

A Dragon called Shining Leaves

Books by Pam G Howard

The Ashridge Adventures

Prince of Dragons

King of Dragons

The McDragon Series

McDragon

Effel

McFinnia

Mr Spangle Series

Spangle

Chapter One

Tan

Looking down at the jagged teeth of rocks below he realised he'd made a huge mistake. Had his foolishness brought him to his end? A big sigh hissed through his teeth as he clung onto the gritty grey rock in desperation, clenching his fingers to try and find a grip.

The whole reason for the stupidity of Tan making this ridiculous climb was because Otto had dared him to, and he wanted to try and heal the breach between them any way he could.

He looked up.

"Only halfway!" he puffed as his arms weakened and his fingers lost their hold - he was going to fall!

Air rushed past him as he plunged down and down - most certainly to find his death. As he fell, he let his thoughts go free to picture his mother with her greying hair and the determined look that she always had on her face, then his golden-haired sister, Roselda smiling happily as usual and finally, his fierce big brother, Leonard who was a soldier in the service of Lord Travers. Lastly, there was Autumn...

Suddenly his legs felt as if they were leaving their sockets, almost as if they'd been caught on a rock and his body shuddered to a halt.

"What the...!!!"

Then he was moving again but rising!! He thrashed about as he screamed in fright trying to see what it was that had snatched him out of the air.

Long scaly huge legs ending in deep russet talons had a firm grip on him. Surely not?! This could be far worse than being splattered on the rocks below - he was going to be food for a monster!

Passing out, his last thoughts were thrust from his mind.

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"Look at you! Did you reach the pinnacle? I didn't see you!" the voice jeered from the other side of the road.

"Drat!" thought Tan, "I thought I'd missed that brainless pig." He was feeling rather annoyed that his so-called best friend, Otto had issued the dangerous challenge of Tan climbing up to the mountain peak and he turned away to put off the meeting until he had calmed down.

"Not so fast!" and a meaty hand clamped tightly on his shoulder swinging his body around.

"What do you want Otto?"

"Just to look at the wimpy turd that you are, that's all!" was the sneering answer.

"What have I done to you to make you like this - we were friends, weren't we? Very good friends." Tan faced up to his opponent.

"That was before."

"Before what? I have no idea what's got into you! Now let me go, your father's librarian is expecting me, and you know he won't be happy if I'm late," he said grumpily looking up at the castle which was suspended in the rocky mountain above him.

Otto gave Tan a shove and stomped off whistling down the lane.

"What was that about," Tan muttered as he straightened his jacket before walking off in the direction of the track which led up to the Lord's castle. It was always a bit of a trek up to it, but worth it once he'd arrived.

He enjoyed the work he did in the library, particularly when he had to find old dusty tomes that hadn't seen the light of day for hundreds of years. They mentioned magic and wizards from years gone by. He always thought that the old librarian, Alton rather looked like a wizard might do, as opposed to someone who spent hours peering through his pince nez as he hunted for information that the books in the library contained. He was tall and slender with long straggly grey hair which the man was always trying to flatten and a beard which came down to his chest. He carried himself proudly yet when he spoke to his assistant it was in a surprisingly soft voice.

Opening the door to the library he stopped just inside and took a deep breath in - the smell of old parchment tickled his nose and made him sneeze as it did every single time, but he was still in awe of the huge number of books which lined the circular panelled walls. There were thousands and thousands of them along with others which were piled up high on various tables scattered around the room. How Alton seemed to know what books were where was a total mystery to Tan.

"There you are! At least I always know when you've arrived!" the librarian called over to him. "I need you to go into the archives as I am sure there is a map inside a book which gives details of the river and where it used to run years ago before it changed course. It is something that would be useful to know. Look for a grey cover."

Tan was about to say that nearly all of the books had grey covers when Alton added, "I think it is called Rivers of the Glades or something like that. Off you go now!"

The lad put his pack of sandwiches down on a nearby desk and set off in the direction of the archives. Motes of dust danced around in the stream of sunlight coming through the huge domed window above them.

The day passed in a flurry of activity and finally came to an end when the light began to fade making it impossible to see properly.

"Home time for you, young man," Alton called out as he rummaged around in one of his voluminous pockets fumbling for the long-stemmed pipe he kept there. He never lit it while in the library telling Tan that it was too much of a fire risk, which was the same reason they only used the lanterns hanging from wooden battens on the walls if there was something important that had to be found when it got dark.

Chapter Two

Autumn

With her red hair streaming behind her Autumn urged her black pony, Blackberry, into a gallop, sheer joy making her whoop with delight. Freedom!

She'd spent the morning and part of the afternoon at the village school where her mother taught, and it was always a relief to get away. Some days could be slower than others because of the vast age range in the children attending. Autumn helped with the smaller children in an effort to give the older ones more chance to learn from her mother. She smiled when she thought of the time when she and Tan had been at school together, he was different from the other boys in that he had always grasped what they were being taught immediately, hence his being selected to work in the castle library.

When she reached the edge of the dark forest, she reluctantly turned Blackberry's head towards home. There were many tales of what lurked in the forest and she was not allowed to enter it.

They stopped a short way from home and weaved between some obstacles she'd set up there, practising leaning down and snatching up the various rocks with handles made of string tied around them which were randomly placed hither and thither. It was hard work but both Autumn and Blackberry enjoyed the concentration and effort it took. Still panting, she tugged her bow from her shoulders to aim an arrow at the target that was in a tree a good distance away.

"Perfect!" was all she could say as she watched it land dead centre.

After collecting the arrow they trotted back towards the smoke that was twisting up into the air from her father's forge, reminding herself how very lucky she was to have a pony of her own and be able to explore further afield than many others did.

"Oh no!" her heart sunk to her boots when she spotted Otto ambling along the lane leading to her home. It was too late to turn back.

"Hello!" he called out smiling.

A nod was all she could manage in return and although she slowed Blackberry to a walk, she pressed her calves firmly on his side to urge him to cross the ground quickly. The pony responded perfectly.

"Did you have a good ride?"

"Yes thanks," was the polite answer.

"Where did you go?"

It was always the same question from him even though he knew perfectly well that she wasn't allowed to go further than the outskirts of the forest.

Seeing him had quite spoiled some of the joy she'd had at getting away on her own and it was a relief when they reached the forge, pulling up just outside in the hope that the lad would take the hint and disappear.

There had been a time when she, Otto and Tan had been inseparable, spending as often as they could together, either in the castle or the fields surrounding the village but now a rift had appeared between the lads for some reason. When they were younger, a favourite game had been "Malvic will get you!" which even now, the younger children played. Malvic was supposed to be the devil who could eat you alive if he caught you. A strange game to be sure.

Her father was in the forge firmly gripping one of the hind legs of a huge cart horse - this particular horse always tried to rest its whole weight on the blacksmith while it was being shod and she was amazed that her father was strong enough to remain upright.

He elbowed it in the ribs shouting, "Get up you beasty!" and the animal shuffled its balance back onto the other three legs. He soon had the hoof shortened and rasped into a perfect shape.

Autumn hovered nearby watching, knowing that eventually Otto would sidle off because the heat belting out of the forge would get to him.

Her patience won in the end and as soon as he had disappeared around the corner she smiled at her dad and led the pony to his stall where she rubbed him down with a handful of straw to dry him off and then brushed him until his coat gleamed like midnight. Blackberry let her know he was enjoying the attention by nudging her and whickering with pleasure. Her next task was to muck out his stable and throw clean straw across the bed.

She was just admiring her handiwork when she heard Tan whistling as he traipsed down the winding road leading from the castle. He always seemed calm and content, rarely letting anything ruffle him.

He settled himself on a nearby bale of straw and chatted quietly as Autumn prepared Blackberry's feed.

An idea popped into her head when Tan mentioned the river that used to run near the village.

"Perhaps we could go out exploring one day like we used to and see if we can find the old riverbed?"

"That's a good plan, we haven't been out like that for a long while. When I'm in the library next I'll take another look at the map so we can get an idea of where to go."

"How about Sunday afternoon? I can make us up a picnic."

The lad beamed back at her.

"We might need to dodge Otto though because at the moment he seems to have an issue with me." Autumn raised her eyebrows as if in agreement.

"Tell you what, I'll ride Blackberry and meet you at the edge of the meadow - there's no way Otto can keep up with me if I'm on horseback."

Chapter Three

Tan

Stretching contentedly in bed Tan thought about his brush with death. When he'd come around after his fall he'd found himself lying on a hard cold rocky floor in a cavern. It was a great relief to realise that there were no broken bones. But how on earth had he ended up here and not in pieces on the rocks below?

He'd looked about him rather surprised to spot a pile of rather musty acorns, quite a big pile in fact. Then he'd turned his head and sat bolt upright in shock!

"What the...!"

A big almond shaped eye stared back at him. It was at the end of a very long sinuous autumnal coloured neck. Surely not... could it be a dragon!?

"Don't eat me!"

There was a rumble and then a voice in his head answered him. "I wouldn't eat a scrawny thing like you! You must be all bones and bits would stick in my teeth." Was the dragon laughing at him?

"Why... why am I here? You saved me from crashing down on the rocks."

"Hmm, that I did. What were you doing climbing my rocks anyway?"

"You probably wouldn't understand, it was a dare."

"Well... it is a strange thing to do when one is so thin and feeble looking."

Tan began to feel a little more confident that he wasn't going to be chewed up and spat out or burned to a crisp.

"How can it be that you, a dragon can speak to me? Am I really dead, is this just my brain having a last dance with life? I thought dragons were something that were just in fairy stories for children, rather like Malvic."

"You are very much alive, which is good because I have been wanting to speak to a human for some time."

The lad looked back at the dragon, "Well, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for saving me." He hesitated, "Can I ask, why is there a pile of acorns over there?"

"Bah... because I've found I have a liking for eating acorns, they make a tasty snack."

Puzzlement showed on Tan's face as he asked, "Why on earth can a dragon like eating acorns?" Followed swiftly by, "How am I going to get back down to the ground?"

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It had been a huge relief to finally be back on terra-firma, the dragon having gathered him up in its taloned front paws and delivering him to the ground, leaving him with the instruction to return as soon as he could so they could talk some more. The dragon was fascinated by life in the village and had many questions and Tan in turn was eager to learn about dragons.

He found his sister at home helping his mother lay the table for dinner.

"You look as if you've been through a hedge backwards," his mum commented as she placed a bowl of delicious smelling stew down on the table.

"You could say that!" was his reply although he had no intention of letting her know what had really happened to him.

"Otto will be at the bottom of it," Roselda laughed.

His mother shot him a worried look, "What happened to your friendship with the boy? I thought you were best friends."

"So did I, but he won't tell me what has come between us."

"Well, it will not help Leonard's prospects if you fall out with the Lord's son." Leonard was his older brother.

"Don't worry mum, Leonard tells me that Lord Travers is a good and fair Lord. I have no idea what it is that has upset Otto, but I'm sure it will pass eventually."

His sister smirked, "Really!" but she didn't elucidate any further than that and Tan filled his mouth with food so that the subject could be dropped, table manners were important to his mum which meant he couldn't speak with his mouth full. Despite her young age, his sister always seemed to have the knack of knowing what other people were thinking.

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The smell of the library enveloped Tan as he entered smiling happily.

"Some news for you, young man!" Alton waved him over.

"Yes, sir?"

"In a week's time you will accompany me to Lord Nivers' estate." Tan's eyes widened at the thought as he had never crossed beyond the boundary before - it was something that no-one from the village did unless they were a merchant selling their wares.

"Why are we doing that?" he asked eagerly.

"There could be trouble brewing further afield in the realm and Lord Travers has asked me to gather as much information as I can about it under the pretence of searching for some of the books in Lord Nivers' library. It's a trip that will take some weeks and you

will need to make your mother aware of that. I shall give the shopkeeper coin to enable you to buy a cloak, some stout walking boots and good quality clothes so that you look the part of my apprentice when we arrive at our destination."

"So... we are to be spies?"

"Well, I suppose you could say that."

The rest of the day passed in a bit of a blur for Tan, but he did remember to take another look at the book showing where the old riverbed might be.

Once he was home his family were amazed to hear of the prospective journey - his mother saying that it was quite an honour for him to be chosen to accompany the old man - normally Alton travelled alone.

It was tough for Tan to get to sleep that night, his head was whirling with everything that had happened to him. Firstly, there was the dragon. The whole reason for him climbing up the mountain that rose high above the castle was that Otto had said there were stories of people seeing something large flying high near the mountain top and that was what he had been dared to investigate.

He was very much looking forward to visiting with the beast again.

Then he pondered on what had changed the relationship between him and Otto, he just couldn't think of any reason for the other lad to turn against him and he missed the companionship of the other boy.

After that there was his pleasure at the thought of the picnic with Autumn and finally the prospect of his journey with Alton.

How his usually quiet life was changing.

