

# THOSE WHO FAVOR FIRE

BY JO WALTON

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This document contains the first three chapters of an unfinished sequel to *Tooth and Claw*; there are currently no plans to complete or publish the book. Readers are strongly advised to read *Tooth and Claw* first, since the fate of several characters is revealed in this excerpt.

*Tooth And Claw* was published by Tor in 2003; an Orb trade paperback is scheduled for publication in January 2009.

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## CHAPTER ONE: IN IRIETH BEFORE THE SEASON

### I. A Call at the Londaver Establishment.

**W**hen once a gently born young dragon has grown his wings, however fond he may be of his comfortable home, he naturally longs to leave and make his mark in a wider sphere of life. Doting mothers allow their sons to leave them, first for the inimitable education offered to all gently born dragons at school and at the Circle, then, with perhaps a little more trepidation, for the joys of Irieth and the wider world beyond. Some young dragons manage to run through a fortune in these youthful years, others, less fortunate, are kept on a strict allowance by their parents. Still others must make their own way in the world. Soon such young dragons choose among the respectable professions where a rising dragon may hope to show the shine on his scales, the Church, the Army, the Law, the Offices, or, most dangerous but most promising of all, Politics. However it may be, all a young dragon's family can do is watch and hope as he moves into this new sphere, leaving his home and family behind except for what dutiful visits he may bring himself to pay them. His friends may try to help from the sidelines, but it remains largely his own doing whether he will eat or be eaten in his new career.

As for well-born maiden dragons, who usually, if they hope to maintain the title Respected, must live at home until they marry, they also are moved by the youthful urge to feel new air beneath their wings. Their parents generally deal with this by allowing them a season in Irieth, to see and be seen, after which they generally marry and are assumed to have put aside all such desires.

Illustrious Londaver had been persuaded by his wife Haner to take a town house in Irieth for the season for just such a purpose. The two daughters, the only survivors of their parents' first clutch, Aeslyn and Lamith, were nearly eighty years old, and, in their own estimation and their mother's, approaching an intolerable pitch of restlessness. Their father had complained of the boredom and the expense of an Irieth season. Londaver was not a rich demesne, nor had the enlightened principles of its present rulers wrung from it every drop of blood or piece of gold it might have been made to yield. As to the expense, Haner said it would be worth it to have the maidens off their hands. The issue of boredom she dealt with by saying that Londaver himself might stay at home with the younger dragonets if he liked, except for two weeks towards the end of the season when he must be present for a rout-party and a ball. Londaver shuddered in horror and the maidens shuddered in delight, but their father gave in at last.

The Londaver sisters therefore came to town under their mother's chaperonage towards the end of the month of Thaw in a flurry of delighted preparations. Having prepared themselves for the very heights of pleasure, they were now waiting with more or less patience for the season to begin. Their mother had chosen a beautiful house in almost the deepest darkness of fashion, largely underground and well-furnished with baths, sleeping rooms, dining rooms and the most elegant Speaking Room imaginable. It was in the fashionable Marshalling Quarter, mere steps from the even more fashionable Southwest Quarter, where such a house would have cost twice as much, as Haner pointed out tartly to Aeslyn when that maiden dared to raise a complaint.

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While they were still settling themselves into their elegant hired establishment, one morning while Aeslyn had departed expressing her intention of visiting the burnisher's and Haner was about some political business, the young Illustrious Marcanil Daverak came to call. Marcanil was a well-bred, not to say stuffy, young dragon who would not usually consider calling upon an unaccompanied young maiden. On learning that only Lamith was at home, he hesitated on the threshold. After a moment he decided to go in. No doubt Haner would be home soon. In any case, Lamith and Marcanil were cousins, their mothers had been sisters. Even more than that, they had spent a great part of their childhood together, they were almost more siblings than cousins. Besides, he was burning with his news, which he imparted almost as soon as he was seated with his cousin in the speaking room.

"They could tear you to pieces," Lamith said, with the delightful little shudder with which well-brought-up maiden dragons contemplate unlikely horrors. The shudder rippled down the twenty foot length of her golden scales to the very tip of her tail, and Marcanil watched it with a smile that was indulgent but not at all brotherly.

"They don't tear you to pieces unless they think you presume," he said. "I'll have Uncle Sher's name at the head of my list, and Uncle Avan's directly beneath it. My list is a hundred dragons long – just ask Lodie, she spent a week writing it out for me. I'm not the slightest bit afraid, even if it will be my first time in the chamber."

"Then it's quite safe really?" Lamith asked, her wings drooping a little in disappointment.

Marcanil was a young dragon, and all young dragons like to be thought brave by beautiful maidens, even when the maiden in question was a younger cousin known from babyhood. "Well, theoretically, of course, the dragons of the Prime could take one look at me and decide to rend and eat me there and then," he said. Lamith shuddered again, and Marcanil raised his head a little, posing like an ancient Honourable on his way to single combat. "I'm an orphan, after all, and my father died in a blaze of notoriety. I don't think it's likely, with all the names on my scroll, but it's just the kind of risk that we have to take."

"You're so brave," Lamith said, her silver eyes whirling a little in admiration.

The doorway of the Speaking Room darkened, and both young dragons looked up.

"Aunt Haner!" Marcanil, who had been sitting sejant, uncurled his tail, raised his wings as best he could and dipped them again in salute.

The Illust Haner Londaver greeted her nephew formally, then came forward to embrace him. She was a glorious matronly red, having been married for a hundred years and borne two clutches, but she moved with the same grace and enthusiasm as her daughter, and might easily have been mistaken for her older married sister. "Marcanil, my dear young dragon, how are you? I haven't seen you in an age." Haner bowed to her nephew. "Is dear Lodie in Irieth with you?"

"No, my sister is still in Daverak, looking after everything," Marcanil said.

"Oh Mother, Marcanil has left the Circle and he's going to enter the Cupola and means to make his career in Politics!" Lamith said, blurting out all her cousin's news in one mouthful.

Haner started, drew back and looked at Marcanil, who bowed his head. "This seems a very hasty decision," she said. "Have you considered taking your place and then going into the Offices for a few years first, before braving the dangers of a political life?"

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Marcanil laughed. "That's precisely what Uncle Avan said. But I don't need to build up my wealth, I have inherited Daverak whole, thanks to your kindness."

"Your Uncle Londaver's kindness, not mine," Haner said, frowning a little. "It suited us very well to have a home of our own while my parents-in-law lived and you grew to your strength. You have thanked us enough. As for wealth, yes indeed, you have Daverak. It's rather wisdom I'd see you build up before you take such risks. Isn't the work of the demesne of Daverak sufficient for you?"

"Time enough to settle down to administering Daverak when I'm older," Marcanil said. "At present, Lodie lives there and can keep an eye on it."

"You can't rely on your sister," Haner said. "Lodie will be wanting to marry soon. Maybe I should have brought her up to Irieth with us this season." Lamith's horrified look showed how pleased she was that it was too late for this idea to be put into practice.

"She's happy enough at Daverak for now," Marcanil said. "When she wants to settle down, I daresay I shall too, we're clutchmates after all. For now, I want to take my place in the glorious administration of Tiamath, to make a difference. Great affairs are being decided, things that will affect every dragon until the end of time, and I want to take my place and have a voice in them now, not later when I'm older and everything is settled. Don't disapprove, Aunt Haner, I couldn't bear it. I've always thought of you as more of a mother than an aunt."

"If I have any influence over you I hope it's for good," Haner said, but she allowed herself to be mollified. "Well, I suppose young dragons need to stretch their wings, and this is your way of doing it."

"It's a very traditional way. I have a right to represent Daverak in the Cupola, as in Daverak itself. I have a scroll of names of dragons who support me." He glanced over at Lamith, guiltily. "There's no real risk."

"We could certainly do with more progressives in the Cupola," Haner said, giving way entirely. "You're absolutely right about great affairs. This very season, the Noble Assembly will be debating Subjugation. Your Uncle Sher is bringing a bill before them. It's why I've come to town, to be at hand in case there's anything I can do to help."

"I thought you'd come to town so we could have a season," Lamith said. "That's certainly what you told Papa."

"Two beeves with one spear," Haner said, turning to her daughter and smiling.

Lamith smiled back. "Papa will be here to take his seat for the vote, because that is when you will hold your ball," she said, awed at her mother's cleverness.

"It's just as you've always taught me, that every dragon has a stake in the world, and every dragon should be free to take a place in it. I want to hold the line against Subjugation, that's why I am so eager to take my place in the Assembly," Marcanil said.

"We do need every claw, though you're so young," Haner said. Marcanil glanced over at his cousin. Lamith's silver eyes were wide open and whirling with pride.

"I wish I were male and could do as much for the poor bound servants," she said.

"I'll do it for you," Marcanil said, his scales almost glowing with pride and delight.

## 2. At the Club

At length Marcanil left his aunt's establishment for his club, which was located a short stroll along the river-front in the Toris Quarter. Inside he gave up his hat gratefully to the gatekeeper and hesitated for a moment in the hall. The sound of merry voices came to him from the gambling room, and the scent of long-dead muttonwools from the dining room. He was hungry, yet he hesitated. He belonged to the club because his dead father had belonged to it and because it furnished good company, not for the food. Food in Irieth was legendarily terrible. It is not possible to feed fresh meat to a city of several hundred thousand hungry dragons. Preserved meat, whether dried or smoked, will do at a pinch, but is not satisfying day after day. The meat proclaimed fresh in the markets of Irieth might have been already dead for several days. Yet even within the city there were better dinners and worse dinners, and the club provided some of the worst dinners poor Marcanil had ever been called upon to eat. He had entertained hopes of being invited to stay for a meal with his aunt, but the Londavers had an engagement and were dining away from home.

As he stood considering whether to eat a bad dinner or to seek good company, the outer door opened to admit two dragons. "Commander Alwad," the gatekeeper murmured politely, and then, "Sanj! I didn't know you were in town."

"I just this moment flew in ahead of the train," the young dragon addressed replied. "The rest of the family are coming along slowly with the baggage and the servants. They'll be opening Benandi House, so I shan't need to beg a bed here, but I thought I'd come along and hear the news."

"You're always very welcome here for whatever purpose," the gatekeeper said.

Marcanil turned around to confirm his suspicions. The elegant bronze dragon the gatekeeper casually addressed as "Sanj" was indeed his own cousin the Illustrious Sanjild Benandi. Sanj's title was not, like Marcanil's own, a title earned by inheritance. It was a title of courtesy only, which Sanj would hold until his father died and he became Exalted Benandi in his place.

"Hello Sanj," he said, feeling, as always, a little outshone by his showy cousin.

"Why, Marc. What a stroke of luck," Sanj said. "I was just discussing family affairs with Alwad here, who is a cousin by courtesy, and there you are to confirm the news. Were you going in?"

"I was wondering whether to eat here," Marcanil admitted.

"Oh my dear fellow, never lunch or dine at this place. The food's appalling." The gatekeeper laughed sycophantically. "Let's all have a beer or two and then go and dine at Benandi House after the servants have had a chance to get something ready. Grandmother insisted on bringing up some beeves for tonight. I've been listening to them lowing for the last thousand miles, so I've never looked forward to a meal more."

"Fresh meat! An excellent suggestion," Alwad said. "But you'll have to introduce me to your cousin, Sanj."

Sanj checked his stride. "Certainly. I thought you must know each other. Marcanil, this is the Respectable Commander Alwad Telstie, whose cousin Sebeth is married to our Uncle Avan. Alwad, this is my cousin the Illustrious Marcanil Daverak, whose mother was Berend Agornin, sister to my mother Selendra, may she fly ever free with Veld."

Only on the last words, speaking of his dead mother, did the laughter leave his voice, and only then did Marcanil realize quite how it bubbled constantly under almost everything that Sanj said. Marcanil bowed to Alwad, and Alwad bowed back. Alwad was an older

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dragon, forty feet long, perhaps of their parents' generation. His scales bore scars that spoke of his army life, had not the military title "Commander" been sufficient. Marcanil was not ready to acknowledge him a relation, though he certainly must be considered as a family connection.

"Now, some beer, before my flame bursts out of my throat and burns down the entire establishment," Alwad said. Sanj led the way into a small speaking room, just big enough for three and furnished in the quaint old fashioned style of light stones set against dark. Sanj sat couchant against the far curve of the wall. Alwad placed himself beside a small table, and Marcanil took the near wall. Almost as soon as they had settled, a scuttling servant brought beer. This speed astonished Marcanil.

"They like me here," Sanj said, catching the tail of surprise in Marcanil's eyes. "They need time to get used to you."

"You're younger than I am!" Marcanil said, which wasn't what he had intended to say at all. Sanj laughed.

"Well yes, but you've only just come down from the Circle, whereas I only spent one year at the tedious place, just enough to be able to say 'When I was at the Circle' in society for the rest of my life, which is all it's good for as far as I can see."

"It's a good place for making friends," Alwad murmured, taking a drink.

"It's perfectly possible to make friends in Irieth," Sanj retorted. "In any case, coming from my family, I might almost say I have enough friends ready made for me, and enemies too for that matter. There are few enough, at the Circle or elsewhere, who will choose to be friendly to be because I am Sanj, rather than because I am Illustrious Benandi, son of my father. Small wonder I seek out those who will."

"I think that is the same for everyone, when they are young and their family is prominent," Marcanil ventured.

Sanj waved a claw dismissingly. "So, Marcanil, I hear I am not the only dragon of our family to be taking his seat in the Noble Assembly this season."

Marcanil was pleased Sanj had heard. "Did your father tell you?" he asked.

"Father? No, as far as I know he knows nothing about it. He hasn't even arrived in Irieth yet, he's still on the train from Benandi. Alwad told me in the street on the way here. Have you heard about it?"

"Your father certainly does know, because I asked him myself to endorse my candidacy. He and Uncle Avan are the first two names on my scroll." Marcanil stretched his wings a little at the thought.

"You're to take your place for Daverak?" Sanj blinked. "What a charming idea. I am likewise to take the place for the Dignity of Agornin, as Father holds the seat for Benandi. It'll be a pure formality, of course."

"I intend to take my place to have a voice upon the issues and make a career in politics," Marcanil said, feeling silly rather than brave, now he had no female admiration as wind beneath his wings.

"Why, I shall certainly follow tradition and vote myself, when I am in Irieth, or when Father especially calls on me to do so," Sanj said, the laughter bubbling to the surface again. "But there's nothing unusual in the two of us taking our places, me as my father's heir and you to confirm yourself in your father's position now you've come of age. What is unusual, and what Alwad told me about, is Gerin, who wants to take a Mountain seat."

"Gerin?" Marcanil echoed, astonished, feeling his pink eyes whirling out of control. "Our cousin Gerin Agornin? Why in the world would he want to do it?"

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“And what a way he's going about it,” Sanj said. “He has no natural seat, of course, with his father being a parson.”

“Nobody ever thought Gerin would be a parson,” Alwad put in.

“Well, no, because he's fabulously wealthy in his own right,” Marcanil said. “His parents hardly have gold to line their bed, but when Gerin was a dragonet he discovered an ancient treasure under the Mountains in Benandi.”

“Some say Father should have kept it all for himself,” Sanj said. “Still, he divided it with Mother and with the two Agornin dragonets. The one who actually found it died not long after, broke his leg and never got his strength back, the way it happens sometimes. I don't even remember his name.”

“Wontas, may he fly free,” Marcanil said. “I can remember him. I was at his funeral, not long after my father's death. Aunt Felin was terribly distressed, and so was your mother, that's what I chiefly remember. As for Gerin, we thought for a while he'd die himself of the shock. He was so upset he could hardly eat.”

“Before I was born,” Sanj said, dismissing his dead cousin with a wave of his claw.

“To get back to the live and fascinating Gerin,” Alwad said, draining his beer and pouring another. “He may have been upset when his brother died, almost anyone with any sensitivity at all is upset when they lose a clutchmate. But he got over it, he grew up in the normal way, he's never been terribly bothered by anything since, as far as I know. He took a prominent place in society from the time he left the Circle, largely because everyone knows that he's fabulously wealthy. Frankly, with the way he gambles he'd have run through anything short of fabled wealth long ago. He's never shown any sign of interest in anything, other than gambling, drinking, dancing at respectable balls and leaving them to chase after tails of rather less virtue. But suddenly now he's announced that he means to support Rimalin's Mountain party and he's collecting endorsements to take a position in the Assembly.”

“If he'd let us know he wanted it, if he'd ever shown any signs of being interested in a career in politics, no doubt Father would have found a place for him,” Sanj said. “Veld knows it's not that unusual for a dragon to develop an interest in great affairs when he grows large enough to settle down – Father did it himself. He'd done no more than take his place in courtesy in the Assembly until after Mother died, and now he leads the party. But it sounds as if Gerin means to work directly against Father and all that we Rivers have been doing.”

“But why?” Marcanil asked, looking at his beer as if he must have drunk enough of it to muddle his head. “What does he have to gain from it? The Mountains are mostly ancient plod-to-churches, dragons like your grandmother. I wouldn't have thought that would be where Gerin would want to fly, even if he has taken up a late interest in political affairs.”

“We haven't the dimmest glow of an idea,” Alwad said.

“I've never known him very well,” Marcanil admitted. “I spent most of my youth with Aunt Haner and Uncle Londaver. When we visited Benandi we always stayed with you, not at the Parsonage.”

“I always had the feeling he resented us for some reason.” Sanj shrugged, serious for once. “He was always there, but always older, he never had time for Orald and me, and then he went away to the Circle about the time when Darapenth was born and Mother died. Since then I've hardly seen him, though Uncle Penn has let me know how he's doing – which has generally been just what you've said, Alwad, once I read between the lines of Uncle Penn's words. Drinking and gambling and chasing pretty tails. I can't think of any

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reason why he might suddenly decide to try politics seriously, or if he should, why he would take up with Rimalin's crowd."

"Maybe he's run through his money," Marcanil suggested.

"My old nanny Amer used to lull me to sleep with stories about the machines they brought to drag it all out of the mountain," Sanj said. "There was gold there in fabulous quantities. Mother's share, which is Dara's dowry, fills a whole tunnel, and Gerin got twice that, his own and his brother's share."

"Doesn't seem likely, I admit," Alwad said. "Still, it's gold, and I've seen him myself lose thousands of crowns in an evening at the card table."

Marcanil wondered if Alwad had perhaps won some of those thousands of crowns from his cousin.

"Thousands of crowns would be nothing to what he found," Sanj insisted. "We're talking about the *treasure of Majestic Tomalin*. I grew up on the stories of that discovery. Nobody could run through that much gold in – what is it, a mere century?"

"He must have some reason for taking up politics though, and I'd dearly like to know what it is," Alwad mused.

"I'll be sure to ask him if I see him," Marcanil said.

"And if you do, you must let us know what he replies," Sanj said, laughing once more.

### 3. Gerin Agornin.

In truth, even fabulous wealth, treasure of ancient kings discovered under the hills, gold enough to fill tunnels, can come to an end.

Gerin Agornin opened a slit of eye and regarded his servant, Parten. Parten was his usual immaculate self, his seven foot length neatly poised to obey his master's wishes, every black scale clean, even the bindings on his wings were tied impeccably. The only unusual thing was that he was standing in his master's bedroom, practically on the gold that constituted his master's comfortable bed, before his master had called for him, or thought of calling for him, or of waking up at all.

"I really do feel you should get up, sir," Parten said.

"I have the feeling you've been saying that for a while," Gerin said, yawning hugely, revealing the great cavern of his mouth.

"Yes, sir," Parten said, allowing a trace of emotion to underline his respectful words.

Gerin laughed and stretched his wings a little. "Yet I don't recall giving orders for you to wake me?" he said.

"No, sir." Parten looked pained. "I used my own judgement this time."

"What time is it, anyway?"

"It's an hour before noon," Parten said, neutrally.

"I don't know when I got to bed but it couldn't have been less than two hours after midnight," Gerin said, yawning again.

"Yes, sir."

"A long political party, at Rimalin's, which went on very late. Opening of the pre-season sort of thing. You must know when I came in, you helped put me to bed."

"Yes, sir."

"So what's so shell-cracking important that you felt you had the right to exercise your judgement and wake me so early?"

"There is a morning caller for you, sir."

"You woke me for a *morning caller*?" Gerin opened both eyes wide to stare at Parten. "Have you taken leave of your senses? Has caring for me driven you completely out of your wits at last, Parten? I never see morning callers, and they are content to leave their cards and consider their social duty done."

"Yes, sir," Parten said. "Generally, you are entirely correct. Yet, in this particular circumstance I felt it best to waken you."

"Who is it?" The possibilities raced through Gerin's mind. "You wouldn't wake me for a creditor. My father? Surely he's not in town? Exalt Benandi? I heard they were coming up."

"It's your cousin, sir."

"Which cousin? I have dozens. Sanj Benandi? You surely haven't woken me for Sanj, Parten?"

"No, sir. The cousin in question is the Respected Aeslyn Londaver."

Gerin groaned and fell back on his gold. "I knew they were in town. Aunt Haner left a card already. Tell them I'll return their call one of these days, though I shan't."

"No, sir."

Gerin growled.

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Parten unruffled, went on undeterred. "You don't understand, sir. The Respected Aeslyn Londaver is here alone, not with her mother and sister, nor even with some other companion, but entirely unescorted."

Gerin leapt out of bed, his wings opening, of their own accord, as if forgetting that he was underground and could not fly. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?" he asked. "My hat, Parten, at once."

"Your hat, sir." Parten handed him a neatly folded morning hat, which Gerin snatched and settled onto his head at an angle. Parten reached up to straighten it, but was brushed aside by his master's wings.

"No time for that. Where did you put her? Who else knows?"

"She's in your study, sir, and as far as I am informed, no other members of the household are aware of her presence. I opened the door to her myself, and I have not called for refreshments."

"So she's been sitting there all this time without refreshments?" Gerin left the bedchamber and hurried along the upward-sloping passage towards the public parts of the establishment. Parten followed, taking care to avoid his master's lashing tail.

"Sorry, sir, I felt that under the circumstances..." Parten's explanation trailed off diplomatically.

"No, you were quite right," Gerin said. "But bring us something now, without letting the kitchen staff know who's here."

"Tea, sir? I fear anything more substantial might risk damage to the library."

"Tea," Gerin confirmed, coming to the library door. "But be quick about it. I want to get her out of here and back where she belongs as soon as I can."

The library door had been one of the features of the establishment that had caused Gerin to choose to hire it as his base in Irieth. Doors, generally, were regarded as old fashioned, and possibly a little seditious. They had overtones of the Old Religion, of conspiracies, of clandestine meetings carried on behind them. Sleeping chambers and elimination rooms needed doors, to preserve modesty, but generally in new establishments nothing else was considered to need them. The library door was old, from long before the present fashion, and clearly the owners of the establishment either thought the library sufficiently unimportant that it could keep its door when the doors of the dining room and speaking room had been removed, or concurred with Gerin that it was useful from time to time to have a room above ground where one might be unobserved.

The library was a pleasant room. There were low book-cases around the curved walls, and above them hung woven carpets in rich colours of sunset and winter-dusk, forming scale patterns. Many would have felt the room enhanced by its only occupant, Aeslyn Londaver, who had seated her golden-scaled self couchant against the far wall and was engaged in reading one of the books. She was wearing a very fetching hat, of a white fur trimmed with gold that brought out the contrasting and purer burnished gold of her scales. Even though he had spent the last three years avoiding her and he knew he could never touch her, Gerin felt his wings lift and his scales brighten at the sight of her.

"Really, Gerin, did they have to wake you or send out a search party?" she asked, closing the book but keeping her place with a finger between the pages. "I knew you were busy and hard to find, but I must have been waiting for you half an hour."

"That's better than you deserve, for you shouldn't be here at all and you know it," Gerin replied.

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"And how else am I going to see you, when you've been avoiding us ever since Mother brought us to town?"

"Young maiden dragons do not pay morning calls alone, not on anyone, and least of all on young unmarried dragons, even if they are cousins," Gerin said, sidestepping the issue of his behaviour. "Your mother should have told you that."

"She did tell me." Aeslyn laid the book down carefully on top of the shelves. "She thinks I'm at the burnisher. But Gerin, we've been in town two weeks, and we left a card the first day, but you haven't come near us. I know you were in town, because I have heard on every side that you are going into politics."

Gerin looked at her hopelessly. She was so beautiful, and so impossible to him, now. "You won't have any reputation as a respectable maiden dragon if you do this sort of thing," he said. "Your mother has brought you to town to find husbands for you and your sister. You can destroy all chance of that by this kind of behaviour."

"Very well," Aeslyn said, her eyes whirling very fast, dimmed with unshed tears. "I have heard what I came to find out, and I shall leave you. You clearly don't care for me. You need not fear this call will be repeated. Goodbye."

At that moment, the door opened, and Parten came in with the tea tray, almost bumping into Gerin, who had stayed as close to the door as he could since he came into the room. He edged sideways a little now, allowing Parten to come past him and arrange the tray half way between the cousins, on top of the bookshelves. "Will you pour, Respected Londaver?" he asked, moving away from the tray.

Aeslyn hesitated and glanced at Gerin, clearly caught between her desire to leave and her training in etiquette. A properly brought up maiden dragon might not pay morning calls alone, but how much less can she refuse a request to pour tea?

"You may as well have some tea since you're here," Gerin said, ungraciously. Parten backed out of the room, giving his master an uncomfortable look as he went. Aeslyn advanced to the teapot and poured, then retreated with her own cup, allowing Gerin to come forward and take his. At a well conducted morning call, even in a bachelor establishment like Gerin's, there would be older female servants to carry around the cups.

Aeslyn settled herself back against the wall, drawn up sejant now, her cup in one hand. "Do take your tea, Gerin," Aeslyn said, her voice falsely sweet.

"I remember my sister Zile telling me about this method of serving tea," he said, coming forward to the tray. "I don't believe I've ever experienced it before, but then, why would I? I avoid paying morning calls as assiduously as I avoid receiving them."

"You're just too selfish to live," Aeslyn burst out. "I don't know how you can just devote your entire life to pure pleasure, not caring as much as a shed scale about anyone else, and then have the gall to boast about it."

"I wasn't boasting," Gerin said, stung.

"You were. But never mind. It isn't devoting yourself to pleasure I mind, I only wish I could do the same. It's just that you don't understand, Ger, you can't see what it's like for me. Did you notice my hat?"

"It looks quite stunning on you," Gerin admitted.

"It's the first absolutely new hat I've ever had. Mother's allowing us three each for the season. Three! When all the other maidens will have hundreds. And I'm supposed to be in raptures over even those three – Lamith *is* in raptures about them. But Lamith's very easily satisfied. She's just like mother. She really cares about fairness and the condition of servants and all of that. Whereas I can't help thinking that if Mother were less obsessed with that, if

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she and Father would run Londaver the way everyone else runs their estates, we'd all be ten feet longer and have three times as much gold. And there's so little I can do – come to Irieth to find a husband, as you said, and there you are with all the freedom in the world, everything, male, fabulously rich, and now a career in politics. You can do anything you choose, and I have three hats and practically no dowry and have to hope some dragon who's not too old or too repulsive notices me.”

“It's not that I don't care,” Gerin said, though he had not meant to say this at all. “Aeslyn, I have been avoiding you, it's true.”

“I didn't mean to come here and throw myself at your feet,” Aeslyn said.

“It's just that three years ago, at Daverak, you seemed to care about me.”

“You were too young, then,” Gerin said, interrupting her. “Too young to change your scales. And be glad you were too young, because I would have married you and that would have ruined both of us. No, listen. I came back to town then, three years ago, and my thoughts were all about marriage, settling down, you.”

Aeslyn took a step forward, her green eyes beginning to whirl.

“Stay where you are!” Gerin said, harshly. “I began to take heed of my affairs in a way I had not done before. You say I am fabulously wealthy. It's not true. I discovered a treasure, and for a hundred years I lived on that treasure as if it had made me rich, but it had not.”

“How had it not?” Aeslyn asked.

“I don't know,” Gerin said, spreading his claws. “I drew on it as if it were endless, but I found, too late, it had an end.”

Treasure, in whatever vast quantities, is nothing but capital, and unless invested wisely, capital on its own produces nothing. Capital spent is capital lost. It would have been better for Gerin to have viewed his apparently endless fortune in the way a maiden views her dowry – something to be bartered for position and a lasting income. Treasure can become wealth. When a dragon sells ancestral lands because a city is growing onto them, and uses the purchase money to invest in factories in that very city and railroads to connect the city to other cities and to the countryside, treasure becomes wealth. If Gerin had purchased an estate and been content to draw his wealth from land, or if he had invested in factories in one of the manufacturing cities, the treasure his brother stumbled on in the hills above Benandi might have proved wealth enough to establish a new great family of dragons.

Instead he had let it run freely through his claws as if it were in truth endless, investing some, indeed, but only in risky ventures that might bring in great returns or great losses. Gerin saw such things more in the nature of gambling than of sober investment, and there, for once, he was wise. Sober investment he shunned as if it were a fur hat in Greensummer. He took his treasure to Irieth and spent it as he needed it, living on equal terms with those who had great lands to bring them great incomes, looking down a little on those of his acquaintance, like Alwad, who maintained a profession. He never thought to measure his treasure in terms of income, and indeed in those terms it was meaningless. He had no income, he earned nothing and neither did the gold, he simply lived upon capital until it was gone.

“But it is gone?” Aeslyn asked, her voice hardly more than a whisper.

“Quite gone,” Gerin said. “There are two pieces of gold I would never part with, a box and a crown my brother and I carried out of the mountain first. The rest is spent, or worse, owing. I could sell my bed and have perhaps eight thousand crowns when I'd paid off my debts – and that's today. Another day selling everything might leave me eight thousand

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crowns in debt. I don't sell anything. I live as I have always lived, and dragons extend me credit because they believe I am rich. I gamble a little, still, and sometimes come out ahead. I have some investments that might bring in a profit one day. I am going into politics in the hope of re-establishing myself, but –”

“Do you owe money to Rimalin?” Aeslyn asked, seeing straight through to the heart of it.

“Yes,” Gerin admitted. “He thinks he has bought me. He is the only one who knows my treasure has run out. I don't understand him entirely, but he thinks he has a use for me, and I dare not go against what he asks.” He groaned. “I know I have let you down, and I feel I have let down Wontas, my brother. Ever since he died, I have always tried to live for both of us.”

“You must marry an heiress,” Aeslyn said, and laughed. “It is the same for you as for me after all, Ger, exactly the same. We both have to find position through marriage.”

“I could not ask you to marry me when all I could have offered you would be the most abject poverty,” Gerin said. “So I left you alone. I had not turned your scales, there was nothing to bind us.”

“Of course not. I understand.” Aeslyn set down her cup. “Between my dowry and your bed we might have had as much as a poor country parson, perhaps, but no more. Neither of us could ask that sacrifice of each other. But it cheers my heart to know that you do not despise me, that you weren't avoiding me because you didn't care for me, or because you were trifling with me. We must help each other find rich dragons to marry now, an heiress for you and an heir for me, perhaps.”

Gerin took a step forward despite himself. She was so brave, so determined. “Aeslyn –”

“No, stay where you are!” she said, raising her hand. “And in any case, I must go. You're quite right, I should not be here. I'm glad I came, I'm glad to know how you feel, to understand.”

“It would be best if you forget me,” Gerin said. “I hoped you might have forgotten.”

“How could you think that of me?” Aeslyn asked. “I'll never forget you, no more than you'll forget me. We'll just do what we have to do, that's all.”

#### 4. A Call at Telstie House.

In the heart of the most fashionable quarter of Irieth, the South-West, lay the grand Riverfront Row, and in the centre of that row stood Telstie House. It was fronted by a grand row of steps in the manner of houses built shortly after the Conquest. The doors were not arched but made of great blocks of stone, with jutting lintels, which gave the place an ancient intimidating feel. The house had been empty all winter, staffed by a scant handful of servants, but now it was being scrubbed and polished by servants newly bought or newly brought to town, for its master and mistress were in residence. Above ground there was a dining room, a speaking room and huge ballroom, one of the biggest in the city, and below ground there were the private chambers of the Telstie family. Servants scurried about, cleaning the rooms, preparing food, in a constant stream of bustle.

The mistress of the house, the Eminence Telstie herself, would not have dreamed of opening her doors to friends until the bustle was quite subdued. She accepted no morning callers on her first morning in Irieth, but remained in her undercave until it was time for a quiet lunch with her husband and sister-in-law. Time and egg-laying had not been as kind to Sebeth as to Haner. She had barely survived her most recent clutch, and even now, ten years later, she showed signs of the strain in the thinness of her face and the colour of her scales. They were now a faded terracotta shade and no amount of burnishing or even paint could make her scales shine. She still tired easily, despite having spent much of the last decade immersed in hot springs with reputed healing qualities and feeding on all the best delicacies – including the larger part of the weakling dragons of the Telstie demesne. Her husband, Avan, the Eminent Telstie, far from grudging her this, almost grudged the portion she insisted he and the children take. He bought her ever more magnificent hats and jewels and assured her constantly of his continued love and support.

As Sebeth came out of the great domed Undercave she saw Avan taking a pile of calling cards from one of the younger and prettier new servants. She watched them for a moment. Avan had clearly said something to her, because they were both smiling. Sebeth's eyes whirled a little faster. She trusted her husband but she did not like to see him paying attention to females other than herself. "Give those to me," she said, abruptly.

Still smiling, Avan handed the stack of cards over obediently. "I was just saying to Nevris here, we don't need to blow a trumpet or even set out a banner to say we're in town, just coming in quietly seems to be more than enough."

Sebeth did not smile and dismissed Nevris with a gesture. "These are probably from the most boring dragons, they're always the ones who come to Irieth early in anticipation of the season. Those, and the ones with daughters to present."

"Oh, very likely," Avan said, soothingly, as Nevris made her way back to the kitchen. "I was just surprised how many of them there are for a very first day here."

His soothing tone irritated her further. "And don't learn the names of all the staff, it makes them get above themselves," she snapped.

Avan's gold eyes whirled in surprise. "I never make a practice of learning all the names, but if I remember them I use them," he said, gently.

"No, just the names of all the pretty ones," Sebeth said, knowing she sounded like a child.

Avan's wings started to rise, then he laughed. "Oh my dear, you know I never notice anyone else when you're in the house! You still have the prettiest tail in Tiamath."

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Sebeth had long known that compliments may flatter but don't reassure when they are asked for. She shrugged. "Let's go into the speaking room. And I do hope dear Haner doesn't go on and on about how we should free all the servants while they're in the room. She should know it makes them unsettled."

"Subjugation is going to come up in the Cupola this season, you know," Avan said as he followed Sebeth into the Speaking Room.

"It's always being discussed, but it won't come to anything, surely?" Sebeth flicked her wingtip over the head of a small bronze statue of Veld.

"There's a surprising amount of support for it," Avan said. "The problem is how all the servants will support themselves if they're not servants. In ancient days, before wing-binding was thought of, we had all the world to spread out into, not just one small country surrounded by the Yarge."

"The real problem is how we'd get anyone to stay in service if they didn't have to – or how we'd get anyone to go into it in the first place," Sebeth said, settling herself by the fireplace. "Ever since they started paying dragons to work in the factories servants have been running away to the cities and working in them. Removing subjugation would make that ten times worse. But how could we keep up our way of life without servants?"

"Please don't get into an argument about this with Haner," Avan said.

"I promise I won't bring up the subject if she doesn't," Sebeth said, tossing her head.

At that moment they both heard a disturbance at the outer door, shortly followed by a servant announcing Haner, Aeslyn and Lamith Londaver. "I'm so sorry we're late," Haner said as soon as greetings had been exchanged. "Aeslyn took simply forever at the burnishers."

They hadn't done that much for her, in Sebeth's critical opinion. The two Londaver sisters were very alike, and both fairly pretty, but Aeslyn was a distinctly paler gold than her sister. She must, Sebeth thought, do something for those maidens. She'd see they were invited about, and introduce them to some of Avan's younger political friends. It would be easier, of course, if Haner wasn't always so impossible. Perhaps she could offer to buy them some hats, nobody ever had enough hats, especially in Irieth, and the Londaver demesne was notoriously scant of gold because, of course, of Haner's servant policies. On the other hand, perhaps she shouldn't subsidise Haner's idiocy by buying hats for her daughters.

Avan assured his sister that they weren't late and anyway it didn't matter, while Sebeth flicked through the cards. They were, as she had expected, from all the most boring dragons she knew. About half way through the stack she paused and felt that all eyes were on her.

"Did you say something, dear?" Avan asked.

"I wasn't aware that I had," she said. "It's just that I found a card here I didn't expect. The nerve that dragon has."

"Who?" Haner asked.

"Well, that's the question. She calls herself Respected Mavonin, and she says she comes from Edawoon, which is one of the new mufug cities in the north. But nobody has ever heard of her, not even others who come from the region. She says she's a widow, but nobody has ever heard of her dead husband either. Anyone might say they were a widow, though she seems a little young for it. Certainly she's pink." Sebeth let the last word hang on the air in all its implications. Aeslyn and Lamith exchanged glances.

"I don't understand," Haner said. "Some poor friendless dragon comes to town and nobody will accept her cards because they don't know her?"

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"She's certainly not poor. She has plenty of money, somehow, from somewhere. And the issue is that she's attempting to go about in society when she has no more right than the servants in my kitchen," Sebeth said. "She may, if she has the nerve to leave a card for me, leave one for you. You mustn't return her call, or appear to know her. I know your altruistic ways, Haner, but really, it would be fatal for your daughters' chances if you were known to have received such a one."

"If she is a widow from the north, that does seem a little harsh," Haner said, looking at Avan.

"If she's not, it's no more than a reasonable precaution," Sebeth said.

"If she moved into a respectable dwelling near Londaver and left a card I would certainly call," Haner said.

"Things are different in the country," Sebeth said. "Besides, nobody would have allowed her to buy or even let a dwelling in the country suitable for gentry, not without knowing who she was."

"Nobody is doing anything to hurt her, beyond declining to call," Avan said, gently, putting a claw on his sister's arm. "Don't take her up as one of your causes, Haner, Sebeth is absolutely right, you could ruin your daughters' reputations and for what?"

"Society," Haner began, but just then one of the servants came in and said that lunch was served in the dining room, and in the commotion of moving to the other room and beginning to tear at the beeves the rest of whatever speech she might have made was thankfully forgotten, allowing peace to prevail in the family for the time being.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE SEASON BEGINS

### 5. Plans in Benandi House.

“I warned you against an alliance with this family, and see what it has led to?” Exalt Benandi looked down her long snout aristocratically.

“Being imposed upon for lunch at our first arrival in Irieth is hardly the worst fate in Tiamath,” Sher replied mildly.

Exalt Benandi merely sniffed.

She was a dragon in her five hundredth year, ruby red, fifty feet in length, a widow, and long accustomed to getting her own way. Her son Sher, the present Exalted Benandi, though he was twenty feet longer than his mother, male, and the present Superior of the Cupola, deferred to her out of long habit. He had defied her once, in the matter of taking a wife, and had, in this very hall, threatened to eat her if she would not comply. Neither of them had forgotten this, and the scene quite often replayed itself in the Exalt's nightmares, but neither of them would have mentioned it could it be in any way avoided. The Exalt had never ceased to deplore the marriage, and as for Sher, he would have given luncheon to every sponger and poor relation in Irieth ten times over daily if only his marriage had brought him the benefit he had longed for, the presence of his beloved Selendra. A few short decades together had been replaced by what felt to Sher like the eternal knowledge of her absence. Nothing remained of her but his three children and their grandmother's carping, which he almost welcomed as a reminder of what he had lost.

“Besides, it isn't a case of one luncheon. Not to mention that we'll have to do something for the Londaver maidens,” the Exalt said. Her tail twitched a fraction in irritation.

“They won't be any trouble,” Sher said, yawning and stretching himself to his full length. “Londaver's a dull stick, but he isn't with them from what Sanj and Marcanil were saying. Invite them to First Dinner the night before the Opening, and maybe later in the season take them to a ball or two. You'll enjoy it. You always said you wished you had a daughter.”

The Exalt looked around the empty dining hall as if for support from missing myriads. “They have a mother, let her look after them.”

“But Haner hardly knows anyone,” Sher said. “Make sure they have some introductions and they'll manage the rest themselves. They're pretty little things, or were the last time I saw them.”

“Pretty little things might mean a deal of trouble, from that family. If I'd had a daughter she'd have been properly brought up and would already have acquaintances in society,” the Exalt replied.

“Invite them to dinner. If they're troublesome, you needn't take any more notice of them.” Sher drew himself to his feet. “If that's all, mother, I should be getting to work. Parcrey will be here soon and I need to sort through some papers.” He took a step towards the door of the dining hall.

“I was intending to have a political First Dinner,” the Exalt said.

Sher stopped and turned his head. “In that case, invite young Marcanil too. He seems to have grown up well enough, and if we're feasting our political allies, it might be as well to

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remind them that the young dragon is a friend, not like his father. He'll be a vote on our side when it comes to it."

"I still regard all that business with his father as entirely unnecessary," the Exalt said.

Sher looked at her consideringly, his dark eyes whirling. He had neglected to inform his mother precisely why it had been necessary for him to fight and kill the elder Illustrious Daverak. She wouldn't have understood, and she would be no more sympathetic now. "I know I can rely on you to put on a good spread," he said, ignoring her remark.

"And Alwad Telstie? I suppose you want me to invite that parasite as well?"

"I don't believe that will be necessary," Sher said. He left the room, his mind already full of his political program for the Cupola session, counting his allies and his enemies and wondering how to make sure of those who were doubtful.

Sanj was speaking to one of the servants in the hall. Sher checked at the sight of his son. Sanj looked like a younger version of himself, though he was sure he had never been as insouciant nor as heedless of others. Sher, who was at home politically with any dragon, whose charm was legendary, never knew what to say to his children.

"Have your friends gone?" he asked now. The servant bowed, handed Sanj a hat, and left them.

Sanj nodded, putting on the hat. "Do you need me, father?" he asked. "I was thinking of going out myself."

"No, you go off and enjoy yourself," Sher said. He sighed, and a tiny wisp of smoke drifted out with the sigh. "I always remember your mother when I come to Irieth. I don't know why, it was at Benandi that we fell in love, and married too, but whenever I come into this house I remember the joy she took in it."

"It's probably because of the change," Sanj said. "You'll find when you go back to Benandi that it reminds you of her at first."

"You're right," Sher said, surprised.

"Oh, I'm not always such a fool as you think me, father," Sanj said, and laughed lightly. He opened the front door and walked down the steps, his wings tight at his side and his hat firmly on his head, the very picture of a smart young dragon.

Sher watched him go for a moment, wistful, then remembered that Parcray would be there any moment to discuss strategy, and made his way to the study, where all his political papers were waiting.

## 6. Before the Flaming

Irieth is beyond any dispute the greatest and most beautiful city in the world. It is the largest of the dragon cities, and while cities of the Yarge might beg for consideration on the matter of size, for Migantil and Tamnen both house swarming millions of Yarge, such barbarian constructions can not compare to Irieth in the matter of beauty. Besides, with them being so small and easily compressed it is a simple enough matter to house as many Yarge as one wishes in a very small space indeed, while for dragons, especially dragons of the greater classes, size becomes a very significant consideration. Dragons do not like to be crowded, and in general do not think well of cities and the crowding they require. In any case, the purpose of cities is considered to be commerce and industry, both of which most great dragons despise for obvious reasons, even while they approve the wealth they produce. In addition, the proximity cities require is held to be immoral, because of the difficulty of maidens keeping themselves to themselves in close quarters. Of all dragon cities Irieth alone rises above this, not only because it has a measure of true elegance, both from the air and from the ground, but because it is the home to the Cupola, and to the Season. Mothers who cry out all year about the immorality of cities nevertheless know that without the Irieth Season they would never marry off their daughters so advantageously.

The Season formally begins the evening before the opening of the Cupola, when every year some great entertainment takes place. It is the first open air event of the year, and as it takes place right at the beginning of the month of Budding, when the weather is generally very uncertain, there is a great deal of anticipation and trepidation in advance of the event. Should the weather chance to smile, as it did in the year when the Londaver maidens first came to Irieth, the common dragons of the city rush from the factory gates to take up early places, pressing and jostling sufficiently to assure any country cousin present that all the evils they have heard of the cities are true. They bring last night's meat from the abbatoir, long cold and with the blood run out of it. They buy hot russets, and beer, and redfish the sellers swear is fresh from the river. They are entertained by street-singers and other common entertainers while they wait. They make jokes and greet friends and wait, patiently or impatiently according to their nature. The gently born dragons send their servants to keep places for them, marked out with ribbon in the colours of their demesnes, and dine beforehand.

Most servants go to a great deal of trouble to be the ones selected to keep the places, because this assures that they would themselves be able to see the spectacle. Gerin Agornin sent Parten as a matter of course and Parten selected two of the younger servants to assist him. Exalt Benandi sent out six reliable servants she had brought up from Benandi Place, armed with reels of ribbon in red and white to mark out an enclosure for her party, which was to be large. The Telstie staff, knowing Avan was a much softer master than Sebeth, persuaded him that all of them not immediately needed to serve dinner should go to reserve places. Two were sent on ahead, and the rest followed as soon as the Telsties were eating, leaving only one old half-blind dragon to wipe the blood off their chests and tend to any other needs they might have. Thus Nevris, who as a maiden would be entirely useless for the purpose for which she was ostensibly sent, hurried out between two of Sebeth's older, greying, servants, looking forward to her treat quite as much as any better born maiden in Irieth for the season.

Among the singers and entertainers was a motherly red dragon selling pamphlets. She approached the Telstie party enthusiastically. "Free the servants!" she said, thrusting her

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pamphlets forward. Onaver who, as head of the household felt his dignity as if he were an Eminent himself, motioned her away. "What use is your trash to us?" he asked. "You'll get no coin here. Be off."

"I take coin from those who can pay, but they're free to those with bound wings. And they're as much or more use to you as they are to anyone. We would untie your wings and make you the equal of any dragon in the land."

Onaver looked down his snout at her as if he felt himself far her superior, free though she might be. Nevris wanted to laugh. The dragon with the pamphlets looked directly at her. "You'll take one, Valued, won't you?" she said.

Surprised, Nevris took one. "What did you call me?" she asked.

"Valued, I said. It's what we free dragons call each other, Valued, or Valuable, to show we value everyone alike."

"Be off with you," Onaver said, making flapping motions with his arms. His tightly bound wings twitched a little as if he would raise them at her if he could.

Soban, the grey dragon on Nevris's left, tried to snatch the pamphlet from Nevris. "Your pamphlet's no use to the maiden, she can't read," she said.

"I can," Nevris flashed, hurt. "I've had clerk's training." She looked down at the pamphlet she was clutching. "It says An End to Subjugation."

"That's right," the pamphlet dragon said. "You read it to the others who can't read. It's just as important that you understand how wrong it is to be bound as it is for those who bind you."

Someone moved ahead, and Onaver succeeded in escorting his group forward, leaving the pamphleteer behind.

Lish, the greying dragon on Nevris's right looked at her curiously. "I didn't know you could read," she said.

"I've had clerk's training," she replied, and shrugged. "I was bought to be a clerk as well as a general servant. I'm glad enough to have this position. It's much easier work than scratching away with a pen in an office all day, and now they've come up from the country there are so many to help."

"Yes, and a chance of catching the master's eye while you're still young and pretty." Soban, grinned at her, showing her fangs.

"What good would that do me, for the master to pay attention to me and the mistress to hate me?" Nevris asked. "Concubines come to no good."

"He might unbind your wings if you laid an egg," Soban said. "I've heard of that."

"Not with our mistress," Lish said firmly. "Nevris is sensible and you're a fool, Soban. Eminence Telstie would be more likely to sell you away before the Eminent could even think of unbinding. There are houses where servants do suffer the attention of their masters and we should be glad we're not in one, not wishing we were."

"I'm too old to care anyway," Soban retorted, lifting an iron-grey wing the few clawbreadth's she could.

They came to the place they were to reserve, already marked out with purple and gold Telstie ribbon. Onaver began bustling about organizing everyone.

As soon as Soban left them to deal with the beer they had brought for their masters, Lish leaned close to Nevris. "Hide that pamphlet under your wing," she said. "There'll be very bright trouble if the mistress sees it. But I'd be interested in hearing what it says, sometime, if you're interested in reading it to me."

"Certainly," Nevris agreed, hiding the pamphlet as best she could.

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"I've heard a little about these Valuers before," Lish said. "Master's sister is one."

"Illust Londaver, who was in the house the other day?" Nevris asked. She took one corner of a cloth and Lish took another. Lish and another dragon took the far corners and they began to straighten it before spreading it on the damp ground.

"That's the one. I don't see her selling pamphlets in the street, but she's one of them all the same. She's freed all her servants."

"Does she go around in society calling dragons Valued all the time?" Nevris asked, lowering the cloth on Onaver's signal.

Lish snorted, adjusting the cloth on her side. "I daresay it would do some of those Augusts and Eminent's good to be addressed as Valuable. I don't know if she does. But I've always wondered what it was all about."

"They're a funny family," Nevris said, reflectively.

"What do you mean?" Lish looked at her sharply.

"Well, whoever heard of a radical Illust? And master's so nice and mistress is so sharp, and she has those marks on her wings as if she was bound once, but she almost bit my head off for mentioning them when I was burnishing her."

"I've been with the Telstie family a long time, and there isn't a better family in Tiamath," Lish said. "And I can tell you why mistress is touchy about the marks on her wings, but it had better be another time because I see them coming."

The crowds were parting before Avan and Sebeth. Nevris and Lish stepped back from the cloth and bowed a welcome. Soban came forward to offer freshly poured beer.

"Do we really need absolutely every servant in the house out here?" Sebeth asked Avan, then settled down couchant on the cloth.

"It'll be starting soon," Avan said, sitting sejant beside her. "And the servants wanted to see, and I couldn't see that it did any harm."

"I suppose not," Sebeth said, and sipped her beer.

Nevris and Lish stood in a line behind them, with the other servants, waiting for the flaming to start. As she turned her dark blue eyes up to the sky, Nevris could feel the itch of the pamphlet under her bound wing.

## 7. The Flaming

Lamith Agornin was far too excited to actually eat. She was freshly burnished, adorned with her new best hat, and actually out at a real grown-up dinner party where dragons she'd never met before addressed her as Respected Londaver and bowed to her. After dinner, they would be going to a Synchronised Flaming, the first one she had ever seen. The spiced muttonwools and preserved fruits Exalt Benandi served her guests might as well have been week old carrion for all the attention she gave them. Indeed, if Aeslyn hadn't reminded her she might not have eaten enough to be polite.

Aeslyn was dealing with the delights of their first Season with markedly less enthusiasm than her sister. She had mentioned her visit to Gerin to nobody, and attempted to behave as if there were no such dragon as her Agornin cousin. She attempted to be pleased and excited by the treats they were offered, but with Lamith uttering little cries of delight at every new thing and not being able to eat, it was difficult not to be more restrained. She had been aware of Exalt Benandi's eyes on them when her sister, absorbed in a conversation with their cousin Marcanil, didn't even taste her muttonwool. The Exalt's frown would have chilled most dragons, but Lamith seemed utterly oblivious to it until Aeslyn poked her.

Aeslyn ate sparingly but politely and considered the company. Nobody could deny that the Agornin children had done well for themselves. From Bon Agornin's start as a penniless dragon on the Telstie estate, his son Avan had risen to become an Eminent, his daughter Selendra had married into Exalted status, while the other two daughters married dragons of Illustrious rank. With Aunt Selendra dead, it would not have been at all surprising if Sher and his mother had cut the connection with the other Agornin relatives, but instead she found herself launched into society at this splendid dinner party. For Aeslyn's purposes the dinner party offered very little. Most of the glorious dragons present were far too old to be worth consideration. Most of them were political allies of Sher in the Cupola, gallant enough to the maidens, but old enough to be almost certainly married, whether or not their wives were in the room with them. The only two young unmarried dragons were her cousins. Marcanil was almost a brother. Aeslyn considered him anyway. He was Illustrious Daverak and ruled the wealthy demesne of Daverak in his own right. She knew him well and knew she could make him do what she wanted. That had to count for something. All the same, she thought she could do better for herself.

Sanj was heir to Benandi, one of the richest demesnes in Tiamath. He wouldn't inherit until his father died, but Benandi was so rich that the family had other property where he could live if he married. He was certainly very handsome, even if he couldn't compare to Gerin. She suppressed that thought as best she could and stole a surreptitious glance at Sanj, only to be caught, because he was looking at her. He smiled and raised his wings to her. She looked down, and became aware that Exalt Benandi was frowning in their direction again. Between Lamith and herself, this might well be the only invitation they ever received to Benandi House. Uncle Sher had greeted them all kindly enough when they arrived, but since had sunk deep into tedious political conversations and ignored their presence. She might never see Sanj again, and in any case, it wasn't as if he were Gerin. She smiled sweetly at Exalt Benandi while inwardly baring her teeth. Well, she thought, there are plenty of rich young titled dragons in Irieth. I have only to meet them and choose between them.

Sanj, meanwhile, admired his cousins very much. He said as much to their mother. "Your daughters are charming, Aunt Haner. I don't often see enthusiasm like that. They remind me of a pair of dragonets."

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Haner laughed. "I'm mortified," she said. "They're almost as bad as my little ones, for all that I've tried to teach them how to behave. I've winced for them this evening, their eyes everywhere and Lamith too excited to eat. Do you think they are too young to have a season? Londaver thought so, but I thought they could do with one to give them a little polish."

"You have no need to wince for them," Sanj said, looking at them again. "They're both very elegant, and I'm quite sure everyone will find their enthusiasm just as charming as I do. They're a little older than my little sister Darapenth, my mother's last egg you know."

"How is your sister?" Haner asked.

"Thriving when I left Benandi, and quite delighted to be left with Aunt Felan and Uncle Penn while we're away. Between ourselves, I think she gets a little tired of Grandmother, and she's too much in her company."

Haner put her head down to her muttonwool. "I can see that your grandmother might be a little tiring for a dragonet," she said.

Sanj laughed. "Not just for a dragonet," he said. "Most diplomatically put."

"I must invite Darapenth to Londaver in the summer," Haner said. "She might like that, playing with my younger ones and getting to know them."

"You'd do better getting her to visit at a time when Father isn't at home," Sanj said. "I agree that she'd like it, but he likes to have her close. Maybe next year's Season, if you won't be in Irieth yourself."

"I never come for the Season," Haner said, absently, then caught herself. "This year's an exception."

Sanj laughed. "Don't tell me, you want to get those over-excited maidens married off? Don't look at me, I'm nowhere near ready to settle down yet."

"Don't be ridiculous," Haner snapped. "Yes, they're looking about them for husbands, what maiden wouldn't be? But my real reason for being here is political."

"Political?" Sanj's eyes whirled in astonishment, but at that moment a servant interrupted with water and clean cloths for wiping away the blood.

"As soon as everyone's ready, we should go out if we want to catch the flaming," Exalt Benandi called.

Marcanil came up to Haner. "May I escort you out?" he asked, politely.

Haner looked around distractedly. "Where are Aeslyn and Lamith?"

"They're coming with Grandmother," Sanj said. "This Flaming might be more fiery than the usual run of the things. I believe I'll step out as well."

Marcanil escorted Haner out into the streets. They made their way through the bustle, which gave way politely before them, towards the purple and white marked areas. Haner nodded to the pamphleteer, who nevertheless did not approach them. She observed how crowded the ordinary dragons were, and how spacious the spaces reserved for the gently born. She said nothing about it, allowing Marcanil to rattle on about the excitement of the occasion. They passed enclosures marked in many different colours, and Haner had no reason to take any especial notice of one marked in plain purple, which held only a single dragon, almost thirty feet long, among her smaller attendants. Her scales were a brilliant bridal pink, and she was wearing a splendid hat. She looked up as the Benandi House party passed her enclosure and paid them close attention.

Meanwhile, the maidens were being treated to a lecture on behaviour from the Exalt Benandi, who had seen nearly five hundred years of it and had strong opinions on the matter. They were instructed to keep their eyes down and their mouths closed unless they

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were directly addressed. "The crowning glory of a maiden is not her shining scales, but her maidenly modesty," the Exalt finished, as they settled into their places on the ground before the river.

"Yes, Exalt Benandi," Aeslyn said, keeping her eyes down as instructed.

"Oh, they're starting!" Lamith blurted.

The Exalt gave her a quelling glare, but Lamith's eyes were on the sky where a high flight of twelve dragons had come into sight.

Others in the crowd were also pointing excitedly and craning for a better position. The flight came nearer, and the flaming began.

There are those who say that synchronised flamings are dangerous and wasteful, that dragonflame, which is a sacred and glorious thing, should be kept for proper uses. There are others who say that flaming is properly a military manouever, and consequently useful to practice – and if it is to be practiced at all, why not above Irieth and in front of a crowd of thousands? Then there are those, the majority, who say "Oooooooh" and "Aaaaaaaah!" It is true that synchronised flaming is dangerous, and the danger adds a spice to the excitement. But with a well trained team the dangers are minimized. It is true that only fifty years before the Dignified Commander Adgadriil had accidentally caught his wing in a flame and fallen to the ground, where he had immediately been devoured by the crowd, much to his family's dismay. But such events were very rare, though not so rare that some in the crowd might not have been hoping for a repetition and an unexpectedly fulfilling supper.

The twelve flying dragons were all older than their three hundredth year, and all held some military position. They began simply enough, flying towards the river in a simple arrowhead formation and flaming in unison as they passed overhead. Then they turned, split into two groups of six in trailing wing formations and flamed as they passed above each other. The complications went on from there, until each dragon was flying his own separate complicated figure and flaming at set points, often when another dragon's wing was only a scale's width away from danger. The patterns were beautiful and unexpected, the flame only failed to ignite on one relatively unimportant moment, and altogether it was a most satisfactory synchronised flaming.

Yet, such a description does little good to those who live deep in the country, or in cities other than Irieth and who might never have been fortunate enough to see a flaming. Imagine a dozen dragons in the peak of condition flying in the updrafts for sheer exuberance, and impose on that the patterns of a formal dance. Then add flame to your picture, goutts of pure dragonflame passing between the dancers and illuminating them, glinting along their scales, flashing from their claws and teeth. Imagine the gasps of the crowd as a flight of half a dozen dragons swoop very close above their heads, and the awed silence as one bold dragon passes so close between two others, both flaming, that it is a wonder his scales aren't singed.

"Who is that daring dragon?" Lamith asked, as an umber dragon swooped on to another position after such an exploit.

"Young maidens should not ask such questions, have you attended to nothing I have said?" asked Exalt Benandi, exasperated.

But Sanj was at his grandmother's other side. "I believe that is Captain Aratarl, the hero of the last skirmish against the Yarge. I met him at the club."

"How marvellous," Lamith breathed. "Do you know them all?"

Sanj laughed. "No, not even half. But there, on the left now, about to go through the gap, is Commander Alwad Telstie, who is a kind of cousin of ours."

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"Not of mine," the Exalt retorted. "Alwad Telstie is a rake, and I prefer you to have nothing to do with him, Sanjild."

"I always know you're very serious when you use my full name," Sanj said. "But grandmother dear, Alwad is an entertaining dragon, always first with the gossip, and I believe his reputation to be exaggerated."

"I am sure it is not." The Exalt looked at the maidens, whose eyes were still on the flight above their heads. "You two would be well advised not to make the acquaintance of Alwad Telstie, family connection or not."

"What has he done?" Aeslyn asked.

The Exalt made a sound half way between a cough and an expression of disapproval. "A well brought up maiden would not ask," she said.

"He was disappointed of a fortune and a title," Sanj said. "Look!" Above them, Aratarl passed through a ring of flame.

"Nobody would censure him for having been disappointed," the Exalt said. "But since then, his behaviour has not been such that I find myself prepared to associate with him."

"You mean he gambles and drinks and lives in debt?" Sanj asked. "That's understandable, in his position."

"What position?" the Exalt made her disapproving noise again. "He has done considerably worse than you have said, Sanj, but even if he had not, he has no excuse for living in that way. His father is a Holiness."

"His Holiness father doesn't pay his bills," Sanj replied. "Besides, I am aware of Alwad's faults, and I choose to know him. Since Orald is compelled to associate with him because of the requirements of the service, it would be very difficult for me to refuse to acknowledge him."

"I have no control over what you do in the club, any more than what your brother does in the Army, but neither of you should bring him home," the Exalt said, accepting defeat. "And do not in any circumstances introduce him to your cousins."

"Oh look, look!" Lamith interrupted. Ten of the dragons had made a great circle, flying west over the heads of the crowd, and the other two were passing through side by side, flaming in unison.

"I have never seen anything like this," Aeslyn said.

"Isn't it wonderful!" Lamith was quivering from head to tail-tip. Exalt Benandi glared at her, but only Aeslyn noticed. Lamith's eyes never for one moment left the daring exploits of the dragons in the sky above her.

## 8. The Opening of the Cupola

A mass of noble dragons was assembled outdoors in the bright light of noon. They were pressed together almost as tightly as the poorer dragons had been the night before at the flaming, for the courtyard was not large, and almost all of the dragons were. They stood as still as they could, their outer lids tight across their eyes against the light, waiting for the Cupola to open. In the strict sense, the Cupola was open all year around. The building had been designed by the Yarge and imposed upon the dragons at the time of the Conquest. It was a concoction of pillars and a bell tower, open to light and air and any passing dragon who cared to enter. At times when the Noble Assembly was not in session, it was the playground for every bold dragonet in Irieth. The Yarg, in imposing such a building, had intended dragon politics to be conducted in the sight of all, with no pleasantly dark corners such as dragons prefer. By the time of the overthrow of the Yarg, the Cupola was hallowed by tradition, but the newly freed dragons decided to add to it, underground, two great comfortable chambers resembling caves as much as possible. The above-ground portions of the Cupola were used now only on occasions of great ceremony.

The bell began to toll. The waiting dragons stirred, an observer in flight would have seen a ripple passing through scales of a dozen different colours. When the bell had rung the ritual seventeen times, drums began. They were not the military drums heard on the frontiers nor yet the cheerful drums played at a ball. These were the ancient drums of the Cupola, whose heads were stretched Yarge skin and whose sticks were dragonbones. There were two of them, normally preserved in a glass cabinet inside the bell-tower, played now by old August Osgund, the oldest member of the Noble Assembly. The Yarge ambassador appeared at the back of the courtyard, and the dragons made way for him as best they could. Marcanil trod on a strange dragon's foot as he tried to move, and had to apologize. Gerin, nearer the front and filled with bravado, stared the Yarge in the eye, and was rewarded with a grimace. The Yarge walked up the shallow steps. The drum stopped.

"I declare this the Four Thousand Three Hundred and Fifth Noble Assembly of Dragons open!" the Yarge said. Few of the dragons could hear, but those who were near could understand, as he spoke quite clearly and distinctly, though with the horrible breathy rattling that inevitably mars the speech of the Yarg. He stepped aside to the right, and a priest stepped forward, his wings lightly bound in the red cords that marked his subjugation to the gods.

"In the name of Camran, in the name of Jurale, in the name of Veld, I declare this the Three Thousand Two Hundred and Nineteenth Noble Assembly of Free Dragons open!" he intoned gravely, and stepped aside to the left.

The bell tolled a single time. Sher stepped forward and took his place between the Yarge and the priest.

"I am the Exalted Benandi!" he declared. "I stand here for the demesne of Benandi. I am first of the Assembly! I am first among the Prime! I am the first of the River!"

These ringing declarations were purely ritual, for while in theory someone could have challenged him, the probability that they would enrage every waiting dragon in the courtyard made it much more likely that they would wait for some better moment. Besides, Sher was very popular, seventy feet long, three hundred years old, with a reputation for being unbeatable in combat. Sher took his place just inside the pillars, at the top of the steps.

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There was a single drumbeat. Rimalin came forward. "I am the Exalted Rimalin. I stand here for the demesne of Rimalin. I stand second of the Prime. I am the first of the Mountain." Sher had made his statements sound like declarations, like the boasts of an honourable of old declaring himself before combat. Rimalin made his sound like statement of unchallengeable fact. The drum beat again.

The leaders were followed by the other fourteen dragons of the prime, those who led their parties and the Assembly. They each took up station along the sides of the hall. Then the other dragons came forward, one by one, declared themselves and their allegiance, and went on into the Cupola. Last came those entering for the first time. Gerin was the first of the cousins to take his place.

"I am the Respectable Gerin Agornin, son of the Blessed Penn Agornin and his wife Felan," he said. "I stand here for the deme of the Skamble. I have a scroll of a hundred dragons supporting my candidacy. I stand on the side of the Mountain."

"Pass, Gerin, and welcome to the Noble Assembly," Sher said, and smiled at his nephew. Rimalin was smiling too, and for a moment as Gerin stood between the two dragons he felt he had been a fool in abandoning the friend of his family and his childhood. Still, what was done was done, and Rimalin knew his secrets and could ruin him. He smiled uncomfortably at Sher, then paced slowly down the long gauntlet of dragons, many of whom gave him a smile or a word as he passed. He took his place at the end of the Mountain line.

Sanj came next, declared himself neatly for the River, and was welcomed by Rimalin and allowed to pass. A few more strangers took their places, all for the Mountain, without challenge, and then it was Marcanil's turn.

He felt absurdly nervous as he stepped up. "I am the Illustrious Marcanil Daverak, son of the Illustrious Daverak of Daverak, deceased, and of his wife Berend, also deceased," he began. "I stand here for the demesne of Daverak. I have a scroll of a hundred dragons to support my candidacy. I stand on the side of the River."

"I challenge," Rimalin said. The drum beat twice, rapidly, and the bell clanged a rapid discord. All the Dragons of the Prime took a step forward. The Yarge ambassador's face worked absurdly. He had stripes of fur over his eyes, which suddenly writhed together like two caterpillars mating.

"On what grounds?" Sher asked calmly.

"Daverak of Daverak was an arrogant criminal. You killed him yourself in a court of law. By what right should his son come here and take his place? Besides, who is to say that this is the son of Daverak. He died a century ago." Rimalin bared his teeth as he spoke.

Marcanil knew that he must unroll his scroll, but instincts were telling him to leap at Rimalin before the other dragon took the advantage, and it made his claws clumsy. It took him two attempts to untie the red ribbon his sister Lodie had tied so carefully, and at last he ripped it and let it fall. "I have the names of a hundred dragons, beginning with my uncle the Eminent Avan Telstie and my uncle the Exalted Sher Benandi," he said, showing the scroll. "That should attest who I am. As for my father's crimes, they were wiped out by his death, and should not be visited upon me. I was no more than a dragonet at the time. Now I am old enough to take my place and to represent my demesne in the Assembly."

"Well spoken," Sher said. The dragon next to Rimalin, whose name Marcanil had heard but forgotten, took the scroll and read through it. "I will attest that this is my nephew, who has been known to me since before he had wings."

"This seems in order," the dragon with the scroll said, handing it back to Marcanil.

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“Very well, pass, Marcanil of Daverak,” Rimalin said.

The drum beat once, the dragons stepped back a pace, and Marcanil walked down the line of dragons, between the pillars, through the bars of sunlight and shadow. Some of the dragons spoke, but he did not hear them. He took his place, beside Sanj, and stood in the half-darkness with his eyes still shielded as they had been in sunlight.

“They always challenge someone,” Sanj said, quietly. “They like to remind everyone that this is real. But they haven't really eaten anyone at the challenge for years and years, my father says.”

“I really thought for a moment they were going to eat me,” Marcanil said. “I couldn't get the ribbon off the scroll, could you see? I had this image of being suddenly torn apart and my bones made into drumsticks.”

“You spoke out boldly enough, and anyone can have trouble with a ribbon,” Sanj said.

“They could have just torn me apart, though, if they hadn't liked what was on the scroll,” Marcanil said.

“I suppose you're right, we could. But you can't have just anyone coming in here either, there has to be a sanction.”

Another dragon took his place beyond Marcanil, and the cousins resumed their appropriate silence.

## CHAPTER THREE: IRIETH

### 9. The Widow

The dragon who called herself the Respected Mavonin was sitting comfortably in her undercave while her maid burnished her scales. She had large golden eyes and a neatly turned tail, she was thirty feet long and a glorious shade of pink. A fire burned brightly in a modern hearth at the side of the cave, casting a cheerful glint as it reflected on dragonscale and gold alike. The bed on which she lay was entirely composed of true comfortable gold, with not a gilded rock in sight. Indeed much of it was old chains and cups, and such of it that was coin was undoubtedly old, bearing the heads of forgotten Yargish kings. Perhaps there might have been much to be learned of Mavonin by examining her bed, but she had no intention of allowing any strangers into her sleeping cave. The maid, who attended to her burnishing with care, using a cloth of soft venison-hide, was old and grey. Her wings were unbound but scarred by years of binding.

"What do they say of me in the streets of Irieth, Issel?" mistress asked maid.

"I don't like to repeat it," Issel replied.

"But I want to hear," her mistress insisted.

"Some say you've no right to call yourself Respected, and no more you haven't."

Mavonin laughed. "Do they say why I don't?"

"They say you're the widow of some dragon who grew rich in trade, and nobody who grew rich in trade is Respectable." Issel rubbed harder.

"What nonsense. I have known plenty of perfectly respectable dragons engaged in trade, in the northern cities. That is just prejudice, and silly prejudice at that. They welcome plenty of dragons among them whose wealth came from trade, and still comes from trade and industry too, if they but knew it. What else do they say?"

"They say no dragon knows no dragon, and if you know no dragon you are no dragon."

"What, some Yarge in disguise?"

Issel snorted. "Very good disguise they make these days, I don't think. No, they mean to say the same as before, that you're some jumped up nobody. They ask me how I can bear to work for you, and all the time their wings are bound as tight to their sides as their scales. They ask me what you pay me, when they don't get paid, not any more than it takes to feed them. They say you must be a Valuer, to free your servants, so they got something right."

"I never heard the term Valuer until I came to this city. Would you like to be called Valued, Issel?" Mavonin moved a little so that Issel could better reach the base of her tail.

"I don't know that I've ever thought about it. I suppose so, yes. If I have to be called anything. I like what it says. More than I care about being called it myself, I think it's right to call other dragons. It's one of the few things in this bedazzled city I do like."

"Maybe I should call myself Valued," Mavonin mused.

"Oh, and have everyone saying you're a freed servant! Now that's a good idea if you want to move in society. Not that anyone would believe you, with wings without a mark on them. You have beautiful wings. No, it would be better to keep up appearances for me to bind mine up again and for you to buy some more servants."

"I don't think I could bear it," Mavonin said, shifting and making the gold clink under her. "It's very brave of you to offer, but no. Are there really so few dragons of noble birth

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who are served by free attendants? If it were that rare, then surely there would be no great movement against subjugation.”

“Well, I know one who's known for it,” Issel said, rubbing hard at the scales at the base of Mavonin's tail.

Mavonin craned her neck to see Issel's face. “Yes, but the difficulty there is getting to meet her.”

Issel kept her head down. “That's the difficulty with getting to meet anybody, when you don't know anybody, at least the Respected Mavonin doesn't know anybody.”

“I can't use my right name, you know I can't.”

“I can't see why we had to come at all, but since we did come, I do see you can't use your right name. Respected Mavonin will do well enough. They don't keep any lists of the Respectable classes.” Issel sighed and moved around her mistress, still burnishing.

“What else do they say about me?” Mavonin asked.

“They say you're not a widow at all – didn't I say they'd say that?”

“You did, Issel. But they know nothing. If they think I am not a widow, what do they guess I am?”

“Hold still while I rub under your chin,” Issel said. While it was impossible for her mistress to talk, she went on, “They say you're no better than you should be.”

Mavonin choked, and Issel moved away in alarm. As soon as her throat was free, the choke became a full-bodied laugh that shook her from head to tail. “No better than I should be,” she said, when she could speak again. “Why, Issel, which of us is that? I don't think even Veld Herself is better than she *should* be!”

Issel looked at her mistress primly. “What they mean –”

“I know what they mean,” Mavonin interrupted. “Small minded creatures!”

“I don't know what you hope to gain by any of this,” Issel said, going back to her burnishing. “It won't bring your gold scales back, and it won't bring your father back to life, and it won't really get you satisfaction.”

“Revenge is a form of satisfaction,” Mavonin said, raising her head so the firelight glinted in her whirling eyes. “There's nothing else for me. The best the courts would do would be to make him marry me, and you can imagine what joy that would be. Besides, I don't have witnesses enough, with my father dead, as he very well knows. I can't bear for him to go entirely unpunished, when he has entirely ruined me. And perhaps I can prevent him from doing the same to any other innocent maidens.”

Issel poked the fire, making it flare up briefly. “You might try the rich widow thing somewhere else and find another husband,” she said, with her back still turned.

“Nobody who would marry me in the conditions I present, rich but friendless and with no name, would be anyone I would wish to marry,” Mavonin said. “No, I am set on this course, Issel, and you cannot deter me.”

Issel shrugged, her wings rippling. “Just so you know what I think,” she said.

“I know what you think. I think I must give a dinner party.”

“Must we have that terrible Dignity Losenar?” Issel asked.

“We must,” Mavonin stood, dislodging a gold chain that had become wound around her foot. “Dignity Losenar may be old and tedious and poor enough to come because I provide good food, but for all that she's a gently born female dragon, and as such she lends me countenance, and respectability. Male dragons are much easier to entice to my eating room, but if I were to allow it to be all male dragons, in company with myself, then there would be no hope of ever being accepted in society.”

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“How many dragons have left cards in return for yours?” Issel asked.

“Enough,” Mavonin said. “Most of them are no doubt curious, or fortune hunters who are not very particular, but I will find sufficient for my purposes. Bring the invitation cards and the ink. I will begin now.”

“Very well, Illust,” Issel said.

“And how many times do I have to ask you not to call me that?” Mavonin asked.

“Very well then, Respected,” Issel repeated, stressing the last word heavily.

## 10. The Pamphlet

It was late in the afternoon of the day of the opening of the Cupola before Nevris had a chance to read the pamphlet to Lish. They had each had duties keeping them busy all morning, and would again in the evening, but late afternoon was a quiet time in Telstie House. Sebeth was resting after her morning calls to recover her strength for the evening ahead. Avan was at the Cupola.

He did not attend daily, but he dutifully took his place as Eminent Telstie at the beginning of each session. He went in from time to time and sometimes spoke up on issues, generally supporting Sher. He always made sure to be present if the Offices were being discussed, and did not hesitate to mention his personal experience at the Planning Office. This did him more good than harm in the Cupola, where genuine experience was valued, and little harm in society, where his background was known. Nevertheless, Sebeth always winced when he told her about this. "Becoming an Eminent wipes out what came before it," she told him.

"It doesn't mean what came before it never happened, and I am not ashamed of it," Avan replied. "Nor should you be. You have nothing to be ashamed of."

"I would rather it was all forgotten. Now I am an Eminence, I intend to behave so that nobody can point a claw and say I'm not a proper Eminence."

"Nobody would do that anyway, and if they did I would deal with them," Avan replied.

Avan and Sebeth felt they needed thirty servants to live comfortably in Telstie House. A third of them were permanent Irieth staff, another third went to and fro with their masters to the demesne of Telstie, or wherever they were. The rest were bought for the season. If they suited, they were retained, if not, they were sold again at the end of the season. Nevris had been bought at the beginning of Thaw, fresh from her training school. She feared that she would find herself back in the ring at the beginning of Greensummer, with bad prospects, for no noble family would be looking for servants at that time. To stay with the Telsties she would need to impress them with her skill and dedication. She tried her best, but she had no idea what might work. She had as yet been given very little clerk's work to do; no more than replying to unaccepted invitations. She was kept busy filling in for other servants. She had served tea at morning calls, burnished Sebeth's faded scales, and even helped arrange preserved fruit in pleasing patterns on top of meat.

Lish came into the kitchen looking tired. "I think she'll sleep for a little now," she said. "Is there a dish of tea?"

Belcelir, one of the kitchen servants, stood to pour her one, and Nevris took it to her and handed it over as if Lish had been a fine visitor to the speaking room.

Lish smiled and drank the tea. "That's good," she said.

"Second pouring of the Eminence's best Summerback," Belcelir said, sipping her own tea. "Second pouring's as good as first with a fine tea like that, if not better."

"We do ourselves well enough here," Onaver said, from his seat beside the fire.

"That reminds me, you were going to read me that pamphlet, Nevris, and here we both are with a minute to ourselves."

There was a murmur of interest from the other dragons in the kitchen. "You didn't keep that wretched thing, did you Nevris?" Onaver asked.

"I didn't think it did any harm," Nevris said, defensively. She was aware that it was Onaver she needed to please quite as much as the Eminences if she wanted to stay with the Telsties. He had bought her, after all, choosing her from the other dragons awaiting

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purchase, and it would most likely be he who would sell her. When the masters were not in residence, it was Onaver who ruled Telstie House.

"Read it," Lish urged. The kitchen quieted as Nevris drew it out.

"An End to Subjugation," she read. "All dragons are hatched freely, but are everywhere bound. Wing-binding destroys the freedom of us all. How can anybody argue in this modern age that it is right to bind the wings of servants and sell them for gold, against their own will? Yet this is the law across Tiamath and forty thousand dragons are bought and sold each year. The rich dragon argues that he could not do without his servants. The free-born working dragon who keeps no servants himself argues that if the servants were free they would compete with him for his scanty wage. The parsons say each dragon was born to his estate. Yet what is this compared to the cruelty of wing-binding and selling young dragons away from all they have known? The truth is that as long as some dragons have their wings bound we are none of us free to fly, the threat of binding hangs over us all and makes us less than we could be. The rich could very well manage without –"

"Stop," Onaver interuputed. "Throw that seditious trash on the fire."

"No, I want to hear it," Lish said. "Makes us all less than we could be. I want to know what they mean by that."

"If we're found with that, it'll mean we'll all be eaten, or sold away," Onaver said. "Give it to me, Nevris." He reached his claw out.

Nevris reluctantly held it out towards him.

Lish also reached for it. "I want to know what it says," she insisted.

"Not in this house," Onaver said. He snatched the pamphlet and thrust it into the fire. It flared, briefly, illuminating a picture of a bound wing, then crumpled into ash. He poked the ash with his claw, stirring it, as if it might still be read. "Dragons in this house will be grateful for their positions."

"I'm grateful," Belcelir said, shyly. "And it's nonsense that the rich could manage without servants. Look how many of us they need to run the house."

"They could pay us wages," Lish said.

"Nonsense," Onaver said.

"They could," Nevris said, staring into the ashes. "But it wouldn't work. My father sold me in a bad season. He got enough gold for me that he could pay the rent on the farm and buy more beeves, after ours died in the drought. The rest of my family are living free, at least I hope so, because he sold me. If he couldn't have sold me, what good would wages have done? Even if all my sibs had taken jobs for wages, it wouldn't have brought it enough money fast enough for him to buy more beeves. He'd have had to have taken work for wages too, and my mother, and all of them left the farm. And if everyone left their farms, what would there be for anyone to eat?"

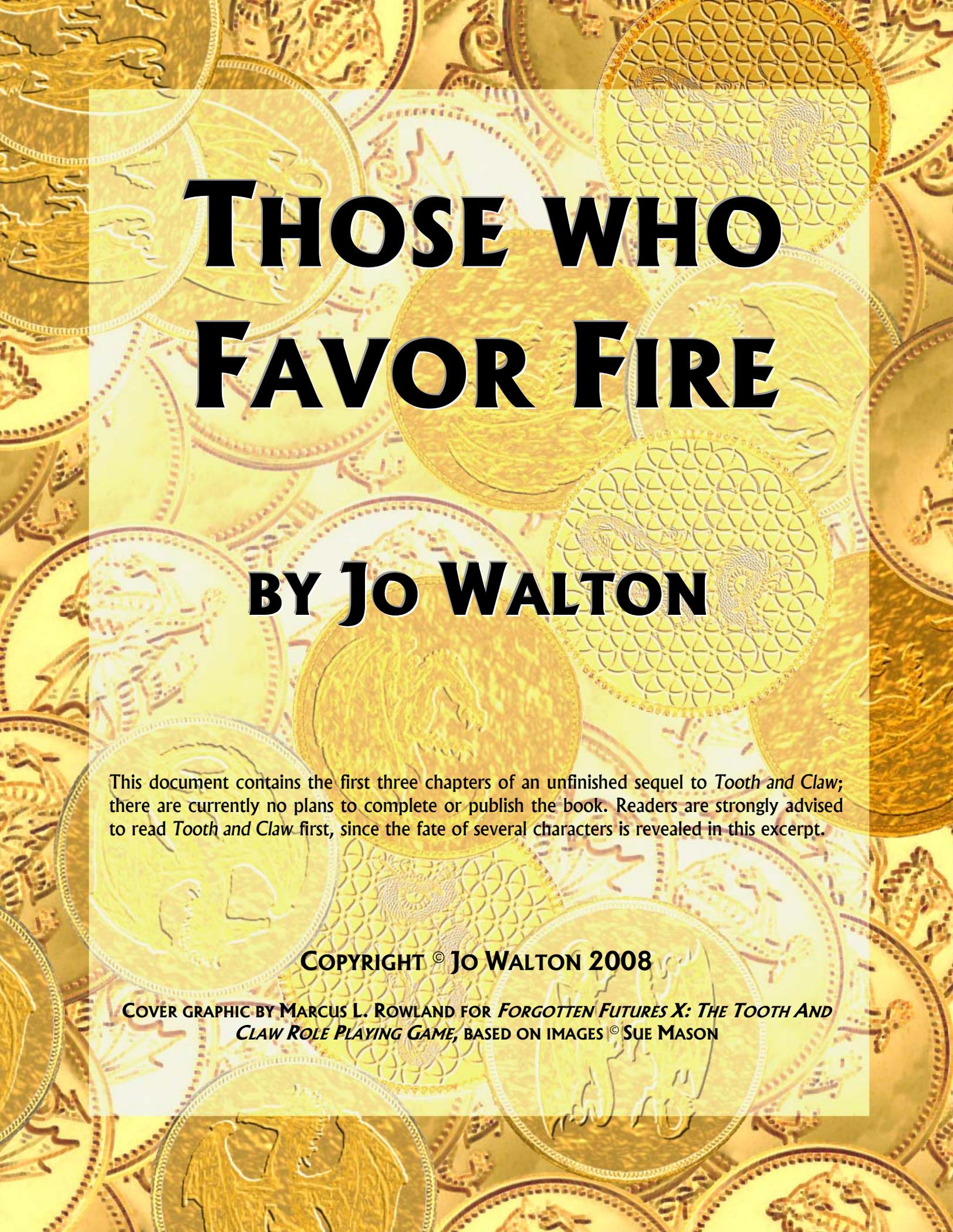
Lish looked at Nevris sympathetically, and Belcelir put her hand on her arm.

"Now you're talking sense," Onaver said. "Valuers are talking a lot of air and twaddle. Nevris knows what's real. Now get back to work. It must be nearly time to start preparing dinner."

They obeyed him and began to bustle about the kitchen. Lish took a moment to whisper to Nevris. "There might have been an answer to that in there too, you know."

"We'll never know now," Nevris replied. "I think Onaver's mostly right, though, it's dreams, very nice, but nothing you can bite."

"All the same, there might," Lish insisted.



# THOSE WHO FAVOR FIRE

BY JO WALTON

This document contains the first three chapters of an unfinished sequel to *Tooth and Claw*; there are currently no plans to complete or publish the book. Readers are strongly advised to read *Tooth and Claw* first, since the fate of several characters is revealed in this excerpt.

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