



CROSSROADS



Dragon's Bluff

MARY H. HERBERT





Prologue

Ulin had never liked chicken and dumpling soup. There was something about the sight of those bits of dough floating in the rich broth, or maybe it was the smell of chicken and herbs that brought back memories of bad colds, bouts of influenza, and a broken arm suffered in childhood—all dosed by his mother with bowls of hot, steaming chicken and dumpling soup. It wasn't that his mother's soups were bad. In fact, Usha Majere's cooking was almost as renowned as her skills in painting portraits. The problem lay in the fact that chicken soup seemed to be the cure-all shared by all the women in his life. Every time he came home to Solace tired, weary, sick, or downhearted, his mother or grandmother served him a bowl of chicken soup. Now his future mother-in-law had taken it upon herself to treat him with soup as well, and like his grandmother and mother, he didn't have the heart to tell her he didn't like it.

He sighed and forced himself to take another spoonful.

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It had been seven days since he returned from his latest trip, a visit to Palanthas, and he was still bone-tired and depressed. The journey, like others before it, had been a waste of time and served only to strengthen his private misgivings. Since his return he had come to this little house in Solace every evening about this time to meet Lucy, his betrothed, and every time he walked in the door, her mother took one look at his drawn face and thrust another bowl of soup at him. Unfortunately, the soup hadn't helped much. He still felt as if he had been hollowed out and tossed aside, an empty husk.

He stirred his spoon listlessly through the broth and tried to look anywhere but at the bits of dumpling floating on the surface. The house was quiet at that moment. Lucy's mother, Ellse, was in the pantry slicing bread and cheese, while her two younger sisters laughed and played outside in the dusting of a late winter snow. Lucy had not yet returned from her work at the refugee school. Ulin slouched in his seat, and his well-cut lips curved in an expression of impatience. He wished Lucy would hurry, so he might have a chance to slip his bowl of soup under the table for her cat. That animal would eat anything.

The thought had barely crossed his mind when the kitchen door blew open, admitting a gust of chill wind and a young woman dressed in a long-sleeved tunic and skirt. A cloak was flung carelessly over one shoulder, and she clutched a piece of paper like a club in her balled fist. Anger radiated from her tense body in palpable waves.

Surprise held Ulin silent. Lucy was not a temperamental person, and he had rarely seen her in this state of rage. Her eyes had turned a deep gray-green like thunderstorm clouds, and her freckles were lost in a flush of scarlet.

A dwarf stamped in behind her and closed the door against the evening wind.

"I can't believe it!" Lucy cried before Ulin could say a word. "Look at this! Ten years he has been gone, and what do we finally get from the reprobate? A letter notifying us

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of his death and a request to identify the body! Why can't he just rot quietly into the ground?"

Ulin blinked as he tried to put the few facts together and figure out what she was talking about.

Lucy slammed the paper on the table, sending ripples through Ulin's bowl of soup. "Look at this! Go ahead and read it," she said. He picked it up and smoothed out the crumpled sheet as she plunged on. "He died in Flotsam during the winter," she informed her mother, who had come to see what the shouting was about. "He's dead, and we still can't get rid of him!"

"Who?" Ellse asked worriedly.

"Someone named Kethril Torkay," Ulin replied, perusing the first part of the letter. A thought clicked in his head and he glanced up at Lucy. "Your father?"

Lucy did not reply, but the drawn lines of dismay on Ellse's face answered his question. He set the letter aside, hurried to his feet, and helped Ellse into a chair. Since both Torkay women were distracted by the shocking news, he played the part of host, offering a seat to the dwarf and pouring tea for Lucy and her mother. He found a jug of something a little stiffer and fixed a pitcher of hot spiced brandy for the dwarf and himself. He placed a mug of the steaming brew in front of the dwarf and took a deep swallow of his own to rid his mouth of the taste of chicken soup.

The dwarf, bundled against the cold, slowly peeled off a muffler, a thick jacket, and a hood to reveal the dour, unbearded face of a mature female. "Thank you," she said gruffly and downed the hot drink in one long gulp.

Ulin poured another drink for her then sat down by his betrothed. He took her hand in his. "Lucy, I'm so sorry."

Lucy jerked out of her thoughts. "Don't be. The man was worthless. *That* part doesn't bother me."

Ulin felt perplexed. Lucy had trained with him as a sorceress, and for the past six months, since the destruction of the Academy of Sorcery, she had spent her mornings teaching in a school for refugee children and her evenings

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working for Ulin's grandfather and aunt at the Inn of the Last Home. She had grown close to Ulin and his family, and yet, not once could he remember her mentioning her father—until now. He glanced at the dwarf drinking her brandy, her face expressionless.

Lucy's anger, an emotion she could never hold for long, faded. The young woman leaned forward to rest her elbows on the table and her head in her hands. "What bothers me is this dwarf wants me to go to Flotsam to identify his body."

"What?" Ulin and Ellse burst out together.

"That's absurd," Ulin snorted. He snatched up the letter and read it this time from start to finish. The words stood out clearly on the coarse paper.

"Who are you?" Ellse finally noticed the dwarf.

"She's a lawyer," Lucy replied.

"A what?"

"A magistrate," Ulin told her. "A scribe of sorts . . . an official who deals with legal matters such as estates, wills, certificates, deeds, litigation, that sort of thing."

The dwarf pushed to her feet and bowed. "I am Chalcedony Rockdale. I have been sent by the Flotsam City Council to request a member of the Torkay family accompany me to Flotsam to identify the body."

Lucy's mother sniffled into a napkin. "What happened?"

"He was caught in a fire."

Lucy snorted. "Probably some bar fire."

Chalcedony did not respond. She watched stonily as Ulin passed the letter to Lucy's mother.

"If the man is such a rogue, why go all the way to Flotsam just to bury him?" Ulin wanted to know.

"There is the matter of his estate," Chalcedony responded, her brown eyes assessing him.

"You mean he actually had something?" Lucy asked, her tone skeptical. She stood up and paced a slow circle around the table.

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"A fair amount. Enough to help our townspeople with several necessary projects. However, he left no will. Legally, no one can touch his estate until his body is identified and a certificate of death is issued."

"But why us? He deserted us ten years ago. Surely someone around there knows him better."

"Not in Flotsam. He spent most of his time in a place called Dead Pirate's Cove"—Chalcedony curled her lip up in a sneer—"and most of those people are totally untrustworthy. The town council would certainly prefer that Kethril's money stay in Flotsam, and the only way to ensure that is to have a reliable witness." She turned to Ellse and tapped a stubby forefinger on the letter still laying on the table. "The council knows it is asking a great deal—"

Ulin scooted his chair back, interrupting her with its sliding creak. "It's asking the ridiculous. Flotsam is on the other side of Ansalon. The journey will take months, and may be worthless. A burned body will not last long in any recognizable condition."

"They've buried him in the sand near town. He'll dry nicely in the heat."

Lucy couldn't help a grimace.

Chalcedony paused then went on. "The council is willing to offer you twenty-five percent of Kethril Torkay's estate plus traveling expenses if you will identify him."

Lucy studied the dwarf for a long breath. "And if we cannot make an identification?"

"You will still earn your fee."

Ulin's lips pursed in thought. This situation seemed rather odd, but then he'd always found lawyers a rather strange lot. He hoped Lucy was not seriously considering this. "Why does Flotsam's council even bother with formalities? If they truly have their hands on Torkay's estate, they could've kept it and saved themselves the expense of searching for his heirs."

"True." Chalcedony finished her spiced brandy and helped herself to another mug. "That would have been

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easier, but the elders of Flotsam's council have some honor, and they are trying to polish a little tarnish from Flotsam's image. They felt it was worth a try."

Lucy nodded. She looked around at her small cottage, at the worn furnishings and the empty shelves in the pantry. The three-room house just outside of Solace was comfortable enough for one or two, but since her mother and two sisters moved in a few months ago, the place had become a little too crowded for Lucy's comfort. "What do you think, Mother?" she asked Ellse. "We could certainly use the money."

Ulin started in his chair. "Lucy, you're not thinking—"

"Yes, I am," she insisted. "I am the only one who can go."

"Ulin can go with you," Ellse spoke at last. She sat still, her eyes downcast.

Resentment flared in Ulin's mind. He had just returned from one long, fruitless journey. The last thing he wanted to do was go on another. "I don't want to go to Flotsam," he blurted before he could stop the words.

Ellse lifted her head. Slow tears trickled down her seamed cheeks. "You will if you want to marry my daughter."

As quickly as it flared, Ulin's resentment died down. Lucy's mother was right. Mothers usually were. If he wanted a place at Lucy's side in the future, he needed to support her in the endeavors that meant the most to her. The gods knew she had supported him.

But he wasn't ready to give in quite so easily. "Flotsam is in Malys's domain. Reaching it will be difficult. Coming back with anything of value could be impossible."

Lucy stopped pacing and put an arm around her mother's shaking shoulders. "I know that, Ulin. Believe me, I have thought about that."

"And you still want to do this?"

"No, I don't *want* to go." She hesitated and shook her head at her own foolishness. "But if I don't bring back

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some token that my father is truly dead, we will never *know*. We won't be able to close that part of our lives." She slid her hand across the table and laid it over Ulin's. "Believe it or not, in all the years that my father has been gone, we have never given up the hope that he might return. We *need* to know he is dead."

Ulin's weary face relaxed in a warm smile. If it meant that much to her . . . "All right. When do we leave?"

"We?" Lucy echoed. "You don't have to come—despite what Mother said. You're still exhausted from your last trip. And what about your father?"

He closed his eyes when he thought of his father. Palin was home now, thank the absent gods. For months he had been held prisoner by Knights of the Thorn, the magic-wielding faction of the newly named Knights of Neraka. The Knights, under the command of the green dragon overlord, Beryl, had tortured and interrogated him to learn the truth about the failure of magic. Eventually they had realized he knew no more than they did, and they had released him. He had come home a broken, bitter man who quarreled with his family and friends and sank deeper into depression.

Ulin opened his eyes to meet Lucy's. "There is little I can do to help here. I'd like to go with you. I've been gone from you too long, and besides, two can accomplish more than one."

They had been so engrossed in their conversation that they had forgotten the dwarf.

Chalcedony cleared her throat. "Arrangements have been made. If you can be ready, we should leave in two days."

"Two days?" Ulin repeated. His bedroll hadn't even been cleaned from the last trip.

Lucy bounced to Ulin's side and put her lips over his mouth, cutting off his words with a deep kiss. When she straightened, the last traces of storm clouds cleared from her eyes, leaving them fresh and green. She grinned at her

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beloved and her mother. "This deserves a celebration. Let's go to the Inn and tell Laura and Caramon."

Chalcedony waved a negating hand. "No, I will just—"

"My grandfather makes the best ale this side of Flotsam," Ulin informed the dwarf.

"And fried ham, spiced potatoes, fresh bread . . ." Lucy added.

The magistrate drained her third brandy and bowed her thanks. "In that case, I will join you."

Still warmed by Lucy's kiss, Ulin slid his bowl of soup under the table for the cat. Grabbing his cloak, he escorted the two women and the dwarf out the door and called Lucy's sisters. Perhaps, he thought, something good would come of this. With luck, the journey might not be a total disaster.