



THE DRAGON OF GWENT

EMMA SHELFORD

Merlin waved me forward from atop his bay gelding.

“Hurry up, Altheda. If we’re quick, we can reach the village before the rains drench us.”

I looked at the threatening sky with trepidation and patted my horse’s neck.

“We’ll find you some hay soon, Djinn,” I said.

Pattering drops hit my woolen cloak when we passed the first hut. Merlin peered around doubtfully.

“Where is everyone? It’s hours until dusk. I was hoping for a hot stew and a pretty maiden to serve it.”

“Of course you were,” I said absently, scanning the motley assortment of dwellings. A door to my right creaked open. “Simple pleasures for a simple man. Look, there.”

I pointed at the opening door under its moldering thatched roof. Merlin dismounted and rapped smartly on the wooden lintel.

A ragged peasant man peered out from the crack between door and house. His frightened eyes raked over our finely woven cloaks and well-fed horses.

“How can I help you, good sirs?” he said.

“I suppose a hot meal is out of the question,” Merlin muttered. Before the man could do more than look chagrined, Merlin said, “You can tell us what has happened here. Why are you all shut behind closed doors?”

“The dragon,” the man whispered in such a tone of doom that the hairs on my neck prickled. “It has nested in the woods to the south and steals our livestock.”

“A dragon,” Merlin said in disbelief. “I don’t believe they exist. I’ve certainly never seen one.”

“It’s real!” A small girl appeared with a sheep at her heel. Livestock sounds drifted from the dim interior. She clutched her father’s leg and gazed at us, her eyes wide with fear. “My cousin saw the monster, felt its fiery breath.”

“We fear for our lives.” The man stroked his daughter’s hair. “If the beast doesn’t leave soon, it will eat more than our sheep next.”

“We wish you luck,” I said quickly. All this talk of dragons recalled the stories Father told me as a child. They had terrified me then, and terror was a difficult emotion to shake. “Come on, Merlin.”

Merlin mounted his horse and followed me silently out of the tiny village. When he spoke, his voice was thoughtful.

“It always amazes me what people will believe. I trained with the Druids in Eire, and they thought that the spirits of nature could be summoned. Preposterous.”

“But what if the dragon is real?” I tried to sound calm and matter of fact, but my mouth was dry. “Perhaps we should avoid the southern woods, take another path.”

Merlin scoffed.

“You’re letting a fairy tale told by an overexcited shepherd dissuade you from our path. Come on, Altheda. It’s not real.”

I swallowed and didn’t answer. Merlin was probably right, and there was no such thing as a dragon.

But what if he were wrong?

The forest was quiet with the rainfall. No birds sang, and only the pattering of raindrops on leaves in the canopy disturbed the waiting silence. Our horses picked their hooves along the dirt track in single file. Merlin’s gelding flicked his tail irritably when my horse wandered too close. Like her owner, my mare was nervous in the still woods. Could she sense a dragon nearby?

A hut appeared in a tiny dell when we crested a slope. Two skinny boys played in the shelter of a towering maple, and a woman scattered seed for beleaguered hens damp with the drizzle.

“Hello,” I called out, anxious to hear news of this mythical dragon. “Are you not nervous of the dragon in these woods?”

The woman spread her unoccupied hand in a gesture of helplessness.

“We are afraid, but what can we do? There is nowhere else we can go, and the dragon will do what it will. I only hope it will spare the pig.” She pointed at a fat sow in a pen beside the hut. “Without that meat this winter, my children will starve.”

Merlin and I glanced at each other. This woman did not have the panic of the shepherd, but she believed in the dragon. Was there truth in the tale?

“Which way to the monster?” Merlin asked.

“The path forks up ahead.” The woman pointed. “The left fork will take you to the river. The right, to the dragon.”

Merlin tossed a coin to each of the boys, who giggled and leaped to catch them, then we carried on our silent way.

The memory of the two skinny boys and the solitary pig they depended on wouldn't leave me. I looked at the sharp broadsword hanging on the scabbard at my hip. I had trained to defeat my enemies with this blade since I was a child. Would I let a childhood terror stop me from defending those who could not defend themselves?

I heaved a great sigh, and when Merlin turned his horse toward the river, I took the right fork. He

twisted in his saddle and grinned when he saw where I was going.

“Excellent! Let’s disprove this dragon business once and for all.”

I answered his grin and kicked my horse into a trot, Merlin at my mare’s heels. The forest grew thicker and darker, and I drew my hood tighter about my face. Although the path had turned into little more than a deer trail, broken branches spoke to someone’s recent passage.

“There’s smoke ahead,” Merlin said quietly from behind me.

I slowed my horse to a walk and stared into the gloom, my heart pounding painfully in my chest. What if the dragon were real?

I dismounted and tied the reins to a branch. My horse munched happily on a clump of leaves. When Merlin’s horse was also secure, we unsheathed our swords and crept forward. My mouth was dry, and my palm was sweaty on my pommel, but I thought of the two boys and their pig, and my resolved hardened. Today, we would vanquish a dragon.

Merlin gave me a hand sign that he would approach from the side. When I nodded, he melted into the woods. I was alone, and my breath came in ragged pants too noisy for stealth. I fought to control myself as I paced forward.

Soon, the flickering glow of firelight shone through the underbrush. The dragon was close. Gulping, I gripped my pommel and squared my

shoulders. It was time to conquer a dragon and my own terrors.

I burst from my cover. Fire leaped up with licking flames past the terrible face of a gigantic lizard. It reared up in a frozen posture of snarling menace. Sightless eyes stared at me above sharp teeth each as long as my hand.

I raised my sword and released a wordless battle cry, then I paused. The dragon didn't move, and I squinted in suspicion.

Was it stuck in the rock? Now that I looked harder, the dragon was only the half-buried bones of a tremendous animal. My eyes raked the small clearing, and I frowned in disbelief.

Three sheep were tied to a tree, with a pig grunting softly close by. Signs of a campsite—a bedroll, a pot near the fire, a spare cloak—were littered under nearby trees.

At a rustling sound, I whirled to my left with sword outstretched. Merlin strode from behind a tree with a man's collar in his fist. He grinned.

"Looks like we caught a thief."

"Did you see our dragon?" I laughed in relief. "Only old bones." I fixed my eye on the scruffy thief in Merlin's grasp. "You will return the livestock to their owners and not bother them again."

The man looked downcast.

"Yes, I will."

Merlin rolled his eyes and pressed a few coins into the man's hand.

“There. To get you started so you won’t feel the urge to steal again.”

The man’s eyes popped, and he stammered his thanks. While he collected his belongings for our trip back to the village, I gazed at the dragon skeleton.

“There may not have been a dragon here,” I said to Merlin. “But there were dragons once.”

“Only old bones,” he said. “We don’t even know if it was a dragon. People will believe anything.”

I looked again at the glaring eye sockets and fearsome teeth. We might not have fought a dragon today, but I was sure that the world contained more mystery than Merlin believed. I might have conquered my terrors, but who knew what else lurked in the dark corners of this land?