

FIREBIRD SERIES – BOOK THREE

THE GIRL WITH A
DRAGON'S
HEART

DAWN FORD



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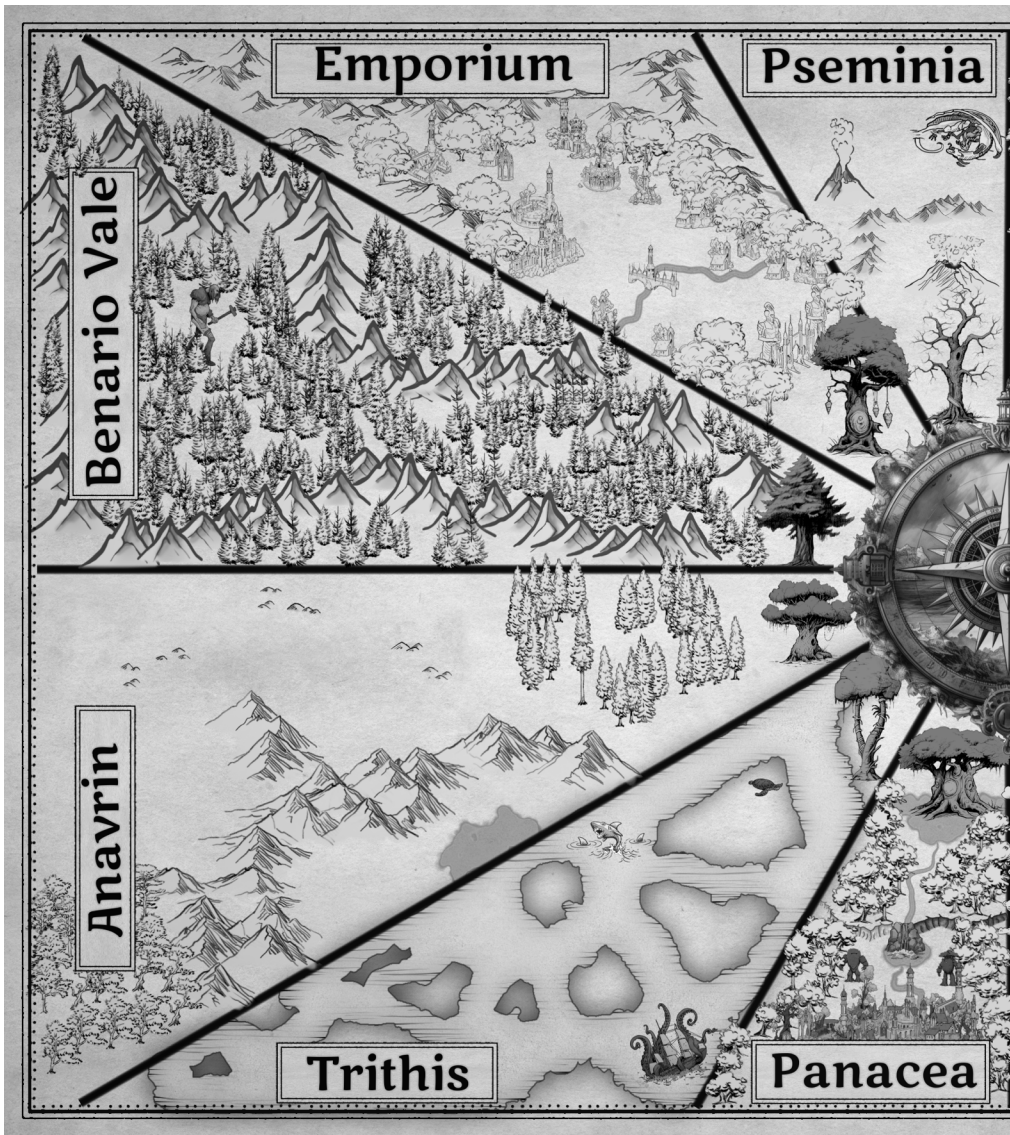
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To Lori. God knew writing was in my destiny. You took me along for the ride and opened my eyes to the possibilities. What a precious gift and friend you are.



Emporium

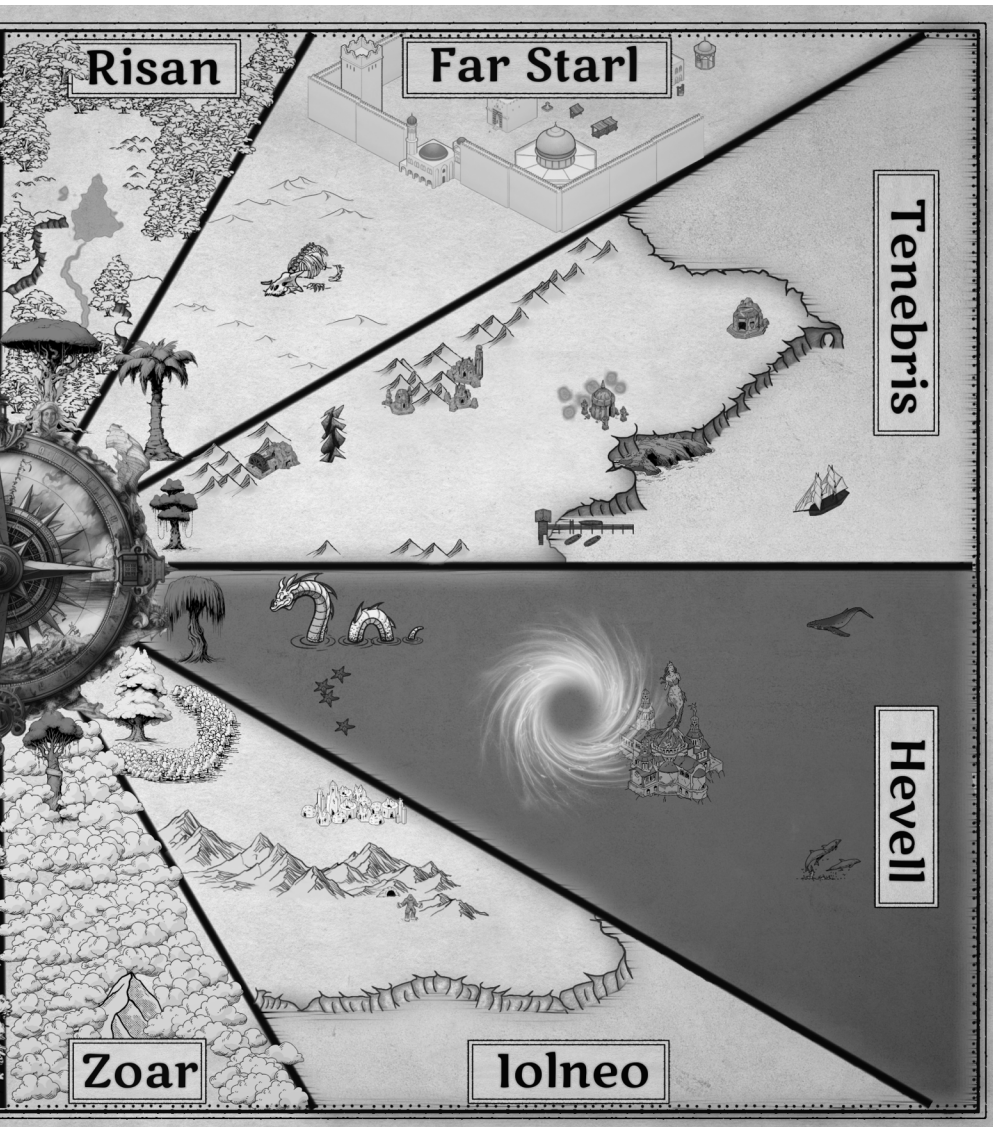
Pseminia

Benario Vale

Anavrin

Trithis

Panacea



Risan

Far Starl

Tenebris

Hevell

Zoar

Iolneo

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PART ONE



1



I gasp at the sight before me.

The Bloodthorn Forest's trees obliterate the horizon with trunks as big around as houses. They stretch up into an endless blue sky, and an urge to fly into the branches which reach into clouds almost overtakes me.

"It's magnificent, isn't it, Tambrynn, Lucas?" A grin splits Grandfather's face.

My grip on Lucas's arm tightens as I glance up, up, up. I almost tip over backward as I take it in. Though we'd seen these trees from afar as we traveled here, standing beneath one makes me seem as small as an ant in the dirt.

A wave of dizziness hits me. I almost fall over taking in the astounding height of the trees. Or is it because of my injury—the actual reason we are in this forest? Though I'm over my fear of water since the flood, the injury I suffered when my father's cursed talisman broke remains. It worsens with each day that passes. The only consolation I have is the cure the Guardian Theocles gave me.

That cure centers on a specific ingredient found only in this

forest. I pray silently, not for the first time, that Theocles was right, and it will work.

“Wow, Bennett.” Lucas glances at my grandfather, awe clear in his wide-eyed gaze. His enthusiasm is catching, and I smile at them. “You said the trees reached to the heavens, but I didn’t realize you meant it so literally.”

“How is it possible for anything to be this massive?” I let go of Lucas and step around the trunk, which would take four or five people to reach around the base. Or three dragons. I’m stunned by the beauty, and I almost forget the pain from my injury.

Wrinkles that grandfather gained from our last adventure ease, and his body visibly relaxes. “Each kingdom has wonders to it. This is one of Anavrin’s greatest marvels.” He takes a deep breath and lets it out. “I love the smell of this forest. Madrigal used to rub a lotion made with oil from these leaves on her skin. It was better than any perfume ever produced.”

My heart pricks at the wistful tone in his voice. He proved how much he loved his late wife, my grandmother, Madrigal. If only I could remember her, but I was only a babe when we left Anavrin all those years ago.

Rich loam mixes with a startlingly sweet cleanness that surprises me. It’s less pungent than fir trees, but somehow more refreshing. We traveled several days to get here, and each step took us higher. We traveled farther above Grandfather and Audhild’s keep. It’s astonishing the ease I’m able to breathe here compared to the mountains.

“Why don’t they use the lotion more often then?” I gaze at the spikes that cover the trunks. They’re longer than the length of my hand and wide enough to grip and climb, though only if one was brave.

“Unlike you and Lucas, most people cannot fly up above the thorns to get to the leaves.” He raises his hand and points

with a clawed fingernail. "It's easily twenty-five feet before the first branch. Imagine an eldrin trying to climb that."

Lucas laughs. "Only a few djinn can get up there. Most of my kind aren't able to master using bird's wings and flying, so they stick to easier forms to change into. And I imagine squirrels aren't even mad enough to climb up these trees." He prods one of the less sharp-looking thorns and comes away with a cut and bloodied finger.

Grandfather grunts. "And no eldrin would trust a djinn with something so priceless. Eldrin only get the oil from the leaves when a limb has fallen, and they have to get them before the leaves die. Bloodthorn trees are hearty. Their roots entangle with other trees, which keep them all stable. It's incredibly rare to acquire."

Heat from my wound shoots through my body. It surprises me so much I take a step back to keep my balance. I wince as the pain intensifies and turn so no one will witness my expression and be alarmed. My breath is shaky, and I clench my fists to maintain control. The flashes are new, nearly consuming me from the inside out. Terrified is too simple a word to describe the panic that races through my body. It takes me a moment to fight it back.

"My lady, are you okay?" Lucas is instantly at my side.

I raise my hand to stop him. I burned him yesterday when he tried to help me. "I'm fine." Blue flames lick at my skin, running along the surface like fire on kerosene. They're harmless to me. However, I'm afraid of hurting anyone who comes near. Luckily, the flames disappear within moments. My wound is throbbing, becoming cold and numb, which I'm sure is not a good sign.

Grandfather, oblivious to my discomfort, limps around one of the gray-barked trees. "Lucas, you're our only hope. I'll need at least a dozen of the leaves—"

A tall man with wide shoulders steps out from a copse of smaller trees. A rocky ridge runs behind him, leading to dark mountains. He's as tall as us, but brawny with tanned skin. A treller. "What do you trespassers think you're doing in our forest?"

His words have a strange accent, as if he is talking around a mouthful of food. He holds the end of a long saw.

Grandfather stands straighter and eyes the tool. "Last I knew, no one owns Bloodthorn Forest. Not even the eldrin." His smile becomes toothy, showing his not-so-eldrin appearance on purpose. Without his rutch to disguise him, he's taken to scaring anyone who tries to cross our paths.

Startled, the man steps backward, but the saw keeps going, stopping him. He scowls as two others step out of the shrubbery, carrying the rest of the massive saw. They're taller than him and broader chested.

"What have we got here, boys? Intruders?" The third man drops the saw and speaks, his words as thick and rolled as the first man's. He steps in front, pushing the other two aside. A double-sided axe sticks out from behind his left shoulder. His eyes glitter with a hint of defiance and violence. "If you've come to fill the order, you're too late. We've signed a contract with Domicus, and these trees are ours to harvest."

Harvest? He can't mean they're going to cut down these exquisite trees.

Lucas moves in front of me, yet off to the side enough to remain safe from any sudden flare I might experience. Images of an area outside of Anatolia cross my mind. Great swaths of a forest destroyed there, with only the trunks left behind like wooden carcasses across the land.

Though the flames had gone, my veins heat to boiling with the thought of these men destroying this perfect forest. "No one's trespassing. What is it with men in a forest thinking they

are kings of the land?” I speak not only to the men, but I mindspeak it to Audhild, who is above us, scouting the area. I reach for the dagger at my hip and the movement triggers a stab of pain to my side. Tears gather in my eyes, but I manage not to let them fall.

“That’s because we are, missy. Kings of this forest. And we don’t appreciate poachers come to steal our treasures.” The second man knocks the other two to the side with his elbows and moves to get in my face. Two broad axes stick out over his shoulders, and he carries a knife sheathed to his thigh.

Audhild’s screech gets the treller’s attention. A shadow above us circles and she drops out of the air between our group and the lumbermen’s. She changes from a marvelous red dragon to a dark-skinned, shriveled woman. She’s not as imposing as she had been before my father tried to change her, but she is still fierce. “Is there a problem, youngling?”

Though she’s lost some of her regal stature, she is still a head taller than the men. The first one drops the saw handle, his hands shaking. He swipes them down his checkered shirt. His companions shift so they’re behind him now. Stupidly undaunted, he frowns at Audhild. “Who’re you?”

Audhild grins—a beautiful, terrible sight. “Your worst nightmare.” She snaps her elongated, wolfish teeth, and the men jump and turn, leaving their tool without another word. I wonder how they can run with such sharp axes next to their heads. However, if they were up to what I fear they were, I have no remorse for any injuries they sustain.

“Do you think that was necessary?” Grandfather asks. “They’re going to report back to Domicus, and we saw how powerful he’s become in such a short time. We’ll be lucky we don’t get stopped anywhere near Anatolia now.”

Audhild laughs. “I do hope so. It’s been so long since I’ve had an eldrin for dinner.”

Rekspire lands beside her, his black dragon form changing to that of a tall, dark-haired man. “It’s not nice to tease the lesser beings, oh, Sovereign.” Though teasingly said, he moves so he is between us and Audhild.

She only grins in response, and I wonder at her state of mind since she was hit with my father’s *Mortuus Irrepto* curse. She was temporarily turned into a *sluagh*, an undead beast, before Rekspire had taken her down. It also hasn’t been long since my bracelet released her from his hold, and I still wasn’t sure of the lasting effects it has. Though Grandfather showed no signs of ill will, Audhild was much more dangerous if she fell back under my father’s influence.

“Shielding your thoughts, youngling?” She spins to face me, her jaw less prominent than when she addressed the men. Her aura, however, darkens.

I narrow my gaze at her. “You taught me yourself how to do so.”

“Ah, yes, so I did. However, your thoughts were louder than a hoard walking on dried leaves just moments before.”

Lucas steps between us, his chest puffed out much like his magpie form. “Is there a reason you’re being so confrontational?”

Audhild hisses and drops her head. “No. I’m afraid I still have a few residuals of the mage’s spell that lurk. Though I get surly, I wouldn’t act on any of the urges that whisper to me.”

I knew the compulsions and experienced the whispers briefly. I understood the way they shifted my thoughts and emotions. Heat flares to life inside me once more, making my wound throb harder. I cringe but am relieved when I remain standing.

I take a moment to gather my thoughts. Audhild’s aura clears, heartening me to the truth of her words. “I’m glad to hear you’re still under your own control. Let’s get on with what

we came here for. The sooner we get my wound healed, the better.” And maybe then the hot flashes would be gone at last.

I exchange a glance with Lucas as we follow Grandfather into the giant forest. He says nothing, though I detect his concern over our dragon friend's well-being.

“I have never seen trees like these.” Rekspire's head swivels from one trunk to another, all of which are covered with thorns. “They are magnificent, but deadly.”

“You don't have Bloodthorn trees on Far Starl?” I ask, curious.

“Our trees are not nearly as magnificent and leafy as they are here. Because of the heat, the only trees that survive are succulent ones, which have sharp, needle-like fronds. They can hold water in their leaves, which allows them to survive the arid atmosphere. It's why I was so enthralled with Anavrin when I first arrived. I flew everywhere to see all I could. Far Starl is much different.” He glances up. “How many leaves do we need?”

“As many as you can carry. You, too, Lucas.” Grandfather speaks over his shoulder. His limp is becoming more pronounced with each day we hike.

I'm not much better with the wound spreading down my right side. My arms itch to join them up in the trees, but since we'd fixed the Zoe Tree's doorway, I'm not strong enough to change. I didn't want to alarm anyone, but the pain and the flashes are getting worse. And they are harder to hide. I pray silently that the cure the Guardian Theocles gave me would do what he said—heal me.

Lucas changes and flies up and out of sight. Rekspire changes as well, and I watch his body circle around until he reaches the area above the thorns. There he lands on a regular tree trunk-sized limb and disappears into the green foliage.

“Youngling, I sense great pain coming from you. And

something more.” Concern deepens the creases in Audhild’s face.

Grandfather snaps his head in my direction. “Are you all right, Granddaughter?”

Of all the times for Audhild to speak in front of Grandfather instead of mind-sharing. I want to grumble at her, but I sense concern coming from her.

“It’s—the pain is getting worse,” I admit. I slump down to sit on an old log that’s heavily covered with moss, lichen, and half-moon-shaped mushrooms that grow out of the rotting wood. I rub at the bark, which crumbles beneath my fingers.

Audhild turns toward Grandfather. “There’s something else. A darkness along the edges of her being.” She turns back to me. “Do you feel any different?”

I’m unsure what to make of her change of attitude. The swing from violent and bloodthirsty to caring and concerned is disconcerting. Besides, I have ideas of what it could be, however, I’m not ready to share those ideas yet. “Different, how?”

She gazes at me with her animalistic eyes. It’s almost as if she is trying to get inside my mind. I maintain the shield over my thoughts. I don’t want her to know my deepest fear. That the curse from my father’s talisman is still there, waiting to strike. Though the eel died during our battle, and we thought the Memento Mori curse broken, I fear it isn’t completely gone.

I have been careful not to show anyone the damaged area because it has changed from an open red wound to a seeping, death-like black. Each time I experience a heated flash, it grows, spreading down my leg and across my back. Soon it will advance throughout my body.

If this cure doesn’t work, I suspect it is only a matter of time before the curse kills me.