



'Calls to mind
Game of Thrones... epic'
Publishers Weekly

THE DRAGONS OF DEEPWOOD FEN

BRADLEY P. BEAULIEU

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PROLOGUE

Deep in the Holt, Korvus Julianus and his guide, Temerin, strode over the uneven ground of the forest. Korvus's mood was light, the alchemycal survey he and Temerin had begun two weeks earlier nearly complete. If all went well, he would finish his measurements before the day was done and either confirm his suspicions that a rare sinkhole was about to form or prove them false.

Citadel trees soared a thousand feet into the air as far as the eye could see. Their bark was rough, their branches stubby. Bridgeboughs spanned the gaps between them, one tree supporting the next supporting the next. The bright sun had risen and the sky was clear, but it was early yet, and the light in the forest was dim.

Though well into springtime, a cold snap had arrived two days earlier and had yet to recede. Korvus crunched over frost-covered pine needles and the occasional patch of snow. Temerin followed a few paces behind him as they made for a shallow ridge, where they took a moment to catch their breath.

Temerin leaned on his unstrung bow, his breath pluming, and scanned the land around them. "Haven't we come far enough?"

Master Korvus blew into his hands. "Nearly so, Temerin. Nearly so." He adjusted the weight of his oilskin pack and continued on. Temerin fell in beside him.

The guide had curly brown hair, dark skin, broad cheeks, and ivory eyes, which were part and parcel of his profession. He was tall for a Kin, and willowy from all his rangings. A rapier hung from his belt. A quiver was strapped to his opposite leg. "It's only, I'd like to get back to Glaeyand tonight."

“As would I, but there’s no rushing these things.”

“I know, but we’ve walked farther than we did from the *last* vyrd.”

“That’s because the vyrd you just brought us to is stronger. You should know that. You’re a ferryman.”

Vyrda were henges, circles of standing stones that marked places of power, and there were many throughout the Holt. Ferrymen like Temerin knew how to unlock their power and use it to travel from place to place via the maze, which was why Temerin was accompanying Master Korvus on his survey, and why Korvus was certain the young man knew the vyrd they’d just visited was more powerful than the one before it. He was only being impatient, an affliction men of his age seemed happy to wear as a badge of honor.

They weren’t far from the Deepwood Fens, which was Red Knife territory. The Red Knives were the remnants of the people who once controlled the Holt, and a brutal lot. They considered themselves freedom fighters who hoped to liberate the Holt from the empire, its ruling quintarchs, and, above all, the Holt’s emperor, who they considered a pawn. This close to the Fens, the likelihood of a Knife flying one of their dragons overhead and spotting them was still remote, but it had risen considerably.

Korvus and Temerin hiked another mile through the forest. The bright sun rose higher and warmed the air. Ahead, midges hovered over a glade of high grasses; swallows swooped down on them, feeding on the wing.

Korvus unslung his alchemyst’s pack and leaned it against the twisted root of a citadel tree. “This is far enough, I reckon.”

Temerin nodded, strung his bow, and began his scout of the area.

Korvus crouched, tugged his pack open, and carefully retrieved his aurimeter. With a wooden base, an etched steel plate pitted with age, and a needle that rose up from the base’s hollow interior, the aurimeter looked vaguely like a metronome, but the alchemical instrument had a much different purpose. The weight at the needle’s bottom was made of brightsteel, a metal infused with ground dragon scales, likely from an iron, but possibly a

brass or a silver. The brightsteel weight, calibrated springs, and etched plate formed a gauge that allowed him to measure the flow of aura, one of two primary sources of arcane power.

Korvus set the aurimeter on a patch of level ground and used a compass to ensure it was measuring the flow due north. Then, he drew his leatherbound journal from the pack's front pocket, laid it on the ground before him, and jotted down the aurimeter's measurement with a freshly sharpened pencil. He turned the instrument clockwise one point on the compass rose, noted the new measurement, and repeated the process, turning and measuring, turning and measuring, until he'd completed a full rotation.

He pulled an umbrimeter from his pack. Similar to the aurimeter, it measured the flow of umbra, the second of the two sources of arcane power. Its weight was darksteel, a metal infused with the ground scales of an umbral dragon—a viridian, perhaps, or maybe a cobalt. He repeated the turning and measuring, and recorded the values.

Aura and umbra infused everything, from plants to animals to the earth itself. During the day, the bright sun, Lux, shed aura upon the world. At night, Lux gave way to the dark sun, Nox, to shed umbra. Living things absorbed both, but there was much more aura and umbra than they could fully absorb. While aura tended to rise and collect in places like hills, cliffs, and mountains, umbra tended to sink and pool in places like swamps, lakes, and fens.

It was also true that these foundational principles of alchemy were unpredictable. Aura and umbra eddied like currents in a river delta, which meant Korvus couldn't rely on a single measurement in case the instruments were merely measuring an eddy in the flow. He needed several measurements to ensure he was measuring the predominant flows. So it was that Korvus repeated the process with both instruments an hour later.

Temerin returned shortly thereafter, holding a rabbit he'd struck through with an arrow. He dressed it, built a fire, and roasted it for their lunch. By then it was nearing high sun, and time to check the instruments for the third and final time.

“Time to head back?” Temerin asked when he was done.

“Not just yet.”

Satisfied that his measurements were accurate, Korvus flipped through the journal to a map of the Holt, precisely drawn by his own hand. Near the center of the forest was his home, the tree city of Glaeyand. The Whitefell Mountains bordered the forest in a grand arc to the west. The Sea of Olgasus lay east. In between was the vast Holt, broken here and there by prairies, lakes, gullies, and the occasional mountain or ravine. Its most notable feature was the Diamondflow, the largest of the three rivers that cut east through the Holt on their way to the sea.

North and east of Glaeyand, red dots marked the vyrda he and Temerin had traveled to in the past two weeks. Near each were a pair of hand-drawn arrows: white to indicate the direction of the flow of aura, black to indicate the flow of umbra. Taking them all in, it was clear aura was flowing more or less west, toward the mountains, which was as it should be. Umbra, however, was flowing neatly toward a position east of them, a good way into the Deepwood Fens. In contrast, the surveys he’d conducted more than a decade ago showed umbra from those same vyrda being drawn toward the *Diamondflow*. The only reasonable explanation was that a sinkhole was about to form. It happened from time to time when umbra collected in sufficient quantities to attract even more umbra from the surrounding lands until the earth gave way to its power, causing broad swaths of land to sink all at once.

Taking in the magnitude of it, Korvus found himself smiling, then grinning broadly. He’d suspected, even hoped, he might find a sinkhole, but to have it confirmed . . . to be on the cusp of *witnessing* it . . . made the long treks, the weeks away from home, the sick feeling in his gut from traveling by vyrd, and the trail rations in place of his wife’s cooking all feel worth it.

Korvus tapped the arrows on the map. “Remember the sinkhole I mentioned?”

Temerin sat cross-legged near the fire, poking the embers with a stick, and took a cursory glance at the journal.

“It’s forming to the east of us,” Korvus went on. “I suspect it won’t be long before it’s triggered.”

Temerin said nothing.

“I want to go there, take more measurements.”

Temerin’s grimace might have been amusing were Korvus not so serious. “*More* measurements?”

“It would delay us a day at the most. I’ll gladly pay you for it.”

“You’ve extended our trip three times already.”

“I *warned* you that might happen.” The flows had been unpredictable at three of the vyrda. Korvus had insisted on remaining overnight to ensure his measurements were accurate.

“I want to go *home*, Master Korvus.”

“As do I, Temerin, but this discovery could lead to *more* expeditions. I’ll ask for you personally. Or if you prefer, I’ll ask that you *not* be considered. Just come with me now. Finding a sinkhole could mean a considerable grant from the emperor.”

Temerin drew in a deep breath, regarded Korvus with ivory eyes, then let the breath out in a noisy rush. “I don’t want to *not* be considered. I’m grateful for the work. Truly. But my wife . . . she’s expected to go into labor soon.”

“You’ll see that pretty wife of yours soon, I promise.” Korvus patted Temerin’s shin. “And I’ll pay for a dinner for the two of you at The Hog’s Head. Assuming she hasn’t gone into labor yet. Later, if she has.”

Temerin paused. With a hint of a smile, he said, “Make it The Twisted Fork and you have a deal.”

“Done!”

Temerin laughed, stood, and did a double take at the map in Korvus’s journal. His smile faded. “You want to go to the Deepwood Fens . . .”

“I do.”

“That’s Red Knife territory.”

“Yes, but nowhere near their hideouts.”

“Word is they were forced to move south.”

“Their old hideout was four hundred miles away. Why would they move it so far?”

“I should think to avoid being discovered *again*.”

“Come now, Temerin. The chances are infinitesimal they’ll be anywhere near where I mean to visit. Besides, it won’t take long.

If my measurements are correct, the location is a mere stone's throw from the vyrd. We'll be there and gone faster than you can fletch an arrow. I promise."

Temerin pursed his lips and shook his head, but the man was no wilting flower. "We take *one* set of measurements, and we return to Glaeyand as soon as you're done. No complaining about eddies. No writing endless passages in your journal."

"Well, I do need to take *some* notes."

"Of course, but the minor details can be fleshed out *after* we return to Glaeyand."

"Fair enough." Korvus packed his things into his pack. "Thank you, Temerin. You've been a valuable asset this entire journey."

With a verve Korvus hadn't felt earlier, he hiked with Temerin toward the vyrd. To study a sinkhole as it formed would be a wondrous achievement, the capstone of his long and accomplished career. He was all but certain the imperator would authorize an expedition to record it.

As they retraced their steps through the forest, the wind picked up and the citadels groaned. By the time they spotted the vyrd through the trees ahead, the bright sun was lowering in the west, all but hidden by the citadels' thick canopy. The vyrd's standing stones were tall, round-shouldered, weatherbeaten. The runes on their faces were worn by centuries of rain, snow, and wind. The broad slabs set into the ground between them were covered in thick green moss, all but indistinguishable from the land outside the vyrd.

They positioned themselves at the vyrd's center. Temerin opened a small pouch at his belt and pulled out a lucerta, a silvery-blue dragon scale, and placed it on his tongue. Despite all the advancements in alchemy, they still didn't know why using lucertae to navigate the maze leached color from one's eyes, but it did. And while most ferrymen needed to wait until the bright sun set or rose—the two times when the vyrda were most active—Temerin was gifted. He could enter the maze several hours before or after the normal times. It was half the reason Korvus had pulled in a favor to have him assigned to the survey.

Temerin closed his eyes and spread his arms. A breath passed, then two. Korvus's guts suddenly felt like they were being drawn through his bellybutton and twisted on a spit. A brief whistle sounded, and they entered the maze.

Korvus blinked. Suddenly, they were in another place entirely. The air was markedly warmer and fetid. The standing stones around them were shorter and more ancient, their runes all but lost to the passage of time. Beyond the vyrd, the vegetation was thicker, and the citadels were spaced farther apart, likely due to the alkaline soil.

Korvus took out his compass and scanned the landscape. "This way."

They headed north, and the stench grew stronger. They came across a deer path and followed it, and the noisome odor grew stronger still. The citadels stood farther and farther apart, and the landscape became more open.

"How much longer?" Temerin asked.

"If my measurements are correct, we're nearly there."

They came to a vast fen, with ponds of still water dotting the terrain. It was nearly treeless, but to their right, a series of tall black pillars stood like palisade stakes.

"Faedryn's wicked grin," Temerin breathed, "what is that?"

"Don't blaspheme." Korvus held two fingers up and moved them in a circle, the sign of Alra. "Not here."

Temerin made the prayer to Alra as well. "Well, what *are* they?"

Korvus counted the glittering black pillars as he trudged toward them. There were seventeen in all. "I've no idea."

Temerin followed, stringing his bow as he stepped through the long grass.

Korvus's first thought was that they'd stumbled on an ancient artifact, something left over from the days when Faedryn walked the earth. But an age had passed since the Ruining, and the pillars looked new. Their edges were sharp; there was no lichen on their glittering black surfaces. As they approached the pillars, a faint curtain appeared between them. Squinting, Korvus saw the curtain curve toward a central point above the pillars. A great dome glittered faintly over the fen.

When he reached the closest pillar, Korvus unslung his pack, set it on a tuft of wiry grass, and threw back the flap. He'd no more reached inside than Temerin said, "Master Korvus?"

Korvus looked up to find Temerin staring at the sky. A pair of dragons soared above the citadels and glided down toward them. One was a cobalt, vivid blue with streaks of midnight running through its wings. The other was an amber, its scales the color of honey. They were umbrals, nocturnal creatures that woke when the dark sun rose and hunted through the night. The taming and bonding of such creatures had been outlawed since the end of the Talon Wars. With very few exceptions, only the Red Knives used them now, and both dragons had riders.

The dragons alighted on a nearby hillock and folded their wings. Korvus glanced at Temerin and saw he had an arrow nocked. "Put that *away!* And for the love of the goddess, unstring your bow!"

Temerin looked like he might argue, but he complied.

By then the riders had slid down their dragons' shoulders to the ground. The amber dragon's rider was Raef, one of the highest ranking members of the Red Knives, a Kin man with dark skin, down-turned eyes, and intricately braided red hair. His left arm ended in a stump wrapped in studded leather. The man beside him was surely Llorn, the Red Knives' cruel enforcer, also called "the Butcher." He had dark skin as well and long black hair, bound into a tail. His cheeks and forehead were covered with blotchy sun marks. Sun marks were a common enough thing in the Deepwood. The sheer number on Llorn's face—as if he defied *everyone* and *everything*, even the dark sun—was not.

Llorn approached Korvus and Temerin. Raef drew his longsword with his good hand and followed. Both men stopped several paces away.

"Who are you?" Llorn asked.

"My name is Korvus Julianus," Korvus said quickly. "I'm a master alchemist, and this is my ferryman, Temerin. We've come on a surveying mission."

Llorn looked from Korvus to Temerin and back. "A surveying mission."

“Yes. To study the flow of aura and umbra through the forest.”

“And who sent you on this survey?”

It wasn't lost on Korvus that the question was a way of asking who might come looking for them if they turned up missing. But it left him an opening. “Marstan Lyndenfell, the imperator himself. He gave us a sizable grant as well.”

Llorn spoke slowly, deliberately. “Marstan Lyndenfell . . .”

Korvus nodded. While Marstan, the imperator, was a nominal enemy of the Red Knives, it was said he held some sway with Llorn's brother and liege, Aarik, the man they called King of the Wood. Surely, knowledge of Lyndenfell's involvement would prevent Llorn from doing anything rash. Surely, the punishment for trespassing on Red Knife territory would go no further than their being ransomed back to Glaeyand. The men might even set them free with a mere warning.

Llorn pointed at the pillars. “Does Marstan know about these?”

Korvus paused. If he lied and told Llorn that Marstan knew, it might enrage him. But telling the truth—that Marstan knew nothing about them—felt like a death sentence. “Of course he does. How else would we have known where to go?”

“So, to survey the crucible, your benefactor, Marstan Lyndenfell, sent an alchemist”—Llorn looked at Temerin again, longer this time—“and a ferryman deep into our lands with no additional protection?”

Korvus's heart was beating so fast it felt like a herd of elk passing through his chest. He knew the lie he'd just told could easily spin out of his control, but what choice did he have now? “That's right.”

Llorn's cobalt dragon issued a rolling growl. Beside it, the amber craned its neck, making its barbs rattle like a spill of bones. Korvus knew little of the bonds men like these had with their dragons, but he knew enough to know that the dragons' reactions were likely echoes of their bondmates' feelings.

Llorn smiled. “I think not, Master Korvus.” He tilted his head at Raef and unsheathed his longsword.

Raef gripped his sword and stalked toward Temerin.

Temerin stepped back. “No, please! I have a wife! Our child’s birth is only days away!”

Knowing what was coming, Korvus focused on Llorn—only Llorn, but from the corner of his eye he saw Temerin try to draw his rapier. Raef swung his sword in a horizontal arc and sliced through Temerin’s neck. The guide collapsed to the ground, gurgled, and lay still.

The cobalt dragon crept forward, flicking its massive tongue at Temerin’s bloody corpse, but Llorn raised a hand, and it backed away.

Raef wiped his sword on Temerin’s cloak, sheathed it, and walked back toward his dragon.

Korvus pointed to the pillars behind him. “Tell me what it is, at least?”

Llorn stared at the gleaming black pillars. “I’ll tell you this much. One day, great power will flow from the crucible. When it does, control over my people’s destiny will be returned to us, once and for all.”

Korvus shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

Llorn raised his sword. “Then pray your wisp quickens before that day comes, so you can witness it from your second life.” He jammed his sword into Korvus’s chest, twisted the blade, and jerked it out. Pain speared through Korvus, and he collapsed to the earth. He raked the wiry grass with his fingers; blood bubbled across his chest, warm and slick beneath his shirt. His vision filled with stars, and a high-pitched ringing filled his ears.

Korvus knew he should pray to Alra for mercy, but he couldn’t. He was too riveted by the black pillars. He stared at them—at the curtain that flowed between them and the dome they created above the fen—and wondered at their purpose.



ONE: RYLAN

Rylan Holbrooke fit his dragonskin mask over the lower half of his face, pulled his hood down over his forehead, then padded along the gully in a half-crouch, scanning the forest of citadel trees and the occasional oak and poplar for imperial patrolmen. The scent of a campfire was strong and growing stronger.

Though the birdsong and the noise from the camp were loud enough to cover his approach, Rylan took care to make no sound as he climbed the edge of the gully and hid behind a stand of lilac bushes. Through the branches, he spied a contubernium, a tent group of eight legionaries. Three of the soldiers were gathered around the fire. One was a senior officer, a husky centurion in his late thirties. He sat on the ground, back against a fallen yew, legs stretched toward the fire. His helm and chest armor, brightsteel *lorica segmentata*, lay on the grass beside him. His dark hair was cut so close to the scalp Rylan could see the scar running up his forehead and over the crown of his head. He had a smug look about him—natural for a centurion, Rylan supposed, but it made him all the more eager to take back the jewelry he'd stolen from a hapless caravan.

The officer sitting cross-legged beyond the husky centurion was a rangy man of a similar age with lank brown hair, deep-set eyes, and a bent nose. The badge on his scale mail, *lorica squamatae* as they called it, marked him as a surgeon, but he likely doubled as the contubernium's second-in-command. He was stripping bark from a freshly cut sapling with a hunting knife, likely carving a crossbow bolt to add to the quiver leaning against the trunk next to him.

The soldier kneeling beside the fire, roasting a pair of pheasants on a spit, was barely a man at all. He had bright orange hair, freckles, and saucers for ears. Nestled in the fire was a wide-bellied pot. Steam puffed out from under the lid, scenting the air with garlic and rosemary.

The centurion was regaling the other two men with a tale of his winnings at a gambling den in Glaeyand. “The final game of the night, it was down to me, a fat miller, and his son. We reached the last trick. Whoever took it would win the pot. I threw down a tower. The miller, fucked, tossed the river. And what did that beshitted son of the sawdust collector do but throw down the mountain and screw me?” The centurion chuckled and scratched his chin. “I could’ve sworn it’d been played seven tricks earlier.”

“Might your lack of perfect recall”—the surgeon sent a shaving of wood flying through the air—“not be explained by the fact that you were deep into your fifth flagon?”

The centurion barked a laugh. “Fifth? I can still stand on my hands and whistle an ode after five! The kid was cheating.”

Rylan shifted to get a better view beyond the fire. Two more soldiers were pounding stakes and righting a large canvas tent. Near the tent were eight saddles and two pack harnesses, any one of which might hold the overly burdensome fines Rylan had come to retrieve. Beyond the tent, the Salt Road, the ancient trading route from Glaeyand to Gorminion, the port city at the mouth of the Diamondflow, was deeply rutted. On its far side, three more legionaries were tending to the horses in a clearing. With all eight soldiers accounted for, Rylan breathed a bit easier. The last thing he needed was a legionary stumbling upon him before he could make his move.

“Hold on,” the surgeon said, “you said you won, but if the miller’s son played the mountain . . .”

The centurion leaned toward the young, saucer-eared soldier and said in hushed tones, “Never let it be said Two Step isn’t the sharpest spear in the sheaf, eh, Balish?” The centurion regarded the surgeon. “I never said I won the *game*. I said I won the *pot*.”

The surgeon went back to whittling his crossbow bolt. “*Stole* the pot, you mean.”

“Stole . . . Won . . .” The centurion shrugged. “Any day I enter a den with forty stags and leave with two hundred is a good day to my mind.”

“I merely want it known,” the surgeon called over one shoulder, practically shouting to the other legionaries, “that you are a thief, a ruffian, and a no-good liar.”

Chuckling, the centurion interlaced his fingers behind his head and shifted against the tree trunk. “Show me a legionary who isn’t.”

The surgeon pointed his knife at the young legionary. “What about Balish here?”

“Balish is a bloody recruit, barely out of his nappies.”

They laughed heartily as Balish’s ears turned bright red.

Rylan had known the sort of men he’d be dealing with from the moment Hollis had described their shake down of the caravan. They felt entitled to the things they took, the centurion especially. It would be a pleasure to see the scales of justice righted, even if only for a few stags.

With the tent nearly pitched and the horses staked and blanketed, it was time to send his dragon into the fray, but Rylan paused, feeling watched. He stared through the trees around him, gazed at the bridgeboughs above. High overhead, on a branch near the canopy, he thought he saw a shape, someone squatting among the green needles, perhaps, but he couldn’t be sure. He waited for the shape to move. When it didn’t, he reckoned it was just his imagination.

Focusing on the forest beyond the camp, he took a deep breath and released it slowly. The bond he shared with his viridian dragon, Vedron, brightened in his mind. She was two miles away, resting on the broken limb of a citadel tree above the pond where Rylan had unsaddled her in preparation for their heist.

Go, Rylan urged her, now.

Rylan felt a brief flash of vertigo as Vedron dropped from the limb. He felt her spread her wings and soar through the forest, felt the rush of air over her sleek back, her legs held tight to her body. Vedron’s giddiness echoed Rylan’s edginess as they prepared to take action.

Three days ago, the same patrol of legionaries had stopped a Kin trading caravan heading toward Glaeyand on the Salt Road. They'd searched the wagons, which was perfectly within their rights, but when they found a tiny bag of contraband—a rheumatism medicine made from ground dragon barbs—the centurion had used it as an excuse to fine every trader in the caravan. The caravan master lost not only his medicine, but his signet ring purchased years ago at great cost, which granted him and all who traveled with him favorable rates at the great auction houses of Gorminion and a discount on tariffs as well. The ring was immensely valuable.

The traders had argued the fines were too steep, but the centurion had taken it in his stride, telling them that if they were so displeased with the fines, they could register a complaint with the trade board in Glaeyand. The centurion and the traders knew that the chances of the board bringing formal charges against the patrol were slim. And even if they did, the traders would need to admit to the contraband. They'd decided the risk of their master being sentenced to months of quarry work in some distant corner of the empire wasn't worth it—he'd likely die before his sentence was up. They'd paid the centurion's fines, but given that all their coins had been leveraged to buy goods in Gorminion, they'd done so in precious jewelry.

On reaching Glaeyand, they'd discussed the incident with Rylan's friend Hollis. Hollis, among other things, traded in antiques, a common item on caravans, and knew the caravan master well. He also acted as a middle man for missions that resulted in, as he put it, "a fairer distribution of wealth in the Holt." Knowing the sorts of capers Rylan liked to take on, Hollis had told him about it the following day: collectively, the caravan were offering a reward for the signet ring's return. Rylan had hardly waited a beat before accepting.

When Saucer-ears signaled that their dinner was ready, the legionaries began to wander back toward the fire. The only other sound besides their conversation was the intermittent rattle of a woodpecker, which ceased when a long, blaring note sounded

in the distance. The long blare sounded again, then rose in pitch, ending in five staccato notes.

The horses nickered, a few tugged at their reins, which were tied to iron stakes. Every last legionary, from the centurion down to young Balish, stopped what they were doing and peered into the forest.

Beyond the clearing, Vedron swooped down through the citadels. Her extended wings were teal with veins of forest green. Her eyes were vivid emerald in the shadows of the trees. Two curving horns swept back from the ridge bones above her eyes. Measuring five horses from nose to tail, Vedron was hardly the largest dragon in the Holt, but the acid she breathed could melt a man's flesh from his bones, and the legionaries knew it. They scrambled for their crossbows, and their horses tugged on their reins, stomped their hooves, reared, and whinnied.

"Secure the horses!" the centurion bellowed, even as a dappled stallion broke free.

A roan mare bolted after the stallion. Three more horses scattered in opposite directions. Black earth sprayed up as the stakes holding them in place were torn free.

Vedron swept across the road, raising needles from the forest floor in her wake, and shrieked, a raucous, high-pitched noise that made Rylan's sternum itch. Worried Vedron would chase the wrong horse, he focused his attention on the dappled stallion heading away from the camp. As they'd practiced, using elk instead of horses, Vedron veered, followed the stallion, and slowed so as not to overtake it too quickly.

By then the legionaries had several crossbows loaded. The tips of the bolts were coated in black coryza, a poison made from the venom of the yellow-backed wyvern. If a bolt managed to pierce Vedron's scales, it could kill her, but they'd practiced for this as well. Before the legionaries could so much as lift their crossbows to their shoulders, Rylan sent a warning to Vedron, and she bent around the trunk of a citadel and disappeared.

The legionaries stared into the trees until the centurion

shouted, "Well, get a fucking move on!" Then he loped toward the nearest horse.

The legionaries left the camp in a loose group. When they were far enough away, Rylan crept from his position and headed for the two pack harnesses. Rifling through one bag, he found dried meat, hardtack, spices. The other was filled with bags of oats for the horses. He eventually found the caravan master's rheumatism medicine and the jewelry box in the bags of the second saddle he searched. Why the centurion hadn't sold them in Glaeyand, Rylan wasn't sure—perhaps to avoid proof surfacing of just how much he'd taken from them. He must have been planning to sell them in Gorminion, far from the watchful eye of the imperial inquisitors.

Still, the caravan master's signet ring was missing. It stood to reason that if the centurion hadn't sold the other effects, he wouldn't have sold the ring, either. The centurion hadn't been wearing it, but he might have had it on his person, perhaps on a necklace or in his pocket. Banishing the thoughts, Rylan kept digging. There were sealed letters, imperial communications destined for Gorminion or beyond, plus a battered dulcimer and a bag of dice. At the very bottom of the bag, he found a heavy chest, likely filled with money imperial patrols were allotted for daily needs. He deliberated taking it, but it was simply too heavy and would jangle if he tried to run.

"Find cover!" a legionary called in the distance. "It's swingin' around!"

The legionaries had managed to corral three of the horses, but they were so busy tracking Vedron's movements they paid the camp no mind.

Rylan hefted the chest and set it on the ground before him. He ducked low as the young legionary, Balish, fought with one of the horses, drawing it toward the clearing. From the hollow in his right boot heel, Rylan retrieved his lock picks. He slipped the picks into the lock, worked the tumblers. In the short span it took Balish to calm the mare, Rylan picked the lock and opened the chest lid. There was money inside, but not as much as he'd expected, and no signet ring. He might take the coins in

recompense, but the total was well short of what it would cost to replace the ring.

Vedron roared and swept through the trees well beyond the reach of the patrol's crossbows.

Rylan knew the caravan would be grateful for *anything* he brought back, but he hated how the empire preyed upon the weak. He'd sooner lose another finger than let the centurion win if he had any choice in the matter. He was closing the chest when he remembered the centurion's boasting. *Any day I enter a den with forty stags and leave with two hundred is a good day to my mind.*

He crept across the grass to the saddles. The centurion's was easy to spot—it had steel embellishments and a spear design worked into the saddle horn, an indicator he'd once served in the empire's cavalry. Rifling through the smaller leather bags, Rylan found a coin purse.

He tugged it open and found two hundred scepters, or thereabouts, and at the bottom, the caravan master's signet ring. He clutched the ring in his fist and stood . . .

And found Balish standing on the horse path staring straight at him.

"Hey!" Balish said.

Rylan spun and sprinted toward the lilac bushes.

"Hey, you bastard, stop!"

Rylan heard footfalls pounding over the earth behind him as he crashed through the bushes and dropped into the gully. He ran pell-mell down the slope, glanced back and saw Balish bursting through the lilac bushes pointing a loaded crossbow at him.

Rylan bid Vedron to fly away from camp and circle back to a glade he'd spotted earlier. Then, he reached into a pouch at his belt and pulled out two paper packets, each the size and shape of a plum. He tossed one of them onto the ground as he ran, and it struck with a sound like breaking glass. Pounding onward, he heard the packet sizzle behind him and glanced over his shoulder. White smoke billowed into the air, an alchemycal reaction between an acid Rylan had harvested from Vedron's saliva and some powdered mold he'd collected from a dying citadel tree.

Largely harmless, the smoke would irritate the eyes and nose of those who came into contact with it. More importantly, the cloud was thick and impenetrable. Rylan threw the second packet down and cut to his right around a citadel tree, hoping to catch Vedron at the glade and fly away.

As the glade came into view, Vedron broke through the trees, circled down, and landed with her back to Rylan. Rylan ran up her tail, and Vedron launched him through the air. He landed on her shoulders with a leg on either side of her neck. He gripped the spines along her neck and urged her to fly to the pond where they'd hidden her saddle.

"Halt!"

Rylan glanced back and saw Balish at the edge of the glade pointing a trembling crossbow at them.

Vedron spun to face Balish and uttered a deep growl.

"A single—" Balish coughed, blinked tears from his eyes. He sniffed loudly and aimed the crossbow at Vedron's chest. The bolt's black-slathered steel head glinted beneath the bright sun. "A single beat of a wing and I let fly!"

Rylan had no time to reason with the man. He told Vedron to fly. The moment she spread her wings, Balish, blinking fiercely, shifted his aim toward Rylan and pulled the trigger.

The bolt streaked through the air and tore through Rylan's left sleeve. A pinch of pain followed. He looked down, certain the bolt had grazed skin—it would take barely a nick for coryza to kill a man. His heart pounding, he inspected his sleeve and found the bolt had caught the leather and frayed his homespun shirt beneath it, but thank the ancient powers of the forest, it hadn't drawn blood.

Vedron drew her head back like an adder, preparing to spray Balish with acid. In that moment, her desire became Rylan's. There was real danger in allowing Balish to live—the stories the legionary would tell could very well lead back to Rylan—but when he realized his thoughts were not wholly his own, he took a deep breath and calmed Vedron through their shared bond.

Vedron cocked her head to one side, peered at Rylan, then gazed down on Balish once more.

I'm fine, Vedron, Rylan told the dragon, and his friends will be here shortly. We have to head home.

Vedron snorted and pounded her tail, refusing to budge, but she didn't spray Balish.

Rylan leaned over Vedron's side and hollered to the saucer-eared legionary, "Turn around and go or get an acid bath. Your choice."

Balish stared up at them. For a moment, Rylan thought the idiot was going to try to take another bolt from his quiver, but he spun on his heels and sprinted back toward camp. Only when he was lost behind a citadel did Vedron lumber over the ground, spread her wings, and leap toward the sky.