

## A mother's role

### Chapter One

'You're going to be late.' The scolding voice sounded out. 'Always, always the same.'

A cutting edge clearly heard through the teenage girl's vocals.

'Come on Eloise!'

'Yes, yes.' A sound of scrabbling cloth and wooden items preceded a flushed young lady, her red hair held in closely spun spirals to frame generous features.

'I'm here Drewsy, ready to go.' A pause led to a glance taken across towards a range of outerwear garments held limply against the pale wooden wall, aged through bleaching from the sun's rays falling through the open window and the occasional scar to be expected from the building that had hosted a large family over a number of generations; a coarse, forest green coarsely spun woollen square wrapped over her broad shoulders and around her generous core.

'Helena?'

'Still waiting outside.' Frustration underpinned Drewsy's tone.

'Helena is far too patient with you...'

Yes, yes.' Eloise bustled forwards, first her left hand and then right scooped up bundles of hair to be released from the weight of the wool squashing their natural, resilient curl.

A door handle twisted to the left and slab of birch drawn backwards, dust glinted in the sun's rays that now outlined the open doorway.

'You are ready.' Calm tones projected, a deep bassy tone at odds with the diminutive female figure stood leaning against the side of the door, her body language relaxed, arms crossed, closely cropped hair did little to soften the elven frame to her face.

'It's not my fault Helena...' Drewsy began, her hands held open, a glance over her left shoulder, frown lines grew in direct proportion to the bounce and poise offered by her sister.

'The Craft does not hurry, yet we accomplish what we aim for.' The features under the short-cropped hairline broke into a gentle smile.

'I am sure the Lady Anya will be here for a while yet, before our chores call out for us once again.' A swift turn on her heel, Helena's robe swished more dramatically than she would have wished for, short legs led her away at a surprising pace.

‘If this was Lady Tusk and Bluebird we were seeing, or Sergeant Ester with the Centaurs, see how nonchalant you would be then.’ Drewsy openly seethed.

‘Shoob will have us on time and a half if we are late to brush down the horses for the evening, that you know.’

A long sigh emitted at the thought of the intense stable manager and her fanatical attention to detail; Drewsy's words now aimed at the back of her broad-shouldered sister.

‘Eloise, are you still set on the Centaurs?’

‘I cannot hold a lance as you do, my sturdy sister.’ Eloise's hair bobbed on its own accord; a glance thrown backwards.

‘You trample all in front of you on your Charger, I will circle around you on horseback with a bow and arrow...’

‘And I will be on call to fix and put you both back together when you fall.’

Helena interjected, slowing her pace; even being two-thirds the size of her two friends, she had kept in front of the two horse-crazy ever-bickering sisters.

A quick breath taken in, feeling herself lifted into the air with ease, placed unceremoniously to sit aside Drewsy's sturdy frame, the girl who aspired to be a Charger pilot for the King's Army certainly had the strength and stamina to take Helena's diminutive figure on her shoulders for any given length of time.

A hand raised to block the late evening's rays, the young lady scanned out over the crowd of young and old slow to assemble in the hamlet of Bodiam, a shake of her head at the numbers present, most she knew but a fair few Helena did not recognize, they must have ventured out from the nearby village of Errator.

‘Any sign of her?’ Eloise glanced up and out towards Helena, the slight figure stiff in posture set up high on her sister told its own story.

‘She has arrived.’

‘The Lady Anya.’ Helena breathed out the words; while she struggled to make out the features of the small figure walking with the more recognizable rotund character of her Arc'monk Hause by her side, the sense of raw presence emanated marked the lead lady of the Craft.

‘Do you feel it?’ She glanced down, noting the frown on first Drewsy's forehead, then across to the head shaking in confusion which belonged to Elaina.

‘Are you sure that's her?’ Drewsy gave an animated shrug, quickly grasping upwards for Helena at risk of being unseated.

‘Sorry.’ A pause. ‘Nope, don't feel a thing; she's a tiny tot, if that's her.’

Elaina continued to shake her head; a rueful expression held sway upon her face. 'I heard she was small but.' A chuckle rolled outwards. 'Her Arc'monk Hause.' Elaina swapped her focus onto the rotund figure, even though the warrior monk was well over six foot, his height did not disguise his ample figure.

'As wide as he is tall, no misplacing Hause, I guess it must be Lady Anya; smaller than I thought she would be.' A look of disappointment took over on her features, slowly shifting her weight from foot to foot.

'I've seen enough.' Helena tapped on her friend's shoulder to let her down.

'The Lady Anya.' Clear reverence present in her tone.

'And that's who you want to be? What you are working towards?'

Drewsy pirouetted Helena's mass with ease up and off her shoulders, back onto the mix of sparse grass and dried mud.

Her pupils open wide, a moment taken, eyes closed and a subtle shake across her body, the familiar half smile returned, Helena spoke confidently, a little more loudly than she intended.

'Absolutely.'

'Did you see him? Did you?' The high energy and intensity of the male voice matched the bouncing figure dance between flailing arms of the two sisters, a high five offered to Helena.

'Vale.' Drewsy's tone had lowered to a bassy rumble. 'If all you have to do to become an Arc'monk is run faster than that tub of lard over there, you will be in every time...'

The young lady came up short, attempting and failing to dodge a finger jabbed into her midriff, now finding herself a little short on air.

'Have a little respect oh mountainous Drewsy, you may be unstoppable on a Charger, but here on two legs us Arc'monks stick together.' The gleam in his eyes intensified.

'You see Hause with his bowstaff whirring, not many walk away from that unbroken.'

'We need to be heading off for the stables.' Eloise glanced across to Helena, the question clear in her tone.

A nod of her head, the diminutive figure gave one last glance towards the two mismatched figures, the head of the Craft and her Arc'monk Mindguard.

'I have seen the Lady Anya.' A long exhale of breath accompanied the words.

'I've seen enough, thank you.'

‘But don't you want to meet her?’ Vale shimmied to one side, nonchalantly fending off an elbow thrown his way from Drewsy recovered to stand upright, still wheezing.

‘I am sure I will meet with her in time, to attend the Craft school in Amble, my goal.’ Helena's features took on a wistful expression. ‘In time.’ A series of rapid blinks of her eyelids brought her back to the here and now.

‘But as you say Eloise, we must not tarry further otherwise Shoob will have us on double duties.’ A quick glance from left to right, focusing on her immediate surroundings, the crowd that encircled Bodiam's visitors no longer in her thoughts; Vale on her right, the two sisters Drewsy and Eloise on her left, a fast march initiated, her right eyebrow raised.

‘Vale, I thought you were part of the morning shift? You joining the stables again tonight?’ Helena laid her jaw to rest on her right shoulder, the energetic young man squarely fixed in her vision, distant plains splayed out outlining him provided an ongoing background, a blend of grass, dust and scrubland the carpet for the orange ball of fusing gases to aim to descend into.

The young man shrugged, a clear muscle structure present exaggerated the movement, even wearing a loose cotton smock the Y shape of his trunk and shoulders was hard to ignore. ‘Exciting times at the stables, when I was there before fastbreak this morning Quark was due to pop, size of a horse.’ A chuckle at his own joke, none of the three young ladies joined in his attempt at humour, a shared look of resignation sent his way a familiar riposte.

‘Yes there are twelve mares heavily pregnant, but to have Quark.’ A ripple ran across his shoulders before tensing out his arms, Vale took a skip into the air.

‘Very exciting, what she will produce, the potential there.’

‘Quark?’ Helena turned to her left, her surprise grew, the usually inanimate Drewsy was keenly listening in to Vale.

‘Quark is Envoy Mawgan's horse.’ A quick lick of Drewsy's fleshy lips, she continued, Eloise nodding in agreement with her words.

‘She may be a little old now, but you will still struggle to find a faster point to point Envoy than Mawgan, she spends most of her time teaching now on Lady Tusk's estate, future generations of riders to pass mission-critical messages from place to place securely across Pantogan.’

Her eyes focused forwards, seemingly unaware of those around her, Drewsy continued.

‘Quark is her chosen horse, the bloodlines are all set up, her foal will either be one of the finest Envoys this land has seen, or a Charger to be feared by any enemy swordsman.’

‘Always wondered why so few men made the mark as Envoys.’ Vale spoke out aloud, breaking the spell of anticipation conjured up by Drewsy, his voice wistful, tone open and inquisitive.

Eloise's put down was immediate, her voice designed to shut the door on the young man.

‘Because you need to weigh next to nothing, have the stamina to ride all day and all night, be able to navigate in the darkest of night, in the midst of battle...’

A drawing in of breath, Vale interjected.

‘I see no problem with this, go on.’ A wide, pearlescent smile grew to gleam across his features.

‘But common to Chargers, Centaurs, those who ride as Envoys need the mental strength, single mindedness, determination and absolute commitment of focus to make the mission a success.’ Drewsy screwed up her face to attempt a sweet smile, it fooled no-one. ‘That is why only females are welcome to apply.’

‘Ha!’ Vale sprung into a flip, cartwheeling around the three young ladies, ending with an effortless back flip over Helena to find himself returned to her right side.

‘And that is why the finest of Arc'monks are male, look at Loane.’ The young man became increasingly animated, his hands whirring as he spoke.

‘I know Hause isn't maybe the leanest example of an Arc'monk, but Loane, nobody better would you wish for to protect our ladies of the Craft.’ His comment pointed towards Helena.

‘Given a choice.’ Helena's eyes tracked momentarily back to the long-forgotten crowd with Lady Anya and Hause somewhere in the centre.

‘Given a choice I would take Rackofan or Tenkini as my protector.’ Her eyes narrowed.

‘While it has been acknowledged that Loane would likely be able to best Rackofan, I would wager a small sum of gold on Tenkini to come out on top of them all.’

The four descending into verbal chaos, a familiar topic being discussed, argued back and forth, the sun marking their travel across the flat landscape, shadows lengthened against a blend of closely cropped grass and fine, silted earth.

‘Ah.’ Vale pointed outwards, his left hand towards a distant figure, his right hand masked his eyes from the light rays now virtually horizontal.

‘Stable manager Shoob.’ The energy taken from his voice. ‘We're in trouble now.’

Steps taken forwards, a little more tentative now; surprise rippled across the four, the usual blank features of the stable manager now broken against a wave of tiredness and sadness.

‘You are late, that we will deal with later.’ A lack of drive, conviction in her voice, the old former Envoy pilot held one hand in another, Shoob took each of the four's eyeline in turn.

‘Quark has given birth...’

‘And!’ All four spoke as one, anticipation bristled on one side of the verbal exchange between the two parties.

A shake of her head, Shoob turned away, the usual stoic, resilient stable manager descending into melancholy, a rolling of her head as she spoke.

‘Quark is fine, she gave birth to a colt foal this mid-afternoon, stocky at best.’

‘So, a charger then!’ Drewsy exclaimed. ‘I knew it!’

‘No, true the colt foal is sturdy, extended back, but the potential for muscle structure is not there, slow twitch as opposed to fast twitch muscles.’

A disappointed shake of her head, Shoob continued walking towards the range of wooden structures now presented to them, sounds of humans and horse a background hum.

‘Mawgan wanted the foal called Charm, so Charm he shall be, but a life as a packhorse is all that can best be expected of him.’

A deep breath taken, a flinty edge returned to her eyes, Shoob took in all four young people present.

‘You three ladies are late, tell me later about Lady Anya; Helena, while your calling may be to the Craft you are still in the here and now to offer service to the Tusk family.’ A pause, a twitch in the muscles across her left cheek.

‘And you two? You want to see yourselves astride a Charger or Centaur?’

The volume in her voice building, this the four had expected, this was the Shoob that they knew.

‘Dress down the alpha Chargers, prepare them for the night, I want to see them brushed, scrubbed and their beds prepared, then you can take first watch and muck them out early light before fastbreak.’

Shoob's nostrils flared, then softened a little.

‘Vortex is in late pregnancy, we have kept her as part of the alpha Chargers to keep her calm; just be careful, be aware of her.’

A quiet voice, lips barely moving, Vale spoke softly so only Drewsy, Eloise and Helena could hear him.

‘These Chargers, treated like royalty...’

‘And that is because they are our royalty, who else is Queen Elaina going to turn to other than Lady Tusk and our Charger pilots?’

Shoob's chin jutted forwards, her eyes bored into Vale.

‘I may be old, but damned if I haven't heard enough arrogant wannabe Arc'monks over the years.’ Her eyes flitted to the north. ‘The Craft rest their soul.’

All four young people joined the stable manager in her gaze to the north.

‘How much do you hear? How is our two-pronged stand against the Bronze at Kirkswell, Bodiam Pass and the wall further north against those four-legged nightmare beasts going?’ Eloise placed her head to one side, the last rays of a distant sun picked out the red in her rippling coils of hair.

‘Captain Westgate and Sergeant Copel hold the pass to our north west through the aerial force of Quivers.’ A shake of her head, closely cropped hair did not flicker, more grey than brown present in Shoob's hair.

‘To the north, Prince Tobin; I just don't know.’ The stable manager stood a little more upright, remembering her audience. ‘What I do know is that we, here are responsible for treating Pantogan's number one weapon with all the love and care we can.’ Her voice rang out with mock irony, mirroring the bassy bellow and stamp of the stallions heard within the tall, oversized timbers that now faced them.

‘Younglings you are no longer, time to put to bed five Chargers.’ A pause.

‘Don't be late next time.’

Eloise licked her lips nervously. ‘You first.’ She gestured towards Vale who involuntarily took a step backwards.

‘Hey, not me, I was here on time this morn, this ain't my fault.’ The façade stripped away, Vale stuttering ever so slightly.

‘Oh for the Craft's sake.’ Drewsy twitched her nose. ‘Come on, after me.’ The stocky young lady marched forwards to reach out for the first of a series of inch thick bolts to release a gated section within the timber assembled and reinforced on a giant scale.

‘Remember, they are only horses, they will be tired after their exercise all day, a little tetchy maybe but ready for the rest.’

A shared glance sent around the three behind Drewsy, all on their heels, waiting for the one who had the ambition to ride one of the heavy battle horse to walk through the now open slab into the Charger pen, a moment taken before following her through.

Cones within their eyes transferred the duties of turning photons of light into vision to monochrome rods, so the vast, rounded, shifting images in front of them shaded from grey to pure black.

‘What is it, Drewsy?’ Helena’s steps halted, only a few inches from piling into the now hesitant stocky lady to be found straight in front of her.

Furtive eyes sent to either side of Drewsy, raw energy rolled off the vast Chargers now either side of the small party, channelling them forwards.

‘Something’s not right, not right at all.’ The moon scurried behind one cloud after another, light levels at a real premium, every chance of a twisted ankle on a tuft of grass or more likely a divot from where a Charger’s horseshoe had dug down to imprint upon the soft earth.

‘Vortex? Vortex!’ The male Chargers uncharacteristically skittish around the four younglings and one female horse lain on her side, raw pain emitted in waves, sweat puddled on her side despite any remnants of heat from the day in short supply following the light levels with the sun ducked well below the horizon.

Drewsy looking around frantically to three oh so pale features.

‘I have never seen a horse so in pain, why can’t she just give birth?’

‘The foal is twisted inside Vortex.’ Eloise took a deep sigh. ‘If we do not do something we will lose both mare and foal.’ A nervous glance taken around her, focusing past her friends. ‘What do we do? What can we do?’

A tremor brought into her voice as first one and then another Charger’s limb stamped downwards, intent signalled.

‘Ah.’ A dry lick of her lips. ‘This is my time; I can do this.’ The slight figure of Helena stepped forwards, her eyes now closed as first one palm and then another placed onto the side of the mare, rivulets of sweat running over her digits, across her petite hands. The bassy tremors felt as much as heard diminished, Chargers stiling in their pounding limbs impacting upon the yielding paddock.

‘Vale, go get Shoob, get help!’ A pause, nerves betrayed through Helena’s voice, strains of moonlight fluttered behind scudding clouds, slabs of muscle oscillated under Charger hide.

‘Helena.’ Drewsy’s tone filled to the brim with indecision. ‘I, we know your calling with the Craft.’ The bassy tones of the young lady underpinned by tension, Drewsy’s peripheral tension registered Vale leaving at speed, dancing between the ever shifting, mountainous slabs of Charger muscle and bone as he raced away.



‘Your training with Darvan, I mean how far have you got? Shouldn't we just wait till Vale gets back with help?’ The tone in her voice rising, knowing the lie as she spoke it; the increasingly laboured breathing of the mare on her side, broken squeals emanated, the Chargers picking up on the static that ran around the paddock, an increased frequency in heavy stamps sent pummelling downwards through the grass clods to a shale bedrock. ‘Helena...’ A long sigh, Drewsy's better judgment firmly placed to one side, a glance across to her sister Eloise who simply offered an empty shrug, her mouth opening and closing on automatic, no sounds to emit.

‘Helena, what can we do?’ Her words petered out. ‘To help, to help you? To help Vortex?’ A glance up and further up to her left side, a now vertical, bristling mass had blocked out any semblance of light, moisture and heat poured from the Charger surface.

‘I can do this; I will do this.’ Helena breathing out the words, the sounds spilled outwards, a monotone mantra devoid of emotion, conviction yet to join the party.

Drewsy found her right shoulder nudged by her sister, the three girls encircled in an increasingly tight circle by one very fraught perimeter of horse flesh.

‘Stand your ground Eloise, these Chargers are no different to the mares you train on as a Centaur, just a little bigger...’

‘Helena, whatever you are doing, hurry it up here.’ Eloise aimed to add a little humour to her tone, only fear seeping out.

‘The foal is turning.’ Helena whispered through gritted teeth. ‘Come on, damn you, turn yes!’ Her breathing, heavy panting in rhythm with the mare, Vortex lain stricken on her side. ‘No, no! Slow down, not so quick!’ Words uttered with little power to command, a wish list of a young lady now finally aware of how far out of her depth she truly was.

‘Vortex, no! Slow down, please no!’

Her final words sent forth as a desperate plea unlikely to be met, a ripping noise, flesh and ligaments finally acceded to the stress they had put under, a piercing scream given by the frothing mare as a foal struggled forth, sluiced in fluid, still the liquid poured forth.

Vortex gushing blood from her ruptured internal organs, struggling to one knee and then another, an aim and desire to see her foal that had taken her life, her energy subsumed, an immediate collapse back onto her side, Helena caught underneath, a second or so of struggle, the covered youngling of the Craft now still and silent.

‘Helena, no!’ Eloise burst forwards, her legs propelling herself, arms struggled to gain any purchase on the steaming horseflesh, Vortex remained capsized, smothering her friend underneath.

‘Eloise, leave her! Helena is gone, but the Chargers will think you are trying to hurt Vortex!’ So little light information for her brain to process, Drewsy's eyes scavenged light rays where they could, a massive hulk of a Charger rearing onto its hind legs, slamming down onto the youngling, not a sound from Eloise herself emitted, a sickening mix of flesh splintered and broken picked up by her ears.

‘Greenjacket, no!’ Drewsy frozen to the spot, stood on the balls of her feet, aware of the mud squelching underneath, little friction should she decide to run, not that she was ever given the choice to take the option.

‘We only ever tried to help...’

Her mouth parted slightly, sensing as opposed to seeing the secondary Chargers moving away from her to either side, a sudden onrush of air briefly felt precisely before an impact slammed against her vulnerable human form, head on from the vast, muscled assault horse used to bludgeon and batter any armoured foe on the field of war. Drewsy's brain struggled to comprehend the magnitude of the force she had just absorbed, her body lying broken and crumpled upon the churned-up blend of mud, fragmented shillet stone and sporadic blades of grass.

The young lady's perception widened, pain no longer intruding upon her consciousness, the girl who had once dreamt, incessantly trained to be considered for a seat on a Charger of her own, now light filtered onto the scene illuminating Drewsy at the centre, cast some yards away from the mare Vortex's gently steaming corpse, a foal incessantly nudged at its still mother, three Charger stallion circling around the paddock, aggression swirled off them in waves.

‘Not like this, too soon, too soon...’ Drewsy could see her lips burbling out the words, frothy bubbles, crimson red spheres popping one after another as they crested her teeth, her mouth, a procession of lemmings leaving behind the cliff edge.

No-one visible for Drewsy to be spluttering out the words too, yet she continued, a faint wisp of a voice being breathed outwards.

‘Tell me what you would wish of me?’

The broken female youngling watching herself now afar with an air of indifference, some silent, unconscious decision having been taken, the deal proposed with a clear time stamp; a scurrying of motion with braziers lit, humans on their way with voices raised, but this was not the motion that had transfixed Drewsy gazing down upon herself, first one then another spider rose up and out of the mud born trenches of the paddock, their arachnid limbs

propelling them forwards, forwards with only one destination in sight, that of the female youngling once set upon directing a Charger into battle.

Score upon score of spiders now congregated upon Drewsy's broken body, running, writhing across her, arachnoid legs securely planted, mandibles piercing first flesh, running along her side, then a traverse along her neck, finally drilling forth into her cranium itself, using gaps, cracks in the ruptured fleshy frame that had been a home to her consciousness for all of her limited years.

Drewsy's consciousness waned, her vision being thrown in and out of focus, a final question over the fluid being pumped into, across her body by the spiders, seeing herself from afar, the monochrome landscape of night exhibited the colours of day, four frothy bloodied bubbles emitted to be pierced accompanied the words.

'Thank you, I accept.'