



# Chapter One

“Dragons?” Professor Scallio peered over the top of his spectacles. “MORE dragons? Where were they this time?”

The very young bat perched on a shelf in the ancient library of Wadingburn Palace opened his mouth, but no sound came out. A much older bat, balanced precariously on a pile of books on the professor’s desk, gave him a sharp look. “Give us the goss, kiddo. Quick smart! No time to hang about!”

The very young bat began to quiver. “If you please, Mr Marlon Batster,” he whispered, “I ain’t accustomed to human people.”

Marlon gave a snort of disapproval. “Thought you wanted to learn the bizz.”

“Oh I do, Mr Marlon Batster! I do!” The little bat flapped his wings. “When you said as I could be a

Batster Super Spotter I was that excited I was all of a flap, so to speak, but I didn't know as you'd want me to talk to human people." He gave the professor a nervous glance. "They're SCARY!"

"Not as scary as I'll be if you don't spill the beans, young Samson," Marlon said cheerfully. "Come on, kid. You can do it. How many dragons? Where? What time?"

Samson screwed up his eyes and took a deep breath. "Three of them. One gold, one blue and one green. Beyond the southern border. Twilight yesterday."

"That's more like it," Marlon told him. "Now hop it. You know the drill. Any more sightings and you're back here, pronto."

"Yes, Mr Marlon Batster, sir. Certainly, Mr Batster, sir. Erm ... Mr Batster?"

Marlon lifted an imperious claw. "Spit it out, kid."

"Ma said as I had to go straight back to bed, Mr Marlon Batster, sir."

Marlon sighed. "Can't get the quality these days. OK, young Samson. Scoot." Samson scooted, and Marlon turned to Professor Scallio. "So. What d'you make of it?"

The professor shook his head, and picked up a piece of paper from his desk. "That's the fourth time your

spotters have seen dragons in the South. There's one report from the North, two from the West and so far nothing definite from this side of the Five Kingdoms, although Millie heard a farm boy telling his friends he'd seen a dragon. Luckily he'd spent most of the afternoon in the Pig Catcher's Tavern, so nobody believed him."

"Good girl, my Millie." Marlon allowed himself a fond smile. "Not much gets past her."

Professor Scallio stroked his chin. "So far the dragons have been seen only at daybreak and twilight ... and they're flying well outside the borders, and keeping away from humans. But there's something going on ... and it's worrying. Very worrying. What could they want?"

Before Marlon could answer the library door was flung open. Prince Marcus, second in line to the throne of Gorebreath, came striding in, his hair standing on end and his riding jacket covered in mud. "Hi, Prof!" he said. "Nina-Rose is staying at our place and I can't stand it any longer, so I came to see you. Arry's behaving like a dying duck in a thunderstorm and Father keeps talking about 'jolly little love birds, ho ho ho!' and Mother's flapping about like a headless chicken. It's murder. I was going to go and see Gracie,

but Mother wants me at home tonight for a hideous family dinner so I'm going tomorrow instead. It's Gracie's birthday soon, by the way. Thought I'd take her on an adventure – but I don't know where yet. Oh! Hello, Marlon! Didn't see you there!"

"Hi, kiddo."

Marlon didn't sound his usual chirpy self, and Marcus swung round to inspect him. "What's up? You and the prof plotting something?"

The professor and the bat exchanged self-conscious glances, and Marcus brightened visibly. "You *are!* What is it?" He looked at the pile of books on the desk, and his eyes grew wide. "*Dragons: an Introduction. The Larger Beasts of the Five Kingdoms – with pencil illustrations. Illnesses, Abscesses and Heat Complaints with Reference to Dragons and Other Scaled Beasts.* Wow! Have you found one? A dragon?"

"Certainly not." Professor Scallio folded his arms. "Nothing of the kind. I ... I was just doing some research. On dragons. Wasn't I, Marlon?"

"Sure thing, Prof. Research, 'n' all that stuff," Marlon agreed.

Marcus had opened one of the books and was flicking through the pages. "Hey," he breathed, "look at this! It's Niven's Knowe, there's a drawing of a whole

load of dragons outside Terty's palace! How come?"

A pained expression crossed the professor's face. "A flight of dragons, dear boy. A flight."

"A what?" Marcus looked blank.

His old tutor clicked his tongue disapprovingly. "Really, Marcus. Didn't I teach you anything? Collective noun. Herd of cows. Flock of geese. Flight of dragons."

Marlon waved a claw. "Colony of bats."

"Cloud of bats," squeaked a fourth voice, from high up among the bookshelves. "Ma always said it was a cloud of bats."

"Alf?" Marlon, the professor and Marcus squinted up into the darkness. "Is that you?"

There was a flurry of small black wings and Alf appeared, blinking in the light. "Wotcher, Unc. Hi, Mr Prince. Morning, Professor." He yawned, and stretched. "I was asleep. Up all last night on the western border. Somebody seen more dragons?"

"I knew something was going on!" Marcus beamed. "A flight of dragons ... doesn't that sound good? Brilliant, in fact." A thought struck him, and his smile grew wider. "Wouldn't that be the best-ever birthday present for Gracie? An adventure where she sees a flight of dragons!" He turned over another page.

“Look, Alf. Aren’t they amazing? Shame they’re not in colour. Oh! There’s the archway at the back of Terty’s place. Even that’s got dragons carved on it. But why are they there? Terty’d have a purple fit if a dragon came anywhere near him.”

Alf began to snigger, but a warning glare from his uncle silenced him. Professor Scallio put the tips of his fingers together and considered his reply. The kings and queens of the Five Kingdoms had never encouraged their offspring to study the past; it was considered much safer to enjoy the present and look to the future. The professor’s view was that an understanding of past events might prevent the repetition of mistakes; King Frank, father of Marcus and his twin brother Arioso, had always disagreed. “It’ll just give ’em ideas!” he had boomed. “Especially Marcus! The boy’s got far too many ideas as it is! Dangerous things, ideas.”

Marcus looked up from the book, and guessed the professor’s dilemma. “It’s OK,” he said with a grin. “You’re not my tutor any more. Were there really dragons at Niven’s Knowe? Or is it just a story?”

“Indeed there were.” The professor sat back and waited for the onslaught of questions.

“WOW! When? Why did they go away? Who got rid of them?” Marcus was on his feet and wild to

hear more. “Will they ever come back? What—”

“Hang about, kiddo!” Marlon raised a wing in warning. “Here comes Her Majesty! Company with her, by the sound of it, so I’ll be offski. Back soon as. See ya!” And he was gone before Professor Scallio could stop him.

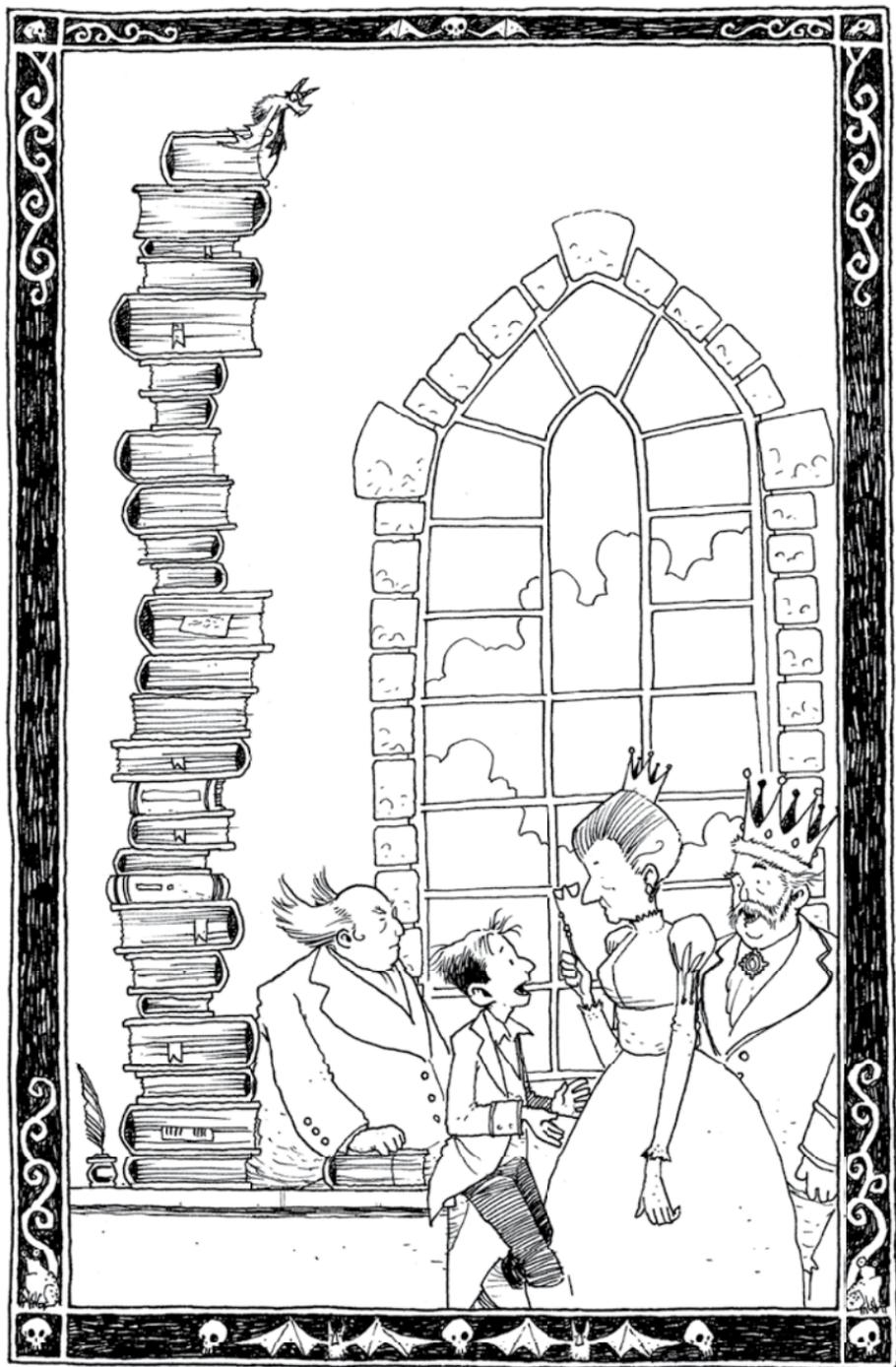
Alf flew hastily back to the darkness and settled down to watch.

Marcus, in an agony of suspense, waited as the door opened and Bluebell, Queen of Wadingburn, came sailing in. Behind her puffed a well-rounded gentleman, who was protesting, “Pretty young thing’s doing her best, Bluebell m’dear. Sure of it. Just need to get it sorted.”

“You certainly do! Can’t imagine coping without a cook. Whatever was Fedora thinkin’ of? Oh!” The queen’s eye fell on Marcus and her expression changed from irritation to pleasure. “Dear boy! How nice to see you!”

Marcus was looking at Bluebell’s companion, his face alight. “King Horace! Sire! I’ve just discovered something absolutely amazing. You used to keep dragons at Niven’s Knowe!”

“What?” The king turned a curious shade of purple. “Certainly not! Not in my lifetime. As if I’d allow such



a thing! Whole idea was ridiculous – totally ridiculous. Never heard of anything so stupid. Luckily my grandfather was a man of sense. Said no king could call himself civilized when he had dragons rampaging around his kingdom; never believed those silly superstitions about evil coming in if the dragons went out. Got rid of the lot of them eighty years ago, and not a moment too soon. And not a sign of evil! Not a sign!”

“Oh.” Marcus did his best to hide his disappointment. “I wouldn’t mind having a few dragons in Gorebreath.”

Up in his lofty perch Alf applauded enthusiastically, but Queen Bluebell peered over her lorgnette. “Don’t be silly, Marcus. There’d be young women screaming all over the place – and think of the cost! You can’t feed a dragon on peanuts, you know. And there’d be endless fire damage to pay – you can’t keep dragons caged up, so they’d have to be taken for walks and so on, and there’d be accidents with haystacks and thatched cottages and wooden sheds for sure. Besides, there are laws about that sort of thing. No Undesirable and Non-Permitted Residents, if I remember rightly. No zombies, sorceresses, werewolves or unreliable creatures of any kind allowed in the Five Kingdoms, and that includes dragons. Exclusion Laws, that’s what they’re called. Keep us safe in our beds at night.”

King Horace was still glaring at Marcus. “Ancient history, those dragons. Where’d you find out about ’em?”

Marcus, taken aback by the king’s reaction, pointed to the open book. “It’s all in there, sire. There are pictures of them outside your palace.”

“What? What what WHAT?” The king gave every appearance of being about to explode. “Thought those books had all been destroyed! Never allow rubbish like that in my library. Look to the future, that’s my motto. What’s past is past, and best left that way. I’m shocked, Bluebell, shocked to the core! Thought you’d have known better.”

Bluebell raised her lorgnette and inspected the page. “Don’t see the harm in a little history, myself. Hmph! Fancy that! Dragons carved on the archway. Don’t remember ever seeing those.”

“I can assure you, Bluebell m’dear, that those are long, long gone! Cut them out years ago!” The king was still trembling with anger as he leant across the table and slammed the book shut. He gave the professor a cold stare. “I’d suggest you burn these books before they cause trouble. History! Stuff and nonsense, the whole lot of it! Now, I must be off. Promised young Tertius I’d be home for tea. If there is any, that is.” His frown deepened. “If you should hear of a reasonable sort of

cook, Bluebell old girl, send us a pigeon with a message.”

Bluebell slapped her forehead. “Knew we’d come here for a reason. Be a good chap, Professor, and ask your sister to put the word round. The palace of Niven’s Knowe needs a cook; Princess Fedora’s sent the old one packing.” She turned back to the king. “If I find a suitable candidate, Horace, I’ll bring her to Niven’s Knowe myself. If your son’s foolish enough to allow his brand-new wife to upset one of the best cooks in the Five Kingdoms, he deserves every dried-up kipper he gets, and it’s time somebody told him a few home truths!”

Alf started to giggle, wobbled, slipped – and only just saved himself from falling into view. Made wary by his narrow escape he moved further into the darkness, and settled himself on a dusty pile of papers. His eyelids began to droop; only the boom of King Horace’s voice kept him awake.

“Now, now.” The king’s belligerent expression melted into a sentimental smile. “Fedora’s a pretty little thing, and I’m sure she means well. It’ll be teething troubles, that’s all. Expect it’ll settle down in a day or two.” King Horace nodded wisely, and puffed his way out of the library.

“Hmph!” Bluebell shook her head. “Pretty little

thing', indeed! Fedora needs a good shake, if you ask me. Still, not my place. I'd better be off. Good to see you, Marcus. Bring that nice girl Gracie Gillypot with you next time." With a cheery wave she sailed out of the library.

Professor Scallio watched her go, then turned to look out of the window, his brow furrowed.

Marcus sat down on the edge of the desk. "I can't believe the laws won't allow dragons into the Five Kingdoms. No wonder the place is so boring."

His old tutor gave a noncommittal grunt. "Did you say you were going to see Gracie tomorrow?"

Marcus nodded. "Yes. I'll go as early as I can, or Nina-Rose'll try and make me join her and Arry on some ghastly outing to make daisy chains or pick roses or skip among the dewdrops."

All but asleep, Alf chuckled to himself. A moment later he was snoring steadily, his effort to stay awake abandoned.

"Hm..." The professor was still staring out at the clouds, an abstracted expression on his face. "I wonder. Marcus, could you do me a favour? Ask my sister Val if she's noticed anything odd about the web of power."

"The web?" Marcus was immediately curious. "Am I allowed to ask why, sir?"

“No.” Professor Scallio sounded irritable, but as Marcus looked at him in surprise he went on, “I’m sorry, dear boy. You’ll have to excuse me. There’s something on my mind. Just do as I ask, there’s a good lad. I’ll see you again soon.” And the old man sat down and pulled a pile of books towards him.

Marcus hesitated. Then he said, “You can trust me, sir. I’m not a kid any more. If there’s something wrong I might be able to help. Me and Gracie, that is...”

There was a pause before the professor looked up. He studied his former pupil with some care, while Marcus did his best to be patient. “I *do* trust you, Marcus,” he said at last. “And Gracie. And you may well be able to help, you and Gracie and the Ancient Crones.” He glanced towards the library door, and lowered his voice. “There have been sightings of dragons, and no dragon has ever been seen near the borders of the Five Kingdoms before. Marlon’s been keeping watch for me; he and his team of bats. So far no humans have seen them, but it’s only a matter of time – and then there’ll be total panic, and the armies will be called out, and who knows what’ll happen then? Dragons are incredibly powerful beasts; they make excellent friends, but very terrible enemies. Very terrible indeed.”

“I see.” Marcus was trying hard not to bubble over with excitement. “I’ll tell Gracie, and I’ll ask the crones if they know anything.”

“Excellent. But Marcus ... remember. Not a word to anyone else!”

Marcus stood to attention and saluted. “You have the word of Prince Marcus of Gorebreath, sir!” He grinned, leant forward, and slapped the professor on the back. “But you have to admit, Prof – it is REALLY exciting!” And he strode out of the library, whistling as he went.

A moment later he was back, still grinning. “Hey! Do you think they’re trying to get back to Niven’s Knowe? That’d give old Terty a scare and a half!” And he was off again, leaving the professor looking extremely thoughtful.

