Dragon Flight

Raemarie Bruce

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There had not been dragons in Quarellis since her grandparent's age. Her grandmother used to spin tales about how the whole village would gather together and watch them soar across the skies, the surest sign that summer was approaching. No one was quite sure when they disappeared, or why. Perhaps their migration patterns just changed as humans expanded outwards. Perhaps something more sinister happened. Either way, Rowan was enraptured by the beasts. As a child, she wanted nothing more than to soar above the skies alongside one. Once she took over the family farm, she dreamed that she could find where the dragons went, and bring them back to the valley. Now, she would settle for just seeing one, to prove that they still existed.

So it was quite the surprise to her to find the dragon in the barn, sprawled out among the haystacks and scaring the cows. It was a great deal bigger than Rowan could have imagined it being, so big that it barely fit inside the barn. It made her feel like a small child again, and the sharp claws and fangs did not help. She should have focused on those first, and ran far away. What she focused on instead were the wings, folded against its side at odd angles. She focused beneath the tough scales and rough skin, on the thick wounds that she would have loved to think came from another dragon if it weren't for the black powder lodged inside. She focused on the ram-like horn that was split in half, and the spike along its tail that had been blown off completely. No, this was a creature in pain, and she had to help it.

Aria was trained first and foremost as a healer. However, with the exception of the occasional dog that ate some potion ingredients it shouldn't have, those skills were rarely used. It suited her just fine; after all, it meant that animals weren't getting hurt. She was not surprised at all to see the farmer rush into her store, begging for help with an animal. Rowan was her most frequent customer.

Aria was surprised about the animal in question.

“I've never healed a dragon before,” said Aria. “I've never even seen one this close before…”

With the caution one might use when they were sticking their hands into a beartrap, Aria reached towards the dragon. It was either knocked out cold, or just too tired to care at the intrusion. She could make out a pulse—two, in fact—steady but slow. Its skin was colder than she might expect from a fire-breathing dragon, but not cold like a corpse. Its breathing was haggard, with occasional puffs of smoke coming out of its nostrils. There was hope.

“We'll need to take care of these lacerations right away,” said Aria. “Plus we'll need to set those wings so they heal properly. But I'm going to need supplies.”

The thing about a 25-foot dragon was that it was hard to hide. Soon, half the town had made their way to the barn, trying to catch a glimpse at the magical beast. The members of the Adventurer's Guild stayed close to the barn doors, both to deter those who would interrupt the healer and to get a glance at what could take down a dragon.

At one point, their guild had been the largest in the region. Things changed when the war between Romant-sous-Bois and Cromlexia started. Quarellis was caught in the middle. Some left to enlist, on both sides. Others left to avoid it at all costs. Now it was just the three of them.

Those are gunpowder wounds,” said Liu.

Liu was a soldier before she was an adventurer. She had been trained specifically in the art of fire arrows and fire lances. She knew their markings well.

“Only Cromlexia's navy has any cannon powder, not the land forces,” said Beatrice. She knew better than any of them; she had been in Cromlexia's navy before the war started. “And why would they be focusing on the skies and not the seas?”

“Cannons wouldn't make these wounds alone, either,” said Phillip. “These are cuts from a blade.”

“That doesn't answer the question,” said Beatrice. “Why would an army focus not on the battle, but on some pretty dragons?”

“Well, maybe that means that it wasn't accidental—”

“Does it matter?” said Briar, poking her head out of the barn.

Briar was not an adventurer, but she was Liu and Phillip's partner, so her words held weight even before the war. As such, the three adventurers turned their heads to her, ready to listen.

“You have a point,” said Phillip.

“I was only listening to Rowan,” said Briar. “You should really brush
There had not been dragons in Quarellis since her grandparent's age. Her grandmother used to spin tales about how the whole village would gather together and watch them soar across the skies, the surest sign that summer was approaching. No one was quite sure when they disappeared, or why. Perhaps their migration patterns just changed as humans expanded outwards. Perhaps something more sinister happened. Either way, Rowan was enraptured by the beasts. As a child, she wanted nothing more than to soar above the skies alongside one. Once she took over the family farm, she dreamed that she could find where the dragons went, and bring them back to the valley. Now, she would settle for just seeing one, to prove that they still existed.

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Now she just had to figure out how.

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"I could use your sword, dear," Briar continued. "I have a whole bolt of cloth we need to cut into bandages. Aria's won't even make it around this beast once."

"I've patched up the wounds as best I could, but it's not responding the way I had hoped," said Aria. "It hasn't woken up, and it's still too cold."

"We can talk to the blacksmith, see if he can donate coals," said Beatrice.
"Maybe we could ask the tavern if they have spare fish as well," said Briar. "You know, to make sure it won't eat your cows."

Rowan sent some rude gestures her way.
"I'm worried that the damage is more internal than I realized," said Aria. "And I wouldn't dare open it up to check. I'm not about to start cutting open a creature I know nothing about."

"Then perhaps a magical remedy is needed for a magical beast," said Liu.

Agatha knew, of course, that the farmer girl was going to be visiting today. One of the few perks of being the village witch was knowing what was going on inside of the village. However, nothing could have prepared her for the farmer, in a flurry of hands, to explain that she needed enough potions to heal a full-sized dragon.

"You would heal a dragon?" Agatha asked. "Don't you realize how valuable one is?"

The farmer glared at her. Apparently, she did not. Agatha grabbed her spell book and joined her guest at the table.
"Dragon heartstrings are one of the basic cores of staff-making," She recited, flipping through page idly. "Dragon scales are the highest-quality product for gloves, primarily used in potion-making, but someone as magically-inept as yourself could also use them for milking cows or whatever it is you do. Dragon fangs can be used to destroy cursed objects. Dragon blood is one of the most sought-after reagents, used in 'Create Life from Death' spells, 'Flame Wind' spells, 'Energy of Death', 'Create a Creature of Death'...need I go on?"

The farmer shook her head. Not to confirm her statement, Agatha realized, but to deny what she was saying altogether.

"There's no need to make this a moral argument," said Agatha. "Do you think your cows will live forever? You drink their milk while they live, and eat their meat when they die. Why would you not do the same to another creature?"

The farmer broke her gaze, her glare shifting as she finally used her head. But instead of listening, the girl instead took her ink and wrote her answer onto a page for a Negate Time spell.

This is our chance to be better, she wrote.

Well, there was no convincing someone so determined. Agatha sighed, stood, and began rifling through her potions cabinet.

It was not a surprise that the dragon would wake up eventually. By the time Rowan made it back to the farm, it had managed to emerge from the bard, destroying it in the process. And boy, was it angry.

"You humans hunt my kind, shoot me out of the skies, and now you see to keep me your prisoner?" The dragon roared.

"Hey, we didn't do that!" One of the adventurers said, peering over the shield they cowered behind.

The dragon responded by unhinging its jaw and letting out a stream of fire. It was mostly smoke, and the fire that did release barely made it a few inches away from the dragon's face. It would still too weak to fight.

Summoning all of her courage, Rowan stepped forward.

The dragon snapped its head in her direction, jaw unhinging, ready to breath lukewarm flames onto her. She held up one hand to signal that she meant no harm. With the other, she presented the potions.

The dragon froze. Cautiously, he leaned in and sniffed the vials in her hand.

"Healing potions..." the dragon murmured. "You wish to heal me, human? After what the others of your kind have done?"

Rowan lowered her spare hand. She set it flat against her chest and moved it in a circular motion. Please. Please let us heal you.

Whether the dragon understood sign language, Rowan did not know. But it was a magical creature, and magical creatures had a knack at seeing within one's heart, or soul, or whatever. It understood that she was not going to change her mind anytime soon.

It lowered itself down to the ground, head arcing away from the adventurers and away from Rowan's gaze, and she got to work.

Even with healing potions, it took time for scales to grow back into place, for bones to realign, and for dragons to heal. Soon enough, the dragon became less of a novelty and more of a feature on the farm. The villagers stopped visiting to gawk at it, and the cows stopped cowering.
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before it. Rowan had taken to sitting on the porch when there weren’t farm chores to do. The dragon never sought her company, but she figured that she was providing it.

Three weeks after the dragon arrived, Rowan sat on the porch to paint her nails. It was hard to maintain a manicure under farm work, but she took pride in her hands. It was how she communicated, and she would rather people focused on the language instead of rough callouses and picked nails.

The dragon was watching her intently.

“What are you doing? Some kind of human ritual?” He asked.

Rowan held up her drying hand. She had not realized the dragon was leaning in until its head recoiled backwards in disgust.

“It smells like hell,” The dragon said.

Rowan shrugged. He wasn’t wrong.

It took until her hand dried before he spoke again.

“I know what your kind is like,” said the Dragon. “You fight and kill your own, squabbling over land that is not yours, right this very minute. And you had every reason not to help me. You had no tools, no experience, no plan. So why? Why would you heal me?”

Rowan shrugged again, a shorter gesture than needed for “Because why wouldn’t I? What good would I be if I ignored someone who was in pain? I can’t stop every war from happening, but I can at least help those who need it when I can. And I bet if you talked to more humans, they would say the same thing.”

The dragon did not respond. She tried not to worry about whether her heart or soul or whatever was clear enough for him, and turned back to her nails. She jumped out of her seat as she heard the wood of the porch crack as the dragon moved closer, and placed a claw on her table.

“The red one, if you please,” He said. “It would be beneficial if I rejoin my pack looking as if I have slain a great foe.”

The dragon was gone the next morning. Rowan saw it again, as summer began and dragons soared over the valley.