


CHRIS D'LACEY

THE ERTH DRAGONS

DARK WYNG

BOOK TWO



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The Kaal settlement, out beyond the scorch line, present day

“I hail from a distant land,” said the stranger, “too far from these mountains to warrant description. I look as you do but I am not of Kaal blood, and the sound of my name will fall harsh on your tongue. I will say it once—Tywyll—so you have heard it true, but you may call me ‘Ty’ and this will do me no dishonor.”

“‘Ty’ what?” asked a young man, Rolan Woodknot. Nearly half the Kaal tribe had gathered around a fire to greet this wanderer in their midst. The women, in particular, were curious about him, for Ty was a handsome, dark-haired man and he dressed unlike any man of the tribe. The Kaal wore single robes to the knee, made of roughly woven thread. The stranger was dressed in a shorter robe and full leg coverings, all of it fashioned from a finer cloth than anyone from the mountains had ever seen.

Rolan picked up a twig and flicked it at the embers of a dying fire. “Each of us here is described by our work or our father’s work, or some mark we carry.” He opened the neck of his robe to show a bloodred stain on the skin that had grown with him since the day of his birth.

“My name describes my . . . bearing,” said Ty, taking a strand of his hair between his fingers and twisting it as if it were new to him. “It needs no attachment. But if it pleases you to raise one, I do not object.”

“It would please me, stranger, to know about *that*.” A voice laden with the juice of many berries rose loudly above the rest. Cob Wheeler scratched his coarse gray beard and pointed to a pure white whinney tied to a post behind the stone on which the stranger sat. “What manner of magicks saw the beast so abused that a horn was left growing from its head?”

Ty pressed his fingertips together. “It appears to you unsightly?”

“It appears to me unnatural. A mutt would not piss near it, and nor will I.”

A few around the fire chose to laugh at this remark. Cob was pleased to hear it. He was one of only a handful of men who had survived a clash with the fire-breathing skalers, a horror that had left the wisest Kaal dead and the youngest ones visited by night terrors. With Oleg Widefoot half blinded by skaler fire and Rolan too young to assume command, the Kaal had looked to Cob to lead the tribe. The arrival of this man who dressed in dark clothing and rode a strange whinney and spoke in words melodious to women was shaking Cob’s authority with every breath.

The stranger’s hand came up slowly.