

RISE OF THE
**SHADOW
DRAGONS**

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FICKLING
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For Christoph, of course xx

ARCOSI

and the surrounding seas





PROLOGUE

Two dragons flew in darkness. Their breath came in wheezing gasps. Their wings flapped heavily, straining hard with every beat. Their scaly flanks were streaked with blood.

‘The dragons need to rest,’ Milla yelled, black hair escaping from her blue scarf. Her face was caked in ashy dust. ‘They won’t make it.’

‘They will! They have to,’ Thom cried hoarsely, a grim look on his face. ‘Milla, we’ve got to reach Arcosi, before it’s too late.’

As if to prove his words, a huge jet of hot steam hissed up from the slopes below, narrowly missing his red dragon. She banked sharply, almost losing control.

‘Thom!’ Milla screamed. ‘Are you all right?’ She twisted sideways and urged her blue dragon lower, searching in the gloom.

His voice carried up from the darkness below. ‘See? The

volcano is erupting. Right now! There's no time. We have to try!'

Sitting low on their dragons' backs, hunched and tense, both riders faced towards the west, urging their exhausted dragons to one final effort.

Milla whispered a constant stream of encouragement, 'Hurry, Iggy, hurry! If it's the last thing we do, we have to tell them of the danger. We have to tell them what to do.'

Behind them, the sky was streaked with red-gold sparks.

PART ONE - AIR





CHAPTER ONE

Six months earlier

*J*owan Thorsen was dreaming of flying. His hands gripped a purple scaly neck, the wind tugged his hair, the sea sparkled beneath him as his dragon sped through the air . . .

When he woke up, Joe was still smiling. The dream faded and he sat up with a jolt, remembering what day it was. Hatching Day fell on his twelfth birthday. His friends Amina and Conor had said it was lucky. And now a dream of dragons? That must be a good sign. Today was the day his life would change for ever. By that evening, he might have bonded with a newly hatched dragon. He'd be living in the dragonschool of Arcosi. His bag was right there, packed and ready. Excitement bubbled up inside him, and he couldn't sit still any longer.

He leaped out of bed and pulled on yesterday's crumpled shirt and trousers, leaving untouched the new white clothes

that had been laid out for him; they were for the ceremony later. He wanted to run and sing and shout, but it was still early, so he crept downstairs, avoiding the creaky floorboards and jumping the last three steps. No noise came from his parents' room.

Outside, smoke curled from the kitchen chimney, up into a blue sky dappled with pink clouds. He peeked through the crack of the kitchen door. No sign of Matteo the cook, just a large plate of steaming cinnamon rolls on the workbench. His favourite. Joe went in and grabbed two, burning his fingers. He shoved them in his pockets, feeling the heat spread through the worn linen. Then he ducked through the back door, walked quickly through the garden and climbed the high stone wall of the practice yard where he'd spent hours working on his sword skills.

He perched there like a pigeon, looking down over the rooftops of Arcosi, the wind in his face conjuring his dream again. He spread his arms like wings and his heart took flight. He gazed past the ships docked in the harbour far below, and right out to the pale sea which stretched away in every direction. Today, he had his first chance to bond with a dragon. He looked at the sea and imagined flying over it. It was so close, he could taste it. It would be just like his dream.

Just then, everything grew dark as a dragon glided low overhead, sapphire wings spread. It landed just outside the practice yard with a *whoomph* of wings and a crunch of earth.

'Milla!' Joe sprang down from the wall and went to greet his cousin. 'I thought you were too busy to come today?'

'Never too busy for your birthday, Joe!' Milla tumbled

off her dragon and Joe threw himself at her. ‘Dragons’ teeth! I swear you’ve grown in a week.’

It was true. Joe was growing so fast his legs ached each night, and he kept banging into things, not used to this new body. That wasn’t all that was new: strange intense moods blew in like storms. They passed as fast as they came, so he kept quiet and hoped no one noticed.

‘You’re tall enough to swing *me* round.’ She pulled back from the hug, eyes shining, black curls framing her face. ‘Don’t you dare try, or I’ll set Iggie on you.’

He laughed at her mock-serious tone. She might be one of the first dragonriders of Arcosi and almost twenty-five years old now, but she was always ready for mischief and he loved her for it.

Joe reached out for Iggie, his cousin’s huge blue dragon, who greeted him enthusiastically with sparks and grunts, and lots of head-butting that nearly knocked him over. Iggie was at least twice as big as the largest carthorse on the island, and his wings were massive. Joe ran his hands over Iggie’s scaly neck, realising that by sunset he too could have a dragon of his own. Real and breathing, here in his arms. What a birthday gift that would be!

‘I used to sit there too,’ Milla said, gesturing at the wall. ‘Best view in the city. Shall we?’

They climbed back up and sat side by side. There was a shadowy full moon giving way to the rising sun, and the air was still cold.

‘Happy birthday, Joe. This is for you.’ Milla passed him a small leather pouch.

‘Thank you,’ he said, opening its drawstring. He tipped it carefully, and something small and shiny fell into his cupped palm. It looked like a coin and a mass of silver chain.

‘It matches mine,’ Milla said, tapping the medal she always wore round her neck.

Joe lifted up the silver disc. It had a device beaten into it: a circle to represent the full moon, and a dragon in flight beneath it. It was the symbol of their family, the ancient dragonriders of Arcosi. ‘Oh, Milla.’ He struggled for the right words. ‘It’s perfect. I’m going to wear it today, for luck.’

‘Let me help you with that clasp.’ Milla fastened it behind his neck, brushing his wavy black hair aside. ‘There! Just as it’s meant to be.’

He patted it, feeling the cold metal settling into place at his throat. ‘And here’s something for you: breakfast!’ Joe passed her a roll and started ripping his own into shreds.

‘Ooh, hot from the oven. Matteo’s cinnamon rolls are as good as Josi’s,’ she said, nodding her thanks.

‘You better not tell her that.’ Joe grinned at her. Joe’s mother’s temper was as legendary as her cooking. Josi belonged to the island’s highest society these days, recognised as a descendant of the ancient royal family of Arcosi, but when Milla was young, Josi had been the household cook, hiding her true identity.

‘So,’ Milla said next, drawing out the syllable. ‘The big day?’

‘Uh-huh,’ Joe mumbled, mouth full of bread.

‘Ready?’ she asked.

‘I feel ready.’ He hesitated, and he was aware of his heart

beating faster, as he chose to tell her. ‘This morning, I was dreaming of a dragon. A purple one. Did that happen for you, with Iggie . . . ?’

She smiled, remembering. ‘Yes, a few times. I couldn’t see him, not exactly. But I knew he was blue, and I knew we would fly together.’

‘Yes!’ Joe said, relieved. ‘That’s what it felt like for me.’ And with a rush of eagerness, he begged her, ‘Is there a purple egg? How many are there? You’ve seen them, haven’t you? Tell me, Milla, please!’

‘You know I can’t tell you.’ Milla’s brown eyes held his, sparkling with life and humour.

He took that as a yes. There *was* a purple egg! He knew it.

Milla yawned widely, and Joe noticed the shadows under her eyes for the first time. ‘Are you all right?’ he asked.

‘Didn’t sleep much last night,’ she said. ‘Trouble in the lower town. Tarya had to send a few dragonriders to back up her troops.’

‘Trouble from the Brotherhood?’ Joe guessed.

‘Who else?’ Milla grimaced.

After the dragons returned, just before Joe was born, the army of Arcosi was halved in size – the island just didn’t need that many soldiers when it now had dragons to defend it. Half the army had been paid off to leave their jobs, all those years ago. And some of them, the ones who resented it, had banded together and now called themselves the Brotherhood. They loitered around, causing a nuisance and calling out insults, but no one took them too seriously.

‘It’s not Tarya’s fault!’ Joe defended his sister, the island’s general. ‘She was generous to the soldiers who left.’ He’d heard his father saying this many times.

‘She still is. That’s the problem.’ Milla sighed. ‘I understand she can’t ban them, in case that makes them more popular, but—’ She stopped herself.

‘What do you mean?’ He remembered seeing the men, still wearing their old black uniforms, tattered and faded. They gathered on street corners, drinking in the daytime, trying to get people to listen to them. ‘They’re harmless . . . aren’t they?’

‘I’m sorry, Joe.’ Milla put one hand on his shoulder. ‘I shouldn’t talk about my worries, not on your birthday. Don’t let this spoil Hatching Day. Your first time. How are you feeling?’

Joe paused, really considering that question. ‘Excited? A bit nervous.’

‘Don’t worry – all the dragons are healthy now.’

‘Are you sure?’ he asked anxiously.

These were only the second clutch of eggs laid since the Great Loss. Two years ago, a terrible sickness had swept through Arcosi’s dragonhalls, killing more than half its dragons. Joe’s brother, Isak, one of the first dragonriders along with Milla, was the Head Dragonguard of Arcosi, and his hair had turned pure white overnight from the shock.

‘Isak has been so vigilant,’ Milla said now. ‘He’s nurtured these eggs as if they were his own.’

It must be a nervous day for them all too, Joe realised in a rush. When the Great Loss came, no one could save

those dragons: not Milla with all her healing skills; nor Isak with all his wisdom; not Tarya with all her battle skills; nor Duke Vigo in spite of his power. He'd heard the rumours, everyone whispering that it was a sign that these youngsters didn't know what they were doing and that someone else should take charge of ruling the city. So they all needed this to go well.

Just not as much as him.

Joe looked down, and noticed he was gripping his silver medal tightly between his fingers. *Please let it be me today*, he wished. *Please don't let me be a waddler!*

That was a rude word for people who couldn't bond with dragons. Someone stuck on the ground: a *waddler*. Someone who would never fly on dragonback. It was whispered by the children before each ceremony. You weren't supposed to say it. Most people on the island were waddlers. Only a lucky few were dragonriders. It didn't stop every child praying, dreaming, wishing that a dragon would choose them.

Since the dragons returned, every young person in Joe's family had bonded with one. 'Oh, Milla, I hope all the eggs are healthy. Whoever they bond with.'

'It's all right, Joe,' Milla said, her eyes warm and bright with understanding. 'What's meant for you won't pass you by.'

He nodded, reassured.

'Come on, let's go down. It's time to get ready.' She wiggled to the edge of the wall and jumped off, landing lightly on both feet.

Joe followed his cousin, feeling his excitement building again. The air smelled of salt and woodsmoke, and he could

hear the distant calls of the fisherfolk down at the harbour, the sounds of the island city waking up.

Iggie clambered up from where he'd been dozing in the first rays of sunshine. To Joe's surprise, the blue dragon came to him first and placed his huge forehead against his chest.

'He is wishing you good luck,' Milla explained. 'From both of us . . .'

Joe scratched between Iggie's blue ears, grateful for his attention, but knowing that the dragon's heart belonged entirely to his cousin. 'Thanks, Ig,' Joe whispered, so only the dragon could hear. 'Later today, let's hope there'll be a new purple dragon for you to meet.'

Iggie half closed his huge green eyes and growled softly, sending tremors through Joe's whole body.

He relaxed. Today would be all right. Today would be the best birthday ever.