demands?”

“There are several, including an annual payment of twenty million crowns. She also wants your Majesty to agree that our people may annex the city of London and the neutral land between your territory and ours here in Ireland. You are also to withdraw from the southern part of Connemara National Park, as far as Lough Nahillion. And from now on, all new laws passed by your Majesty must be submitted to the Faery Queen for her approval. I have taken the liberty of putting all this down in writing.”

Before he could take the document out of his jacket pocket, Sharni leapt to her feet with a menacing sniff. Smoke issued from her nose. This was unwise – and hopefully there would be no consequences – but Aiden knew how she felt. He himself had found it hard not to react, and he was sure it was the same for his father. But as king and as first in line to the throne, this was what was expected of them. They had to remain calm.

“Anything else?” Aiden’s sister hissed. “The southern part as far as Lough Nahillion? That’s a third of the park! Why don’t you just declare war on us and have done with it?”

“Sharni.” Her father’s voice was surprisingly dispassionate as he drew her back towards the throne. “Please excuse my daughter’s behaviour.”

Damian raised his hands in acknowledgement. “I completely understand her reaction, but I am merely the messenger. Please remember that.”

The king nodded. “Could I take that?” he asked, looking at the document the Faery envoy had produced from his pocket. Damian handed it to him. “I would like to discuss the Queen’s demands with my advisers first, if I may.”

“Of course, your Majesty. That is the least I can do for you,” Damian replied. “I will speak to the Queen and make sure you are given a week to think it over. A week to decide whether you wish to meet our demands or declare war on us. That seems appropriate under the circumstances.”

“Agreed,” said the king. He remained seated as Damian gave a short bow and strode quickly out of the throne room.

“You don’t seriously mean to accept these demands, do you?” asked Sharni.

Her father did not answer. Instead he turned to one of the servants and told him to summon his advisers immediately.

Aiden watched the servant walk the customary three steps backwards with his head lowered before turning to leave the room. It was seen as a mark of great disrespect to turn your back on the king. During Aiden’s grandfather’s reign, everyone had had to walk backwards through the throne room in a deep bow all the way to the door. All subjects had been expected to show this mark of respect to the Queen, Aiden’s grandmother, too. When he had been crowned king, Aiden’s father had shortened the ritual to just three steps, but Aiden and Sharni still didn’t see the point of all the pomp and circumstance surrounding the monarchy.

Their father took a completely different view, and repeatedly explained to his children: “The king is not just any dragon: he is a figurehead for our people. Many of my subjects are stronger and cleverer than me, but they all look up to me and expect me to lead them. That is why we need the symbols, the insignias and the rituals. We can change them or tone them down, but we can never get rid of them completely, because then everyone will see that we are just ordinary Draconis. And that, my children, would be the end of the monarchy. Our people would rise up and overthrow us, but the power held by a ruler does not simply go away. It must continue to be exercised; somebody must rule. And thus the strongest and most brutal of our people

Flame & Arrow Band 1: Drachenprinz

Flame & Arrow Band 1: Drachenprinz (*Dragon Prince*)

by Sandra Grauer

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would triumph, and tyrannise the rest. It is our task to prevent this. That is why our family sits on the throne.”

At the thought of these words he had heard so often from his father, Aiden rolled his eyes. What was the point of all this fuss, when it came to standing up to the Faeries? There was no point – none at all.