



Erin stood inside a wide circle of sand, with her sword high and her shield ready, and waited for her enemies.

A figure stepped into the circle and faced her. He was shorter than Erin, and thinner, but he looked quick and dangerous. She let him move forward, keeping her feet steady, waiting...

He lunged!

...And missed, his sword swishing past

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as Erin swayed to the left. She brought her own blade round in a short tight arc, and he yelped and fell. Erin steadied herself as the next attacker stepped forward. This one was more cautious, holding back and keeping his guard up. His eyes were hostile, but he looked nervous. Erin *roared* and rushed at him suddenly, and he stumbled backwards. She swung her shield up and knocked him flat.



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Then came a thin quick girl, her face tight and careful. She parried Erin's first attack and stabbed, and Erin scrambled back as the tip of the sword whistled past her face. Erin drove forward, slipped to one side in a feint and then back, smashing her sword hilt against the girl's. The girl cursed and dropped her sword, and Erin struck again.

The last attacker approached. He was different. Wide-shouldered, almost as tall as Erin, he held his sword well, and confidently. Like her, he stepped carefully, his shield up and his sword ready.

Erin struck, but he caught her blow on his shield and heaved, shoving her back! She gasped and staggered as he pushed forward,

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and she almost fell, before getting her balance and striking back. They pulled apart and circled each other warily. Erin's sword and shield were heavy. Sweat trickled down her forehead, and the back of her tunic was damp. She would have to end this soon...

She moved to the side, and then struck again, fast!

Again he caught the blow on his shield, and again he heaved, but this time she was ready. As he pushed forward, she dropped her own shield, grabbed the top of his, and *yanked* it towards her. He gave a shout of surprise and dragged himself back, and she let his momentum carry her round behind him, twisting, swinging her sword and stabbing

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against his back.

“Touch!” came a voice, and the boy sagged to his knees.

“Hah!” he gasped out. “Nice trick. Thought I had you.”

Erin grinned and stood up straight. Around them, the others cheered. Tom, her largest opponent, was grinning and rubbing his back, where Erin's wooden sword had hit. Around them were Connor, Ellis and Cara. Ellis and Cara were smiling, though Connor looked annoyed. Outside the circle, Mira and Kai cheered.

They were in a training ground surrounded by other training areas, a racecourse, and a few small buildings, all sitting inside a vast

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underground hall. It was a colossal space, and yet for these children, and for the adults who taught them, it had become like home.

For this was the Dragonseer Guild Hall, and Erin and her friends were *dragonseers*.

Daisy, their self-defence teacher, stepped into the ring. “Well done, Erin!” she said, beaming. “At this rate we’ll have to try two against one!”

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Erin laughed. “Bring ’em on!”

Daisy chuckled. “Careful now. That last move of yours cost you your shield – one more attacker and you’d have been in trouble.”

Daisy was short and cheerful, with blonde hair tied in a ponytail that bounced as she walked, and bright yellow leggings and top. Erin sometimes thought she didn’t look



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much like a warrior, but she had fought enough practice sessions to know that Daisy was the best. She took her job seriously, because the Dragonseer Guild had a serious purpose.

The hall was hidden away somewhere under the city of Rivven in the land of Draconis. Above them life went on as normal, but down here ... things were different.

As Erin watched, Tom closed his eyes and concentrated, and a shape appeared behind him.

It was twice as tall as Tom, with a long neck, dark-red skin like iron in a forge, and orange-and-yellow stripes stripes of flame. She was a dragon, and her name was Ironskin.

“Hello, Tomas,” she said, leaning down and

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resting her head against his. “Are you all right? You took a hit there.”

Tom leaned against her and smiled. “It’s all right, Ironskin,” he said. “They’re just wooden swords.” He winced and rubbed his back again. “Still sore, though. I wouldn’t want to fight Erin with a real blade!”

“Well done, Erin!” said Ellis, her first opponent. He was a pretty good sword fighter, but he was much more interested in exploring and map-making. Cara, the third opponent, inspected her wrist where Erin had smashed against her sword hilt.

“Sneaky,” she muttered. She looked as if she was making a note for next time. Cara was a careful, clever girl. Her dragon,

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Silverthief, was quite small, not much bigger than Cara, but she was fiercely protective and now she glared at Erin.

“You did it!” said Mira, running up to her. Mira was hopeless with a sword and had been knocked out of the competition early. She preferred tinkering with machines, and her dragon Flameteller, with his bronze colours, looked a little like a machine himself.

“How can you run *towards* them like that?” Mira asked. “Aren’t you scared?”

Erin laughed. “It’s easy when I’m fighting. I don’t think about it!” She turned to Connor, her second opponent. “Good match,” she said, grinning.

Connor scowled. “It was supposed to be

a *sword* fight,” he complained. “You hit me with your shield!”

“Still counts,” said Erin. “Never mind, I’m sure you’ll win *one* day...”

“Perhaps we should try something else,” he said with a sour smile. “What about a summoning contest?” He clicked his fingers, and his dragon Lightspirit appeared. Lightspirit was a thin, wispy creature, with pale green brows.

“Where’s *your* dragon, Erin?” asked Connor in a mocking voice.

Erin’s face went red, but before she could



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answer, Daisy stepped between them.

“Enough of that!” she snapped. “Erin won fair and square, Connor – you were too timid, and she used her advantage. Now, it’s Mr Creedy’s class next, and you’ll all need your dragons with you. Erin, you can go to Drun and get him to help you. You others, head over to the training grounds. Well done, everyone!”

The others headed across, but Daisy called Erin back.

“There’s a sword competition next month,” she said. “They have a junior section, and I think you’d do very well. How would you like to take part?”

Erin grinned. “Yeah! Here in Rivven?”

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Daisy smiled. “No, it’s in Strick, but I could take you, if you’d like?”

Strick was the next town along the coast. It was only a few miles away, a morning’s ride by cart, but Erin hesitated. “Maybe,” she said at last. “I might be busy.”

Daisy looked surprised. “Really?”

Erin looked away. She felt suddenly hot. “Um, I have to go see Drun for help summoning Rocky.”

“Erin?”

“I have to go see Drun now!”

Erin walked away quickly, leaving Daisy gazing after her in surprise.