

Prince of Dragons
By Pam G Howard

Books by Pam G Howard

The McDragon series

McDragon

Effel

McFinnia

The Mr Spangle series

Spangle

Chapter One

Flint

In the depths of the forest the old witch tipped her head to one side, listening intently. She nodded to herself sadly. Her preparations must now be sufficient for what was to come – it was time!

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The dragon's golden eyes glinted as Flint approached it, following his progress towards where it was slumped on the ground, looking very pitiful, one wing trapped under its body, the long tail rather limply curled around it.

"Only a youngster by the looks of it," the boy thought to himself.

Holding his hands in front of him with the palms facing towards the beast, he said calmly, "I won't hurt you. Let me see if there is anything I can do to help."

A feeble snort of flame emitted from its nostrils and then the large head thumped onto the ground in submission.

Dragons were rare this close to the castle. They could occasionally be seen circling the highest peaks of the mountains over to the north but never on the ground.

Flint approached the dragon and carefully walked around it, checking its injuries. The smell which greeted him was of smoke, charcoal and wind. He winced when he saw how the spear had gone deep into the beast's body.

"I will need to get help," he said thoughtfully, "and quickly in case the person who did this comes to finish you off. I can try to get your wing out from under you if you like?"

The dragon tilted its head to one side, looking intelligently at him.

"Try and lift your body a little and we'll have a go." The dragon gave a groan as it shifted, giving Flint the opportunity to tug on the wing. It felt leathery, but firm under his fingers. Green blood oozed from the wound. The dragon lifted the wing and flopped it down on the ground.

“I don’t see you being able to fly for a while.” The wing had a break in one of the spiny bones which went from the body to the tip of the wing, ending in a sharp point.

The question in his head was, who on earth would have the skill to help?

His mind raced as he recalled some of the gossip in the servants’ quarters over the past few months.

The witch woman. They only spoke of her in whispers, their faces fearful. She was someone to be avoided, although rumour also had it that she could heal just about anything with her herbs and magic but... and this was the crunch... she always demanded a promise in return or she could turn you to stone. Never money, but the debt had to be paid.

There was nothing else for it – the dragon’s life was worth more than that of a lowly servant boy.

“Wait, I’ll be back as soon as I can,” and he set off as fast as he could in the direction of where he thought the witch woman’s hovel ought to be.

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Flint pounded through the forest, pushing and shoving at the undergrowth until at long last he broke into a small clearing with a wooden cottage in the centre.

A small hunched over woman stood in the doorway of her home watching him closely as he panted up to her and collapsed at her feet.

“Y..you... need... to come...” he panted, “a... dragon... is injured!”

“Save your voice young man – I know, the trees told me of your need.” herby breath travelled across the space between them as Flint tried to rise to his feet.

As she spoke, he saw gaps where some of her teeth should have been. She was very old with a brown heavily wrinkled face. Her long dress was a deep leaf green colour, her woollen cloak brown like a tree trunk.

He peered up at her in shock.

“The trees?”

“Indeed!” She didn’t move.

“There is however a boon that I will require as repayment of my services,” she said, cackling as her mouth twisted into a smile.

“O...k,” he replied rather hesitantly.

“You need to bring the girl here! Swear that you will do so!” The voice that uttered these words was harsh and he could tell there would be no bartering about this.

“What girl?”

“The Lord’s daughter, of course!”

“B...but, I don’t speak to her and I can’t lead her into danger.”

The old woman chortled when she heard his words, “Don’t be ridiculous boy! Of course, I wouldn’t hurt her. Use your gift and look into my soul!”

Flint looked shocked. As far as he knew his mother was the only person who was aware of his magic and she had sworn him to secrecy about it saying people would not understand. He was now on his knees and her dark beady eyes stared into his. He held her gaze unwaveringly.

“How did you know about... you know what?”

“That is for me to know. Do you promise to bring the girl to me?”

The gift she talked about allowed him to sense whether people were good or bad or evil.

He studied her for a few moments feeling only a green softness, no blackness or grey about her and he nodded.

“I do!” inside he just hoped he could keep his word, although he had no idea how he was going to achieve that!

The crone nodded, “That will do then. Now let’s be on our way. Bring that basket with you!” and she set off at a fair pace for such an old bent woman using her walking stick to support her while carrying a soft bag which was slung across her body, her brown cloak swirling around her.

Chapter Two

Elvie

At the age of seven Elvie realised something magical was happening within her – she had no idea where the tingling, bubbling feeling inside of her came from but it hadn't been there before. She debated asking the governess if it was normal, but something held her back. Miss Welm was a very upright and stoic person with no imagination and the thought of giving the woman another reason to belittle her made Elvie keep her mouth shut.

The day of the awakening, as Elvie came to think of it, the two of them were promenading, Miss Welm's expression, along one of the pathways in the sprawling gardens of the castle. It was a rare treat for them to be in the open air because Miss Welm felt the cold and kept them indoors as much as she possibly could, while Elvie on the other hand relished the freedom of being out in the open, no matter what the weather was like.

The walkway they were on circled the trunk of a huge oak tree which dominated this part of the garden. Elvie couldn't resist brushing her fingers gently against it as she passed by. She halted in surprise – there was a thrumming beneath her hand, almost as if the tree was purring at her touch. She placed her palm firmly against the rough bark and thought she could feel the life force inside the oak moving from its roots up to the tips of the branches where a few curled up brown leaves remained. The bulk of them were already littering the grass beneath her feet.

She couldn't resist calling to the governess, "Touch the tree, Miss Welm – can you feel something?"

The woman reached her hand out as instructed before sneering down at the young girl beside her.

"What on earth are you talking about! It's a tree – there is nothing to feel, nothing at all!"

"Can't you sense something like a heartbeat inside the tree?"

"Ridiculous! Now I know you are really an imbecile! Too much imagination!" and at that the woman strode off, back towards the house shouting over her shoulder for the girl to follow her.

Elvie placed her palm on the trunk again, enjoying the feeling of the patterned bark beneath her fingers and the rhythmic surging of the water which she knew kept the ancient tree alive. There was a rustling above her head and a green leaf floated down, brushing gently against her cheek as it passed her to settle on the ground. She was sure the tree was trying to give her some comfort and she gave it another small pat as she set off after the scrawny woman.

From that time on Elvie kept quiet whenever the same sensation quivered through her body.

As often as she could after that she touched trees and flowers, she was sure they all seemed to become brighter, as if delighted to be noticed by her. On the other hand, when she tested touching the cut flowers that were in the abundant arrangements placed around the castle there was no feeling at all from them. They were dead.

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When she was seven and a half her father returned from one of his trips to another part of his lands. He was accompanied by a very tall, willowy blond woman. On hearing the carriage arrive Elvie peered out of one of the windows in the school room to watch her father step down from the carriage and then turn to offer his hand to the woman behind him. A rather ungainly boy followed them.

“Who is that with my father?” she asked the governess.

“Get back to your work!” Miss Welm instructed her. “You will find out soon enough. There are changes afoot in the house and your father will explain it all to you when he wants you to know.” She sounded almost vindictive about it.

Elvie kept a discreet eye outside watching as the newcomers walked towards the formal stone steps, looking this way and that to take in the magnificence of their surroundings. They were followed by a tall man wearing a jet black cloak, a long sword strapped to his waist beneath it.

Despite being on tenterhooks to know what was going on Elvie had to wait until lunch time before she was summoned to the formal dining room by her father, a very rare occurrence which usually boded bad news.

He glanced very briefly at her before brusquely saying, “This is your new mother!”

Elvie stood stock still and stared at him, but he refused to meet her eyes.

“My new m.mother...?”

“Indeed. You are to call her Mother from now on,” and he turned his head to gaze out of the window.

The woman held out a pale hand with long red painted nails which matched the colour on her mouth towards the small brown haired girl. There was no softness on her face as she watched Elvie, who had her mouth open in shock.

There was nothing for it but to step forward and take the hand in front of her, curtseying as low as she could while staring at the face of the woman before her. There was no welcome there.

“And... this is Brutus, your stepbrother,” her father indicated with his hand in the direction of the plump boy who Elvie hadn’t noticed standing next to them.

“Br..Brutus... pleased to meet you.” The boy smirked back at her.

“You can return to the nursery for your lunch,” her father instructed as he turned his back and marched to the chair at the head of the table.

“My dear!” and he indicated to a seat at the end of the long dining table. The butler stepped forward from where he’d been discreetly standing at the side of the room and quietly pulled out one of the leather clad chairs as he waited for “Mother” to settle herself down. As Elvie exited the room she was stunned to see that Brutus was being helped into a seat next to his mother. The black cloaked man remained standing just behind them.

Brushing away the tears which were creeping down her cheeks Elvie trudged back towards the nursery to the company of the delightful Miss Welm. What did this mean? Where had the woman come from?

Elvie had never met her own mother. She’d been told that she’d died giving birth to her baby daughter and it was made very clear to her that it was not a subject for discussion. Only once, when she was old enough and brave enough, had she asked her father what her mother had looked like and he had turned his back and stalked out of the room without uttering a sound. Even the servants kept their silence on the subject.

Her father had always treated her coldly, rarely looking at her, almost as if he was ashamed of her in some way. In her dreams she’d imagine the soft arms of someone comforting her rocking her gently back and forwards to a lilt

lullaby. Those dreams always felt real and were very precious leaving her with the feeling of being safe and loved for a long time after she woke.

The dream always felt very real.

Chapter Three

Flint

The undergrowth almost seemed to part as the witch woman strode through it and on looking back the boy could see no pathway behind them, leaves had covered their footprints.

It seemed she followed much the same route he'd taken to find her. Broken twigs here and there were evidence of his haste.

Flint knew they were nearing the clearing when they heard the rasping breath of the dragon.

"Hurry!" the witch called looking back over her shoulder, "there is less time than I thought!"

The dragon was lying in the same spot where the boy had left it, its injured wing bent out of shape to one side.

With more flexibility than one would have expected of someone of her apparent great age, the woman knelt beside the beast and examined the oozing wound that was evident between its scales.

"Be brave my friend, be brave!" and as she stroked its scaly nose gently, the dragon closed its eyes and seemed to relax into a stupor.

"Is he asleep?"

"A form of it." Still concentrating on her task, "You realise it is a young male then?"

"Yes, but I have no idea how on earth I know that."

"Hmmm," was her only reply.

"Now pass me the long-bladed knife from the basket – be very careful with it, even a little nick from it will have you bleeding profusely!" He handed over the knife very gingerly.

Grasping it firmly she angled the tip towards the wound and slid it between the two big scales either side of the spear. As she did a fountain of smelly pus spurted upwards and the witch ducked to avoid being covered in it. Droplets hit the ground, hissing as they landed.

“Much as I expected,” she muttered, “but the pain will ease now, however the biggest problem is going to be removing that spear head. It is one that has barbs on the end which will have opened on impact. Nasty things! They can be quite deadly.”

Flint generally had a strong stomach for blood. He had gutted many a rabbit in his time but when she lifted one of the scales and delicately manoeuvred the sharp blade in a circular motion around the spear’s shaft, he gulped as the dragon’s flesh parted and more pus began to trickle out. The smell was very pungent and disgusting.

“Whoever wielded this spear meant business – not to kill, mind you, but to trap. I rather think their aim must have been off because it has pierced very near the heart. Let’s hope we are lucky enough to save our young friend.”

“Flint!” she barked suddenly.

“How did you know my name?”

“That is not important now,” she barked. “Run to the end of the path in the direction of the castle and keep watch. They will be searching for their prey. If you see them try to distract them somehow. I need more time!”

The lad scrambled to his feet to set off at full pace towards the castle. He had the odd sense that the trees and bushes parted showing him the path to follow and allowing him to speed his way through them. Glancing back, they had closed behind him, much as they had when the witch woman led the way to the clearing.