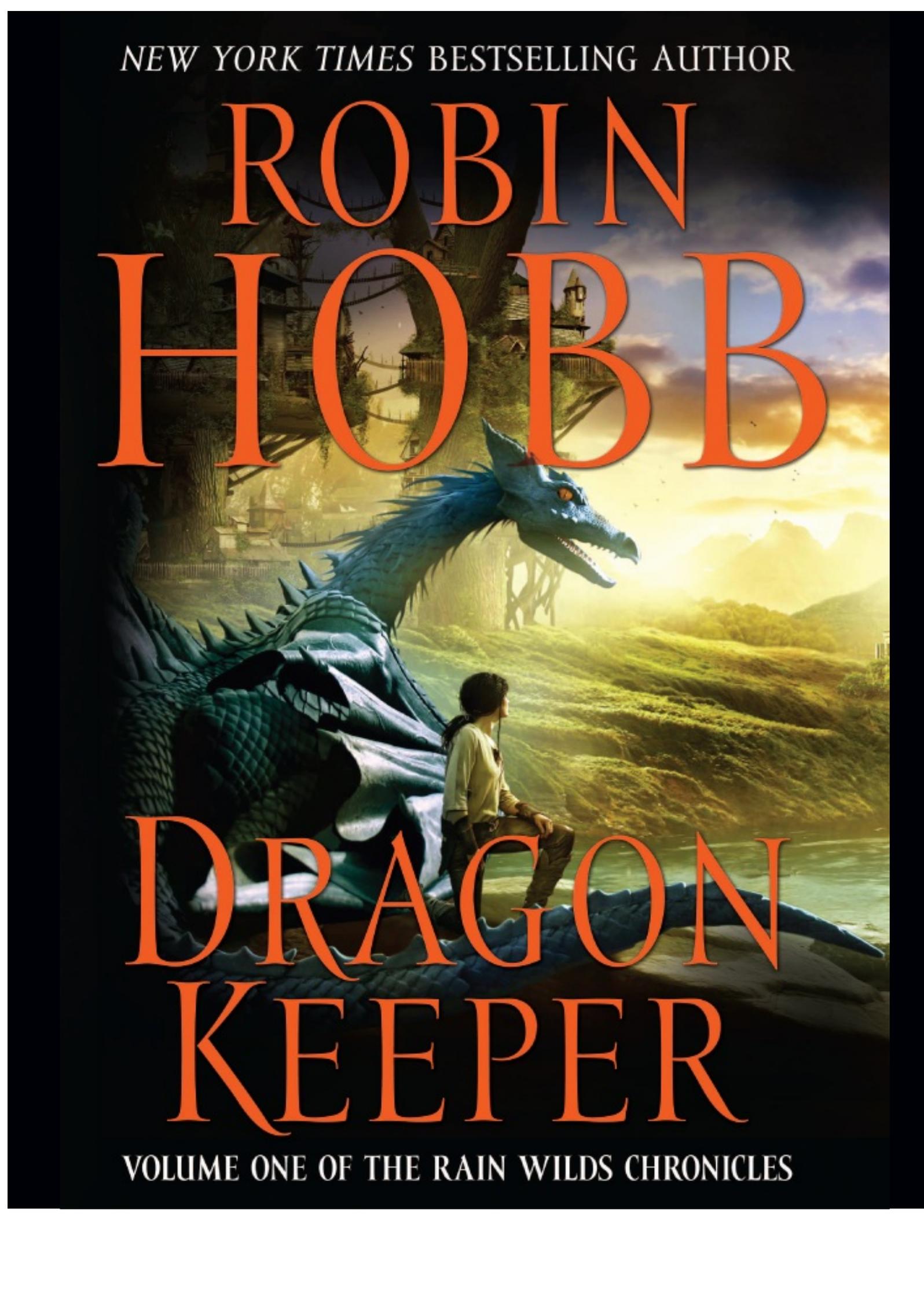


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ROBIN
HOBB

The book cover for 'Dragon Keeper' by Robin Hobb features a large, detailed illustration of a blue dragon with a rider on its back. The dragon is positioned in the center, facing right, with its head turned slightly towards the viewer. The rider is a young person with dark hair, wearing a light-colored tunic and dark pants, sitting on the dragon's back. The background is a lush, fantastical landscape with rolling green hills, a small village with wooden buildings and a tower, and mountains in the distance under a sunset sky with warm, golden light. The overall scene is framed by a dark border.

DRAGON
KEEPER

VOLUME ONE OF THE RAIN WILDS CHRONICLES

DRAGON KEEPER

VOLUME ONE OF
THE RAIN WILDS CHRONICLES

ROBIN HOBB

 HarperCollins e-books

*To the memory of Spot and Smokey,
Brownie-butt and Rainbow, Rag-bag
and Sinbad.*

Fine pigeons, one and all.

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THE RAIN WILDS CHRONICLES

KEEPERS AND DRAGONS

ALUM: Pale skin, silvery gray eyes. Very small ears. Nose almost flat. His dragon is ARBUC, a silver-green male.

BOXTER: Cousin to Kase. Coppery-eyed, short, stoutly built. His dragon is orange male SKRIM.

COPPER: An unclaimed, sickly brown dragon.

GREFT: Eldest of the keepers, and most heavily marked by the Rain Wilds. His dragon is blue-black KALO, the largest male.

GRESOK: Large red dragon, first to leave the cocooning grounds.

HARRIKIN: Long and slim as a lizard, at twenty, he is older than most of the other keepers. Lecter is his foster brother. His dragon is RANCULOS, a red male with silver eyes.

JERD: A blond female keeper, heavily marked by the Rain Wilds. Her dragon is VERAS, a queen, dark green with gold stippling.

KASE: Boxter's cousin. He has copper eyes and is short, wide, and muscular. His dragon is orange male DORTEAN.

LECTER: Orphaned at seven, raised by Harrikin's family. His dragon is SESTICAN, a large blue male with orange scaling and small spikes on his neck.

NORTEL: A competent and ambitious keeper. His dragon is lavender male TINDER.

RAPSKAL: A heavily marked keeper. His dragon is the small red queen Heeby.

SILVER: Has an injured tail and no keeper.

SYLVE: A twelve-year-old girl, youngest of the keepers. Her dragon is golden MERCOR.

TATS: The only keeper to have been born a slave. He is tattooed on the face with a small horse and a spider web. His dragon is the smallest queen, green FENTE.

THYMARA: Sixteen years old; has black claws instead of nails and is at home in the trees. Her dragon is a blue queen, SinTARA, also known as SKYMAW.

TINTAGLIA: An adult queen dragon. she assisted the serpents on their journey up the river to cocoon

It has been years since she has been seen in the Rain Wilds.

WARKEN: A tall, long-limbed keeper. He is devoted to his dragon BALIPER, a scarlet male.

THE BINGTOWNERS

ALISE KINCARRON FINBOK: Comes from a poor but respectable Bingtown Trader family. The dragon expert. Married to Hest Finbok. Gray eyes, red hair, many freckles.

HEST FINBOK: A handsome, well-established, and wealthy Bingtown Trader.

SEDRIC MELDAR: Secretary to Hest Finbok, and friends with Alise since childhood.

THE CREW OF THE *TARMAN*

BELLIN: Deckhand. Married to Swarge.

BIG EIDER: Deckhand.

CARSON LUPSKIP: Hunter for the expedition. Leftrin's old friend.

DAVVIE: Apprentice hunter to Carson Lupskip. About fifteen years old.

GRIGSBY: Ship's cat. Orange.

HENNESEY: First mate.

JESS: Hired hunter for the expedition.

LEFTRIN: Captain. Robust build, gray eyes, brown hair.

SKELLY: Deckhand. Leftrin's niece.

SWARGE: Tillerman. He has been with the *Tarman* for more than fifteen years.

TARMAN: A river barge, long and low. Oldest existing liveship. Home port Trehaug.

MISCELLANEOUS CHARACTERS

ALTHEA VESTRIT: First mate, *Paragon* out of Bingtown. Aunt to Malta Khuprus.

BEGASTI CORED: Chalcedean merchant; bald, rich, trading partner of Hest Finbok.

BRASHEN TRELL: Captain of the *Paragon* out of Bingtown.

CLEF: Ship's boy on the *Paragon*, former slave.

DETOZI: Keeper of the messenger birds at Trehaug.

DUKE OF CHALCED: Chalced's dictator, elderly and ailing.

EREK: Keeper of the messenger birds at Bingtown.

MALTA KHUPRUS: The Elderling "queen," resides in Trehaug. Married to Reyn Khuprus.

PARAGON: A liveship. Helped escort the sea serpents up the river to the cocooning grounds.

SELDEN VESTRIT: A young Elderling; Malta's brother and Althea's nephew.

SINAD ARICH: Chalcedean merchant who strikes a deal with Leftrin.

Day the 2nd of the Plough Moon

Year the 6th of the Reign of the Most Noble and Magnificent Satrap Cosgo

From Erek, Keeper of the Birds, Bingtown

To Detozi, Keeper of the Birds, Trehaug

This night have dispatched to you four birds, bearing in two parts our agreement with the dragon Tintaglia, to be ratified by the Rain Wild Council. Trader Devouchet, leader of the Bingtown Traders' Council, suggested that duplicates be sent. They sum up the formal agreement between the Traders and the dragon. We are to aid her serpents in traveling up the Rain Wild River in exchange for her assistance with defending the Trader cities and waterways against the Chalcedean invaders.

PLEASE DISPATCH A BIRD AS SOON AS POSSIBLE TO CONFIRM RECEIPT OF THIS MESSAGE.

Detozi,

A brief message of my own, penned in haste in a very small space. All is chaos here. My bird coop scorched in the fires the invaders set, many of my birds dead from smoke. I'm sending Kingsly as one of the messenger birds tonight. You know I raised him from a squab by hand after his parents died. Please keep him safe there and do not return him until we know that all is well. If Bingtown falls, treat him well and keep him as your own. Pray for us here. I do not know that Bingtown will survive this invasion, dragon or no.

Er

Prologue

Serpents' End

They had come so far, yet now that she was here, the years of journeying were already fading in her mind, giving way to the desperate needs of the present. Sisarqua opened her jaws and bent her neck. It was hard for the sea serpent to focus her thoughts. It had been years since she had been completely out of the water. She had not felt dry land under her body since she had hatched on Others' Island. She was far from Others' Island's hot dry sand and balmy waters now. Winter was closing in on this densely forested land beside the chill river. The mudbank under her coiled length was hard and abrasive. The air was too cold, and her gills were drying out too quickly. There was nothing she could do about that except to work more swiftly. She scooped her jaws into the immense trough and came up with a mouthful of silver-streaked clay and river water. She threw her great head back and gulped it down. It was gritty and cold and strangely delicious. Another mouthful, another swallow. And again.

She had lost count of how many gulps of the grainy soup she had ingested when finally she felt the ancient reflex trigger. Working the muscles in her throat, she felt her poison sacs swell. Her flesh mane stood out all around her throat in a toxic, quivering ruff. Shuddering down her full length, she opened her jaws wide, strained, gagged, and then met with success. She clamped and locked her jaws to contain the liquid, releasing it only as a thin, powerful stream of clay, bile, and saliva tinged with venom. With difficulty, she turned her head and then coiled her tail closer to her body. The extrusion was like a silvery thread, thick and heavy. Her head wove as she layered the wet winding over herself.

She felt a heavy tread nearby, and then the shadow of the walking dragon passed over her. Tintaglia paused and spoke to her. "Good. Good, that's right. A nice even layer to begin with, one with no gaps. That's right."

Sisarqua could not spare a glance for the blue-and-silver queen who praised her. Creating the case that would shelter her during the remaining months of winter took all her attention. She focused on it with a desperation born of weariness. She needed sleep. She longed to sleep; but she knew that if she slept now, she would never wake again in any form. *Finish it*, she thought. *Finish it, and then I can rest.*

All around her on the riverbank other serpents labored at the same task, with varying degrees of success. Between and among them, humans toiled. Some carried buckets of water from the river. Others mined chunks of silvery clay from a nearby bank and loaded them into barrows. Youngsters trundled the barrows to a hastily constructed log enclosure. Water and clay were dumped into the immense trough; other workers used shovels and paddles to break up the lumps of clay and render the water and clay into a loose porridge. It was this slurry that Sisarqua had consumed as the major ingredients for manufacturing her case. The lesser ingredients were just as essential. Her body added the toxins that would plunge her into a sleep half a breath above death. Her saliva contributed her memories to the keeping of her case. Not just her own memories of her time as a serpent, but all the memories of those of her bloodline spooled around her as she wove her case.

Missing were the memories she should have received from watchful dragons tending the serpents as they made their cases. She had enough memories to recall that there should have been at least a

as they made their cases. She had enough memories to recall that there should have been at least a score of dragons present, encouraging them, chewing the memory sand and clay and contributing their own regurgitated saliva and history to the process. But there weren't, and she was too tired to wonder how that lack might affect her.

A great weariness washed over her as she reached the neck of her case. It had to be constructed in a way that would eventually allow her to draw her head in and then seal it behind her. It came to her, slowly, that in previous generations, the dragons who had tended the serpents had sometimes helped them seal their cases. But Sisarqua knew better than to hope for that help. Only 129 serpents had massed at the mouth of the Serpent River to begin the desperate upriver migration to the traditional cocooning grounds. Maulkin, their leader, had been gravely concerned that so few of them were female: less than a third. In any cocooning year, there should have been hundreds of serpents, and at least as many females as males. They had waited so long in the sea, and then come so far in the hope of restoring their species. It was hard to hear that they might be too few and too late.

The difficulties of the river journey had reduced the number still further. Sisarqua was not certain how many had reached the cocooning beach. About ninety, she thought, but the graver news was that fewer than twenty of the survivors were female. And all around her, exhausted serpents continued to die. Even as she thought of it, she heard Tintaglia speak to a human worker. "He is dead. Bring your hammers and break up his case. Work it back into the troughs of memory clay. Let the others keep alive the memories of his ancestors." She could not see, but she heard the sounds of Tintaglia dragging the dead serpent from his unfinished cocoon. She smelled his flesh and blood as the dragon devoured his carcass. Hunger and weariness cramped her. She wished she could share Tintaglia's meal but knew that it was too late for eating now. The clay was in her gut and must be processed.

And Tintaglia needed the food. She was the sole dragon left alive to shepherd all of them through this process. Sisarqua did not know where Tintaglia got her strength. The dragon had been flying without rest for days to shepherd them up the river, so unfamiliar to them after decades of change. She could not have many reserves left. Tintaglia could offer them little more than encouragement. What could one dragon do when faced with the needs of so many sea serpents?

Like the gossamer recollection of a dream, an ancestral memory wafted briefly through her mind. *Not right*, she thought. *None of this is right; none of it is as it should be.* This was the river, but where were the broad meadows and the oak forests that had once edged it? The lands that bounded the river now were swamp and boggy forest, with scarcely a bit of firm ground to be seen. If the humans had not labored to reinforce the bank of this beach with stone before the serpents arrived, they would have churned it to mud. Her ancestral serpent memories told her of broad, sunny meadows and a rich bank of clay near an Elderling city. Dragons should have been clawing chunks of clay free and churning the clay and water to slurry, dragons should have been putting the final seals on the serpents' cases. And all of this should have been happening under a bright summer sun in the heat of the day.

She gave a shudder of weariness, and the memory faded beyond her recall. She was only a single serpent, struggling to weave the case that would protect her from winter's cold while her body underwent its transformation. A single serpent, cold and weary, finally come home after an eternity of roaming. Her mind drifted back over the last few months.

The final leg of her journey had seemed an endless battle against the river current and the rocky shallows. She was a newcomer to Maulkin's tangle and astonished by it. Usually a tangle numbered twenty to forty serpents. But Maulkin had gathered every serpent he could find and led them north. It had made foraging for food along the way far more difficult, but he had deemed it necessary. Never had she seen so many serpents traveling together as a single tangle. Some, it was true, had degenerated to little more than animals, and others were more than half mad with confusion and fear. Forgetfulness

to take more than animals, and others were more than that had with confusion and fear. Forgotten shrouded the minds of too many. Yet as they had followed the prophet-serpent with the gleaming gold false-eyes in a long row down his flanks, she had almost recalled the ancient migration route. All around her, both spirits and intelligence had rallied in the embattled serpents. This arduous journey had felt right, more right than anything had for a very long time.

Yet even so, she had known moments of doubt. Her ancestral memories of the river told her that the waterway they sought flowed steady and deep, and it teemed with fish. Her ancient dreams told her of rolling hills and meadows edged with open forests abounding with game for hungry dragons. This river had a deep channel that a ship could follow, but it threaded a wandering way inland through towering forest thick with creepers and brush. It could not be the way to their ancient cocooning grounds. Yet Maulkin had doggedly insisted that it was.

Her doubt had been so strong that she had nearly turned back. She had almost fled the icy river of milky water and retreated to the warmer waters of the oceans to the south. But when she lagged or started to turn aside from the path, others of the serpents came after her and drove her back into the tangle. She had had to follow.

But though she might doubt Maulkin's visions, Tintaglia's authority she had never questioned. The blue-and-silver dragon had recognized Maulkin as their leader and assisted the strange vessel that guided his tangle. The dragon had flown above them, trumpeting her encouragement, as she shepherded the tangle of serpents north, and then up this river. The swimming had been good as far as the two-legs city of Trehaug. Wearily but without excessive difficulty, they had followed the ship that led the way.

But past that city, the river had changed. The guiding ship had halted there, unable to traverse the shallows beyond. Past Trehaug, the river spread and widened and splintered into tributaries. Wide belts of gravel and sand invaded it, and dangling vines and reaching roots choked its edges. The river they followed became shallow and meandering, toothed with rocks in some places and then choked with reeds in the next stretch. Again Sisarqua had wanted to turn back, but like the other serpents, she had allowed herself to be bullied and driven by the dragon. Up the river they had gone. With more than one hundred of her kind, she had flopped and floundered through the inadequate ladder of log corrals that the humans had built in an attempt to provide deeper water for their progress through the final, killing shallows.

Many had died on that part of their journey. Small injuries that would have healed quickly in the caressing salt water of the sea became festering ulcers in the river's harsh flow. After their long banishment at sea, many of the great serpents were feeble both in mind and spirit. So many things were wrong. Too many years had passed since they had hatched. They should have made this journey decades ago, as healthy young serpents, and they should have migrated up the river in the warmth of summer, when their bodies were sleek with fat. Instead they came in the rains and misery of winter, thin and battered and speckled with barnacles, but mostly old, far older than any serpents had ever been before.

The single dragon who watched over them was less than a year's turning out of her own cocoon. Tintaglia flew overhead, glinting silver whenever the winter sunlight broke through the clouds to touch her. "Not far!" she kept calling down to them. "Beyond the ladder the waters deepen again and you can once more swim freely. Keep moving."

Some were simply too battered, too weary, too thin for such a journey. One big orange serpent died draped across the log wall of the penned water, unable to drag himself any farther. Sisarqua was close to him when his great wedge-shaped head dropped suddenly beneath the water. Impatiently, she waited for him to move on. Then his snaky mane of tendrils suddenly snapped and released a final

wanted for him to move on. Then his spiky mane or hair suddenly spasmed and released a final rush of toxins. They were faint and feeble, the last reflexive defenses of his body, yet they clearly signaled to any serpents within range that he was dead. The smell and taste of them in the water summoned her to the feast.

Sisarqua had not hesitated. She had been the first to tear into his body, filling her mouth with his flesh, gulping it down and tearing another chunk free before the rest of the tangle even realized the opportunity. The sudden nourishment dizzied her almost as much as the rush of his memories. This was the way of her kind, not to waste the bodies of the dead but to take from them both nourishment and knowledge. Just as every dragon carried within him the memories of his entire line, so every serpent retained the memories of those who had gone before. Or was supposed to. Sisarqua and every other serpent wallowing dismally alongside her had remained in serpent form too long. Memories had faded and with them, intelligence. Even some of those who now strove to complete the migration and become dragons were reduced to brutish shadows of what they should have been. What sort of dragon would they become?

Her head had darted in, mane a-bristle, to seize another sizable chunk of the orange serpent's flesh. Her brain whirled with memories of rich fishing and of nights spent singing with his tangle under the jewel-bright skies. That memory was very old. She suspected it had been scores of years since any tangle had risen from the Plenty to the Lack to lift their voices in praise of the starspeckled sky above them.

Others had crowded her then, hissing and lifting their manes in threat to one another as they strove to share the feast. She tore a final piece of flesh free and then wallowed over the log that had stopped the orange. She had tossed the hunk of warm meat down whole and felt it distend her gullet pleasantly. *The sky*, she thought, and in response felt a brief stir of the orange serpent's dim dragon memories. The sky, open and wide as the sea. Soon she would sail it again. Not much farther, Tintaglia had promised.

But distance is measured one way by a dragon a-wing and quite another way by a battered serpent wallowing up a shallow river. They did not see the clay banks that afternoon. Night fell upon them, sudden as a blow, the short day spent almost before it had begun. For yet another night, Sisarqua endured the cold of the air that the shallow river did not allow her to escape. The water that flowed past was barely sufficient to keep her gills wet; the skin on her back felt as if it would crack from the dry cold that scoured her. And in the late morning, the sun that found its way down onto the wide river between the jungled banks revealed more serpents who would never complete the migration. Again, she was fortunate enough to feed from one of the corpses before the rest of the horde drove her away from it. Again, Tintaglia circled overhead, calling down the promise that it was not far to Cassarick and rest, the long peaceful rest of the transformation.

The day had been chill, and the skin of her back was dried by a long night spent above water. She could feel the skin cracking beneath her scales, and when the river deepened enough to allow her to submerge and soak her gills, the milky river water stung her split skin. She felt the acidic water eat at her. If she did not reach the cocooning beach soon, she would not make it.

The afternoon was both horribly short and painfully long. In the deeper stretches where she could swim, the water stung her breached skin. But that was preferable to the places where she crawled on her belly like a snake, fighting for purchase on the slimy rocks at the bottom of the riverbed. All around her, other immense sea serpents squirmed and coiled and flexed, trying to make their way upriver.

When she arrived, she did not know it. The sun was already westering behind the tall banks of trees that fronted the river. Creatures that were not Elderlings had kindled torches and stuck them in

great circle on a muddy riverbank. She peered at them. Humans. Ordinary two-legs, little more than prey. They scampered about, apparently in service to Tintaglia, serving her as once Elderlings would have done. It was oddly humiliating; was this how low dragons had fallen, to be reduced to consortin with humans?

Sisarqua lifted her maned head high, tasting the night air. It was not right. It was not right at all. She could find no certainty in her hearts that this was the cocooning place. Yet on the shore she could see some of the serpents who had preceded her. A few were already encapsulated in cases spun from the silver-streaked clay and their own saliva. Others still struggled, wearily, to complete the task.

Complete the task. Yes. Her mind jolted back to the present. There was no more time for these memories. With a final heave, she brought up the last of the clay and bile that remained to her and completed the thick lip of her case's neck. But she was empty now; she had misjudged. She had nothing left to seal her case. If she tried to reach the slurry, she would break the coiled cocoon she had made, and she knew with painful certainty that she would not have the strength to weave it again. So close she had come, so close, and yet here she would die, never to rise.

A wave of panic and fury washed through her. In one instant of conflict, she decided to wrest herself free of the cocoon, and to remain absolutely still. The stillness won, bolstered by a flood of memories. That was the virtue of having the memories of one's ancestors; sometimes the wisdom of old prevailed over the terrors of the present. In the stillness, her mind cleared. She had memories to draw on, memories of serpents who had survived such an error, and dying memories of ones who had not. The corpses of the failed serpents had been devoured by those who survived. Thus even the memories of fatal errors lived on to serve the needs of survivors.

She clearly saw three paths. Stay within her case and call for a dragon to help her finish sealing her case. Well, that was of no use to her. Tintaglia was already overwhelmed. Break free of her case and demand that the dragon bring her food, so that she might eat and regain her strength to spin a new case. Another impossible solution. Panic threatened again. This time it was an act of her own will that pushed it aside. She was not going to die here. She had come too far and struggled through too many dangers to let death claim her now. No. She was going to live, she was going to emerge in spring as a dragon and take back her mastery of the skies. She would fly again. Somehow.

How?

She would live to rise as a queen. Demand that which was owed to a queen dragon now. The right of first survival in hard times. She drew what breath she could and trumpeted out a name. "Tintaglia!"

Her gills were too dry, her throat nearly destroyed from the spinning of the coarse clay into thread. Her cry for aid, her demand, was barely a whisper. And even her strength to break free of her case was gone, fading beyond recall. She was going to die.

"Are you in trouble, beautiful one? I feel your distress. Can I help you?"

Inside the restrictive casing she could not turn her head. But she could roll her eyes and see the one who addressed her. An Elderling. He was very small and very young, but in the touch of his mind against hers, there was no mistaking him. This was no mere human, even if his shape still resembled one.

Her gills were so dry. Serpents could rise above the water for a time, could even sing, but this long exposure to the cold, dry air was pushing her to the edges of her ability to survive in the Lack.

She drew in a labored breath. Yes. The scent was there, and she knew without any doubt that Tintaglia had imprinted him. He brimmed with her glamour. Slowly she lidded her eyes and unlidded them again. She still could not see him clearly. She was drying out too quickly. "I can't," she said. They were the only words she could manage

were the only words she could manage.

She felt him swell with distress. An instant later, his small voice raised the alarm. "Tintaglia! This one is in trouble! She cannot finish her case. What should we do?"

The dragon's voice boomed back to him from across the cocooning grounds. "The clay slurry, very wet! Pour it in. Do not hesitate. Cover her head with it and smooth it over the open end of her casing. Seal her in, but be sure that the first layer is very wet." Even as she spoke, the dragon herself hastened to Sisarqua's side. "A female! Be strong, little sister. There are few who will hatch to be queens. You must be among them."

The workers had come running, some trundling barrows, others bearing slopping buckets of silvery-gray clay. She had drawn her head in as far as it would go and lidded her eyes. The young Elderling outside her case shouted his orders, bidding them, "Now! Don't wait for Tintaglia! Now, her skin and eyes are drying too fast. Pour it in. That's it! And more! Another bucket! Fill that barrow again. Hurry, man!"

The stuff sloshed over her, drenching and sealing her. Her own toxins, present in the sections of the case she had woven, were affecting her now. She felt herself sinking into something that was not sleep. It was rest, however. Blessed, blessed rest.

She sensed Tintaglia standing close by her. She felt the sudden weight of warm, regurgitated slurry and knew with gratitude that the dragon had sealed her case for her. For a moment, toxins rich with memories stung her skin. Not just dragon memories from Tintaglia, but a share of serpent lore from the one Tintaglia had recently devoured enriched her case. Dimly she heard Tintaglia directing the scurrying workers. "Her case is thin here. And over here. Bring clay and smooth it on in layers. Then bank her case with leaves and sticks. Cover it well from the light and the cold. They cocoon late. They must not feel the sun until summer is full upon them, for I fear they will not have fully developed when spring comes. And when you are finished here, come to the east end of the grounds. There is another one struggling there."

The Elderling's voice reached into Sisarqua's fading consciousness. "Did we seal it in time? Will she survive to hatch?"

"I do not know," Tintaglia replied gravely. "The year is late, the serpents old and tired, and half of them are next to starved. Some from the first wave have already died in their cases. Others still straggle in the river or struggle to pass the ladder. Many of them will die before they even reach the shore. That is for the best; their bodies will nourish the others and increase their chances of survival. But there is small good to be had from those who die in their cocoons, only waste and disappointment."

Darkness was wrapping Sisarqua. She could not decide if she was chilled to her bones or cozily warm. She sank deeper, yet still felt the uneasy silence of the young Elderling. When he finally spoke his words came to her more from his thoughts than from his lips. "The Rain Wild people would like to have the cases of the ones who die. They call such material 'wizardwood' and have many valuable uses for—"

"NO!" The emphatic denial by the dragon shocked Sisarqua back to a moment of awareness. But her depleted body could not long sustain it, and she almost immediately began to sink again. Tintaglia's words followed her down into a place below dreams. "No, little brother! All that is of dragons belongs only to dragons. When spring comes, some of these cases will hatch. The dragons who emerge will devour the cases and bodies of those who do not hatch. Such is our way, and in such a way is our lore preserved. Those who die will give strength to those who live on."

Sisarqua had but a moment to wonder which she would be. Then blackness claimed her.

Day the 17th of the Hope Moon

Year the 7th of the Reign of the Most Noble and Magnificent Satrap Cosgo

Year the 1st of the Independent Alliance of Traders

From Detozi, Keeper of the Birds, Trehaug

To Ereka, Keeper of the Birds, Bingtown

Attached you will find a formal appeal from the Rain Wild Council for a just and fair payment of the additional and unexpected expenses incurred by us in the care of the serpent cases for the dragon Tintaglia. A swift reply is requested by the Council.

Ereka,

A spring flash flood has hit us hard. Tremendous damage to some of the dragon cases, and some are missing entirely. Small barge overturned on the river, and I fear it was the one carrying the young pigeons I was sending you to replenish the Bingtown flock. All were lost. I will allow my birds to set more eggs, and send you the offspring as soon as they are fledged. Trehaug does not seem like Trehaug anymore, there are so many Tattooed faces! My master has said that I must not date things according to our Independence but I defy him. Rumor will become a reality, I am sure!

Detozi

Chapter One

The Riverman

It was supposed to be spring. Damn cold for spring. Damn cold to be sleeping out on the deck instead of inside the deckhouse. Last night, with the rum in him and a belt of distant stars twinkling through an opening in the rain forest canopy, it had seemed like a fine idea. The night hadn't seemed so chilly, and the insects had been chirring in the treetops and the night birds calling to one another while the bats squeaked and darted out in the open air over the river. It had seemed a fine night to lie back on the deck of his barge and look up at the wide world all around him and savor the river and the Rain Wilds and his proper place in the world. Tarman had rocked him gently and all had been right.

In the iron-gray dawn, with dew settled on his skin and clothes and every joint in his body stiff, seemed a damn-fool prank more suited to a boy of twelve than a riverman of close to thirty years. He sat up slowly and blew out a long breath that steamed in the chill dawn air. He followed it with a heartfelt belch of last night's rum. Then, grumbling under his breath, he lurched to his feet and looked around. Morning. Yes. He walked to the railing and made water over the side as he considered the day. Far above his head, in the treetops of the forest canopy, day birds were awake and calling to one another. But under the trees at the edge of the river, dawn and daylight were tenuous things. Light seeped down, filtered by thousands of new leaves and divested of its warmth before it reached him. As the sun traveled higher, it would shine down on the open river and send fingers under the trees and through the canopy. But not yet. Not for hours.

Leftrin stretched, rolling his shoulders. His shirt clung to his skin unpleasantly. Well, he deserved to be uncomfortable. If any of his crew had been so stupid as to fall asleep out on the deck, that's what he would have told them. But they hadn't been. All eleven of his men slumbered on in the narrow, tiered bunks that lined the aft wall of the deckhouse. His own more spacious bunk had gone empty. Stupid.

It was too early to be awake. The fire in the galley stove was still banked; no hot water simmered for tea, no flatcakes bubbled on the grill. And yet here he was, wide awake, and of a mind to take a walk back under the trees. It was a strange impulse, one he had no conscious rationale for, and yet he recognized it for the kind of itch it was. It came, he knew, from the unremembered dreams of the night before. He reached for them, but the tattered shreds became threads of cobweb in his mind's grasp, and then were gone. Still, he'd follow their lingering inspiration. He'd never lost out by paying attention to those impulses, and almost inevitably regretted it the few times he'd ignored them.

He went into the deckhouse, past his sleeping crew and through the little galley and forward to his cabin. He exchanged his deck shoes for his shore boots. The knee boots of greased bullhide were nearly worn through; the acidic waters of the Rain Wild River were not kind to footwear, clothing, wood, or skin. But his boots would survive another trip or two ashore, and as a result, his skin would, too. He caught up his jacket from its hook and slung it about his shoulders and walked aft past the crew. He kicked the foot of the tillerman's bunk. Swarge's head jolted up and the man stared at him blearily.

“The rain is coming down on the deck now. Dab! dab! dab! dab! dab!”

...I'm going asnore, going to stretch my legs. Probably be back by breakfast."

"Aye," Swarge said, the only acceptable reply and close to the full extent of Swarge's conversational skills. Leftrin grunted an affirmation and left the deckhouse.

The evening before, they had nosed the barge up onto a marshy bank and tied it off to a big leaning tree there. Leftrin swung down from the blunt-nosed bow of the barge onto mud-coated reeds. The barge's painted eyes stared off into the dimness under the trees. Ten days ago, a warm wind and massive rainstorms had swelled the Rain Wild River, sending the waters rushing up above their normal banks and over the low shores. In the last two days, the waters had receded, but the plant life along the river was still recovering from being underwater for several days of silt-laden flooding. The reeds were coated with filth, and most of the grasses were flattened beneath their burdens of mud. Isolated pockets of water dotted the low bank. As Leftrin strode along, his feet sank and water seeped up to fill in his tracks.

He wasn't sure where he was going or why. He let his whim guide him as he ventured away from the riverbank into the deeper shade beneath the vine-draped trees. There, the signs of the recent flooding were even more apparent. Driftwood snags were wedged among the tree trunks. Tangles of muddy foliage and torn webs of vines were festooned about the trees and bushes. Fresh deposits of river silt covered the deep moss and low-growing plants. The gigantic trunks of the enormous trees that held up the roof of the Rain Wilds were impervious to most floods, but the undergrowth that rioted in their shade was not. In some places, the current had carved a path through the underbrush; in others, the slime and sludge of the flood burdened the foliage so heavily that the brush bent in muddied hummocks.

Where he could, Leftrin slogged in the paths that the river current had gouged through the brush. When the mud became too soft, he pushed through the grimy undergrowth. He was soon wet and filthy. A branch he pushed aside sprang back, slapping him across the brow and splattering his face with mud. He hastily wiped the stinging stuff from his skin. Like many a riverman, his arms and face had been toughened by exposure to the acidic waters of the Rain Wild River. It gave his face a leathery, weathered look, a startling contrast to his gray eyes. He privately believed that this was why he had so few of the growths and less of the scaliness that afflicted most of his Rain Wild brethren. Not that he considered himself a thing of beauty or even a handsome man. The wandering thought made him grin ruefully. He pushed it from his mind and a dangling branch away from his face and forced his way deeper.

There came a moment when he stopped suddenly. Some sensory clue he could not pin down, some scent on the air or some glimpse he had not consciously registered told him he was near. He stood very still and slowly scanned the area all around him. His eyes went past it, and then the hair on the back of his neck stood up as he swiveled his gaze back suddenly. There. Mud-laden vegetation draped over it, and the river's raging flood had coated it in muck, but a single streak of gray showed through. A wizardwood log.

It was not a huge one, not as big as he had heard that they could be. Its diameter was perhaps two thirds of his height, and he was not a tall man. But it was big enough, he thought. Big enough to make him very wealthy. He glanced back over his shoulder, but the undergrowth that blocked his view of the river and his moored barge would also shield him from spying eyes. He doubted that any of his crew would be curious enough to follow him. They'd been asleep when he left, and no doubt were still asleep.

The secret trove was his alone.

He pushed his way through the vegetation until he could touch the log. It was dead. He had known that even before he had touched it. When he was a boy, he'd been down to the Crowned Roost

chamber. He'd seen Intaglia's log before. He'd watched it, and he had known the crawling sensation it had wakened in him. The dragon in this log had died and would never hatch. It didn't much matter to him if it had died while the log still rested on the banks of the cocooning beach, or if the tumbling it had taken in the flood had killed it. The dragon inside it was dead, the wizardwood was salvageable, and he was the only one who knew where it was. And by his great good fortune, he was one of the few who knew how best to use it.

Back in the days when the Khuprus family had made part of its vast fortune from working wizardwood, back before anyone had ever known or admitted what the "wood" really was, his mother's brothers had been wizardwood workers. He'd been just a lad, wandering in and out of the lo building where his uncles' saws bit slowly through the iron-hard stuff. He'd been nine when his father had decided he was old enough to come and work on the barge with him. He'd taken up his rightful trade as a bargeman, and he learned his trade from the deck up. And then, when he had just turned twenty-two, his father had died and the barge had come to him. He'd been a riverman for most of his life. But from his mother's side, he had the tools of the wizardwood trade, and the knowledge of how to use them.

He made a circuit of the log. It was heavy going. The floodwaters had wedged it between two trees. One end of it had been jammed deep into mud while the other pointed up at an angle and was wreathed in forest-flood debris. He thought of tearing the stuff clear so he could have a good look at it and then decided to leave it camouflaged. He made a quick trip back to the barge, moving stealthily as he took a coil of line from the locker, and then returned hastily to secure his find. It was dirty work but when he had finished he was satisfied that even if the river rose again, his treasure would stay put.

As he slogged back to his barge, he noticed the heavy felt sock inside his boot becoming damp. His foot began to sting. He increased his pace, cursing to himself. He'd have to buy new boots at the next stop. Parroton was one of the smallest and newest settlements on the Rain Wild River. Everything there was expensive, and bullhide boots imported from Chalced would be difficult to find. He'd be at the mercy of whoever had a pair to sell. A moment later, a sour smile twisted his mouth. Here he had discovered a log worth more than ten years of barge work, and he was quibbling with himself over how much he was going to have to pay for a new pair of boots. Once the log was sawn into lengths and discreetly sold off, he'd never have to worry about money again.

His mind was busy with logistics. Sooner or later, he'd have to decide who he would trust to share his secret. He'd need someone else on the other end of the crosscut saw, and men to help carry the heavy planks from the log to the barge. His cousins? Probably. Blood was thicker than water, even the silty water of the Rain Wild River.

Could they be that discreet? He thought so. They'd have to be careful. There was no mistaking fresh-cut wizardwood; it had a silvery sheen to it, and an unmistakable scent. When the Rain Wild Traders had first discovered it, they had valued it solely for its ability to resist the acid water of the river. His own vessel, the *Tarman*, had been one of the first wizardwood ships built, its hull sheathed with wizardwood planks. Little had the Rain Wild builders suspected the magical properties the wood possessed. They had merely been using what seemed to be a trove of well-aged timber from the buried city they had discovered.

It was only when they had built large and elaborate ships, ships that could ply not just the river but the salt waters of the coast, that they had discovered the full powers of the stuff. The figureheads of those ships had startled everyone when, generations after the ships had been built, they had begun to come to life. The speaking and moving figureheads were a wonder to all. There were not many liveships, and they were jealously guarded possessions. None of them was ever sold outside the Traders' alliance. Only a Ringtown Trader could buy a liveship, and only liveships could travel safely

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