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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Dreamwalker**

Written by J. D. Oswald

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## Prologue – Birth

When Balwen's last sits on the stolen throne,  
And kitling sleeps beside the babe ne'er born,  
When darkness stills the forest birds at noon,  
In blood and fire Gwlad shall rise anew.

*The Prophecies of Mad Goronmy*

Wind ripped through the trees like war, tearing the last autumn leaves from the tortured branches and flinging them across the pathway. Rain-heavy clouds scudded across the night sky, alternately covering and uncovering patches of dark star-specked heavens. The thin glow from a shielded lantern on the front of the wagon cast insufficient light on the path. Occasional downpours crushed the ground, boiling the hard-packed earth in a short-lived frenzy and spooking the horses as they pulled wearily at their task.

Father Gideon shivered, pulling his cloak tighter around his neck with one hand, gently teasing back the reins with the other. He whispered calming noises to the horses, trying to instil a sense of peace even though his words were whipped away on the wind, never reaching the twin pairs of pointed ears twitching back and forth on the edge of fear. It was difficult to judge distance in the dark, impossible to tell how long he had been driving through the foul

storm, but he was fairly sure their destination was not far. A quiet sob of pain from behind him reminded him of why he was out here, braving this foul weather when he could have been back in the castle, enjoying a tankard of ale and a bowl of stew in front of the great refectory fire.

Pushing aside the dripping canvas flap, Father Gideon peered into the back of the wagon. A single hooded oil lamp lit the interior poorly with flickering shadowy yellow light, swaying back and forth to the rhythm of the wheels on the track. Lying in the middle of the wagon, surrounded with blankets and cushions, the princess slept.

She looked almost at peace, for a change, although even sleep could not hide the shrunken lines of her once-beautiful face. Even sleep could not mask the laboured effort of every breath or the regular spasms that racked her prone form from head to toe. The swelling of her belly, Prince Balch's seed, stretched out of all proportion the tiny emaciated figure that carried it. Still, Father Gideon knew it wasn't the child that was killing Princess Lleyrn. Her strength of character and desire to see the pregnancy to term were perhaps the only things keeping her alive. And for all his knowledge, gleaned from a lifetime of study and travel, of administering to the sick and needy, yet he had no idea what it was that had struck his charge so low.

A snickering whinny from one of the horses brought Father Gideon back to his senses. Turning away from the princess, he saw a faint light ahead and soon the wagon was pulling across a small clearing towards the cottage he had not visited in fifteen years.

It was a curious building, much larger than its proportions suggested. Two windows, one either side of a wide doorway, looked out on to a well-cultivated vegetable patch. The structure was only one storey high, and yet the apex of the simple roof was over thirty feet off the ground. The single stone chimney leaked thin smoke into the night and a comforting glow glinted past drawn curtains.

As he approached, the swirling wind changed in direction, coming straight from the cottage. Instantly the horses tensed and stopped, throwing their heads around in uncertainty and alarm. Cursing, Father Gideon remembered where he was, to whom he was forced to turn. With a flick of the reins, he turned the wagon round on the wide path so that it stood between the cottage and the horses. They calmed noticeably and he allowed them to drop their heads to the grass, pulling on the brake to stop them straying too far.

The princess weighed next to nothing, yet Father Gideon was aware that he was no longer a young man as he carried her the last few tens of yards to the cottage. As if sensing his arrival, the door opened as he climbed the first wooden step towards the wide deck that surrounded the whole building. A vast shape blocked most of the light from escaping and an irrational fear swept over him for an instant.

‘Gideon,’ the figure said, its voice at once low and yet unmistakably feminine. ‘I was expecting you. Bring her in.’

‘Thank you, Morgwm,’ Father Gideon said. He knew there was no point in asking how she had known of his journey when none back at the castle knew that he was gone, let alone that he had brought the princess with him.

Morgwm the Green had always been an enigma to him, but her knowledge of medicine was unsurpassed in the whole of Gwlad. Only the petty prejudices of men kept them from realizing what treasures of hidden knowledge were her and her kind.

Morgwm stepped back to allow him entry to the front room of the cottage, and he marvelled once more at how lithe such a big creature could be. Her tail looked to be a hindrance, yet it moved with her, missing all obstacles as if it had a mind of its own. Her taloned feet should have gouged the polished wooden floor and yet she trod with such delicate care that not a scratch could be seen.

‘You’re staring again, Gideon,’ Morgwm said, the bright scales around her eyes flickering in the light from the fire.

‘I’m sorry,’ Father Gideon said, a flustered embarrassment reddening his cheeks as if he were a teenager trying to speak to a girl who had caught his notice. ‘It’s just, I had forgotten.’

‘That I’m a dragon?’ Morgwm asked, a faint chuckle in her voice. ‘Would that all men could be so fair-minded. But come, place her here.’ She indicated a low table close to the fire which had been spread with thick blankets. ‘Let us see what is wrong with your girl.’

Father Gideon lowered his charge on to the table. She had slept throughout, although spasms of pain regularly racked her body and a sheen of grey sweat dampened her face, clagged her once-lustrous hair to the sides of her bony skull.

‘She was taken ill some months ago,’ he said, stepping aside so that Morgwm could get closer. ‘Not long after the

child first began to show. I've tried all I know, yet she grows worse with each day.'

The dragon bent low over the princess, her hands going from head to neck to the large bulge of belly, razor-sharp talons so close to delicate skin and yet never threatening. She hummed a low indistinct noise interspersed with odd clicking noises as she set about her task. Father Gideon looked away, unable to help. He was standing to one side of the fire, beside which a large cauldron of water steamed gently. On the other side a big basket sat just near enough to be warm without scorching. Something large sat inside it, wrapped in a blanket. Bread proving, he thought for a moment, except that it would have been a very large loaf, even for a dragon. Then he noticed a gap in the folded blanket showing something smooth, pale and speckled with tiny flecks of brown. A thrill passed through him as he recognized the egg, and with it came a chill fear. Morgwm surely risked a terrible punishment if discovered.

'Gallweed,' Morgwm said, and a surge of guilt flooded through Father Gideon as he remembered why he was here.

'Gallweed?' He asked. It sparked a memory but he could not place it.

'A nasty little poison. You humans have such dull senses, you cannot taste it, nor smell it. Your girl reeks of it. Someone has been administering her regular doses for months.'

'Who would do such a thing?' Father Gideon asked, although a nasty suspicion was forming in the back of his mind.

‘I was thinking you might be able to tell me,’ Morgwm said. ‘And who is this, who attracts such a rare, potent and expensive poison?’

‘You don’t know her?’ Father Gideon was surprised, perhaps expecting the dragon to know everything. But then it was unlikely she would ever have met any of the royal family. ‘This is Princess Lleyn, heir to the Obsidian Throne.’

He watched a brief flicker of fear flash across the dragon’s eyes, her hands draw back involuntarily from the prone body before her. Then her shoulders slumped a weary resignation and she turned once more to face him.

‘Well, I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do,’ Morgwm said. ‘Princess Lleyn is going to die.’

Morgwm looked at her old friend standing by the fire. He had not aged well in the years since last she had seen him, and her diagnosis seemed to knock something vital out of him. She turned once more to the princess and placed a hand on the great taut sphere of her belly. Her fingers could feel the pulse of a heart, slow and weak like that of an old man near death. Such was the way with gallweed. It would slowly suck the life out of a person. If Lleyn had really been ill for several months then she must have been a bright and vivacious person before then. Normally gallweed would kill in weeks, and that without the added burden of a pregnancy. Such a pity to struggle so hard only for the baby to be stillborn. For it surely could be no other way.

A terrible spasm wrenched the princess’s body away from her touch. Morgwm reached out to try and push her back down on to the blankets, but with an almost inhuman strength Lleyn sat bolt upright. Her eyes were wide open



and yellow with her failing body. She reached out an arm, grabbing Morgwm's and pulling the dragon close, seemingly insensible to the nature of her nursemaid.

'My prince, O Balch, it hurts me so. Please save the child,' she whispered. Then another spasm creased her face, her grip loosened and she fell back on to the blankets. Father Gideon was at her side as Morgwm laid a scaly hand on the side of Lley'n's neck, then her forehead. The once-beautiful eyes stared unfocused at the dark recesses of the ceiling and with a tender touch Morgwm slid them closed.

'I am sorry, Gideon, truly. Even if you had come to me at the start of this I could only have made her passing easier. She was dead from the first drop of poison.'

Father Gideon looked down at the lifeless form of the princess, his eyes brimming with tears, his face drained of blood. Morgwm made to touch him, to try and comfort him, but the poor man looked like his knees would give way if a feather landed on his shoulder, so instead she busied herself with tidying up the body. In death Lley'n looked calmer, less pained, although nothing could hide her terrible emaciation. Her muscles had relaxed now, her arms fallen to the sides of the table, her naked feet splayed slightly. Only the heavy swell of her belly still seemed taut and quivering. Morgwm placed a hand on it, aware of the last ebbing warmth through the thin fabric. Not one death today, but two.

Then she felt it. A tiny kick of defiance, and behind it, so faint as to be almost undetectable, a regular pulsing rhythm. A heartbeat.

'The child. It lives still,' Morgwm said. 'I don't know

how. The poison should have killed it months ago. We must act quickly.'

Without waiting for Gideon, who was still staring forlornly at Lley'n's calm face, Morgwm pulled her bed dress up over the mound of straining belly. Although not yet twenty years, the princess had the body of an old woman. Her skin hung limply over fleshless ribs and her legs were like sticks wound in soft leather. Ignoring the poison-wrought devastation, Morgwm felt closely around the swell of belly, trying to see how things lay beneath. Finally, with one razor-sharp talon, she cut swiftly into the skin, parting it with delicate fingers and reaching within.

A short strangled squeak came from Father Gideon's mouth as Morgwm lifted the small blood-smeared baby from the cut in its mother's belly. She slit the umbilicus and tied it in a neat little knot, then hung the child up by its legs and tapped it smartly on the back. Once, twice. It coughed, clenched its tiny hands into fists and let out a great bawling wail.

'Warm water, towels, now,' Morgwm barked, and Father Gideon jumped as if he had just been stung. Soon the baby was clean and wrapped in blankets, placed on a low bench dragged up close to the fire.

'A boy,' Gideon said, looking down into the wide-eyed face. 'He has some of his father about him. That will come to haunt him in later life.' The baby gurgled contentedly, then squealed with excitement as Morgwm stooped over him.

'What am I to do with him?' Gideon asked, watching with wonder as the huge dragon cradled the tiny child. 'How shall I feed him? What shall I call him?'

‘Calm yourself, Gideon, you’ll upset the child.’ Morgwm placed the bundle down on the bench again and went off to the storeroom. Herbs and spices were neatly packed in countless boxes and jars, but she didn’t need to look for what she needed. Everything had a place and she knew exactly where it would be.

Taking water from the cauldron she mixed first a sticky black poultice and set it to steep by the fire. Next she took some white powder and stirred it into another bowl of water, adding cold until the temperature was just right. With the smallest spoon she could find, she once more took up the child and began to feed him.

‘Mother’s milk is the best feed for a newborn. It has so much in it that he needs. This powder will make a reasonable substitute, but the sooner we can find a wet nurse the better. Then we must cover our tracks.’

‘How so?’ Father Gideon asked. ‘The princess is dead.’ Morgwm could see the anguish in his eyes, hear it in his voice. Yet Gideon was a practical man who would put off his mourning if need be.

‘Indeed she is,’ Morgwm replied. ‘And we must make it seem that the child died with her. I take it none know that you brought her here?’

Gideon nodded.

‘Good. You must take her back. I will make it look like she still carries the child. I am sorry, Gideon, but you will probably be blamed for both their deaths.’

Father Gideon lowered his head, his shoulders sagging under the burden of responsibility. ‘As her physician I carry that blame already,’ he said. ‘But what of the child? He can’t go to Ystumtuen.’

‘No, he cannot. He would be killed within the week. I’ll take the boy to a village a few days from here. Their wise woman seeks my counsel from time to time. She’ll see to it that he is well raised.’

Morgwm took up the pot of poultice from beside the fire and crossed to the dead form of the princess. With a complicated motion of her hand, she conjured a homunculus from the air and placed it where the child had so recently lain. Then she took a needle and fine thread, sewing up the gash. Finally she worked the poultice into the scar, chanting under her breath as she went.

‘The poultice will take the colour of her skin.’ She gently pulled the princess’s bed dress back down over her nakedness. ‘No one will see the scar.’

She lifted the near weightless body from the table and handed it back to Father Gideon. ‘Now you must go.’

‘What should we tell the child?’ Gideon said. ‘He’s the rightful heir to the Obsidian Throne.’

‘You should tell him nothing. I should tell him nothing,’ Morgwm said. ‘And if he’s lucky he’ll grow up to be a happy and healthy young man. Only then, and only if it is truly necessary, will we tell him of his birthright.’

Morgwm sat up all the night and on into the morning, pondering the events that had transpired. She knew that Gideon had seen the egg, knew also that he would never reveal her secret. Quietly, so as not to disturb the sleeping infant, she knelt beside the basket and peeled back the layers of blankets, laying a hand on the warm shell.

Her own hatchling, the first new dragon born for many decades, at least in this part of the world. Humans may

have hunted dragons for thousands of years, but that wasn't the only reason their numbers were so few. Something had gone out of the heart of them millennia ago, before even she had been hatched, so that now to be a dragon was to be a pale shadow of the former glory that once had ruled the world.

Or so Sir Frynwy's stories would have it. Morgwm could not be sure that life hadn't always been the way it was, that dragons bred seldom and were more likely than not to be unsuccessful in the attempt. Maybe the tales of old were just that – imaginative diversions to alleviate the drudgery of daily existence.

The egg juddered slightly as the tiny creature inside it responded to the close proximity of its mother. It had been growing slowly stronger over the days. Hatching would be very soon. And now there was an added complication. The child would have to be taken to Pwllpeiran, and that was a good two days' forced march away, probably longer as she would have to keep well away from any roads travelled by men. The death of the princess would bring them flocking to Ystumtuen like geese to winter pastures. No, she would have to take the forest tracks, and that would take her at least a week.

Unless, of course, she used the Llinellau.

Sighing, Morgwm re-covered the egg, checked that the infant child was sleeping safely in its makeshift cot in front of the fire and went out to prepare for her journey.

Picking her way through the cabbage patch, Morgwm noticed the sky darkening and a chill descending on the clearing. She had been sure that the storm was past – the morning had been clear. Glancing up at the sun, climbing

high into the late morning sky, her normal reserve dissolved and her mouth dropped open like an idiot's.

It was too early, surely. Not for another week. Or had she been so wrapped up in her work she had forgotten the passing days?

A semicircular disc was beginning to bite into the glowing yellow orb of the sun as the moon, great Rasalene himself, moved into the position of the Confluence. Dumbstruck, Morgwm stared at the darkening sky, watching as Arhelion was slowly covered. Deep in her bones she could feel the ecstasy of that great mating.

Noise burst across the clearing as all the birds flew into the trees and settled themselves down for the coming night. Never mind that only a few hours had passed since dawn, their chittering and song fell away far quicker than any evening chorus should. The wind that had been tumbling around the clearing like an unruly child died down to a scolded nothing. The cold deepened with the gloom, a strangely surreal darkness that glowed at the edges, as if the air fizzed with light somehow trapped. Inch by slow inch, the dark moon spread itself across the receptive sun until, with an almost audible pop, the cover was complete.

Morgwm stood in the near-total darkness, staring up at the perfect black circle scribed by a halo of flickering white. She was transfixed by the beauty of the sight, a deep calm washing over her as if a wrong done aeons ago had finally been put right. All the cares and worries of her long life were gone, all forgotten in that one endless perfect moment.

Then a terrible crash broke through her reverie, fol-

lowed by the wailing of a healthy pair of lungs. The child! She had completely forgotten him.

Morgwm hurried back to the cottage, fearing the silence that fell once more upon the dark clearing. She swept through the door and took in everything in a single glance, astonished for the second time that day, the second time in half a lifetime.

The basket by the fire had tipped over, and even now the edge of the blanket was singeing, a charred smell of burned hair filling the room. Pieces of eggshell lay scattered over the floor, and for a terrible instant Morgwm imagined the infant, somehow able to move even though it was just hours old, knocking over the basket, spilling its priceless contents on the floor.

But there was no dead kitling on the floor, no mess of unfinished yolk. And the child still lay in its makeshift cot, gurgling in a contented way, its blankets all awry.

Confused and with her hearts in her mouth, Morgwm stepped closer, her vast feet avoiding the broken shell as if to tread on it might somehow cause harm to the dragon kit that should still have been lying within. The baby boy's eyes were open and a broad smile spread across his face as she approached. Then he squealed a happy cry and something far larger than his tiny body moved under the blankets. Morgwm pulled them away, half her mind already knowing what lay beneath.

It was a dragon, twice the size of the baby boy yet still miniscule. Perfectly formed, its skin was still smooth, the first scales no more than the faintest of dimples rippling over its chest as it breathed. It lay on its back, neck

extended along the baby's side, seeking warmth and companionship to the infant's obvious delight. Tiny taloned feet worked back and forth and its wings fluttered gently, far bigger in proportion to its body than those of any adult.

Slowly, tentatively, Morgwm reached down and stroked the infant dragon's belly. Its lazy eyes opened and it looked up into the face of its mother. A grimacing smile spread across its mouth, revealing sharp fangs. Then it belched, an absurd little noise that had the baby boy alongside wriggling with amused pleasure. Morgwm cupped her hatchling in her hand and lifted it out of the cot. Its miniature hands grasped at her fingers with surprising strength, and she lifted it up to the light the better to see what she and Sir Trefaldwyn had done.

A strange sadness filled her that she had missed the hatching, but it was swept away at the realization that it must have occurred at the height of the Confluence. This then was a true child of Rasalene and Arhelion. And she could barely contain her excitement as she inspected the kitling minutely for defects, appraising her offspring with the detached professionalism of a healer. It was perfect. He was perfect.

He.

The first male dragon to be hatched in a thousand years.