



## CHAPTER ONE

*Six months earlier*

*J*owan Thorsen was dreaming of flying. His hands gripped a purple scaly neck, the wind tugged his hair, the sea sparkled beneath him as his dragon sped through the air . . .

When he woke up, Joe was still smiling. The dream faded and he sat up with a jolt, remembering what day it was. Hatching Day fell on his twelfth birthday. His friends Amina and Conor had said it was lucky. And now a dream of dragons? That must be a good sign. Today was the day his life would change for ever. By that evening, he might have bonded with a newly hatched dragon. He'd be living in the dragonschool of Arcosi. His bag was right there, packed and ready. Excitement bubbled up inside him, and he couldn't sit still any longer.

He leaped out of bed and pulled on yesterday's crumpled shirt and trousers, leaving untouched the new white clothes

that had been laid out for him; they were for the ceremony later. He wanted to run and sing and shout, but it was still early, so he crept downstairs, avoiding the creaky floorboards and jumping the last three steps. No noise came from his parents' room.

Outside, smoke curled from the kitchen chimney, up into a blue sky dappled with pink clouds. He peeked through the crack of the kitchen door. No sign of Matteo the cook, just a large plate of steaming cinnamon rolls on the workbench. His favourite. Joe went in and grabbed two, burning his fingers. He shoved them in his pockets, feeling the heat spread through the worn linen. Then he ducked through the back door, walked quickly through the garden and climbed the high stone wall of the practice yard where he'd spent hours working on his sword skills.

He perched there like a pigeon, looking down over the rooftops of Arcosi, the wind in his face conjuring his dream again. He spread his arms like wings and his heart took flight. He gazed past the ships docked in the harbour far below, and right out to the pale sea which stretched away in every direction. Today, he had his first chance to bond with a dragon. He looked at the sea and imagined flying over it. It was so close, he could taste it. It would be just like his dream.

Just then, everything grew dark as a dragon glided low overhead, sapphire wings spread. It landed just outside the practice yard with a *whoomph* of wings and a crunch of earth.

'Milla!' Joe sprang down from the wall and went to greet his cousin. 'I thought you were too busy to come today?'

'Never too busy for your birthday, Joe!' Milla tumbled

off her dragon and Joe threw himself at her. 'Dragons' teeth! I swear you've grown in a week.'

It was true. Joe was growing so fast his legs ached each night, and he kept banging into things, not used to this new body. That wasn't all that was new: strange intense moods blew in like storms. They passed as fast as they came, so he kept quiet and hoped no one noticed.

'You're tall enough to swing *me* round.' She pulled back from the hug, eyes shining, black curls framing her face. 'Don't you dare try, or I'll set Iggy on you.'

He laughed at her mock-serious tone. She might be one of the first dragonriders of Arcosi and almost twenty-five years old now, but she was always ready for mischief and he loved her for it.

Joe reached out for Iggy, his cousin's huge blue dragon, who greeted him enthusiastically with sparks and grunts, and lots of head-butting that nearly knocked him over. Iggy was at least twice as big as the largest carthorse on the island, and his wings were massive. Joe ran his hands over Iggy's scaly neck, realising that by sunset he too could have a dragon of his own. Real and breathing, here in his arms. What a birthday gift that would be!

'I used to sit there too,' Milla said, gesturing at the wall. 'Best view in the city. Shall we?'

They climbed back up and sat side by side. There was a shadowy full moon giving way to the rising sun, and the air was still cold.

'Happy birthday, Joe. This is for you.' Milla passed him a small leather pouch.

'Thank you,' he said, opening its drawstring. He tipped it carefully, and something small and shiny fell into his cupped palm. It looked like a coin and a mass of silver chain.

'It matches mine,' Milla said, tapping the medal she always wore round her neck.

Joe lifted up the silver disc. It had a device beaten into it: a circle to represent the full moon, and a dragon in flight beneath it. It was the symbol of their family, the ancient dragonriders of Arcosi. 'Oh, Milla.' He struggled for the right words. 'It's perfect. I'm going to wear it today, for luck.'

'Let me help you with that clasp.' Milla fastened it behind his neck, brushing his wavy black hair aside. 'There! Just as it's meant to be.'

He patted it, feeling the cold metal settling into place at his throat. 'And here's something for you: breakfast!' Joe passed her a roll and started ripping his own into shreds.

'Ooh, hot from the oven. Matteo's cinnamon rolls are as good as Josi's,' she said, nodding her thanks.

'You better not tell her that.' Joe grinned at her. Joe's mother's temper was as legendary as her cooking. Josi belonged to the island's highest society these days, recognised as a descendant of the ancient royal family of Arcosi, but when Milla was young, Josi had been the household cook, hiding her true identity.

'So,' Milla said next, drawing out the syllable. 'The big day?'

'Uh-huh,' Joe mumbled, mouth full of bread.

'Ready?' she asked.

'I feel ready.' He hesitated, and he was aware of his heart