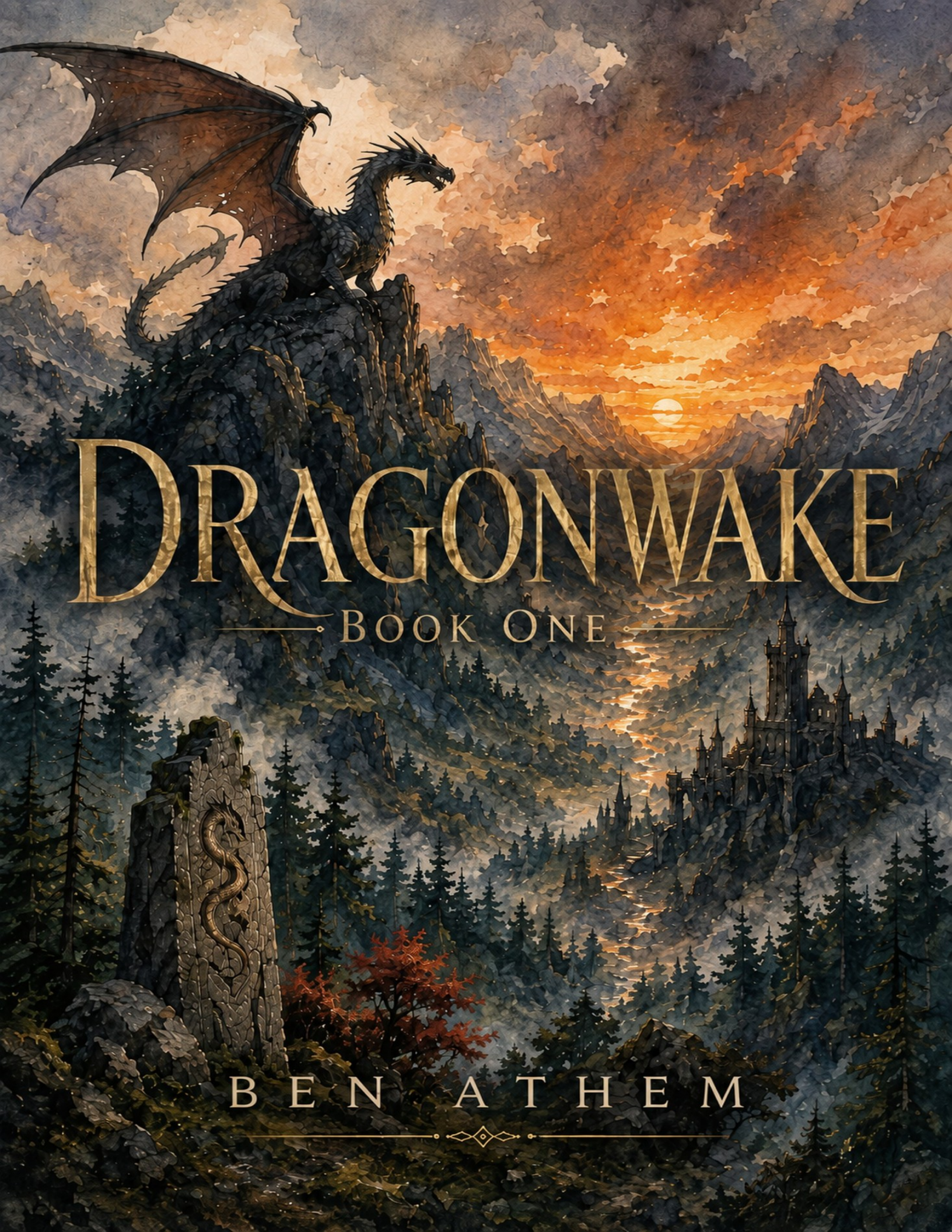




DRAGONWAKE

BOOK ONE

BENATHM

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BEN ATHEM

PROLOGUE

ELARA

The first thing Elara learned about dragons was that they could scream.

The sound rolled down from the Greyspines and shook flour from the rafters. The cup in her hand slipped and struck the table, spilling water across the wood.

Her mother stopped kneading the bread.

For one breath, neither of them moved.

Then the warning bell began to ring.

It was not a sound Elara had heard before. The old iron bell beside the meeting hall was used for fires and floods, but never with such violence.

Whoever held the rope was pulling hard enough to make every strike crack.

Her mother wiped her hands on her apron and crossed the room. She opened the door only as far as the latch allowed.

People were running toward the northern fields.

Others were running away.

“Mama?”

Her mother closed the door and slid the wooden bar into place. “Put your shoes on.”

“But—”

“Now, Elara.”

Elara obeyed. Her fingers fumbled with the buckles while another scream broke over the village. This one ended in a ragged sound that was almost a cough.

Something struck the earth outside.

The floor jumped beneath her feet.

Her mother reached her just as the front window shattered inward.

Heat rushed through the room. Not flame. Not yet. Only air made suddenly dry and breathless.

Through the broken window, Elara saw a wing.

It filled the lane from one house to the next, its dark membrane torn in three places. The hooked tips dragged through thatch and sent roof tiles clattering to the ground. Beyond it, something vast struggled to rise.

A dragon.

He was larger than their house. His scales might once have been red, but soot and blood had darkened them almost to black. One foreleg folded beneath him when he tried to stand. A broken spear jutted from behind his

shoulder, buried deep enough that only half the shaft remained. There were arrows in his neck and another beneath his jaw.

The blood around those wounds had already dried.

He had not received them here.

Men gathered at the far end of the lane with bows, wood axes, and grain forks. Elara recognized the blacksmith. The miller. Old Tomas, who gave her sugared plums when her father was not looking.

They looked nothing like themselves.

“Stay back!” someone shouted.

The dragon turned toward the voice. His golden eyes were wide enough for Elara to see the white around them.

An arrow struck the soft skin beside his mouth.

He recoiled.

Fire came with the cry.

It did not pour from him in one clean stream. It burst out in a broken rush, sweeping across the meeting hall and the house beside it. Thatch caught at once. A man fell in the road, beating at his burning sleeve.

Everyone began shouting.

The dragon thrashed against the buildings hemming him in. His tail went through a stable wall. Horses screamed. Another volley of arrows

struck his wings, and he answered with fire because pain was the only language anyone had left him.

Elara's mother pulled her away from the window.

"The root cellar," she said. "Keep hold of me."

They went through the back door into smoke.

The yard had changed. Cinders drifted through it like red snow. Their apple tree burned along one side, its leaves curling in the heat. Elara covered her mouth with both hands, but smoke found its way between her fingers.

Her mother caught her wrist and ran.

The root cellar lay beyond the shed, built into the rise at the back of their garden. They were halfway there when the dragon's wing struck the roof.

The world came apart in wood and stone.

Her mother shoved her forward.

Elara hit the ground beside the cellar doors. Something heavy landed across her legs. For a moment there was no pain, only pressure and a strange quiet inside her head.

Then she heard her mother breathing.

Once.

Again.

Not again.

“Mama?”

Elara twisted beneath the broken timber. Pain tore through her ankle.

Behind her, most of the shed had collapsed into the yard.

Her mother lay beneath it.

Only one hand remained visible.

Elara reached for it, though she was too far away. “Mama.”

The dragon screamed again.

This time, another voice answered.

A shadow passed over the smoke. Wind flattened the burning grass as a second dragon descended into the yard.

She was pale where the first dragon was dark, her slate-colored scales silvered along the edges. Age had not yet bowed her, but scars crossed one wing and ran down the side of her neck. She landed between the wounded dragon and the men gathering in the lane.

The sounds she made were too deep for Elara to understand. They passed through the ground and into her bones.

The wounded dragon went still.

The pale dragon lowered her head to his. For one brief moment, the village disappeared around them. There was only the touch of her brow against his and a low sound that did not need translating.

Then she turned toward Elara.

Elara tried to pull herself free. The timber pressed harder against her legs.

The dragon came closer.

Every story Elara had ever heard told her to scream. She could not find enough breath.

One enormous golden eye lowered until it was level with her.

The dragon looked at the hand protruding from the wreckage. Then at Elara.

“Alive?”

The word was rough, shaped by a mouth not made for human speech.

Elara stared.

The dragon waited.

Elara shook her head.

Something changed in that golden eye. Not hunger. Not anger.

Grief.

The dragon placed one claw beneath the beam pinning Elara. The talon was longer than Elara’s arm, but it moved with impossible care.

“Do not move.”

She lifted.

Elara dragged herself free. The dragon curved one forefoot around her—not touching, only sheltering—and carried her away from the burning shed.

Men poured into the garden.

Elara's father was among them.

His face changed when he saw the wreckage. Then he saw Elara beneath the dragon's claws, and grief became something else.

He raised his spear.

“No!” Elara tried to stand. Her ankle folded, and she fell against the dragon's foot. “She helped me.”

Her father did not seem to hear.

The pale dragon could have killed him. Elara understood that even then. One sweep of her claws would have opened him from shoulder to hip.

Instead, she stepped back.

She left Elara in the grass and turned toward the wounded dragon.

He had reached the northern road. One wing dragged behind him. Men followed at a distance, loosing arrows whenever they found a clear path between the houses.

The pale dragon looked at Elara once more.

Then she followed him into the smoke.

Elara's father gathered her into his arms.

He held her so tightly it hurt. She let him.

Over his shoulder, she watched the pale dragon disappear.

They found the wounded dragon before dawn.

He had collapsed in a ravine less than two miles from the village. The men said he attacked when they approached. They said they had been given no choice. They said many things in the days that followed, and with every telling, the dragon's old wounds vanished from the story.

By the time the dead were buried, he had arrived from a clear sky with fire already in his mouth.

The second dragon had come to help him destroy what remained.

Elara told them otherwise.

"She saved me," she said.

The adults exchanged looks above her head. The healer said smoke could make the mind build strange memories. Her aunt said terror sometimes made kindness out of monsters.

Her father said nothing at all.

On the seventh day, he took Elara to the blacksmith's forge.

He had not shaved since her mother died. His eyes looked bruised, and the hand holding hers trembled whenever he thought she was not paying attention.

On the worktable lay a dragon's fang.

It was nearly as long as Elara's forearm, white at the tip and dark with blood at the root.

"It pierced their hide," the blacksmith said quietly. "When the spearheads couldn't."

Elara's father stared at the fang.

"Then make me a weapon from it."

Elara pulled at his hand. "Papa."

He looked down at her, and for a moment she saw the father who had carried her home from the river when she cut her foot. The father who tucked blankets beneath her chin and always saved the crisp edge of the honey cake for her.

Then he looked back at the fang.

"No dragon will do this to us again."

That evening, Elara found the pale dragon waiting beyond the burned apple tree.

She wore the shape of a woman now, wrapped in a gray cloak. Silver threaded her dark hair. The same golden eyes watched Elara approach.

Elara stopped several paces away.

"What was his name?" she asked.

The woman's face tightened.

"Korath."

“He killed my mama.”

“Yes.”

Elara had expected an excuse. The simple answer hurt more.

“My father killed him.”

“Yes.”

For a while, neither of them spoke.

Behind Elara, hammers rang from the forge. The blacksmith had begun shaping the fitting that would hold the fang.

“I am Senna,” the woman said at last.

Elara looked at the stranger who had saved her, and at the grief she recognized because it lived inside her too.

She did not forgive her.

Senna did not ask her to.

Elara sat beneath the burned apple tree.

After a moment, Senna sat beside her.

Behind them, the first weapon of the Long Hunt was being made.

CHAPTER ONE

EMRICK

The fang that formed the spear's blade was longer than Emrick's forearm.

It had yellowed slightly with age. Fine cracks ran through the enamel near its root, darkened by oil and old blood that no amount of polishing had entirely removed. Silver bands fixed it to a shaft of black ashwood, and forty-three narrow lines had been cut into the wood beneath the grip.

One for every dragon it had killed.

Garren Valemont held the spear across his open palms.

"Take it."

Emrick did.

Korath's Fang was lighter than he expected. He had seen it carried during oath ceremonies and displayed above the hearth in the trophy hall, but no one except the head of the family had been permitted to touch it in his lifetime. As a child, Emrick had imagined it would feel heavy with all the history people placed upon it.

Instead, its balance was almost perfect.

His father watched him adjust his grip. “Well?”

Emrick turned the spear once, careful of the low ceiling. The point followed the movement as though it had anticipated him. “I understand why Grandfather favored it.”

“Your grandfather favored anything that gave him an advantage.”

There was affection beneath the dry answer. Garren crossed the trophy hall and stopped beside the empty brackets above the hearth. Without Korath’s Fang resting there, the room looked wrong.

Scales covered the long walls in ordered rows, each marked beneath with a date and place. Horns curved down from the rafters. A single black claw sat beneath glass near the door, its tip worn smooth where generations of Valemont children had pressed their fingers against it despite being told not to.

Emrick had grown up among these remains. He knew their stories before he knew the names of Ardol’s kings and queens. The copper scales had come from a dragon killed above Northmere after it burned two farms. The broken horn belonged to one that had nested in a quarry and taken six workers before the hunters reached it. The pale wingbone over the western arch had been carried home by Elara Valemont’s father at the beginning of the Long Hunt.

None were decorations. His father had always insisted on that.

They were evidence.

“Captain Torven believes the tracks are genuine,” Garren said.

“And the fire?”

“Hot enough to fuse the iron hinges on the granary door.”

Emrick looked down at the spear.

Three attacks in twelve days. First a flock torn apart on one of the high pastures. Then the granary at the edge of Alderwick. Two nights ago, a pair of travelers had been found on the northern road, one burned beyond recognition and the other crushed beneath their overturned cart.

There had been sightings in the Greyspines for years—shadows above distant ridges, livestock disappearing from fields, stories carried down by shepherds who had spent too long alone. This was different. This had left bodies.

“We leave at dawn?” Emrick asked.

“Torven wants to examine the road before the rain destroys what remains of the trail.” Garren’s gaze stayed on the spear. “You leave within the hour.”

Emrick’s stomach tightened.

He had waited his entire life for those words. Now that they had come, the room seemed suddenly too quiet.

“You could still send someone else,” he said.

His father looked at him sharply.

Emrick kept his voice even. “Not instead of me. With me. Someone who has faced one before.”

“Torven has faced more than anyone currently serving this house.”

“I meant you.”

For a moment, Garren said nothing.

He was fifty-two, though most people assumed him older. Silver had overtaken the dark hair at his temples, and a dragon’s claw had left three pale ridges from his jaw to the collar of his shirt. He had killed nine dragons himself. As a boy, Emrick had thought that meant his father could not be frightened by anything.

He knew better now.

“The Hunter Council is already asking whether House Valemont can still protect its own territory,” Garren said. “If I lead the party, Calder will call it desperation. If my heir does, they will remember that this family has a future.”

There it was. Not the whole reason, but a true one.

Emrick ran his thumb over the nearest mark cut into the spear shaft.

“So this is for the council.”

“This is for the people burying their dead.” Garren stepped closer.

“The council is why it must be you.”

Emrick met his father's eyes.

"I would not send you if Torven believed you unready," Garren said.

"Neither would I place that weapon in your hands."

The words settled somewhere beneath Emrick's ribs.

Approval from his father never came loudly. It came in a hand resting briefly on his shoulder during training. A corrected stance offered without criticism. A place at the table when maps were unrolled and decisions made. Emrick had spent years learning to recognize it.

This was more than approval.

It was trust.

"Were you afraid?" he asked.

Garren's expression did not change, but his hand tightened around the back of a nearby chair.

"On your first hunt," Emrick added. "When you knew you might actually see one."

"Terrified."

The answer came without hesitation.

Emrick waited.

"Fear makes you careful," Garren said. "It reminds you that courage and stupidity often look alike from a distance." His eyes moved to Korath's

Fang. "Listen to Torven. Come home when he tells you to come home. No kill is worth your life."

Emrick smiled faintly. "Grandfather would disagree."

"Your grandfather is dead."

That ended the argument.

The door opened without a knock.

Romillie stood on the threshold, already dressed for the day in a dark green tunic and riding trousers. Her black hair had been tied back, though several strands had escaped around her face. At eighteen, she had mastered the particular stillness that meant she was angry and intended to make it someone else's problem.

Her gaze went first to Emrick, then to the spear.

"So it's true."

Garren's mouth flattened. "You were told to wait in the map room."

"I did. Then I became curious whether the meeting would begin before the dragon died of old age." She looked at Emrick again. "Torven is ready."

"I'll meet him in the courtyard."

Romillie did not move from the doorway.

"Was there something else?" Garren asked.

"No."

It was plainly a lie.

Emrick rested Korath's Fang against his shoulder. "Say it."

Her jaw shifted. "I hope you kill it."

"Thank you."

"And I hope you don't become unbearable afterward."

"No promises."

That drew the beginning of a smile, gone almost immediately.

Romillie stepped aside to let him pass. As Emrick reached her, she touched the leather strap crossing his chest and pulled it tighter.

"That was loose," she muttered.

"I knew that."

"Of course you did."

She walked toward the map room without waiting for them.

Garren watched her go. "Your sister believes she should be joining you."

"My sister believes she should be in charge of most things."

"She is frequently right."

Emrick glanced at him, uncertain whether he was joking. His father had already turned away.

They found Captain Torven bent over a map with Leora Valemont beside him.

Emrick's mother had tied her silvering brown hair into a low knot. A ring of keys hung from her waist, along with the narrow notebook she used to track everything from grain stores to broken roof tiles. Where Garren commanded the hunters, Leora kept Valemont Keep and the land around it functioning.

She looked up when Emrick entered. Her eyes stopped on the spear.

"I see the decision has been made."

Garren moved to the table. "It was made when the second body was found."

Leora's lips pressed together, but she said nothing more.

Torven nodded to Emrick. He was a compact man nearing fifty, with iron-gray hair cut close to his head and an old scar pulling at the corner of his mouth. He had removed his gloves and placed four small objects on the map.

Emrick leaned closer.

Two were blackened fragments of wood. One was a bronze-colored scale no larger than a coin. The last was the head of an iron bolt, bent almost double.

"From the cart?" Emrick asked.

"Found beneath it." Torven tapped the bolt. "Not ours. No maker's mark."

“Was it fired at the dragon?”

“Possibly. Could have been part of the travelers’ load.”

The scale drew Emrick’s attention. Its surface had lost its shine, and a dark residue clung to one edge.

“Blood?”

“We think so.”

“Then it’s wounded.”

Torven gave him a brief, assessing look. “Likely.”

“Wounded creatures return to shelter,” Emrick said. “It may be denning near the northern road.”

“Or it may circle back to remove anything that followed it.” Torven straightened. “Books can teach you the first possibility. Experience teaches you to expect the second.”

Garren folded his arms. “How many are you taking?”

“Five. Rafe, two trackers, Emrick, and me. A larger party will be easier to hear and harder to move through the upper woods.”

“Take eight.”

“Five.”

Something passed between the two men. They had known each other too long for rank to make every disagreement polite.

Garren looked at the bent bolt, then at his son. “Six.”

“Five,” Torven repeated. “And when we leave the keep, he follows my orders. Not yours.”

Emrick felt his mother’s attention shift toward him.

Garren’s expression hardened. Then, slowly, he nodded. “Bring them all home.”

“That is the intention.”

Torven began gathering the evidence into a leather pouch.

“Captain,” Emrick said. “How many dragons have you killed?”

“Six.”

It was fewer than Emrick had expected and more than any living hunter he knew besides his father.

“How many hunts?”

“Enough to know the number of kills is the least useful thing about a hunter.” Torven closed the pouch. “Be in the courtyard in twenty minutes. If you are late, we leave without you.”

He departed.

Emrick’s mother waited until the door shut behind him.

“You haven’t eaten.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“That was not a question.”

She handed him a wrapped parcel from the side table. Bread, hard cheese, and slices of cold apple. Emrick could smell the rosemary before he opened it.

Leora adjusted the collar of his hunting coat, though it did not need adjusting.

“Your father will tell you to be brave,” she said quietly. “Torven will tell you to be careful. I would prefer you be both, but if you must choose, choose careful.”

“Father said much the same.”

“Then perhaps the world truly is ending.”

Emrick laughed. His mother did not, but some of the tension left her face.

“Come back,” she said.

He covered her hand with his. “I will.”

The courtyard smelled of horses, wet stone, and sourleaf.

Rafe was responsible for the last of those. He stood beside a gray mare, chewing one of the bitter leaves while checking the straps on his saddle. Sandy hair fell across his forehead, and a thin scar cut through his left eyebrow.

He glanced at Korath’s Fang as Emrick approached.

“That seems excessive.”

“It has worked forty-three times.”

“So has dropping a large rock, if you choose the right height.” Rafe spat the chewed leaf into the drain. “First hunt?”

“First dragon.”

“Good. If this were your first hunt, I’d tie you to the gate until we returned.”

“Would Torven allow that?”

“Torven would bring better rope.”

The captain appeared behind him. “Keep talking, Rafe. We can test the theory.”

Rafe mounted without another word.

The remaining hunters were brothers named Edren and Pell, both lean and quiet, with the weathered look of men who spent more nights beneath trees than roofs. Emrick had trained with them twice and had never managed to tell whether they approved of him.

Torven inspected Emrick’s gear himself. He checked the fastening on Korath’s Fang, tested the draw of Emrick’s bow, and removed one of the two knives from his belt.

“You won’t need this.”

“It’s a spare.”

“It’s weight.” Torven handed the knife to a waiting stable boy. “Out there, your name means nothing. You follow when I move, stop when I stop, and run if I tell you. If you see the dragon, you do not chase it. If you lose sight of the party, you call once and remain where you are.”

Emrick glanced at Rafe. “What if you fall from a cliff?”

“Then you may ignore the order about remaining where you are.”

Rafe looked disappointed that Torven had answered seriously.

Garren and Leora stood beneath the courtyard arch. Romillie had climbed the western wall and was watching from between two merlons, her bow held loosely at her side.

Emrick mounted his bay gelding and settled Korath’s Fang into the long sheath beside his saddle.

His father approached.

For a moment, Emrick expected another instruction. A reminder about weak points or wind direction. Something he could carry as proof that Garren believed him ready.

Instead, his father rested one hand against Emrick’s boot.

“Protect them,” he said.

Emrick looked toward the road descending to Alderwick.

“I will.”

They rode through the gates.

People had gathered along Alderwick's main road by the time the hunters reached it. No one cheered. This was not one of the old songs, with bright banners and a dragon already dead by the final verse. The burned granary stood black against the pale morning, and the smell still hung over the town.

A woman near the well held a little boy against her skirts. Both watched the spear at Emrick's side.

He lifted his hand to them.

The woman did not lift hers back.

They passed the northern gate and followed the road toward the Greyspines.

Rain began before midday, light enough to silver the air without settling the dust. The mountains disappeared behind cloud. Alderwick fell away below them, its slate roofs and narrow streets becoming smaller until the keep was the only clear shape on the ridge above it.

Emrick looked back once.

Romillie was no longer visible on the wall.

"Eyes ahead," Torven called.

Emrick faced the mountains.

They left the road in the late afternoon and made camp beneath a shelf of gray stone where the first dense pines began. Torven allowed no

fire. They ate cold food and spoke little while Edren and Pell examined the muddy ground beyond the trees.

The brothers returned as the light was failing.

“Tracks,” Pell said.

“Dragon?” Torven asked.

“Too damaged to be certain. Something large came down from the eastern ridge and returned the same way.”

“How recent?”

“Two days. Maybe three.”

Torven looked toward the darkening trees. “We begin there at first light.”

Rafe rolled his shoulders beneath his cloak. “I was hoping for a pleasant walk and an early return.”

“You may return whenever you like,” Torven said.

“And miss watching Valemont meet his first dragon? Never.”

Emrick ignored him and checked Korath’s Fang for the fourth time.

The spear had killed creatures larger than the one they followed. Faster ones. Older ones. Every mark beneath his hand represented a hunter who had stood where he stood now and done what duty required.

The thought steadied him.

Darkness gathered between the pines.

Then a cry came down from the mountains.

It was not the roar from the old stories. There was no triumph in it.

The sound rose raw and uneven, broke halfway through, and began again.

The horses pulled against their tethers.

Every hunter went still.

Rafe stopped smiling.

Torven rose with one hand on his sword. "That's close."

Emrick tightened his grip around Korath's Fang.

Somewhere beyond the trees, something was suffering.

He had been taught that suffering made dragons dangerous.

By morning, he meant to end it.