

Vengeance of Dragons –

Chapter 2

written by Holly

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The Veil joins all the worlds – those that are, those that were, and those that will someday be; they exist simultaneously within its compass. It is no-time, no-place, no-thing; infinite, terrifying, unknowable. Its winds blow through the realities, its storms twist them, and even its silences cast long shadows that bind realities to each other in ways no mortal can control, and only a few suspect.

Through the Veil, galaxies and souls travel as equals. In it, stars and gods and dreams are born, live out their spans, and die. It is neither a heaven nor a hell, though men of uncounted realities have named it one or the other or both, and have built stories and religions and civilizations around their error.

The Veil . . . is. Uncaring, unchanging and unchangeable, it nonetheless offers much to those who know how to reach it and exploit it.

Within the Veil, the Star Council regrouped in answer to the summons of a single powerful soul, its members racing inward like stars in a tiny imploding galaxy – hundreds of brilliant points of light spiraling toward an ever-brightening center.

The soul that summoned the Council still thought of himself as male, and still cherished the name of Dafril, which had been his in the most recent of his incarnations. Dafril yearned for the immortality of the Veil, the power of gods . . . and a body of flesh. A thousand years earlier, he and his friends had devised a plan that they hoped would bring them all of

those things. At last they were close to achieving their dreams.

We have two orders of business, Dafril announced when all the Councilors save one – a missing soul named Luercas – were gathered. First, we must prepare our avatars, for the hour of our return draws near. Second, we must decide how we will deal with the forces that have risen against us in our absence.

We've spent a thousand years in the planning of our return, Mellayne said quietly. *If we don't know what we hope to do now, will we ever?*

At the last moment things change, Dafril said. *And this has become the last moment. We could only speculate before now about the kind of world we'd find when we returned – now we know what we face. We could only guess what sort of people would inhabit it. And we never expected betrayal by one of our own – yet we must assume, since Luercas has disappeared, he has done so in order to oppose us.*

I thought the Mirror would only wake us when they'd rebuilt a real civilization, Shamenar said. *I cannot believe the primitive conditions we face. The filth of even their greatest city stuns the mind. Raw sewage in the gutters; animal waste in the streets; slaughtered animals hanging in open-air markets; rooms lit only by fire. And the sicknesses of the people . . . worms and boils and rickets and yaws, bots and influenza and diabetes and rat-plague and things I haven't even heard names for before.*

They're ignorant, Tahirin added. *Superstitious, cruel, violent, dishonest – and as brutal as their short, uncomprehending lives, most of them. How can we work with these people?*

Dafril drew energy from the Veil and grew more luminous, to give his people courage. *This is the world we come into. This is the lot we've drawn. They've built what they could – now we*

make it better. Only we can return civilization to our home. We can cure their diseases; we can improve their city; we can teach them and set them on a new path. The white cities will rise again, and we will ride through their streets in skycarts and breathe perfumed air and feast on wondrous food. The wind will once more play the White Chimes, and a hundred thousand fountains will sing and cool the breezes, and coldlamps will illuminate the darkest corners. Remember. Remember what we did before, and know that we can do it again.

I wish I could be so sure, Werris said.

Dafril felt their fear. A thousand years of passive waiting lay behind them, and that time had weight. In it, his people had grown accustomed to the limitations of bodilessness and fearful of change, challenge, and danger. Now they faced all three, and he sensed in many of his followers a desire to continue as they were, to cling to the known. He felt the same fear and in some small way tasted the same desire, but he also recalled the hunger he'd brought with him from life.

Life was the only game worth playing.

More than a million people inhabit Calimekka, he reminded them. And the city grows daily. You can bring civilization to a million souls far more easily than you can to a hundred, because you have more people to work with. We shall . . . tax them. We'll apply a fair tax equally to every soul in the city. With that little tax, we give them the good things they haven't the talent or the intelligence or the imagination or the ambition to give themselves. We will have our civilized city, and they will live healthy lives protected from violence in a world that no longer knows war, famine, or pestilence. What could be more reasonable?

Well. Yes. Why would anyone object to our making their lives better? Except Solander, of course, Sartrig said. *And his Falcons. And evidently Luercas.*

Dafril felt the stab of truth there. Solander, who had fouled their work so completely a thousand years earlier, had somehow come back. He'd found himself a body, an incredible body subtly shaped by magic, hardened by magic the way fire hardened steel – a body worthy of immortality. He was not yet born, but he and that wondrous body were waiting for them, already watchful, already planning to oppose them again, standing as ever on the side of dirt and disorder and chaos. They would have to deal quickly with Solander. And Luercas . . .

Luercas had been Dafril's closest and most powerful ally a thousand years earlier. He'd been a friend and a companion; he had shared Dafril's dreams of their shining white city and of immortality spent amidst beauty, luxury, and art; he had struggled with Dafril to save their fellow dreamers when everything went bad at the end. But when the Mirror of Souls finally woke the hundreds of souls it held within its Soulwell and set them free within the Veil, Luercas had vanished. And Dafril was left wondering what his absence meant – whether the cold and twisted things that preyed between the worlds had devoured his soul, or whether some unsuspected bitterness or treachery had turned it against the Star Council. He could not believe that Luercas, ever the most careful and patient of souls, would carelessly allow himself to be devoured. Which left . . . betrayal.

Sartrig's spirit-light darkened as the senior councilor brought himself to the fore. *I have a problem. I have chosen a marvelous avatar – a young Wolf named Ry Sabir – a powerful, well-bred man with both training in magic and a body shaped by magic. But he has some knowledge of blocking and shielding, and he fights my direct influence at every turn. As long as he believes me to be the spirit of his dead brother, he at least considers my council. But he is most intractable and strong. When the moment comes, I don't know that I will be able to penetrate his magic to . . . lead him.*

Dafril felt the fear behind Sartrig's remark and its echoes shivered through his own soul. Men and women in this new time and new place were not all purely human – an interesting result of fallout from the last weapons in the final exchange between his people and the Falcons. He and his companions had just barely missed seeing the first fruits of that fallout, he suspected. A thousand years had honed the changed people – the people the Calimekkans called the Scarred – into a host of lovely species; some of the finest specimens in this new time offered options he had never imagined a thousand years earlier. His preferred avatar was a young woman named Kait Galweigh, a strong, beautiful girl of high birth with an interesting twist. She was a skinshifter, a talent he found irresistible. She was well thought of, had the necessary connections to Calimekka's ruling factions, and had for some time been willing – even eager – to listen to his advice, believing that she heard a long-deceased ancestor when he spoke to her.

But she had become increasingly suspicious in the last weeks, after falling in with unfortunate companions who had introduced her to magical training which allowed her to block out his presence.

He had therefore chosen a backup for his preferred avatar. Exquisite little beast though Kait was, he had accepted the fact that she might be out of his reach when the great moment arrived. So his second choice was another of those marvelous skinshifters – a powerful wizard who had friends in useful places, and who was as beautiful as Kait. To his detriment, he was not as young. He wasn't female, either, and Dafril had been fascinated by the idea of femaleness. He was also cruel, and known for perversions of a sort that Dafril found disgusting. And he had enemies. But Dafril had decided that he could work with Crispin Sabir's drawbacks if Kait failed to work out.

Another fact made Crispin interesting to Dafril, though it

wasn't something he yet knew how to use. Crispin was father to the body that Solander inhabited. Dafril could feel the faint resonance created by the link of paternity. He knew that if he found a way to use it, his enemy could also use the link against him . . . if he knew of it. If he didn't, well . . . it was, for the moment, something to keep in mind.

Meanwhile, the avatar Sartrig had been drawn to was also one of the world's few skinshifters. Those flexible bodies were so tempting, but offered special problems as well as opportunities.

Prepare an alternate, he said. For that matter, each of you should have at least one alternate. We will have only the one moment to reach our avatars once the Mirror draws us through the Soulwell into the world. If your avatar is beyond the Mirror's reach at that moment, or is in any way closed to you, you'll be tossed back into the Veil without an anchor, and lost to us forever.

The silence that greeted this statement echoed with fear.

Someone from far in the back of the Council's cluster finally broke the silence by changing the subject. *Which leaves us with the problems of Luercas and of Solander and his minions.*

Serious problems, both, though I think Solander is the lesser. We have already defeated him once, and though he is already embodied, and the body is truly his, in order to acquire it he is being born. He will be an infant, and then a child, and while he is helpless, we will have time to prepare. We know of his presence and that of his followers; they should pose little danger to us.

Luercas is another matter. We must accept that with every moment he ignores our calls and hides himself the likelihood of his plotting against us increases. Nor am I comforted by the fact that he is one and we are many, for though we have the strength of numbers, we cannot assume that he is alone –

he has always had a talent for finding allies in unlikely places.

We'd thought to show him mercy, to give him a chance to rejoin us, Dafril continued, *as suits those we love and would call friends; but though I am loathe to admit it, I must now concede that those of you who advocated his destruction were right. When you search for him, search in groups large enough that you can overcome him if you find him. He is old, and clever, and he survived things in the Old World that most of you cannot imagine. When you find him, don't try to reason with him, don't warn him of your presence, don't try to free his soul from the Soulwell to send him beyond the Veil. Annihilate him. For if you do not, I fear he will annihilate you.*

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