

Deelind and the IceFire

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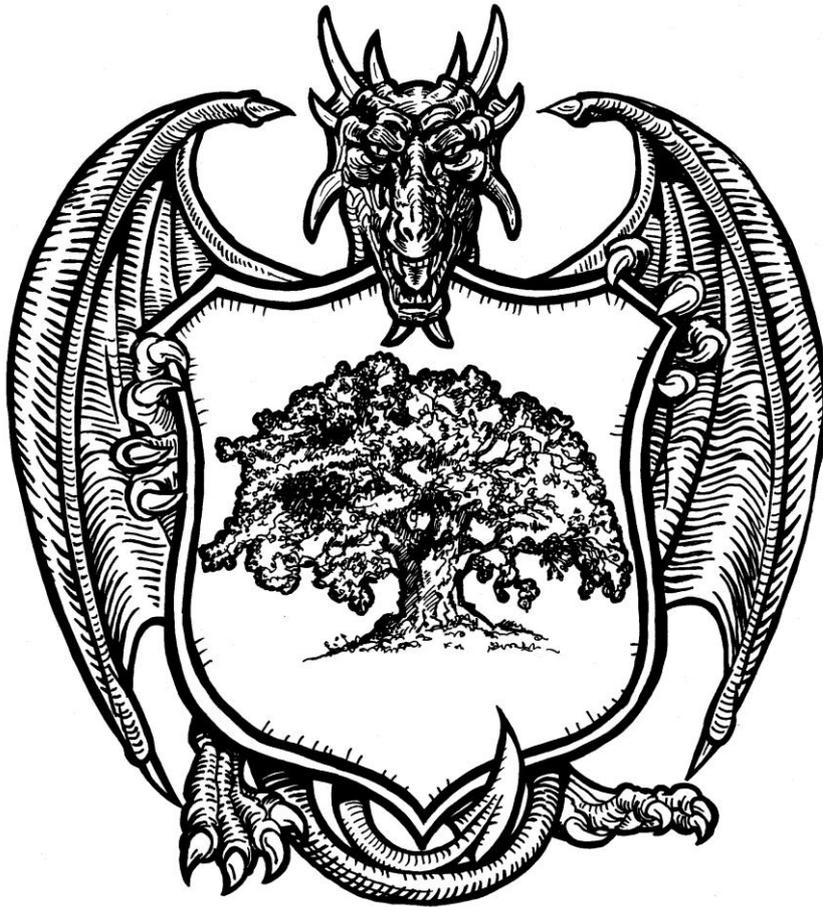
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L. Dempster

BOOK 1 OF THE THUNDER OF DRAGONS SERIES



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Chapter 1

Brakenhill Tor

Deelind ran down the hill, her bare feet digging into the dew-dampened grass as her dress wrapped around her legs, almost tripping her up. Her long hair flew behind her and a fresh morning breeze blew in her face. Flying free and happy she spread her arms out like an aeroplane and glided down the hillside. The breeze turned into a strong wind almost blowing her dress over her head, making her squeal in surprise. A shadow fell over her. The wind became warm and the sunlight turned a red-orange colour. At the bottom of the hill she saw a young woman running towards her. Terror etched the woman's face as she screamed in anguish, 'No, no! Look out!' Deelind turned, looked up and froze. A huge wing came down towards her. She shrank into herself just as a blanket of soft brown feathers covered her. Intense, burning heat surrounded her, constricting her breathing and bringing tears to her eyes. The earth beneath her crumbled away and then all was dark.

'Deelind! Deelind, you are going to be late!' called her gran. Jerking awake, she groaned groggily at the familiar feeling of sweat-drenched material sticking to her skin. Rolling out of bed, she staggered to the bathroom for a shower. Dressing quickly in jeans, T-shirt and running shoes, she sighed at the thought of another long day working in the manor house's hot kitchen while her schoolmates enjoyed their Saturday off. She scooped up her sweaty PJs and left the room, taking the stairs two at a time. On entering the cottage's cosy kitchen, she saw her gran sitting at the kitchen table sipping her tea. One hand held open

a worn, leather-bound book. A large constellation map was inked onto one yellowed page while the other page was filled with flowing, handwritten notes.

Gran looked up, spotting the PJs while giving Deelind a warm smile. 'Bad dream again?' Concern edged her voice.

'Yes. The same one as always,' she said, tossing her PJs into the washing machine. Combing her fingers through her wet hair, she looked out of the window at the kitchen garden. The bluebells were just beginning to open. Soon there would be a carpet of them, their intensely shaded, bell-shaped heads bobbing in the breeze with their scent filling the air. A soft mist hung over the small stream running behind the garden and as her eye caught a glint of light sparkling off the water, a sense of peace flowed over her. She loved the two-bedroom cottage they lived in. She didn't have much time to herself, but when she did, she loved to go into the backyard and watch the birds roosting at the manor house on top of Brakenhill Tor. They looked like falcons, but they were larger than expected and she couldn't pin them down in her gran's bird book. Sometimes the birds stared directly at her and goose bumps would pop up all over her body.

'The stars are in a strange alignment today,' said Gran, sounding puzzled as she flicked through the pages of the book. 'Both good and bad.'

Not taking much notice because Gran was always practising her starcraft, Deelind startled when she felt Gran's arms encircle her waist. Turning into the embrace, Deelind hugged her back. Gran had long, thick and shiny grey hair which she wore in a variety of styles. Today she had three plaits running through the length of it, and the style went well with the flowing blue dress she was wearing. Deelind rested her head against her gran's shoulder.

'Go carefully,' Gran cautioned with a final squeeze, as Deelind stepped back. Nodding her head in understanding, Deelind headed to the front door and grabbed her quilted coat off the coat hook on the way out. Her gran was her world. She could not remember her mother who had died in a car accident just after she turned four, and she had never known her father who had left before she was born.

Deelind stepped out of the front door onto the country lane. The mist had thickened and pressed against her, sending tendrils of damp to curl over the edges of her collar. With a shiver she pulled her soft, faux-fur collar closer around her neck and walked briskly down the narrow road that led towards the manor house. Between the mist and familiarity of the lane she had walked all her life, she was lost in her thoughts when she felt something give way and squelch under her foot. Lifting her foot up, she saw she had stepped on a dead blackbird. 'Ew, ew, ew, gross!' Hopping on one foot and holding her nose, she hobbled to the grass on the side of the lane and hurriedly wiped the bottom of her shoe until it was as clean as she could get it. Uneasy, she eyed the bird. Gran had a thing about blackbirds, and she would have seen this as a bad omen.

The cottage put her halfway between her school in Buttercup and the Brakenhill manor estate, which was a few miles outside the town. She worked in the manor house kitchen after school, on Saturdays and during her school holidays. She worked alongside Geoff, the head chef, his partner Miss Tibi Walker and several other kitchen helpers. Unlike the kitchen helpers who lived in Buttercup town, Geoff and Miss Tibi lived at the manor house. Miss Tibi

helped Geoff in the kitchen, but she was also the head housekeeper. The housekeeping staff largely kept to themselves. She had been told they lived in staff accommodation somewhere behind the Tor. She had been coming to the manor house for as long as she could remember, and with no children of their own, Geoff and Miss Tibi had taken her under their wing. It had been natural to join in with their kitchen and household activities, taking on more as she got older.

In many ways, Geoff and Miss Tibi were her adoptive parents and she loved them dearly. The couple were complete opposites in personality and in physical appearance and they balanced each other perfectly. Geoff was six feet tall with a large, soft build. He kept his hair shaved close to his skull and with nothing to distract the eye, his rich, deep grey eyes stood out. Miss Tibi was short at five foot one, and thin. She had soft, ash-blond hair brushing her shoulders, and blue eyes. Where Geoff was steady and calm, Miss Tibi was a whirlwind of activity and life. Miss Tibi fussed around her, organising her tasks, mending her school uniform, checking her homework, arranging her meals, and insisting she take food home every evening for her gran. Miss Tibi could be overwhelming and, on those days when Deelind was sure she had the 'deer in the headlights' look, Geoff always helped her out. In his quiet way, he would send her a wink and distract Miss Tibi.

Despite the cold mist, by the time she reached the Brakenhill gates she felt hot in her warm coat. Shrugging out of her coat, she saw that although the early morning sun was gently illuminating the top of the Tor, it had not risen high enough yet and the gates were still in the shade. The Tor was a large, steep, grass-covered hill and the only one for miles around. She had heard the kitchen staff say that Lady Lee owned the Tor and all the land around it. Deelind looked

around. Where was Grimbell? He had waited for her outside the gates every day for as long as she could remember. The chilly morning breeze made her warm skin pebble as she peered through the gates, her gaze taking in the impressive moat which was as wide as two bus lengths. It ran the full perimeter of the estate, or so she had been told, for she had never followed it herself.

Not sure what to do, she walked to the dragon-shaped gate pillar that was connected to a large stone wall running alongside the moat. For the first time, she noticed a faded insignia on its chest. She could just make out the shape of a shield with a tree in the centre of it. She felt a pulling sensation which became stronger the more she looked at it. The hairs on her arms stood up. She yanked herself back and shook her head to release the weird feeling. Now that was odd.

Pushing the experience aside for later thought, she peered at the dragon's face. Each morning when she arrived at the gate Grimbell would slip his hand into the dragon's mouth, holding a large, old metal key. Moments later, the gates would open and the drawbridge would slide out horizontally, bridging the moat and linking the outside world to Brakenhill Estate. Perhaps she could feel in the mouth for something that would help? It looked rather dark and menacing. Nervously she stretched her hand out towards the mouth, but before she reached it, the dragon bellowed, 'Who seeks entry?' Jumping back, she stared at the stone dragon. Impossible! Stone can't talk and the dragon's mouth hadn't moved, had it?

'Deelind! Wait! I'm coming,' panted a tall man, waving frantically while running up the estate's cobbled driveway. Deelind's brow snapped together as she raised her hand in greeting. Why was Geoff meeting her today? As Geoff reached the edge of the moat, the drawbridge began to move across towards the

gates. He stepped on it and let it carry him the rest of the way. Still thinking about the dragon, she waited and watched. She loved how the drawbridge seemed to hover above the water and never got tired of watching it slide open and close. When it touched the moat edge with a gentle thud, the gates opened just wide enough for her. She slipped through and stood on the drawbridge next to Geoff, who was still breathing heavily after his run. The gates closed and the drawbridge began to retract, carrying them across the moat.

Entering through the gates offered the first unimpeded view of the manor house which stood near the base of the Tor. It always took her breath away. The house was majestic, and it amazed her how the back-end of the ground floor extended past the first floor into the Tor. The roof of the extended ground floor became a large, terraced area which was partially cut into the Tor. To the right of the house was the extensive vegetable garden which supplied most of the produce for the kitchens. The land to the left of the house flowed into open fields.

'Morning, Deelind,' said Geoff with a gentle smile and affection in his eyes as he bent to give her a quick hug.

'Morning,' she said, squeezing him back. She looked up at him, her eyes tight with concern. 'Where is Grimbell? Is everything alright?'

'He is running an errand for Lady Lee,' he said and changed the subject to other things, clearly not wanting to discuss Grimbell any further.

When the conversation lulled, she said, 'The stone dragon spoke to me.' Startled, Geoff glanced at her and she saw something flicker across his face. It was too subtle and swift to interpret, and he hid it quickly and coughed as if to clear his throat.

Stepping from the drawbridge and onto the driveway he said, 'Surprised you, did it? That was just a speaker in its mouth, with a motion detector which

plays a recording. I forgot Grimbell installed it recently. It is proving effective at discouraging unwanted visitors.'

They walked the rest of the way to the kitchen in silence. Something about Geoff's answer seemed odd. She couldn't quite convince herself that she hadn't seen the dragon's mouth move or felt the tugging feeling of the dragon's insignia.

Hearing her footsteps on the cobblestones of the expansive driveway, she pondered on what it must be like to live in a place like this. It was almost like stepping back in time with the old rotary dial telephone in the main hallway, the glow emanating from fireplaces in the main rooms, and the apparent lack of modern devices like TVs, mobiles and computers. She could imagine Victorian ladies walking through the gardens in their bell-shaped dresses, and porters standing between the two massive columns that framed the heavy, double front doors. Walking through the vegetable garden to the right of the manor house, they made their way to the side door and entered the hustle and bustle of the hot kitchen. Geoff went back to his cooking and left her to hang up her jacket and get on with her duties.

It was a particularly busy morning in the kitchen and Deelind almost missed Geoff and Miss Tibi whispering in the pantry. She tried not to listen to their conversation but could not stop herself being drawn towards the pantry door.

'... but she needs to be told soon,' pleaded Miss Tibi.

'If she is meant to, she will learn in good time and when she is old enough to understand,' replied Geoff.

'Old enough!' Miss Tibi said in a fierce whisper. 'If she is not at school she is working here. She is sixteen now and if that isn't old enough, I don't think you will ever think she is ready to know. Look at her. She has no real friends and you know that's not healthy. I think she should be introduced to Jack's boys.'

A loud, shrill clang sounded. Geoff had dropped the large pot she had seen him carry to the pantry. It had been full of potatoes, if the sound of heavy things rolling on the floor was any indication. Deelind jumped, nearly knocking over a bucket and mop standing next to the pantry door.

'Lady Lee has said no, Tib. You know the rules,' he said firmly and calmly, his voice seemingly coming from different areas of the room as if he was retrieving rolling potatoes.

Miss Tibi huffed and called out, 'Deelind, we need some vegetables for tonight's meal.'

Deelind moved quietly away when she heard Miss Tibi's footsteps approaching the pantry door. Why had they been talking about her? She wondered what they meant by her needing to know something, and who were Jack and his boys? Miss Tibi had said, 'Jack's boys,' as though they lived next door.

Other than the ground floor and the first floor of the manor house and the vegetable garden next to the kitchen, she had never been allowed to explore the estate on her own. The manor house was a huge, two-storey building with high ceilings and long, narrow, floor-to-ceiling windows.

Each evening she would help Miss Tibi carry vast amounts of prepared food from the kitchen to both the dining room and up onto the terrace, situated on the first floor at the back of the house. Oddly, she never saw anyone on the estate other than Geoff, Miss Tibi, Grimbell, Lady Lee, housekeepers and some

kitchen helpers, yet the plates returned to the kitchen completely empty. Where did the food go? Why on earth did they prepare enough food every day to feed two armies when there only ever seemed to be four people living on the estate? When she asked Geoff, he would cheerfully raise his arms up dramatically and say, 'Well, who do you think feeds all the birds and moles?'

It was frustrating. Clearly, birds and moles did not eat three-course meals. No matter how hard she had pushed, Geoff never gave a straight answer and as the years passed, she had stopped asking.

With her attention focused on the conversation she had just overheard, she almost forgot to answer Miss Tibi. 'I'll get them now, Miss Tibi,' she called.

'Not so fast!' Miss Tibi's voice sounded much closer. Her heart stopped. Did Miss Tibi know she had overheard them talking?

'There you are!' said Miss Tibi, walking towards her, her face open and friendly. Apart from some tightness around her eyes, Miss Tibi's face revealed nothing of her argument with Geoff. 'It is a beautiful day. Please can you pick some flowers before you pick the vegetables? There are plenty this year in the field next to the vegetable garden. You have been working so hard. I think some fresh air will do you good but mind you don't wander too far or there will be hell to pay if Grimbell hears of it.'

Grimbell was the caretaker of the manor estate. A stocky man, he was the same height as Miss Tibi, making Deelind taller than him by a good three inches. Grimbell was as old as the hills and barely said a word, grunting his way through every conversation. He was unable to move his left arm and its skin looked like it had been melted in a hot fire. It was probably why he was so grumpy.

'Don't wander outside the field and stay away from the Tor,' added Miss Tibi, reaching up with a hand to brush a strand of hair away from Deelind's face.

'Yes. Thank you,' Deelind said, rushing for the door before Miss Tibi could say anything else or change her mind. She could not believe her luck.

While removing her kitchen apron and collecting the basket to hold the soon-to-be-picked vegetables, she heard Miss Tibi and Geoff having another heated discussion. They did seem to be arguing a lot today.

'You said she could go where? You know Grimbell will be angry if he finds out. Let's hope nothing happens to her again or, worse, she goes missing, too!' Geoff growled at poor Miss Tibi as Deelind hurried out of the kitchen door. She did not want to wait around to hear any more or to be told she was no longer allowed to go into the field. It was a lovely day and a great opportunity to explore the estate garden.

She disappeared into the vegetable garden and ducked into the greenhouse. After stopping for a moment to see if anyone was going to try to call her back, she relaxed and sat down on a small, wooden stool, mulling over the morning's events. This had been the strangest morning she could remember. There was no Grimbell to meet her at the gate. Usually he walked her home in the evening and she wondered if he would be finished with his business in time to walk with her this evening. Then there was Miss Tibi's and Geoff's conversation. Who had gone missing? Other than Grimbell and Lady Lee, everyone else was at work. She hoped it was not Grimbell. Strange, too, was Miss Tibi allowing her time to explore the field on her own to pick flowers.

When she thought it was safe to venture out, Deelind slipped out of the greenhouse and walked into the vegetable garden. Catching her reflection in the greenhouse glass, she watched the lean girl stop to scoop her long, chestnut-brown hair away from her heart-shaped face and into a loose ponytail using a hairband she always kept on her wrist. The day was warming quickly, and she was glad to have her hair off her neck. As she gazed at her reflection, bright, emerald-green eyes framed with thick, long lashes stared back. Pale skin that seemed to burn at the slightest hint of sunlight accentuated her hair and eye colour. While some would say she was pretty, in that moment, clad in jeans and a T-shirt, standing in a place she known all her life, she felt very ordinary. Turning away from the reflection, she found herself sighing as she walked along the stone path that wound its way through the vegetable garden. It was a beautiful clear day that should be filled with relaxation and fun and yet...

Her dreams were bothering her again. Since her sixteenth birthday only two months ago, the dream she had been having for years had suddenly become more frequent and alarmingly real. She breathed in lungfuls of crisp morning air in an attempt to brush aside the after-effects of the dream.

While growing up, she had imagined the young woman from the dream to be her mother, but she couldn't remember her, so she wasn't sure and there were no photos she could look at. Gran didn't keep photographs, believing that they captured pieces of your soul. For as long as she could remember she had lived with her maternal grandmother, in their traditional two-bedroom thatch cottage on the outskirts of a small Welsh town called Buttercup near the English border.

Her thoughts tumbled around in her head as she walked. Now that she was sixteen, she would soon have to choose if she wanted to carry on with school

or leave and work full-time at the manor house. There was not much else to do at the estate other than work in the kitchens, and she couldn't imagine herself doing that for the rest of her life. She had never thought about what she would do when she left school. For her, school was a place to survive. It didn't help that it was the only high school in the town.

She kept to herself at school and did not have many friends. Most of the schoolkids belonged to the Thorn gang. The rest just scattered at the end of the schoolday in a bid to escape being chased down by the gang.

Two students, Spike Drake and his younger sister, Rose, pretty much ran the school. Spike was the gang leader and a renowned bully who would help himself to the student's lunches or their food money, or just beat them up for fun. Two years older than Rose and herself, Spike should have finished school already, but he had been kept down twice and was now in Deelind's year.

Spike hated her, but he and his gang seldom bothered her. This might have something to do with her living on the side of town that the gang rarely visited, but it was probably because of an incident that had happened three years earlier. It had been the first day back at school after the summer holidays and Spike's first day in her class. Spike had been told to sit behind her and, to stamp his authority in this new class, he leaned across his desk and cut her hair. On hearing scissors snip and seeing her hair fall onto the floor, she had spun around, leapt out of her chair and shouted, 'You little weasel!' This was followed by a loud crunching sound as she broke Spike's nose and knocked him out cold. Both of them had been suspended from school but it was worth it. Of course, Miss Tibi had fussed about it at the time but her gran, knowing that Spike was a violent bully, had simply said, 'Well done. He won't bother you again.' Her heart warmed at the memory. Gran was the best.

Spike's father, Mr Drake, was a committed follower of Blackthorn and a member of Blackthorn's personal army. Blackthorn could have been the Devil's son and some people were sure he really was the Devil. He ruled the town with the use of drugs and his army of bullies. Crossing him or his army could mean death, although the police never seemed able to link any deaths to Blackthorn or his followers. It didn't help that the police station in the town was only open every Monday and Friday morning. It had a phone outside, near the front door which was linked to the main police station a couple of miles away. The Thorn gang made sure that the phone never worked.

Between Blackthorn's army and the gang, they controlled most of the northern part of the town and largely had free rein in and around the rest of the town, too. However, they seemed, for some reason unknown to her, unable to completely take over the town. There were areas that Blackthorn's people never seemed to go, such as her cottage and Lady Lee's manor estate on the west side.

Some days the gang members would arrive at school with black eyes or broken bones and their clothes full of dirt. She heard whispers at school that said the Thorn gang would get into fights with the orphans that lived somewhere past the manor house. She had never seen or been able to find out exactly where this orphanage was located. When asked, Miss Tibi would say, 'Oh, they live a few miles away and you need to stay away from them.' When pushed, Miss Tibi would get all flustered and Deelind would drop the subject, having received no answers. She had looked on a map and could not find an orphanage or any other building past the manor house.

Deelind tried to make sense of Geoff's comment that morning. 'If anything happens to her again...' Had they even been talking about her?

Nothing other than the confrontation with Spike had ever happened to her. She had never been sick nor broken a bone in her body. Her life was rather boring.

Her musings were interrupted by a strange noise coming from the far wall of the vegetable garden, the one next to the meadow. Looking first to see if Geoff or Miss Tibi had heard the noise, she carefully made her way towards the sound. In the past she had peeked over the wall which revealed a meadow pitted with craters. It looked like an old battlefield and she had wondered if it had happened during the Second World War. It must have been a while ago because the craters were now covered in grass and flowers.

A rumble came from underground just as she peered over the wall. The sound was coming from a large, twenty-foot grassed crater in front of her. Suddenly, grass, flowers and soil from the edge of the crater shot up into the air. Instinctively she closed her eyes as clumps of dirt showered down on her. On opening them again she saw the dirtiest, strangest-looking boy with scruffy, black hair standing in the crater. Just behind him was a fresh hole in the side of the crater. The boy's large hands were full of soil, he was barefoot and he wore a fluffy bodysuit under his blue denim dungarees. She noted that he was only about an inch taller than her as she watched him go bright red and try to speak several times.

His warm, brown eyes squeezed shut as he moaned, 'Oh dear. Ivan's never going to take me out again. Nice to see you, Deelind.' He dived head first at the other side of the crater and with some weird noises and movements he created a second hole and disappeared down it at a rate that her brain battled to take in. Oddly, there was an 'L' sticker, like those found on cars for learner drivers, stuck to his bottom.

Not even two seconds later another odd-looking boy popped out of the first hole in the side of the crater. With his messy, black hair and similar facial features, he was clearly related to the previous boy. Older, this boy was taller than the previous boy by several inches and had well-defined muscles that rippled through his bodysuit. This time she could see that what she thought was a bodysuit was, in fact, fine, softly sheened black fur. His overly large, broad hands were easily the size of a side plate and he had strong, thick fingers.

‘Deelind?’ His brow furrowed in dismay. ‘You’re not supposed to be here. Sorry about Mug, I don’t think he will ever get the hang of navigation. Dad is going to go mad when he finds out about this.’

‘... uh...’ she said, loosely pointing at him, ‘what... how... who?’

‘Must run. Don’t worry about the burrows,’ he said as he disappeared into the second hole.

Her mouth dropped open. Burrows? Recalling her gran’s saying about catching flies, she snapped it shut. Shaking loose some of the dirt from her hair and quickly brushing it off her clothing, she discarded her basket and clambered over the wall. On the other side, she jumped into the crater, which now contained two holes, one on either side. She peered into the first hole where the boys had come out and then went over to the second hole that they had disappeared down. Both holes looked scruffy, the soil was slightly moist, with a freshly dug, earth smell, and they disappeared into darkness.



Chapter 2

The Molders

Eyeing the holes warily, Deelind hesitated for a moment. Her body broke out into a cold sweat. She hated dark and cramped places and she was seriously considering climbing into the hole. With it being Saturday and the start of a week's holiday, her jeans and T-shirt were perfect for this. Miss Tibi would not have been pleased had she been wearing her school uniform. Miss Tibi wasn't going to be happy about this either, but she just had to find out more about these boys. After wiping her sweaty palms on her jeans, she crouched down on her hands and knees and crawled into the hole.

The soil around her was surprisingly firm, but while the hole was big enough for her to crawl down, it was not a comfortable fit. Her arms, legs, sides and head scraped and bumped the sides of the hole as it changed in width and height. The crisp air blowing in from the hole's entrance changed the deeper she went, becoming dense and moist. The hole travelled sharply downwards and the light from the entrance was fading quickly. Nervous, she slowed down. What was she doing? Where was she heading? Why was she following these strange boys?

She stopped. The tunnel had gone completely dark. The space around her felt smaller and darkness pressed against her. Her heart lurched and spots danced in front of her eyes. Gasping, she was only able to take shallow breaths. As her throat began to close, panic threatened to overwhelm her. Think! Breathe! Several long minutes passed before she was able to think even a little. Had the tunnel entrance collapsed, and she was stuck? A small rational part of her knew

that the light from the entrance was no longer reaching her. Trying to turn around, she discovered she couldn't. Panic roared up again. Her eyes blurred with tears as she tried to reverse but her body and clothing caught against the tunnel walls, hindering her retreat.

A scuffling sound came from behind her. She froze. A big lump formed in her throat as terror pulsed through her. What was that?

'You're claustrophobic, aren't you? You must keep going forward,' said a young voice.

Screaming in fright, she scrambled blindly forward as fast as she could.

'It's okay, Deelind, it's only me,' the voice called out. 'We will be out of this excuse of a burrow soon and it won't close up for at least another few minutes.'

Some of what he said penetrated her fear-filled mind and she stopped. Taking some deep breaths, it was a while before she could no longer hear her heart thundering in her ears.

'You scared the life out of me! How do you know my name? What do you mean, 'close up'? Who are you?'

'I'm Tom,' the voice declared proudly. 'I am seven years old.' Well, that was helpful.

'Why are you following me? How do you know that this hole comes to an end and why will it close up?'

'This is a burrow not a hole. You ask more questions than I do. Why are you following Mug and Ivan?'

This was going nowhere. 'Tom,' she said, digging deep for patience. 'Who are Mug and Ivan and what do you mean 'burrow'? Realising she had little

choice if she wanted out of this cramped space, she started slowly crawling forward.

‘My brothers, of course,’ said Tom, who sounded right behind her. She was suddenly relieved that it was dark, and this boy could not see her in this awkward position. ‘Dad says tunnels are permanent underground passages. Some of the tunnels are reinforced with bricks or sandstone. Most have cobbled stone floors, and some have lighting. They are built by moler or Mole People engineers. Burrows are temporary underground passages dug by molers. They are dark, low and narrow, and you must crawl through them like this one and holes are just that, holes. Did you like the ‘learner’ sticker I put on Mug’s bottom?’

Amused, Deelind felt herself relax a little. Her panic had receded, and since Tom’s arrival the claustrophobia was easier to manage. Ignoring his question, she asked, ‘What is a moler?’

‘Molers are molers.’

‘That still does not answer my question.’

‘Molers are miners, gardeners and landscapers of the land,’ he said as though reciting something he’d been told. He sighed. ‘It’s boring really. Mug has just become a moler and Ive is trying to teach him how to navigate but he has no sense of direction, which is a bit of a problem if you are a moler. That is why I thought he needed a learner sticker,’ chortled Tom. ‘I’m not going to become a moler. I intend to be a Dragonknight.’

Far from answering her question, she now had more questions. Briefly closing her eyes in a reach for patience, she reminded herself that Tom was just seven years old.

‘Why and how does the burrow close?’ she said, suddenly concerned that this never-ending burrow was going to seal up on her at any minute.

‘That is the gift of a moler. It closes to hide the fact that molers exist. It can be dangerous because if it closes around you it will trap and suffocate you. There are two types of burrows. This is a travelling burrow which only closes after fifteen minutes. We’ve got plenty of time. The escape burrow is the dangerous one and only dug by experienced molers because it closes up in seconds.’

Her head ached from all the day’s strange events and the aftermath of the panic attack. Suddenly she could see a dim light ahead as she felt her way awkwardly around a sharp, ninety-degree bend. Hearing voices arguing, hope filled her, and she sped up. Finally, she crawled out of the burrow only to exit into what looked like a tunnel. It was lit and well constructed, and the air felt more normal. This bigger tunnel looked like it had been around for a long time as the walls were smooth and dry and there were glowing lights embedded into the ceiling. It was big enough to allow an adult to stand upright and wide enough to allow two people to walk side-by-side. Still on her hands and knees, she looked up and saw the two boys whom she had followed into the burrow. They had stopped arguing and were now standing on either side looking down at her. She scrambled to her feet. Glaring at each of them, she could see worry and surprise on their faces.

‘She is even prettier close up,’ said Mug, turning crimson.

‘You’ve exited here into the outer defence perimeter tunnel and with all this noise the whole hill is going to know something is up!’ Ivan hissed at Mug. ‘It’s Dad’s problem to train you and good luck to him. With your navigation skills, you will never get out of the pit.’ Facing Deelind, he said, ‘We have to get

you back to the surface as quickly as possible, before anyone finds out you were down here. Why on earth did you follow us?’

Ignoring this, she said, ‘Who are you?’

Ivan’s forehead furrowed as he said, ‘Sorry, I forgot you have no idea who we are. I am Ivan, this is Mug, my middle brother, and Tom there is my youngest brother.’ Turning towards Tom, who was standing behind Deelind, he said, ‘Why are you following us, Tom? You were told to stay at home.’ Within a blink of an eye Tom disappeared down the tunnel. She saw that he looked just like any other small, human child. He didn’t have the same fur skin and broad, palmed hands that his brothers had.

‘Leave him,’ said Mug catching Ivan’s arm as Ivan turned to chase after Tom. ‘You will never catch him. He’s too quick.’

‘Fine,’ said Ivan, dragging his hand through his hair as he glared down the tunnel where Tom had disappeared. ‘We need to get her out of here before George and his patrol arrive to investigate all this noise and the illegal entry into this tunnel.’

‘I am not going anywhere until one of you tells me what is going on. What are molers and Dragonknights?’

‘We have no time for this,’ said Ivan waving his strange and now seemingly dangerous hands in the air. Her eyes rounded and she resisted the urge to take a step backwards.

‘Let’s take her home first, Ive,’ said Mug, his eyes bright with excitement. ‘She needs to clean up before Tibi sees her. She looks like she’s been rolling around in the mud.’

Looking down at herself she saw she was covered in dirt, her knees were muddy, and her white T-shirt had turned a mottled grey-brown. She was sure her hair was a mess and most likely full of soil as well.

‘You make her sound like a puppy that you can take home. However, you do have a point about getting her cleaned up,’ Ivan said, looking her over. ‘I think we should hand her over to George and let him sort this out.’

‘No!’ said Mug, paling. ‘I did this. I don’t want her getting into trouble because of me. Anyway, you owe me for covering for you when you slipped out last Saturday to see Kate.’

‘Okay,’ Ivan grumbled. ‘I will get you close to the guardhouse and then it is over to you. Let’s move, quickly and quietly please. Your burrow will be gone soon, and no one will know that it was there.’ He left without waiting for agreement. Deelind still hadn’t decided to follow, even as Mug pleaded and promised to explain stuff on the way. However, she wasn’t all that keen on facing Miss Tibi and explaining why she had crawled into a hole after a moler-boy she did not know. Before she could give it any more thought, Tom had reappeared behind them. Coming up next to her, he grabbed her hand and pulled, urging her forward.

‘I thought he had run ahead. How is it he appeared from behind us?’ said Deelind, giving in to Tom’s tugging.

‘Tom is the fastest runner in Brakenhill,’ said Mug with pride in his voice. ‘It is almost impossible to catch him, unless you set a trap. He must have used a sub-burrow and looped back around us. Dad uses him to run messages all over Brakenhill, even to the Upper house. He knows the burrows and tunnels better than anyone.’

At that moment Tom said, 'Look,' and pointed to the burrow Mug had dug. Before her eyes the ground started to close. She watched in amazement as the burrow closed, leaving the tunnel wall completely intact. The only trace of there ever being a hole was the soil lying on the tunnel floor that had fallen off them as they'd exited Mug's burrow. She swallowed loudly. Thank heavens she had not still been stuck in the burrow when it closed.

'Impressive, isn't it?' said Mug, quickly brushing away any traces of fresh soil on the tunnel floor with his foot. They hurriedly set off after Ivan. 'I never tire of watching them close,' Mug continued. 'Mum could make her burrows seal up right behind her. If I tried that I would end up killing myself because the ground hardens too quickly for us to dig through it right away.'

'Mug, I can't keep up. None of this makes sense. Tom's answers just gave me more questions. Where are we? Why do you look...?' She stopped when she saw Mug wince, but her mind was still buzzing with questions. She had watched many fantasy and science fiction movies over the years and had read magical books, but this was real life! About to pinch herself to see if she really was awake, she blurted out, 'What is a Dragonknight?'

'You mean you don't know?' said Mug pausing for a moment, his shoulders stiffening. 'You have been coming to Brakenhill all your life and don't know what goes on here? Not even what happened to you twelve years ago?'

'No,' she said, her eyes tightening in confusion. 'Not a thing by the sound of it.'

Ivan suddenly stopped and pointed to the entrance of another small tunnel, low to the ground but looking better formed than the one she had followed the boys down. 'Quick! Move into the flood tunnel. George's patrol is coming.' She was amazed that Ivan knew that people were approaching. She

couldn't hear anything. In single file they followed Ivan as quickly as possible into the tunnel. This tunnel seemed to wind its way even deeper down into the earth, eventually stopping at a wooden panel. Ivan stuck one of his strong nails into a crack and put his ear to the panel. After a few seconds, he turned his finger. The panel opened inwards into a five-sided room.

'This old water junction will work nicely as a distraction for us,' he said, stepping into the room. They quickly followed him in, and the door closed behind them.

'What is it used for?' she said, turning in a circle, looking around the room. Each wall had a wooden door, just like the one they had come through, set tightly into a stone frame. A steep, stone stairwell rose from the centre of the room and up through the ceiling.

'It was used to fill the moat around the manor house. This junction isn't used anymore,' said Tom before Ivan could reply. She had never thought about how the moat remained full. There were no rivers close enough to feed it that she knew of, but then she had never been all the way around the moat to be sure.

'The moat is fed from an underground lake and river,' Ivan added as if he had read her thoughts. 'Mug, as soon as I have gone, seal the door and flood the chamber. I take it you have done this with Dad? Draining the chamber will occupy everyone for an hour or so. This will give you time to get Deelind through the guard entrance, cleaned up and back to the surface. I will go back and distract the patrol.' He turned and left.

Turning to Tom and Deelind, his expression tense, Mug said, 'You two, go up to the next landing in the stairwell while I flood the chamber. This will take a few minutes and it is dangerous if I get it wrong.'

Taking Tom's hand, she headed up to the landing and they sat on the top step waiting for Mug.

'Mug likes you,' said Tom while drumming his foot against the step below.

'Oh!' Maybe that was why Mug kept going red in the face when he spoke to her.

'I've been watching him watching you when you go into the vegetable garden. We've only watched because we've not been allowed to talk to you.'

'Why not?'

'I don't know. Princess Lee's orders.'

'Princess Lee? Do you mean Lady Lee?' Tom did not answer and Deelind was silent, contemplating yet another piece in the puzzle that was her life.

There were a few minutes of silence and some scraping sounds from Mug on the level below, when a blast of wind swept up the stairs followed by the noise of rushing water. She looked down the stairs to see what was going on at the same time as Mug raced up them to escape the rising water.

'Let's go,' he said, flushed with excitement. 'I reckon that will keep them busy for two or three hours.'

'Good,' she said, 'and now you can explain things along the way.'

'Okay, okay, but let's get out of here,' he said as they climbed the stairs. 'I am a moler,' he began.

'Moler? Tom mentioned that you chose to become a moler. Tom looks human. Are you no longer human? What are you?'

'Whew! Okay. So many questions,' said Mug and he chewed on his bottom lip as if contemplating where to start.

‘See? Told you,’ said Tom, nodding sagely to Deelind. Deelind rolled her eyes at him, her mouth twitching.

‘What?’ Shaking his head Mug said, ‘Never mind.’

‘All humans in our world are called Mole People. Our families are often a mix of both Mole People and molers. For example, in my family, my dad, Ivan and I are molers, but Tom is still human. For ease of reference our families are called mole families, since it’s easy to see in each family who’s a moler and who isn’t. Molers and Mole People have slightly different roles but our skills cross over fairly easily.’

‘Molers are guardians of the earth and belong to the Dragon Kingdom. To become a moler you go through a morphing ceremony which can take place anytime after your sixteenth birthday. I went through my ceremony four weeks ago. Once completed, you automatically join the molers and belong to the Lower house and Moler Valley. The transformation gives us super-strength, unusually large, strong hands to dig with, and the ability to navigate in the pitch-dark. The fur we grow helps us to move when we dig through the earth. We are changed at such a fundamental level that we are no longer human but another species entirely.’

‘Can anyone become a moler?’ said Deelind.

‘Any creature, apart from a featherlite, may become a moler.’ Her mind did a double take. Did he just say creature? What was a featherlite? Mug hadn’t said anything about Dragonknights yet and he had only just begun with molers. Unaware of Deelind’s musings, Mug had continued talking, his pace slowing the further they climbed the stairs.

‘Like Tom, Mole People tend to live underground with their moler family members. We’re all easy to recognise because we tend to wear earthy-toned

clothes which are better suited to the work we do. Mole People make good miners and tunnel builders, and often do other jobs like farming, building, shopkeeping and engineering. My family lives in the pit under the Tor next to Princess Lee's manor house. Most mole families live in Mole City or in Moler Valley and a few live in Brakenhill Village.'

She felt her forehead crinkle. 'You live in a pit?'

Glancing back at her, he said with a slight smile, 'Nah, not in the way that you mean. The pit, as we affectionately call it, is the dungeon of the old castle buried under the Tor. It is the lowest part of the Tor and where my dad, Jack, works and manages the maintenance, excavation moler crews and, of course, moler training. I never knew how much effort and muscles you needed to use when digging a burrow. Dad let Ivan take me out today for a training run, but my navigation is terrible, and I ended up outside the vegetable garden.'

Even as her mind tumbled with questions, she took a moment to wonder if Mug ended up at the vegetable garden out of habit, considering what Tom had just told her about Mug's many visits to the vegetable patch. It was clear now who Miss Tibi had been referring to in the kitchen that morning when talking to Geoff about meeting Jack's boys.

'The manor house was built only two hundred years ago in front of the old castle. My ancestors helped hide the castle under a huge mound of soil that is now called the Brakenhill Tor. The manor house fits better into today's modern world. Castles tend to attract too much attention from your world.'

Pausing to catch his breath, Mug said, 'Let's stop for a moment. The water won't come any higher, but we still have a couple of levels to go before we leave the stairwell.'

Deelind sank down onto the stairs, grateful to rest her aching legs. She could see the relief on the others' faces as well, although Mug seemed lost in thought.

'What is it, Mug?' she said.

His eyes jerked to hers. 'Nothing serious, it's just that this next bit I'm about to tell you is going to sound a little "out there" and I've realised that all this is rather a lot to absorb if you've never seen it before. But let's try anyway.

'Us molers look after the Lower house, Moler Valley, moat, tunnels and burrows. In the Middle house you will find Princess Lee, the Great Hall and the manor house. The Upper house is the very top of the Tor where the Dragonknights live.

'Still with me so far?' Deelind nodded, although she wasn't entirely sure.

'Okay. There are three valleys that lie behind the Tor, hidden to the world by Oak Tree magic. Brakenhill Village in Brakenhill Valley is where there is a mix of everyone living together. The Tor is the entrance to the valleys. Hundreds of years ago the Tor was a castle and the gateway between earth and Aenvale. Today the Tor, castle and the three valleys are the last remnants of the Dragon Kingdom. The link between Aenvale and Brakenhill has faded away. Few know anything about Aenvale and those that do, do not talk about it.'

Groaning, Mug stood up and started climbing the stairs. Tom and Deelind rose with him.

'What are Dragonknights? Are they medieval knights?' she said, feeling ridiculous even voicing the words.

Mug's mouth twitched and his eyes twinkled as he said, 'While there are several Dragonknights who are old enough to have been actual knights, they are

actually a separate species called featherlites. Featherlites are dragons who have melded with other creatures.'

Rolling her eyes, she said, 'Yeah right. Nice try.'

Mug raised his hands placatingly. 'No, I'm serious. I promise. There really are living, fire-breathing dragons. You see the Dragonknights are Princess Lee's personal guards, army and defenders of Brakenhill. However, first you must become a featherlite.

'Becoming a featherlite is crazy. To start with, you must be over eighteen and go on a quest into the Dragon Valley, where you need to find a featherlite egg that is about to hatch. Normally all the dragon eggs hatch around the same time each year. If the newly hatched dragon chooses you and you both survive the melding, you are then joined to the dragon for life, becoming a featherlite. You are essentially no longer human and now part of the featherlite species. Unfortunately, if the melding does not work you and the baby dragon may die.

'Then you start Dragonknight training to be a royal guard. If you are successful, you are invited to become a Dragonknight,' explained Mug. 'As well as the designation of Dragonknights, there are Dragonscouts and Dragonkeepers.'

'So that's why a featherlite can't become a moler and vice versa. They've already been through a transformation into another species. I must say, a quest sounds exciting,' she said.

Seeing Deelind's face light up, Mug groaned. 'Oh no, not you, too. Tom never stops talking about finding dragon eggs. Featherlite eggs are hard to come by. They are different to normal dragon eggs and are the only type that can meld with a human. There is only one dragon left who lays featherlite eggs, but she and her partner are old now. Dragons that lay these eggs are called featherlite

egg bearers. These egg bearers can lay both featherlite eggs and wild dragon eggs. Dragons hatching from the wild eggs remain wild. The wild dragons live in Dragon Valley and can only lay wild dragon eggs. We have not had a featherlite hatching in many years now. We used to have thousands of dragons and featherlites and now there are only a few hundred left.'

'Does anyone ever ride a featherlite?'

'No, definitely not! Featherlites consider this an insult and will seriously injure anyone who tries to ride them.'

'Who can become a featherlite? Could I become one?' she asked. This was far more interesting than everything else she had heard so far.

'Anybody can become a featherlite, unless you are already a moler. You and people from your world could become molers or featherlites, it is just that the outside world doesn't know about our world.'

Regretfully she realised that if she wanted to become a featherlite she would have to wait another two years. Yeah. Sure. Just the thought was ridiculous. But goodness, becoming a featherlite sounded so exciting! It was infinitely better than working in the kitchens. She sighed wistfully.

'So few are chosen to be featherlites that I didn't think it was worth waiting around to find out if I would be chosen,' Mug explained. 'Besides, I don't like heights all that much anyway.' Tom snickered.

'Tom thinks he is going to become a Dragonknight when he grows up, but if he doesn't stop skipping school all he is going to become is a saddle polisher!'

'Everyone was excited sixteen years ago when one featherlite egg was laid,' said Tom ignoring Mug.

‘But sadly, the egg does not seem to want to hatch. Tom thinks it is waiting for him to be old enough,’ Mug teased. ‘Captain Roeland, the head of the Dragonknights, thinks that there is not enough Oak Tree magic left and the egg will not hatch. The council thinks that Blackthorn’s increase in power from his IceFire drug has unbalanced the magical energies and they are not sure if another featherlite melding will occur again.’

‘When a featherlite egg is laid it has a blue flame burning around it. They say it is a beautiful sight,’ said Tom, his gaze lost in dreamy wonder. ‘You know, dragons can breathe fire, move water, create wind and some can even control the earth.’

‘I’m not sure why you would want to be a featherlite anyway,’ said Mug, lifting his shoulder in a half-shrug.

‘Why not?’ said Deelind.

‘You have to go through three years of training, schooling with Princess Lee, and the physical changes to your body are just mad. If that wasn’t enough, Blackthorn gets to hunt you down.’

Her mind was jumping all over the place. ‘Do you mean old Blackthorn from Blackthorn Farm, in the north part of the town, past the sports fields?’

‘Yes, that Blackthorn,’ said Mug, curling his lip. ‘He is Princess Lee’s half-brother and wants her crown and the dragons. He who controls the dragons controls the kingdom and earth. Blackthorn will wipe out everything in his path and anyone who gets in his way. Princess Lee has a big job keeping Brakenhill safe from Blackthorn and any threats the outside world might pose.’

‘Hush now, we are here,’ said Mug quietly. Finally, they had reached the level they needed. Mug looked sweaty and she could feel her own face was flushed from exertion. With a flick of his hand Mug signalled something to Tom.

From Tom's movements, she guessed it was to check to see if the tunnel was clear. It was obvious that they had done this many times before. Tom shot into the tunnel and within a minute returned and nodded.

They entered the tunnel and followed it in silence for a couple more steps before stopping at a T-junction. With another one of his hand signals, Mug instructed Tom to take the left-hand tunnel and distract the guard.

Deelind watched Tom enter a large cave. Directly in front of him was a wall made of sandstone blocks with a large, arched opening, signifying the castle gate. The portcullis was raised. There were two large, brown and yellow flags hanging on each side of the portcullis. A guardhouse was positioned to the right of the gate. Before Tom could say anything, a guard exited the guardhouse and said, 'Yes, we know there has been a leak in an old water junction and a breach in the defence burrow by your brother. Come and get a note for your father.' Tom followed the guard into the guardhouse next to the entrance and coughed twice, which turned out to be the signal that the entrance was clear. Deelind was amazed and a little alarmed that the guard already knew about the flooded water junction.

Mug put a finger to his lips, indicating to her to be quiet and then he whispered, pointing to the arched stone doorway. 'We are heading to the castle gate. Stay behind me and move as quickly as possible.' She nodded.

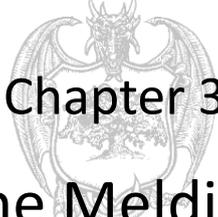
They moved swiftly in the direction of Tom's cough and within the space of a few steps they had entered the large cave. She came to a halt and stared around her in wonder, only snapping out of it when she felt Mug dragging her forward. The guard could appear at any time.

'Stop!' bellowed the guard from within the guardhouse just as they arrived under the arch of the castle gate.

Mug shoved her through the stone doorway before he was hauled into the guardhouse and knocked to the ground by the guard. Luckily, the guard did not see her.

‘Only me,’ he stammered, ‘in a rush, water junction has sprung a leak, got to get tools from the pit.’

‘You know the rules about entering without permission. Now beat it and you, too, young Tom! Take this note with you and give it to your father.’



Chapter 3

The Melding

Deelind found herself on the other side of the entrance looking down a large, well-lit castle passage. The passageway split into two, with one ramp going upwards and the other downwards. It looked old, solid and well used. Before she could take a step, two of the nastiest-looking guards appeared at either side of her. They both seemed just as surprised as she was.

The guards wore armour plating with a green, red and black tunic, a helmet with a shield-shaped badge stamped into it and shiny black boots. They had the same fur as Mug and Ivan and even bigger hands and muscles. The insignia on their tunic sleeve was a shield with three parallel stripes running diagonally from the top left to the bottom right. Within each stripe was an image. The top brown stripe had a mole head, the middle yellow stripe had a tree, and the bottom brown stripe had a portcullis.