

Chapter Two

Even before he had met Tanji, Kevin had been spellbound by the amazing properties of the world of Lyndesfarne. He had once again expressed his astonishment and fascination with the Other World to her one mid-week evening, over a casual meal in a fashionably back-street Manchester bistro.

The restaurant was not somewhere which he had frequented before he had met Tanji, preferring to either cook for himself or grab a Chinese takeaway. Now he wanted to ensure that Tanji enjoyed her time in his world and he has identified this restaurant, having undertaken a little research on the Internet. They had made several visits over the last few months and it had rapidly become a firm favourite.

Apart from the restaurant, Kevin had taken to showing Tanji parts of his own world that he liked or, in an embarrassingly large number of cases, places that he thought might impress her. For the first time in his life, money was not, really, an objection: he felt he could afford to do anything he took a fancy to. Of course, this was not quite true, but Kevin did have several accounts in which he had amassed considerable savings. He had been living rather modestly, on his own, for several years before he had met Tanji and money had just built up in his bank accounts.

His nest egg had taken a battering when he had left the firm of architects that had employed him during the construction of the New Bridge, but fees and commissions from a fairly eclectic collection of consulting engagements had been coming in steadily for some time.

He had wanted to buy Tanji things – clothes and jewellery and other stereotypically feminine fripperies – but she did not really seem to wish for very much. When browsing in shops on their various trips, she had pointed out a few trinkets from time to time, but even then Kevin suspected that she was just doing it to please him rather than from any particular avaricious desire of her own.

Nevertheless it was clear to him that she did appreciate the effort he was putting in. Over desserts, she expressed a desire to reciprocate in some way and wanted to know what she might do to amuse him.

“Take me places, show me the sights,” Kevin responded enthusiastically.

“What kind of places?” she queried, amused by his somewhat childish enthusiasm. .

“Well, everything,” he said, scrambling for the words to express his request, “Oh, I don’t know – museums and art galleries, zoos and gardens, towns and cities, holiday resorts and nature reserves.”

He paused for a moment.

“I know,” he concluded dramatically, “Show me dragons!”

Tanji looked startled, even alarmed, for a moment. Kevin remembered a truth about Lyndesfarne society. They had lived with dragons for a long time. They were a rare but dangerous creature, now confined to reservations far from human habitation. But even now, people in the Other World preferred to secure their homes against them, living – or at least sleeping – underground wherever possible. There seemed to be something embedded in their psyche which made them instantly wary whenever dragons were mentioned.

Tanji quickly relaxed, much to Kevin’s relief.

“I’ll make some arrangements,” she said, suddenly smiling widely, “It will take some time – a few days, at least.”

“Oh, there’s no rush,” he replied, slightly bewildered at this impetuous suggestion, “Whenever you can sort something out.”

“I’ll enjoy it. Although it will involve a certain amount of travelling,” she added.

Kevin had much more flexibility in his working arrangements now that he was a self-employed consultant to the construction industries on both sides of the crossing.

“I’m sure that’s no problem either,” he replied, “I’ve got nothing particularly pressing just at the moment. But why do we need to travel far?”

Tanji looked pensive for a moment.

“You can’t cage dragons,” she said finally.

She explained that dragons, unlike Nightwings and other smaller flying reptiles, cannot be tamed. They were impossible to keep in cages or zoos, as they tended to injure themselves by beating themselves furiously against the bars of their cage, or whatever it was that imprisoned them. She also made it clear that dragons were also surprisingly fragile, at least in parts. Their skeletons were very light and partially hollow. This was the only way that basic physics – mostly unchanged in the world of Lyndesfarne, Kevin had long assumed – would allow such a large animal to fly. In any case, it seemed inevitable that, if a dragon broke a bone in its wing, the creature would atrophy and die in a matter of days.

It was just less than a week later that Kevin found himself emerging from a portal, having followed a series of signs at the portal junctions marked, according to Tanji's softly-spoken translation, 'dragon canyon'. Emerging from the doorway of the portal building – a low, stout construction of weathered stone which blended into the surrounding countryside – they were met by two men who, it seemed, had been engaged to be their guides on this adventure. Kevin remembered to hold up his hand in greeting in the Lyndesfarne fashion, successfully suppressing his almost automatic reaction to shake the hand of anyone to whom he was newly introduced.

Standing just outside the doorway of the portal, behind the two guides, was one of the magical vehicles that Kevin had experienced before on his trips to the world of Lyndesfarne. There were no wheels or any sign of an engine or other locomotive power. He knew that these strange devices would simply float in the air when instructed using the correct gesture, and move and turn when commanded, although they never travelled faster than about ten miles per hour.

Looking closer, he observed that the transport was a little larger than any he had seen before, with three rows of what looked to Kevin like plumply-stuffed sofas, fronted by oversize footrests with low sides over which it was necessary to step to enter the vehicle. Later, he would discover that the device was articulated – when it moved over rough ground, the various sections would move up and down, as well as turning relative to each other as it negotiated uneven surfaces.

The vehicle was open to the elements, with the – well, "casing" was the word Tanji had used previously in his hearing – already deactivated. It seemed to be loaded with crossbows and a variety of other artefacts which Kevin, for no reason he could have easily articulated, assumed must be magical weapons of some sort. He was also faintly curious about the seats in the vehicle. They were formed from some kind of muddy grey-green material which felt like leather.

"Stop staring," Tanji said, nudging him gently.

The older of the two men, a grizzled veteran whose name Kevin understood to be Simas, began what was obviously a prepared speech about the trip upon which they were about to embark. Tanji, translating the senior guide's words in a sing-song tone, using phrases like "Stay in the vehicle at all times" and "For your own safety" in a way that Kevin found amusingly familiar.

At the end of the diatribe, she added in her own voice that there was an "extra strong casing, with additional protections for safety". Kevin was nearly convinced.

Directed by the assistant guide, a much younger man whose name was Omiz, the two tourists clambered aboard the transport, sitting themselves in the third row of seats and stowing their luggage in a capacious storage area behind their feet. Kevin had not brought very much with him. He had wondered what he should pack for this trip. He knew that delicate electronic items might possibly be permanently damaged and as usual left everything of this nature behind. Even so, almost all of the things he could imagine being useful on, say, a safari in Africa – a camera, a pair of binoculars, even a plastic bottle of water – he suspected would be non-functional in the world of Lyndesfarne.

In the end, he took almost nothing, apart from a few specially-selected items of robust clothing that experience had already taught him would survive the trip through the barrier, packed in his old rucksack. The only things he added were a stout pair of old-fashioned lace-up leather boots, which he was already wearing, and a glass bottle of water with a cork stopper.

There was a further short briefing from the head guide, who had settled himself comfortably in the middle row of seats, presumably so that he could easily twist around to address the paying travellers. The spiel from Simas was smoothly translated in a soft voice by Tanji directly into Kevin's ear.

The small party set off. Omiz sat in the front seat, gesturing in a fluid and relaxed fashion which made it quite clear he was firmly in control of the vehicle.

After ten minutes travel over a rough but well-defined road, they began to descend into a series of rocky canyons and wide ledges, winding this way and that. It became clear to Kevin that the portal was located close to the edge of a plateau. As they travelled, they looked out over astonishing views over the steeply-sloping landscape lit up by the morning sunshine. He was initially slightly worried by the absence of any kind of fence or barrier which might prevent them from careering over the side of the outcroppings which formed their road, but their low speed, together with the way the magical vehicle appeared to be rigidly fixed to the ground, soon reassured him.

Much of the landscape consisted of grey rock outcrops protruding through growths of scrubby bushes. Here and there, entrances to caves were visible, although getting closer would require a scramble over broken rocks. There were a few regions of low but densely-packed trees on the slopes, with grass in other, more level places. Kevin noticed that it was very dry and dusty in most places on the ground, and much of the plant life looked desiccated. There were just

a very few areas where rivulets meandered, clearly identifiable by more lush growths of trees and marshy grasslands.

From the slightly disjointed narrative from the two guides – he did not think it was Tanji’s translation to blame – Kevin came to understand that the vegetation supported herds of goats and a certain species of deer, or perhaps antelope. They were fairly hard to spot, being quite small and nervous animals, who understandably kept themselves under the cover of the trees as much as possible, only venturing out to feed on the grass.

“The fawns are the major source of food for the dragons,” Simas continued, pointing out a nervous hind peering from the undergrowth, “They work together, as a team” – Tanji’s translation faltered for a moment here – “And they can carry off a young kid. They will act in unison to bring down an old or weakened adult.”

“There may be a few wild boar around,” he added, “But they’ll be well-hidden at this time of year.”

Looking back, the guide directed their attention to the broken cliffs and slopes they had just traversed.

“Dragons like to have rocky outcrops and crags for nests and as lookout points,” he explained.

After twenty minutes or so of slow travel, with the magical vehicle twisting and rocking as it accommodated the irregularities of the terrain, Omiz gestured dramatically and they stopped abruptly.

“There!” cried Tanji, pointing into the sky.

Kevin squinted against the sunshine. There, high in the sky, soaring and wheeling in the air, was a flight of perhaps a half-dozen dragons. He judged that they must have wingspans of at least ten feet – perhaps more – and they were lazily circling in the thermal air currents thrown up by the sun warming the rocky outcrops below.

He knew about thermals, those huge invisible columns of warmer air surging into the sky, the tops usually marked out by a fluffy mound of brilliantly white cumulus cloud. In his own world, large birds and gliders used this natural source of energy to avoid exerting their muscles or using motors; here, it seemed that the same approach was used by dragons to avoid flapping too energetically.

In one smooth movement, Simas swung up a flat circular plate mounted on some kind of a pole fixed to the back of the seats he was occupying. The plate appeared to be a mirror of burnished metal but, as the guide gestured at it, the bright metal started to display a magnified image of the dragons in flight.

Kevin watched fascinated, barely breathing, torn between the enlarged image on the magic plate and direct sight of the creatures themselves.

After a while, he whispered to Tanji.

“Could you ask a question for me?”

“Of course,” she replied softly.

“Why is this region so dry?”

Tanji spoke in the Lyndesfarne language, presumably repeating Kevin’s question.

“Dragons don’t like water,” the senior guide explained, once again translated by Tanji, “They like a very dry – but not arid – landscape.”

Simas explained that dragons had particularly good eyesight, which they used to keep their bearings in the air. They therefore disliked being too far from the ground, and they absolutely hated flying into clouds where they were unable to see anything and tended to panic immediately.

It was quite possibly the damp air inside clouds, the guide suggested, where they picked up their fear of water in any form. He further explained that dragons, like cats, very rarely drink water and they are accustomed to getting all of their liquid needs from their food.

The beasts were quite majestic in flight, at least from a distance, and some of them seemed to be drawing closer as they watched.

“Aren’t they magnificent?” he said to Tanji.

“I suppose you’re should be right,” she conceded, “But I confess I can’t easily see them that way.”

“Why not?” he pressed.

She was silent for a few moments.

“It’s all those stories from my childhood,” she answered eventually, “Dragons were always depicted as dangerous vermin, fickle – even evil creatures.”

“Dangerous, I can understand,” he mused, “But why *evil*?”

He did not get a reply. One of the braver – or perhaps hungrier – of the dragons swooped down to have a closer look at the tourists in the vehicle. He instinctively ducked as the magnificent animals soared overhead. It took every bit of Kevin’s willpower not to cower in the footwell of the vehicle. He could see that Tanji had a similar urge, but she too was steeling herself to sit upright. Out of the corner of his eye, Kevin thought he could detect a certain measure of approval from the guides.

The two tourists spent several engrossing hours watching the great beasts flying and wheeling above their heads, or perched on their nesting areas on the crags high above the canyon floor. Kevin could see their bright intelligent eyes following the party crawling about on the ground below.

As the tourists and their guides finally returned to their starting-point, Kevin found himself wondering just how clever the dragons actually were. Not people-smart, he concluded, but very probably cunning and unpredictable hunters, capable of working together in small packs, and with an innate ability of spotting, and taking immediate advantage of any weaknesses in their prey. No wonder, he thought, they were so feared in this world.