

WENDY

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Oxford, 2012

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Chapter 1 – Wendy at Home

Wendy was a dragon.

She lived in a cave on Pendragon Hill, overlooking the river Afon that wound through the fields below. The cave was of a considerable size, big enough to give plenty of room for her and for when another dragon came on a visit.

The town of Llanddraig, set in a bend of the river, was not very happy to have a dragon living in their hill. People had got rather tired of having to produce a cow or a couple of sheep every week for Wendy to eat. Wendy said that she was sorry, but with herself and four or five draglets to feed, if they didn't produce the cows or sheep she might have to start looking in the houses for the odd mouthful.

She didn't like people much. Very salty and too many small bones to spit out. The ones that had sometimes been left out for her had been either tough or nothing but skin and bones with no decent meat on them at all. Even sheep were better, although to begin with the wool had got stuck in her teeth. Later on, people had had the sense to shear them first so as to keep the wool.

She was never quite sure how many draglets there were in their own pit at the back of the cave. She knew she had laid six eggs. She had seen their clumsy oaf of a father tread on one and break it, and that was why she had thrown him out and now lived alone as a one-dragon family. But there were so many legs and wings and tails in the draglets' pit that she had lost count. Every time one of them got cross with the others there was a whoosh of flame and a cloud of smoke, and that didn't make it easy to count, either.

One day she sent word to the mayor of Llanddraig asking for an extra cow next week. One of her friends was coming to see her and she wanted the visitor to see how well a good Welsh dragon could cook.

The townspeople said that enough, now, was enough, and that it was time to get rid of their dragon. Wendy wasn't too bad and they were used to her, and besides it was good to have the only real Red Dragon pub. But visiting dragons was pushing it to goodness, and as for a clutch of four or five draglets, once they grew up Wendy would be asking for a cow a day, and no town wanted five or six Welsh Dragon pubs.

No one had seen the draglets yet – who was their father? Was he a good red dragon or was he one of Wendy's foreign friends? If he was one of those dragons with scales of many colours they sometimes saw flying over, what colour scales would the draglets have? Everybody would laugh at them if they had polychrome dragons. A Blue Boar was one thing, and so was a Green Man or a

White Horse, but who'd ever heard of a Blue Dragon, Green Dragon, or White Dragon, and so forth? Everybody knew that the only real Welsh dragon was red.

It was time to advertise for someone who could deal with dragons. Rats and mice, even fleas and ants they had people to cope with them. Dragons now were a bit different. Bigger for one thing, and a fire hazard for another, so there might be insurance difficulties with fire as well as third-party and public liability. What would removing a dragon cost? The only union-recognised wage anyone could remember for a dragon-killer was a king's daughter, but they hadn't a king by them.

Advertise, perhaps, and ask them to quote?

A few days later there appeared:

Wanted
Experienced Dragon-Slayer to remove
One red dragon
and a
Quantity of multi-coloured draglets.
Applications with qualifications
and names and addresses
of two satisfied referees before 1st March.
Llanddraig is an equal-opportunities employer.

There was a flood of responses. The Royal Society for the Protection of Creatures sent an immediate protest. The Anti-Cruelty League sent a deputation. Several anti-bloodsports groups sent parties with posters to picket the town hall. Two small bombs from anti-vivisection groups exploded outside the offices of the local paper. Three national newspapers set up appeals to support dragons and one enterprising breakfast-cereal maker created a children's club. Three box-tops won a red dragon badge and for ten box-tops a child received a certificate saying that he or she (the name neatly written in) had saved one green, blue, or other coloured draglet [*please tick the box for preferred colour*], though what it had been saved from, and even whether there were any draglets of the chosen colour, were not specified.

Several toy-manufacturers produced cloth or plastic draglets. They each came out a bit different because nobody had yet seen a draglet, but all the same children rushed to buy them. Some shops sold out faster than they could get stocks in, causing tantrums of screaming children and parents threatening to sue for thwarted progeny. It was well known that thwarting children led to psychological damage and future anti-social behaviour. Why should their child run the risk of becoming a criminal just for lack of a toy dragon? Where were the lawyers?

The Llanddraig town council tried to patent Wendy so as to establish some control over the exploitation of their own dragon by outside enterprises unless they were licensed, but Red Dragon Pursuivant went to the High Court to obtain a writ against this, saying that his was a long-established post and no jumped-up provincial town council was going to patent him.

This heralded a question in Parliament, whether dragons should be considered an endangered species, followed by a motion to appeal to the United Nations to register dragons under CITES. An immediate reaction came from the Far-Eastern bloc, where dragons were something of a nuisance, breeding too fast, burning up the crops just as they ripened by rampaging around in their breeding season, and needed to be controlled. A compromise was proposed by the Indian delegation, in exchange for an arrangement about tigers, under which only red dragons would be fully registered while a watching brief would be kept on those of other colours. An Institute would be established, with full extra-territorial rights and diplomatic status so that staff would be freed from all national taxes, to study dragons and compile statistics on their population, range, requirements, and impact on public health. It would be invited to produce a preliminary report for filing in the appropriate places within the next couple of decades.

Back home in Llanddraig big-game hunters were beginning to appear. They had been slow off the mark initially because of the need to get police permission to move their armoury of guns and then to hire secure vans to transport the weaponry. Their arrival was greeted with howls of protests, and anti-hunting groups immediately established a chain of pickets round Pendragon Hill.

Wendy much appreciated this attention. The pickets were quite tasty, not too salty, and their duffle coats were good for roughage. Their posters came in handy, too, as picks to clear the rubber boots from her teeth. Nobody seemed to miss them and the people of Llanddraig were glad to be saved a few cows. They were pleased, too, that trade was picking up in the town. Perhaps Wendy would prove to be an asset after all. Every bed in the Red Dragon, Blue Boar, White Horse, Green Man was booked up with hunters, reporters, and protesters, and as soon as a room became free (Wendy was very helpful about spitting out hotel room keys so that they'd know which ones were available), they were snapped up by newcomers.

The local MP came down to see what was going on, and a number of people who'd lost their seats at the last election gathered hopefully, but he kept well back, sending a researcher to investigate for him. She was a pretty girl who'd always liked dragons and she soon set up a good relationship with Wendy, suggesting that she ought to have her own representative. Why should Llanddraig try to license toys and other souvenirs? if anybody was going to make a profit out of all the fuss, surely it should be Wendy. And she could sell her life story to whichever paper would pay

most for it. If Wendy would agree that Marigold should act for her, Wendy would get twenty per cent of all the receipts, after expenses had been deducted.

Wendy felt that eighty per cent commission was too high but Marigold reassured her that although sixty was normal, dragons were special.

Wendy managed to beat her down to 75 percent, and after they'd signed an agreement which Marigold insisted on having it on fireproof paper and in triplicate so that she could deposit one copy in a vault in her bank, she went off to bargain with newspapers and photographers. She appeared on four television programmes as Wendy's representative and signed a contract with three magazines to write the story of 'My life with dragons', 'Why I love dragons', and 'How to look after your dragon.'

The crowds of visitors at Llanddraig, who had come all that way because they expected to see a real-life dragon fight, were beginning to get restive.

'When are we going to see a dragon?' they began to complain. 'No dragon yet have we seen', for Wendy had not come near enough to be visible to anyone in Llanddraig. There was nothing else for anybody to do in the town. The beer in the White Horse was no better than that in the Red Dragon, and while the Green Man had a skittle alley, the landlord watered the beer and did not have a spirit licence. As for the Blue Boar, there was a retired colonel sitting in a chair by the fire all the time it was opened with interminable stories of crossing the Gobi Desert on a camel and a thirst to match

Half the journalists had arrived too late to get a bed in one of the pubs and could only find room in the five temperance hotels, much to the amusement of their colleagues. Those who were staying in a pub could drink after hours because they were residents, but those visiting from the other hotels and landladies were firmly expelled as soon as 'Time!' was called, sharp at ten to ten (the pub clocks, all ten minutes fast, were used at closing time; the landlords' watches, all fifteen minutes slow, were used for opening). At ten to midnight every Saturday night, even the residents found their glasses snatched away.

'Not a drop, not a drop more can you have. Not until opening time on Monday. Sin it would be to drink on Sunday.' The landlords were unanimous on this.

When the assembled journalists tried to telephone their editors to tell them of the unbearable conditions they were labouring under, none could get a reply. None of the telephones in the town seemed to be working.

'Sunday it is' they were told. The post office was shut and the lady who worked the exchange would no more dream of operating it on Sunday than she would play a jig on the harmonium that she played in chapel.

Just as the visitors began to think that there was nothing to be done for the next thirty-six hours but go back to bed and were manoeuvring for whose bed to go back to, puffs of smoke began to appear above Pendragon Hill. Was Wendy on fire? Crowds of tourists rushed to see and the lookout started to wind up the siren that called out the volunteer fire brigade. The puffs steadied down to a steady series, as though an Apache were waving his blanket over a fire to signal that Llanddraig had gone west. Puff-puff-piff, piff, puff-piff, puff-piff-piff, piff-piff. The smoke clouds, the puffs larger than the piffs, drifted away north-east on the slight breeze. A small dot appeared in the sky. Was it a bird? was it a plane? was it...?

‘It’s a dragon’, shrieked a child who was always first with everything. ‘But it doesn’t look like my badge. Mummy, why doesn’t it look like my badge? Mummy, why is my badge different? Mummy, why is it that funny colour? Mummy, why is it coming here? Mummy, is it going to eat us?’

‘That’s an idea’, muttered the man standing next to them, ‘Johnnie, why don’t you go and see whether Wendy is looking out of her cave?’ Johnnie ran off up the hill and only a slight crunching sound suggested that Wendy might be awake up there.

The new dragon came nearer and nearer, a fine sight with flashing colours. Gauging the wind neatly from the drift of the puffs of smoke, he landed on the lip of Wendy’s cave and vanished into its mouth. The puffs of smoke died away, to be succeeded after a short while by the appetizing aroma of roast beef, with a slight tinge of Johnnie. The crowds drifted away once they were sure there was nothing further to be seen.

‘Travel on Sunday is it now?’ some of the townspeople murmured to each other, but with no great feeling of outrage. Dragons were different and the normal rules never had applied to Wendy, who sometimes came out for a swim in the river or a few aerobatics whatever day it was.

Next day Wendy asked if she could have a word with the mayor. Rather apologetically she explained that the beef had been so delicious last night that her visitor, who came from Anatolia, wanted to show her how to prepare one of his local delicacies. Johnnie had not really been enough for this – so small a child was no more than a tasty appetizer even for her. What her friend was used to was a young lady plump enough to grill on the rocks after marinating her outside the cave for a few days. Was there any possibility of anything like that being available?

The mayor ran through a list in his mind of some of the less-desirable young ladies of the town, and then of some of the busybodies who made his life a series of pinpricks with their continual grumbles and grouses. He said that he would see what he could do, though there might be a delay of a day or two.

‘Were any special virtues necessary?’ he asked, with a hazy memory of legends he’d heard. Wendy assured him that there were not; those attributes were added to make a better story of it – nice as such a virtue might be, it didn’t affect the flavour.

The mayor decided that whichever he chose, his life would be much more peaceful, and the local vice-squad would be very happy, if the visitor stayed for a month or more, but the question was, who should be first? Perhaps he should set his own convenience aside and concentrate on the younger element, but how to choose? Maybe this eye-to-the-main-chance young woman who was taking bread and butter out of the council’s mouth by trying to make a monopoly of Wendy spin-offs would have an idea. Perhaps, even better, he could suggest that maybe she’d be interested to research a dragon recipe book, thus killing two birds with one stone.

Marigold was a wiliier bird and had more sense than that. She suggested a beauty contest, a Miss Llanddraig competition with prizes to be awarded by the distinguished Anatolian visitor. So posters were printed and posted up round the town, and a distinguished panel of judges was invited. It was never very difficult to find judges for such a contest, especially if television coverage were guaranteed.

A few days later a line of bikini-clad young ladies paraded past a line of judges who had been instructed that a luscious, buxom appearance was to be the ideal. After some difficulty, with so good a range from which to choose, a winner was selected, with three runners-up, for the mayor had quietly suggested that a reserve stock might be quite a good idea, either in case this friend stayed on or in case any others appeared.

Megan, who had been chosen the winner, was escorted up Pendragon Hill to receive her accolade from the distinguished visitor. As she got higher up the winding path that led towards the top of the hill she noticed that her escorts were lagging behind. She slowed her steps to allow them to catch up but they waved her on, calling out that they were all too elderly to keep up with so sprightly a young filly, and that she should hasten on to receive her prize.

Her friends began to wonder how much longer she was going to stay gossiping with Wendy and her friend. Perhaps, they thought, she was trying to get the job of looking after the draglets – she had always been good with the orphan lambs which had to be reared by hand. By the time it got dark it became obvious that she was going to stay the night; it was getting too chill to come down the hill just in a bikini, and her shoes with their four-inch heels would make it difficult to walk down the rough path in the dark. The friendly glow of a fire from the mouth of the cave and the smell of a delicious dinner cooking, which drifted down to the town, assured her friends that she would be well looked after and carefully tended.

Myfanwy, who was intermittently Megan's best friend, was worried when she failed to appear next morning. They usually spent their days together giggling in one of the town's caffs, and often spent their evenings together, hunting in couples. Daytime work was short in Llanddraig and the girls' evening work was essentially part-time and casual. It was often unpaid social work with the young men of the town, and even when they were paid for jobs by some of the older men or by visitors it never brought with it a National Insurance stamp or any holiday pay. Myfanwy had once had a pleasant fortnight by the sea with a very good friend from Birmingham but except for some help with her little trouble a month or so later she had never heard from him again.

Despite the occasional rivalries inevitable in such work, Megan and Myfanwy had remained friends. They were so alike that it had been difficult for the judges to decide between them, and the most senior of the judges had consoled Myfanwy for missing the first prize with a special dinner in a private room at the Blue Boar. As a result it was not till next morning that she realized that Megan was still missing. She decided to brave the climb up Pendragon Hill, to accompany her on the way home, something of an effort with her voluptuous figure.

Wendy greeted her with great courtesy and explained that Megan had decided to accept a position in Anatolia, where her exquisite taste would fill a great need. Myfanwy was very surprised to hear such a description. Megan was a nice girl, she'd always thought, but even Mr Jones, the art teacher, who had given her special lessons after hours, had never called her clever.

She wondered why she had gone off just in her bikini, not packing any luggage and even leaving her smart new shoes behind, and she felt rather hurt that Megan had not come to say goodbye. Wendy explained that there had been a chance of a direct flight that evening with special catering so that Megan had jumped at it. As her friend Karim had a fancy for Welsh mutton for the next day or two, would Myfanwy perhaps like to fill in for Megan by looking after the draglets?

As the previous night had been a bit strenuous and Myfanwy wasn't at all sure that the judge would want her to come again, she decided that an easy couple of days with the draglets, who didn't need a great deal of attention, might be just what she felt like. Being well brought up at home, however she might spend her time outside, she tidied things up, clearing out the rubbish bin behind the fireplace. She was a little surprised to find some bones which looked a bit long for sheep and a bit thin for cows, but she had never paid much attention to the more boring bits of biology lessons and she was no anatomist (she was too interested in some of the other parts).

She got on very well with Wendy and Karim, who were happy to listen to gossip about all the characters of the town, and especially to hear stories about the mayor which showed him in quite a new light – with his chain off, and out of sight of the mayoress, he was a very different person, and as for the sheriff and the townclerk.....

She charmed Karim especially, who wasn't used to pretty young girls stroking his scales and whispering in his ear (Myfanwy thought her taste just as good as Megan's, and filling a post in Anatolia would at least get her away from her parents' nagging every time she came in late). After some hugging and caresses, rather to Wendy's annoyance who wondered whether she shouldn't have chased her back down the hill, Karim agreed to take her on a joy-ride over the town – Myfanwy had never been up in the air before and had always been jealous of her other friend Nora who had once been taken to the Scilly Isles for a weekend by helicopter.

As they zoomed over the town, the senior judge saw them out of his window. He had found Myfanwy more invigorating company than anyone he'd met for a long while and he was developing a strong paternal interest in her future. He feared that she was being carried off before his very eyes and rushed to find one of the big-game hunters.

'Please rescue Myfanwy,' he cried.

'Who's Fanwy?' the hunter asked, who being English wasn't well up in local names except Nora, the chamber maid, and Jane, the bar maid, at the White Horse.

'There, up there,' cried the judge, 'please, please before he flies off with her.'

The hunter drew a careful bead and fired once, just as Karim was flying low over the park, low enough that Myfanwy was more shaken than hurt by the crash landing.

'You beast, you beast, you've killed my favourite dragon,' she sobbed through floods of tears, 'I hate you, I hate you.'

The judge took her off to stay her with bottles of a suitable liquid in the comfort of the Blue Boar.

Wendy was seriously annoyed. This was no way for Llanddraig to treat a dragon, especially one who was a visitor. Here they were trying to persuade tourists to visit Wales, and what did they do but take anti-aircraft guns to them? How was she going to explain this to his family in Anatolia? For that matter, how was she going to explain it to the fatherless clutch of eggs resting quietly in the incubator once they hatched? As if that dratted man on his horse spearing Karim's grandfather hadn't been bad enough. Charging up and down on a white horse just because a silly girl who happened to be the king's daughter had gone all googoo at a handsome dragon and got tied up in his larder. Now here was Karim being used for target practice by an oaf with an elephant gun.

Compensation, that's what she'd have from Llanddraig, and retaliation, that's what she'd have for the hunters. It was time the draglets learned to fend for themselves and who better to practise on. No point having that girl back, she'd only lead them up the garden, especially if there were some dark corners there.

Where was that dratted Marigold? Off chasing her own interests somewhere no doubt. She must produce a list of which hotels and which rooms the hunters were staying in, and then she'd see how well she could train the draglets. None of this saturation-bombing for her; she didn't want to burn the town down. One precise squirt at each, that's what she'd teach them.

Meanwhile the mayor and council were wondering what to do with Karim. They got off to a good start by fining the hunter £100 for leaving litter in the park, which was against the local by-laws. But what to do with the body? It wasn't as though it was a sturgeon, when they could ring up Her Majesty and ask her to collect fish royal. The local coroner said that it wasn't treasure trove, so they couldn't make the government take it away and pay for the cost of taking it and pay them its value.

The Natural History Museum didn't want it. They said that the consensus of opinion among scientists was that dragons were a figment of the mediæval imagination and they'd prefer not to get something that half the staff would waste their time proving didn't exist when any fool could see it was there. What about America or Japan? Surely there were people in America who'd believe anything if it was improbable enough?

Japan, it seemed, not only had some dragons of its own but also a political party intent on proving that dragons were Chinese and therefore un-Japanese. Anyway there was an economic crisis and even if they wanted a dragon they'd not be likely to be able pay for it and if they did want one they wouldn't want a dead one.

America would only be possible if it could be proved that Anatolia was anti-communist, that the dragon was over a hundred years old, and if they filled up sixteen forms to show that Karim's corpse was not covered by the CITES ban on trading in dragon parts.

'If dead dragons are a drug on the market maybe we could sell it to a Chinese pharmacy in London or Liverpool?' one councillor rather better-read in alternative lifestyle magazines suggested. However when they tried, the shop keepers said that they preferred to get dragons from China so that they knew just what imitation they were using.

One of the souvenir makers offered to buy Karim's claws and scales, each of which he intended to seal into blocks of plastic and sell as key rings, but this proposal didn't carry much weight because what would they do with a descaled and declawed dragon?

Discussion was abandoned when a cascade of dragons was seen approaching fast from the east. Without a word to anyone they gathered up Karim's body and flew off with it, leaving everyone subdued and somewhat apprehensive. Mysterious rumblings and spurts of vari-coloured smoke and flame from the top of Pendragon Hill added to the tension.

By this time a contingent of New Age scientists had descended on Llanddraig. They were fresh from evaluating the curative powers of frog toes and newt's eyes and were ready to prove, in their own journals, the reality of a dragon's existence and to lampoon the sceptics who were already proving in the columns of older-established journals that the whole story was a fabrication of unscrupulous public relations officers trying to boost the tourist trade. If it was dragons in Llanddraig it would be hippogriffs in Hartlepool and coelacanths in Sleaford. Whatever fakery was going on in Llanddraig, no one was going to pull the wool over their eyes.

Three of the braver scientists started the ascent of Pendragon Hill, clutching their protective sprigs of vervain and bunches of garlic. Wendy watched their approach with approval – just what the draglets needed to practise on, even being considerate enough to bring their own herbal flavourings.

An hour and a half after they had disappeared into the mouth of the cave the first draglet peered out, teetering on the ledge at the mouth of the cave (Wendy had insisted on an hour to digest before they tried to fly in case they got cramps). It was a brilliant blue in colour but otherwise much the same shape as Wendy. It wobbled to and fro, tentatively stretching out a claw and then shrinking back, standing on three legs with one leg poised *gardant*.

Wendy finally lost patience and gave it a sharp shove. With a squawk of terror and a spurt of flame it toppled into space. All the spectators dashed for cover save for the local fire brigade who hastily spread a large canvas sheet, ready to try to break its fall. Before it hit the ground, a panic-struck flapping of wings slowed its descent. With a triumphant screech it soared back into the sky, calling to its siblings that it was wonderful once they were in and not frightening at all. Eventually all were flying, a multi-coloured wreath of dragons circling round the crest of the Hill.

Alas, Marigold came with the frustrating news that all the hunters had left. Terrified by the arrival of Karim's friends they had decamped in a body, carefully leaving no forwarding addresses in the hopes that they couldn't be traced in case there were to be suits for damages.

The townspeople, though, were fascinated by the multi-coloured draglets. Their initial fear of being laughed at had evaporated with all the publicity and with all the business that Wendy was attracting. Sign painters got busy painting out Boar, Horse, Man, and writing in Dragon. Since none of them had seen either Wendy or a draglet close-up some of the pictures were rather impressionistic. They felt they were fairly safe in this, for nobody except a draglet would be any the wiser and they were too high up to see.

Or so they thought until with a shrill whistle a purple draglet zoomed down, diving at each pub and clearly much offended at the lack of an eponymous pub, while a yellow draglet circled ominously above. It took only a moment to paint out the Cockatoo in the hope that the draglet could

not tell a tea room from a pub or would not object to the difference. What could they find purple, though? At last someone remembered Ogden Nash and surreptitiously coloured the Spotted Cow and ostentatiously, with a flourish of pibcorns, replaced Cow with Dragon.

Honour was satisfied and now everyone knew how many young dragons there were, for with them all flying they could hardly still be called draglets. But how were they to cope? One full-grown mother-dragon, five young dragons of unknown gender and appetite who'd soon be looking for mates, and a nestful of eggs. Who knew what the incubation period was for dragons' eggs? Who knew whether dragons were likely to import their mates or would move to foreign parts? It was one thing for sociologists and anthropologists to study the endogamy and exogamy of distant peoples – why had nobody studied the mating habits of dragons near to hand?

Could Myfanwy be persuaded to go up again and discover whether the young were males or females? Not a chance; she'd had the sense to look at a few anatomy books and realised that Megan had not gone as far away as had been suggested, or at least only in part when they carried Karim away.

'Let Nora have a turn', she said. 'She's bigger than me and will fill the rôle better.'

She never had liked Nora and wouldn't mind if she didn't see her again. As more than one of the town councillors had found her habits of keeping a detailed diary and of offering to sell off separate pages something of an embarrassment, there was general agreement that Nora would prove an excellent ambassador to Wendy. It was also agreed that they might try to flatter Meredith Williams, who spent much of his time writing letters to the local paper objecting to every policy they adopted, into keeping her company.

Mr Williams had lived in Llanddraig for forty years man and boy, and never received any distinction before. He'd always had an eye on Nora, ever since she'd come into his ironmonger's shop at the age of thirteen to buy a couple of mousetraps. She'd been so helpful, running up the ladder to fetch them, so much easier for her in her short skirt than for him in his dustcoat. She was obviously so considerate to her mother's housekeeping, too, by wearing a sweater that she'd obviously outgrown and which was really too small for her. Even though she was so friendly and smiled at him so much, with the eye of Mrs Williams firmly upon him, he'd never dared to explore any possibilities. He happily agreed to become a temporary deputy non-elected assistant councillor with plenipotentiary powers to assist Nora in finding out details of the gender, needs, and probable future domiciles and careers of the young dragons.

The two of them walked up the winding path leading to Wendy's cave, with Mr Williams solicitously holding Nora's arm and helping her over every imagined inequality in the path. Nora with an ever-ready eye for the main chance, was firmly clasping his arm and pressing it her side

while keeping a sharp eye out for any hollow where she might usefully sprain her ankle on the way down. It would have to be one which would be hidden from Mrs Williams who, she guessed, would be watching them with gimlet eyes (and a telescope if she could borrow one) from the top attic window of their house.

Down below, Nora's friends Annie and Gwyneth were dissolved in giggles as they watched her antics. Mr Williams might be a silly old man but he was good for a meal ticket any day and, once hooked, likely to come back for more.

Wendy was pleased to see them because she had been wondering what was to become of the youngsters. Tradition was all very well, but she realised that there were likely to be limits to the number of cows and sheep the people of Llanddraig were going to leave for her. She eyed Nora and Mr Williams speculatively, but tempting though Nora's ample curves were she realised that a steady stream of missing young women would eventually raise a few eyebrows. Even a doddering old fool like Mr Williams might notice if his companion was missing on the way down again, and there wasn't enough on him to make it worth opening her mouth.

She told Nora that she'd been trying to think of a good home for the children, somewhere that they'd be looked after and could pose for sculptors and painters. Like all young people they were vain of their appearance and didn't yet realise that there wasn't a lot of future for Green, Blue, Yellow, or Purple Dragons except on pub signs. Somewhere not too far away so that they could come and see her on St David's Day and Mothering Sunday. She said that she wasn't sure what gender each was as dragons were special and could choose their own when they grew up. She'd been quite a lad herself in her younger days and maybe one day she'd write her memoirs and wipe that good-for-nothing Marigold's nose.

Nora and Mr Williams thought that they'd got as much information as they were likely to, and as it would soon get dark they'd better be on their way. They started down the hill. Wendy kindly giving them a good whoosh of fire so that they could see the beginnings of the path. They were just getting to the point where Nora had decided to sprain her ankle when Mr Williams anticipated her. As he fell over he bumped her so hard that she staggered and fell down on top of him. Mrs Williams, who was watching from her attic window let out a screech of rage. Bouncing down the stairs and out of the house she trotted up the hill, gasping for breath and waving her umbrella with cries of 'Shameless hussy' and 'Dirty old man'.

Before she reached them, puffing and panting up the hill, Nora was sitting up and screaming 'Rape, murder, I'm a poor innocent girl' and any other remarks which she thought might encourage Mr Williams to shut her mouth with silver, or even better with paper.

'Sh, sh, you silly girl. Shut up, here's a shilling for you,' at which she screamed all the harder.

‘Insulting me you are. What d’you think I am, a bob-a-job girl?’

‘No, no, I’ll give you more if you come to the store at the back of the shop, but shut up please and get off me, she’ll be here in a minute. I’ll give you more there, really I will.’

‘I’m not on the never-never,’ said Nora menacingly. ‘Cash on delivery, come on now, you skinflint.’

She just had time to stuff her bra (how had her blouse managed to come so undone?) with a rustle of paper before Mrs Williams was upon her, slashing out with her umbrella impartially at any bits of either of them that she could reach. Nora leapt agilely to her feet and scooted off down the hill, leaving Mr Williams to explain what he could, including how two five-pound notes could have fallen out of his wallet which had been carefully buttoned into an inside pocket. He had to crawl around on his knees in the dark pretending to look for them for an hour before Mrs Williams would let him get up.

Chapter 2 – Wendy's Children

Young Dragons
for sale
Impress your neighbours
Attract the tourists
Unique opportunity for
mythological research
All fully housetrained
Serious Offers with Guarantees of
suitable flameproof accommodation
to Wendy, Dragon Hill, Llanddraig
by October 31

This advertisement appeared in a well-spread series of publications and attracted much interest and comment, producing so much free publicity that many PR firms were gnashing their teeth in envy – if they had been dragons there'd have been enough flame to heat a small city. As it was, they were reduced to hatching schemes to lure Marigold away from Wendy to their own ranks. If she could do so brilliant a job promoting a dragon, just think what she could do with an exciting commodity like soap powder!

Offers began to arrive. The first was from a small boy in Piddletrenthide with a bid of tenpence and a broken catapult; accommodation would be in an empty rabbit hutch which his dad would redecorate with a flameproof paint. This was just what the news agencies needed. Camera men and television reporters descended in a horde. There hadn't been such a story locally since the Piddle had burst its banks, flooding the surrounding countryside and providing an heaven-sent alibi to the landlord of the Puddleduck Arms when his beer was found to have a much higher water content than it had had when it left the brewery. Archibald basked in the publicity, and his father in the facility fees he was charging for each photo and interview, and all was well until his mother's picture appeared so widely that it was recognised by officials in six different benefit offices as that of a supposedly homeless single-mother with three disabled children.

When a perfectly serious bid arrived from the Drachenfels, where the hill had been untenanted as long as anyone could remember, there was a general feeling of once bitten twice shy, and publicity was only local.

A tentative enquiry arrived from Arizona, where London Bridge had not proved as successful an attraction as had been hoped. Having bought the wrong bridge because they had all thought that London Bridge was the one with the towers that opened to let tall ships (or in Arizona cowboys with tall stetsons) pass underneath, they weren't buying anything that they had not carefully inspected. Wendy felt that this would be a long way from mother for so young a child, and Marigold was unsure whether they could secure an immigration permit. American feeling was so strong against smokers that a fire-breathing dragon might have problems. Also if import of bits of dead dragon were prohibited by CITES, did this affect the same materials on the hoof, as it were? Dragons suffered slightly from dandruff, and what was the position of shed scales? And, a final problem, how could a dragon be transported? It was really rather too far for a child to fly on its own. There were no signposts in the Atlantic and Wendy was afraid that it might get lost. Seagulls were unreliable as guides and easily frightened by inadvertent woofs of flame. Cadwallader was the one who was most interested in a life on the open range (John Wayne was his favourite hero in the old films they watched on their television and video). He was liable to get hiccoughs when tired, and this might be dangerous crossing the east coast of America. Most Americans were inclined to be trigger-happy and an unknown creature producing spasmodic bursts of flame might delude people into thinking that Saddam Hussein was arriving at last. Dragon scales were tough but they weren't bullet-proof. So Wendy said to Marigold,

'Send them a nice letter and invite them to come on a visit to see a real live dragon. Maybe we'd better warn them that there's been a great deal of interest. Might encourage them to try to outbid other customers with a good transport package as well as pension scheme, holiday benefits, and other conditions.'

A tentative bid came from Australia, where they already had koala bears, kookaburras, platypussies, kangaroos, wallabies, neighbours, and Foster's beer, but nothing that breathed fire, not even a volcano. Porffyrion got all excited,

'Please, Mum, I love standing on my head, it would be real cool to live upside-down on the other side of the world. Do you think they have underdowns instead of eiderdowns down-under? I love opals and a hat with a screen of old corks round it would look real cool. Please Mum, could I? Pretty please?'

Her language, like her scales, was sometimes on the purple side, so Wendy thought that that should fit in, too. The journey wasn't too much of a problem, either, because she could stop off with cousins in Anatolia, Mongolia, and China on the way. So Marigold wrote to Woolla-Woolla and asked them for more details of their offer.

Another offer had come from a remote valley in Switzerland, the Dreckertal. This was the headquarters of a small and little-known bank, one which had specialised in serving small republics in Africa and South America. So many leaders had salted away their 'retirement pensions' there and then had been deposed. Some of the depositions had been so effective that the ex-leaders had never needed to draw a pension, and as a result, the Schweizer Dreckbank had become one of the world's richest. They had decided to celebrate this by building the world's biggest cuckoo clock. The only problem was that a cuckoo would look lost in a construction that size, but a dragon, now!

The salary offered was generous, but there looked like being some problems. For one thing, a dragon in a wooden clock was asking for trouble. No worry, said the Swiss, modern building requirements meant that it would be a pre-cast concrete clock, constructed and coloured to look like wood, but, like all Swiss banks, fireproof.

'What about the hours?' Wendy wondered, 'Zooming out in a puff of green smoke like a pantomime character every hour on the hour, is that a career for any child of mine? It's enough to give any dragon the pip. Maybe a real dragon twice a day, midday and midnight, with a chamois in between? Dragons were scarce, but they could easily get a flock of chamois to share the other hours. After all, no point in them spending a lot of money, we hope, on a real dragon and then driving it cuckoo.'

The bank accepted split shifts as an idea on condition that they could call on the dragon for an extra hour whenever there was a visiting president or general to impress. Any excess chamois would be useful back-up rations for the dragon. They could even use the herd as breeding stock for that purpose, an idea which appealed to the thrifty Swiss.

Wendy thought this might work out provided that her child was protected from any bears that might wander over from Berne or gnomes from Zurich. Blaellian was sure that edelweiss would go nicely with her blue scales, so she was quite interested in the idea and thought that she could hold her own against bears and gnomes.

'What about a weekly day off and holidays? It wouldn't be fair, Mummy, to be in the Alps and never have the time to go skiing. It wouldn't, would it? Could we find another dragon so we can share the job? They'd have two dragons, then, and we could each take days off, couldn't we? Do you think we could? We could, couldn't we?'

Wendy scented an ulterior motive, confirmed by seeing a blush on Blaellian's scales. She remembered that last time the Chinese cousins had been over Blaellian and Con-Fu Sion had often gone off for walks together.

'Why not,' she thought, 'the Dreckertalers are rich enough to stand two dragon salaries.'

'Yes, but the rich are rich because they don't spend their money,' Marigold pointed out.

‘But think how they could sell souvenirs of our shed scales, gold and blue together, real groovy,’ said Blaellian.

The Dreckbank agreed to the double act, on two conditions: one that the two should be respectably married so that any consequences would be legitimate, the other that the two together should share a one-and-a-half salary. Wendy thought that this sounded acceptable, and it meant that she would have three children within reach and two of them close to each other, Blaellian in Switzerland and Gwyndywr at Drachenfels, only an hour away as the dragon flies, in case they got lonely. Draiggoch of course would stay in Wales because of his colour and perhaps he would move to Cardiff to join the new Welsh Assembly if she could get him elected there. No way could there be a Welsh Assembly without a Welsh dragon, and any Welsh dragon must be red.

Blaellian went off to email Con-Fu and Wendy sent the draft contract off to her solicitor to examine the small print under the microscope, Swiss banks being what they were. He said it looked OK but pointed out that no foreigner had ever succeeded in suing a Swiss bank yet. Con-Fu was as enthusiastic as one would expect and was on his way.

So now Wendy had a wedding to plan, as well as all her other work, and to make it more difficult the bank wanted it in the Dreckertal – the publicity would be wonderful. Who’d ever had dragonuptials before? Marigold would have to help her with the guest list. She hoped that she would not forget anyone and leave them out – she remembered only too well what had happened when someone got forgotten and wasn’t invited to that christening party. The Dreckbank would be proper narked if their whole valley got put to sleep for a hundred years – the accumulated interest would be nice, especially as it would be compound, but think of all the business they’d lose in the meanwhile.

One day, a procession of yaks arrived in Llanddraig. This was not something people had seen before. Cows, now, were common enough, and sheep were old friends, especially out on the hills when no one else was around, but yaks were something new, though as some muttered in the pubs, there were those around who could yak the head off a donkey or even a dragon. The yaks were led by men in long robes with ornate hats.

The chief yakherd asked, ‘Please, if you please respected Sirs, is there, is there here a yakpark where we may leave our creatures and our people to graze for a day or four. A long way, a long way have they walked, a long way, a very long way. Across hills they walked, across mountains, through rivers they walked and across seas. Through a tunnel they came, through a tunnel in darkness and in tumult. Again they walked, up hills and down hills they walked. And then in terror across a Bridge. High between heaven and water they walked. Not in peace on a bridge of rope and plank, but a bridge of iron and stone. A bridge detached from the forces of life and earth, a bridge suspended in

the sky. A bridge of noise and thunder as machines howled and screamed, screamed and howled for all the two hours it took for our yaks to cross the bridge. They were still frightened, our yaks, after being in cattle trucks in the dark and the tumult, shut in trucks, our yaks which live in the open air, in the open air they live, not in trucks in a tunnel, and then arguments, arguments and such rudeness, whether they should be held in prison, in quarantine for half a year, hours of argument until a follower of the way called in the President of the Royal Zoological Society to swear that there was no such thing as mad yak disease, mad cow yes, mad pig, mad dog, mad cat, mad men many, but mad yak never. And then all must be muzzled so no one would be yak-bit. How can yak eat grass with a muzzle? Must grass not be yak-bit? See how thin they are, thin and hungry after all the way they walked.'

But long before this impassioned speech was finished, with all its pauses and dramatic gestures, the yaks were freed of their muzzles and led to the sports field which was in much need of mowing. Tents were set up for the people and the pavilion unlocked for mothers with small children. The men needed no direction to the pubs; these were one feature of British life which had become familiar during the long walk from Ashford. Mild and bitter might be different from tea and butter, but no worse for that.

The mayor asked what else they could do for them. What they wanted most, they said, was a meal of hot, buttered oatmeal, and then an introduction to this wonderful dragon they had heard so much about. This was easily arranged, though it took a while to extract some of the younger yakherds from the pubs into which they had vanished, and from the company of Megan and her friends.

Next morning a message was sent up to Marigold who came down to invite the leader to climb up to meet Wendy. 'What could they do for him?' she asked.

'Well,' he said, 'things were difficult at home, very difficult. The Chinese have taken against the monks, against us all, driven us out they have, driven us away. Never do we see a dragon any more, driven them out, too...'

Marigold managed to cut him short once she had realised that they were all suffering from withdrawal symptoms. They belonged to a special hereditary sect which had looked after the Imperial five-clawed dragons in the old days, and even after the Republic was established and dragons were a drug on the market, they had still had to be looked after, in their own secret valley up in the mountains between China and Tibet. But during the Cultural Revolution it had been decided that the five-clawed dragons should be dragged out to look after themselves and mingle with the ordinary common or garden dragons, and the monks had been expelled. So they had come

to Llanddraig in the hope of finding a new home and adopting their own dragon. Perhaps they could find themselves a valley somewhere or even an island if only they could have a dragon.

Wendy looked at their yellow robes and thought that this might be a solution for her Daffoddyll, she had always been the quiet one and very shy of strangers, and maybe a monastery garden would be just her scene. Certainly her colouration would blend nicely with their robes. Besides there was that green valley nearby that nobody was using now that Cronin had finished writing about it.

Daffoddyll thought it might be rather fun to live in her own valley, somewhere far away from other people with a group of monks just to look after her, and a party of nuns to look after the monks (they were a hereditary sect, after all). She liked the way they chanted, singing very slow low notes with a haze of higher sounds – it reminded her of Wendy's lullabies when they were babies.

Just as she was agreeing to try living with them for a year, there was suddenly a great clatter and a wild whooping followed by volleys of pistol shots. Everyone rushed to the edge of the hill to see what on earth was going on down below.

There was a covered wagon, with a team of six horses careering along at a full gallop, with a horde of horsemen, all with feathered head-dresses, chasing after it, whooping and shooting in the air. 'What on earth now?' thought Wendy. 'Wonderful publicity – where were the television cameras?' thought Marigold. 'Wow! just like the films, really groovy!' thought Cadwallader. 'Oh, how common', thought Blaellian, who was already becoming as solemn and sober-minded as any Swiss banker might desire.

The wagon came sweeping up the road round and round Pendragon Hill, all the noise getting louder and louder until Wendy got fed up, swooped up into the air and zoomed down like a dive-bomber with a belch of flame which stopped the wagon dead and at the same time roasted the horses to a turn. When she and all her children had finished dinner, she thanked the rather disgruntled charioteer for a delicious meal and asked what she could do for him.

He took off his stetson, mopped his brow and said, 'Well, ma'am, we done come from little old Arizona to see whether there's real dragons in them thar hills, and I reckon, ma'am, there just about is. How about, could we have a dragon to nest on our bridge?'

'Oh mother, please,' said Cadwallader, neatly cutting her bargaining position out from under her. 'Idiot', she hissed, 'you're no son of your father – how can I get you a good deal if you're going to give the game away like that?'

'What conditions are you offering?' she asked the Arizonan. 'Cadwallader would need a special import visa since dragons are an endangered species, with the right to enter and return as often as he wants so that he could come back here for holidays without any hassle. You remember the piano

which the American customs stripped of all the ivory from its keys – I don't want them trying to pull off his scales! And how about transport?'

'All taken care of, ma'am. One Senator for Arizona is the chairman of the committee for the Customs Department, and the other runs Immigration. They're both hot-foot for a dragon on your bridge in our little Lake Havasu City and there'll be no difficulties. If your li'l boy can fly, transport's no problem either. We have a great flying club and they'll come over and escort your boy across the land and provide in-flight refuelling with whatever a dragon needs. We're an inland state, ma'am, and we don't have a navy, but we have good relations with Rhode Island and they can find ships, if he'll need them, that will provide sea-motels as night stops if your boy would pause once he's over land and give them a little whirl. He might like a spell there for a rest before he crosses the continent.'

This seemed to answer most of Wendy's worries and she handed him over to Marigold and the lawyers to dicker and get the best possible salary and conditions. She warned him, though, that Cadwallader would not be able to start until after the wedding – Blaellian would want all the family there for the occasion.

How does one organise a dragon wedding? Drat these conventional puritans in Dreckertal – if they could have Swiss rolls, why couldn't a nice pair of dragons? Why did they have to be so formal? Weddings were not something that dragons went in for – more usually flying visits. If that were good enough for Karim and her, and look what good results that had had, why not for Blaellian and Con-fu? Now someone was going to have to invent a ceremony, someone was going to have to perform it, someone (Marigold for sure) was going to have to produce a guest list, send out all the invitations, and what about catering? If she left that to the Dreckbank, what on earth would it taste like? Only too easy to guess, even if it were exquisitely cooked.

She might be the mother of the bride, but if these dratted Dreckers wanted a glossy wedding, they were going to have pay for it. Glossy – could she con one of the glossy magazines into paying for it as well? If the costs were paid twice, she'd have enough for the slush fund that Draiggoch would need for his Assembly seat. Pity it wasn't Gwyndywr getting married – all the Germans were used to slush funds. Could she get these Arizonans to get Hollywood involved? Los Angeles was near enough to Lake Havasu wasn't it? Surely they could stage a wedding colourful enough to keep the Dreckers happy.

Or should she stage a mythologists's conference? Who could she con into paying for that? Then they could all argue about the customs of dragons, and if they couldn't find any records of how dragons got married, if they were mythologists surely they could think something up. Just because she and Karim had got together informally, it didn't mean that no dragons had been married before.

What about her mam and da? She'd never asked. It wasn't something that got talked about at home. There weren't any wedding photos on the mantelpiece and she'd never seen her mother's lines. Too late now, some had been destroyed by the Romans, others by the Normans and the Puritans, and the rest had all gone in the blitz, always very useful when a town hall got burned, for that left a lot of latitude for inventive sociology.

First things first. With all this, Marigold was going to need some help and that meant asking the mayor for more funds – a promise of an invitation to the wedding for him, his wife and his three unmarried daughters should soon settle that. Of course Marigold knew where to look for helpers. Nicely brought up girls with good degrees to impress the Americans were two a penny. She knew two who'd probably be good at it, one Balliol, one Christ Church, bright enough to do the job and not so bright that they'd do her out of hers. One white and one black, which would keep the equal opportunity fanatics happy. Daphne was a nice, bubbly young lady, well accustomed to bossing people around on her grandfather's baronial estate and charming all those she met in society to do anything she wanted, as well as bright enough to have got a good second in PPE. Asphodel had come to the House from Kenya and was tall and jet black with beautiful aquiline features and a slender figure to match; it was seldom that anyone had rivalled her on the field and she had left a swathe of conquests behind her in other fields.

It took Daphne and Asphodel a while to settle in and learn just where subsidies could be scrounged from, but as Marigold pointed out, if they didn't cotton on quick they weren't going to get much of a reference for their next job, and if they didn't find funds pretty rapidly, they'd find themselves living on their salaries. They soon discovered that all the leading dragon experts were very happy to come and discuss the mythical habits of such mythical creatures as long as there were plenty of freebies and a guaranteed attendance of enough students to while away the time between discussions, as well as hoping for the company of Daphne and Asphodel themselves.

Wendy strongly advised that the conference should not be held in Llanddraig. For one thing there was no suitable accommodation and for another the presence of a real dragon in the neighbourhood was upsetting to those who were convinced that they were mythological. When someone had been a professor for long enough, they did not like it when something appeared that proved they had been wrong all those years, and although they were quite happy to shut their eyes and pretend it wasn't there, a real live dragon zooming about would probably have confused the poor dears.

The conference convened in very pleasant surroundings in what had been a country house that had belonged to a friend of Daphne's parents, with a large garden in which there was a sufficiency of follies, gazebos, and other tactful buildings to afford some privacy for any of the assembled

experts to give individual tuition to any students whom they were fortunate enough to attract or vice versa. The convenor had been well primed by Marigold with the subject that Wendy wanted discussed, and a plain brown envelope of sufficiently stimulating size.

Results, however, were disappointing. Several participants produced legends of dragon obsequies followed by the nuptials of the gallant knight and king's daughter, but nobody seemed even to have heard of occasions where more than one dragon was present. Only in the village street where there was both a Red Dragon and a Green Dragon had such couplings arisen and since those were invariably the establishments of rival breweries, they were more likely to cause riot than marriage even in the current climate of takeover mania.

The conference was about to break up when a late arrival from the mountains of Inner Mongolia recounted the legend of the dragon wedding of 4,500 BC. This had been recorded at the time but, save for a few fragments, most of the text had been lost. It had been his life's work, under the inspiration of Chairman Mao, to reconstruct the text in such a way that it would be an example to the present generation. The heroic worker dragons of that period had resisted the demands of the decadent aristocratic dragons for excesses to celebrate the wedding of two of their children. The resulting war had laid waste a whole province, but in the end the heroic workers had triumphed and the aristocrats banished from the Mongolian paradise to the decadent Imperial court where the others of their ilk were gathered.

This did not sound quite the party which Wendy thought the Dreckertalers would appreciate. A scorched-earth valley, with dragons belching fire at every movement might be all very well in Chechnya, or even Mongolia, but it was not what the Swiss were accustomed to. However, Daphne managed to persuade the eminent scholar, in a lengthy session in one of the more intimate follies, to part with a copy of the manuscript from which she and Asphodel might be able to establish what was original and what had been appropriately edited, and might be re-edited sufficiently to keep the Swiss happy.

The one trace of older periods that had survived, whether from envy or cupidity, or just to show the general decadence of the period, was unclear. What was left was a description of the Donation Dance or Present Procession. For this the parents of the bridal pair were seated in state, with a suitable supply of baskets placed at their feet, with in front of them a ceremonial archway formed by the brothers of the bride and the sisters of the groom, or a mixture of the two if numbers were otherwise insufficient, in the expectation of further such happy occasions. They stood rampant with wings outstretched to form the arch, supported if necessary by any younger siblings who might have remained sober. The assembled guests formed a line in pairs and, moving with stately tread to a solemn musical accompaniment, came to deposit their wedding gifts at the parents' feet. A footnote

recorded that this custom had been prohibited after a wedding at which some of the gifts, brought by the bride's family, had started to eat the gifts of the groom's family. The ensuing brawl had resulted in a dozen dragons in hospital, badly over-stretching the local resources, and three deaths, two of them the bride's parents, and actions for damages which wasted court time for twenty-five years, the longest-lasting of which tried to establish who was to blame for burning down the provincial governor's palace and frightening his aged mother into fits.

With an absolute prohibition of live gifts, and the substitution of gold and other suitable minerals, plus drafts on any bank recognised by the Swiss authorities, Daphne and Asphodel were sure that they could render this tradition both spectacular and innocuous, and that with the support of a suitably concocted version of the rest of this text, plus such traditional Chinese features as a blown-out candle and broken saucer, combined with a massed band of alphorns and yodellers, they could devise a ceremony lavish enough to impress any potential sponsors, and kitsch enough to keep any Swiss bankers happy. The results should also provide the happy pair with adequate security in case they found the regular hours too much of a drag and had to resign at the end of the initial contractual period. Wendy had chosen the alphorns and yodellers, hoping that they would have enough breath to cover the length of the Donation Procession, for she adamantly refused to consider any traditional wedding march. Wagner had insulted all dragons by referring to Alberich's pet as a Wurm, and Midsummer or no, this was a wedding and not a Dream. Besides, she had been brought up chapel, and chapel would her daughter be wed. Swiss-Kitsch in places, plus ancient Mongolian ceremonial, and plenty of champagne afterwards (the bank were paying), but chapel in all the essentials.

Now, who to invite? Wendy didn't have any family of her own, the knights of the Round Table had done a fairly thorough job in Britain and she'd rather lost touch with the few other British dragons who'd survived. Con-fu had a large family and he could be left to sort them out and provide names and addresses. The Dreck Bank would no doubt have a list of their own and would probably want to invite people from rival banks so as to be able to crow over them about all the wonderful publicity they were receiving, but again compiling that list could be left to them. She'd have to work out the wording of the invitation and make sure that it included enough of a description of the Donation Dance to ensure that the results would be worthwhile. Well, that could be left to Marigold and her assistants – what was the point of a university education if at the end of it you could not write an appeal letter that made it seem a privilege to be allowed to contribute?

Accommodation for the guests – that would have to be looked into. Were there five-star hotels in the Dreckertal? No point in inviting well-heeled guests if they were going to be shoved into two- or three-star dives. A quick email of enquiry produced a satisfactory response. They were so sure

that their new cuckoo clock would prove to be a tourist attraction that they had already started to construct three new hotels, and temporary accommodation for the dragon guests shouldn't be a problem either. Besides, there was plenty of time to sort all this out because the wedding would be combined with the inauguration of the clock, and that wouldn't be finished for a few months yet.

Now, what about the glossies? Which might be interested – there was quite a wide scope across Europe, and maybe Marigold could organise a bidding war in each country, with single language rights for each one. No point in trying the Italians, of course; they'd have the paparazzi perched on every mountain top within sight and the Italian glossies would have to negotiate with them. Might she be able to negotiate with the local eagles to keep their numbers down and come to some arrangement with some of the paparazzi to ensure the survival of a select few? Probably not, the Swiss eagles were a clannish lot and, like any Swiss, would know how to strike the best deal with both sides, and play each against the middle.

Best now to forget about all that and sort out some of the other children.

Chapter 3 – Draiggoch and Gwyndywr are Settled

Wendy decided that Draiggoch should be the next to get settled in a suitable job. As he was a true Welsh red dragon, she had already thought that it would be most suitable to look for a local position, such as the Welsh Assembly. Luckily a local bye-election to the Assembly was coming up, so why shouldn't Draiggoch stand for that? He looked Welsh, he spoke Welsh, he was Welsh, and he was locally born.

Marigold had never tried to run an election, at least not since her best friend at school had tried to be Captain of the Lower Fourth, and the result of that was that Marigold had been elected instead, which didn't augur well for this effort. Asphodel wasn't keen either; elections at home tended to be accompanied by casual slaughter of candidates, their agents, and half the voters from their tribe by their rivals from the next tribe, and this put her off the whole idea in case the same thing happened in Wales. Daphne, however, remembered all the fun, free drinks, surreptitious slanders, and all the specious promises that had been made when one of her many boyfriends had stood for President at the Oxford Union, and thought that a local election for the Welsh Assembly might be just as much fun. Besides, there might be some controversy and they might get more publicity like the last election for the Professor of Poetry for Oxford University had done.

So leaflets and posters were printed in thousands, with Draiggoch standing heraldically poised in a field of leeks, with a couple of pretty young harpists from the local music college well in the foreground so that doubtful voters might be influenced by their beauty. Rosettes were produced with a portrait of Draiggoch in the centre and all the local pubs were primed to provide a free pint for anyone wearing them on condition that they charged fifty percent over the normal price to anyone wearing a rosette for either of his rivals. Jones the Butcher and Williams the Fish found it difficult to contend with this – a couple of free chops or an extra herring or two wasn't in the same class. Since Daphne had limited the number of rosettes to no more than two thirds the number of voters in the area, and had made sure that each rosette had an identity number which the landlords were told to look at with a UV reader and to check them against a copy of the electoral register, forged rosettes and covert swapping had little success.

Draiggoch's speeches were well received. He promised to lobby for special subsidies from the European Union for leek farmers and to get Caerphilly cheese recognised as a locally limited brand name, and to resist any attempt from farmers across the bay at Cheddar to do the same. He said that he would campaign to get the local steel industry repatriated from India, encourage new local industries such as the manufacture of harp strings, and persuade dictionaries to remove opprobrious definitions of 'welching'.

He was elected with a large majority and subsequent complaints to the Electoral Commission were defeated because the local landlords, well-satisfied by the increase of beer consumption, all swore that as good Welsh patriots they had offered the free pints of their own accord to anyone sporting the national emblem of a Welsh dragon.

Draiggoch took his seat, a specially made fire-proof stall, to a fanfare of pibcorns and in front of a worldwide assembly of television reporters and cameras.

His maiden speech, made a few weeks later, once he had absorbed the rules and customs of the Assembly, was on providing Protected Species status for mermaids. It was well received and it was followed by a group swim-in off the Mumbles, where members assured the assembled merpeople that they would press the European Union parliament to follow suit and then to instruct the High Representative to present the matter to the General Assembly of the United Nations. The mermen asked whether Equal Rights would ensure that they also were covered by this decree, and they were assured that this would be taken into consideration. During a later debate at the Assembly, there seemed to be some feeling among Members that the mermen's customary diet of salmon was affecting the numbers coming into the rivers, and that this might militate against it, with members of the Noise Abatement Society arguing that their habit of blowing conch trumpets on all occasions made their presence more of a nuisance than an advantage. Besides, everyone wanted to see a mermaid, but who wanted to see mermen?

Members of the Assembly were gratified by the increased public interest and attendance at their debates, though Draiggoch had to be reminded from time to time of the no-smoking rule, and twice the building had to be evacuated when he had become over-excited in debate and had set off the fire alarms. He sat as an independent, and members of all parties were always eager to ask him to pose with them beside voters from their constituencies. This became so boring that he began to wonder whether to have a cardboard cut-out portrait made that they could pose with instead, but when he suggested this, all his colleagues said that there could never be a real substitute for a true Welsh red dragon and if he did it, none of them would vote for any of his proposals.

'Not to see us they come,' they said, 'unless some real trouble back home there is. To see you, look you, it is, and to be photographed with you that come they do. And then happy they are, and vote for us they will.'

So Draiggoch decided that he'd have to put up with it, it was all part of the job, and now a public servant he was. At least he didn't have to shake hands with all the voters and kiss their grubby brats, like the other members had to. When they were grubbier and noisier than usual he used to amuse himself with an occasional huff that sent them scurrying back behind their mothers' skirts, and if they were nice and polite he would sometimes let them stroke his scales and even let

them climb on to his back without ever turning his head and snatching a quick snack, tempting as this sometimes was.

‘So he’s settled,’ thought Wendy. ‘Let’s get Gwyndywr sorted out next.’

She told Marigold to get in touch with the people who’d written about the Drachenfels and see what offers they would make.

A reply came quickly. Once upon a time there must have been a dragon settled there, because otherwise why would it have that name, but nobody could remember when one had last been seen, and there was nothing in the records in the town’s archives about it. Now that dragons were becoming fashionable, they would like to have one of their own and make the rock earn its name. They had a Lorelei nearby, of course, but she’d been there forever and people were rather bored with her, and besides her singing sometimes disturbed their sleep. A dragon would be a real attraction for the town and would be sure to bring in the tourists.

Gwyndywr wouldn’t have to do anything special, just be there and be seen occasionally, often enough to keep the tourists happy and sometimes be photographed with tourists who asked nicely, and who made an appropriate contribution towards his upkeep.

The local brewery in the nearby village of Frankenstein had come through with a good deal: a cash down payment plus a regular allowance for out-of-scale expenses and a weekly barrel. In return, they could use Gwyndywr’s name and photograph to advertise their premium Frankenstein’s Dragon Brew, The Beer with Fire, and as a tourist attraction.

So a suitable contract was drawn up, with provision for occasional holidays either to come home or to visit his siblings, and with escape clauses in case there was a drought of beer or lack of food.

‘What about a pension?’ wondered Marigold, but the Burgermeister pointed out that there was no normal retiring age for dragons, and as nobody knew how long they lived, the local actuaries would find it difficult to come up with an appropriate rate, and he couldn’t possibly commit the town to a pension of indeterminate duration. However, as the contract was open-ended, with a ten-year period of notice of termination on either side, Gwyndywr’s security of tenure was reasonably guaranteed.

Soon enough Gwyndywr was happily settled on his own rock, looming over the Rhine and well supplied with weekly deliveries of beer and sausages. The local people were happy to have the Drachenfels occupied again, even if it meant that their flocks were occasionally a goat short or a sheep missing and they agreed to provide the weekly rations of food. The presence of a real dragon gave the place reality once again, and Gwyndywr began to attract tourists who spent money in the village as well as at the brewery, and a small factory was established nearby, which made dragon-themed souvenirs and provided increased local trade and employment, which pleased the residents

and made Gwyndywr even more popular. They also appreciated the fact that he was always quite careful to absorb only the occasional lone traveller, and so far nobody had made any complaints. The locals, of course, he never touched, however well-fed and tempting they looked, for he knew that it was essential to keep on good relations with them. Just occasionally someone from the neighbourhood might come up with a special message from the Burgermeister, and then that would be another matter, just as it was at home in Llandraig, where, as he remembered, the mayor had had a similar arrangement with his mother.

One evening, when Gwyndywr was dozing after a busy day of zooming around for visitors' cameras, he heard a low rumbling sound which appeared to be coming from under the floor, with a low-pitched mooing like a herd of dyspeptic tubas. What's faffing about down there in the cellarge, he wondered?

'Who on my rock is sitting?' a bass voice enquired.

'I am Gwyndywr, the dragon of Dragon Crag,' Gwyndywr replied in rather bad German – most of his tourist visitors had been Americans so he had not learned much of the local language yet.

'The only dragon of Dragon Crag am I,' the subterranean voice said. 'For many centuries only one dragon here has there been.'

'But they asked me to come just because there had been no dragon here for many years. They did not like Drachenfels to be empty. Where have you been all this time?'

'Here inside the rock. With a sword to attack me a young man came. He killed me thought he, but kill me nothing can.'

'Why did he want to kill you?'

'By someone who wanted my treasure, tricked into it he was.'

'A *treasure*? What was it? Have you still got it?'

'Nothing in his pocket could he put.'

'What happened to the young man?'

'On a trip down the Rhine a forest bird told me he went, there a magic fire to find. What thereafter happened I do not know, so to vanish, in case reappeared he did, and in case any more wanderers came by, I decided.'

'What do I do now? My mother and I signed a contract with the brewery to stay here for three years initially and more if I and they are happy, and I like it here. Besides, my sister will be living quite close in Switzerland, in the Dreckertal, and my mother, Wendy, wanted me to be here in case she gets lonely.'

‘Wendy your mother is? Many years ago knew her I did, a young and a beautiful dragon she was. My friendliest greetings to her please send. The brewery how much paying you they are? One third of it as rent to me you can pay. So again I shall a treasure get.’

‘It won’t be much treasure – it’s mostly beer and sausages, with the occasional sheep and single tourist.’

‘So what can you pay you pay, and with me the beer and sausages you sometimes share, and what the tourists have in their pockets, on their fingers, and around their necks to me you give. And young men with swords and wanderers with spears for yourself, you keep. And some evenings perhaps you visit me and cards we play, and talk we shall, and together drink.’

Gwyndwyr was happy to agree with this proposal. It meant company in a warm underground cave on some cold winter evenings, an occasional game of cards, and someone with whom to share the bottles of schnapps which sometimes appeared with the sausages. Besides, an experienced older dragon might have useful advice to give. Gwyndwyr was sometimes conscious of being the offspring of a single parent and of never knowing his father. Perhaps this voice might prove to be a substitute.

‘A young friend of mine have you seen? On a rock in the river she sits, her hair combing, and singing. Well she sings, more beautiful than in the river the women who wash.’

‘I have heard singing, sometimes several voices very loud, sometimes one singer very charming and melodious.’

‘That my Lorelei must be. Friends with her make and you will she help. When hungry you are, sing she will, and people then gold will give her and food she will buy. The gold let her have and the meat you enjoy.’

‘Not much gold around today; it’s paper or plastic, but what there is she can have and I’ll give her your regards and best wishes.’

‘Thank you. Farewell and after yourself look well.’

Gwyndwyr settled down and his perch on his crag soon became a popular attraction. Tour boats on the Rhine pointed it out and even allowed passengers to land briefly so that they could say that they had set foot on the famous Dragon Crag. From time to time, if the passengers were willing to pay a special additional fee, the boat would hoot a pre-arranged signal, and Gwyndwyr would fly down and circle the boat so that the passengers could photograph and film him. The tour company had agreed to divide the fee, one third to them and two thirds to Gwyndwyr, who would then split his share with the voice in the basement. Occasionally an intrepid visitor climbed higher and, if they were attractive and well-fed, a whiff of smoke and a slight crunching sound signalled that they had reached the summit.

He got on well with the locals and was well-known to be friendly and always willing to help out at a fete or other occasion, providing an extra attraction. He was particularly popular with the children and, if they asked him very nicely, even gave them a short flying trip, accompanied by shrieks of excitement.

He often entertained the children by telling them stories. One of their favourites was Percy and Romeda. Romeda lived in city in the far west, and once upon a time and long, long ago, when her father was the ruler of the city, an evil man called Nicodemus stole her away. Romeda was the most beautiful dragon in the whole country, and all the dragons in the city rushed into the streets and flew up into the air. Her father, Prince Bertram, was so distressed that his flames became positively purple with rage. He offered a fortune in gold to anyone who could rescue her, and her claw in marriage if both were willing. Since his domain was quite small, only ten leagues in any direction, he had more sense than to offer half of it. At least there was the distant prospect that if all ten of his sons should die before him, Romeda's husband might inherit the city. However, this was unlikely since he was determined to live for several more centuries.

Dragons came from all parts of the country to offer to rescue her. Some were armed with everything from bazookas to howitzers, others with just their natural claws and flame, but none could find any trace of her. At last rumours came of a cavern on an island in the north, from which came occasional piteous cries for help and the raucous songs of a man. Once more Prince Bertram appealed for help and, at the same time he sent an emissary to offer a ransom. After a considerable delay the emissary, whose name was Ross, returned.

'My Prince,' he said, 'for months he would not see me. Albatrosses, he said, were birds of ill-repute and he asked for a raven instead, but there were never any more to be found. All had moved to a tower in London where the pickings were good. But at last he agreed. "Ransom must be handsome", he said.'

'Handsome is as handsome does,' replied the Prince. 'Was he more specific?'

'Not at first,' Ross said, 'but he talked about gold. Eventually he said he would return Romeda for as many pieces of gold as she had scales.'

Prince Bertram weighed this news in the balance, mentally counting each of Romeda's scales. 'Too many,' he said, 'there's not that much gold in the city. We'll have to find a champion. Where is she kept?'

'Chained outside his cave,' said the albatross, 'and he keeps well inside. All that can be seen is the smoke from his fire and the batteries of SAM-7s which surround his mountain.'

When this last piece of information became known, most of the potential rescuers found urgent private business in their home neighbourhoods; their mothers were missing them, the grass needed

cutting, Uncle Fred needed to be escorted home from the pub, and three of them who shared the same grandmother had to go home for her funeral. At last, only the smallest of them, a slim and elegant dragon called Percy, was left.

‘Would you try to rescue my daughter?’ asked the prince.

‘Yes, if I can have the gold and Romeda,’ Percy said, ‘and if you let me have Ross as a guide to Nicodemus’s cave.’

This was agreed and off they flew, becoming such good friends that Percy began to call his guide by his first name.

‘How much further is it, Albert,’ he asked.

‘Close now, better look out for SAMs,’ said Albert, just in time as one came shooting up at them. Percy veered sharply off course and dived for the deck to get below Nicodemus’s radar shield. He landed next to Romeda, just out of sight from Nicodemus, who was keeping well back in the cave.

‘Oh do rescue me, please’, whispered Romeda, who was delighted at the sight of the handsome young Percy.

‘Shh, keep quiet, and I will if I can’, whispered Percy, equally impressed by the beautiful young Romeda, whose silvery scales were well set off by her maidenly blushes.

How could he get through the chain of defences, he wondered. And then he had an idea.

‘Albert,’ he called, ‘can you see into the cave?’

‘Yes, but Nicodemus seems to suspect me and he’s picked up his lance and is waving it around.’

‘Perfect,’ said Percy, ‘get him to wave his lance a lot and tire himself out while I sneak in and melt Romeda’s chains. Keep still,’ he whispered to her, ‘we must be quick so this doesn’t drag on too long.’

Because he was so slender, his jet of fire was very narrow and concentrated and melted her chain so fast that the rest of it clanked to the ground before he could catch it.

‘What was that?’ roared Nicodemus, but he was too late to catch them. Percy and Romeda zoomed off so fast that even a barrage of SAMs couldn’t catch them.

‘Come on, Bert,’ Percy called, ‘come on before he can reload.’

And so Percy and Romeda came safely home to the delight of the Prince and all his dragons. Percy was generously rewarded and he and Romeda shared the Prince’s gold with Albert so everybody was happy.

It was always the children’s favourite story and every time Gwyndwyr told it he became more popular with them.

Local relations did become a bit clouded one day, when the lead cornet player in the local brass band vanished one dark night. Only weeks to go before the district brass band competition, and how could they find a new lead so that they could keep the trophy for another year? A few days later, however, the Lorelei was heard singing to a cornet accompaniment and all was explained. Not eaten, only ensnared by someone more attractive than the local Mädchen. With luck a deputation armed with enough local histories to show that that wench had been sitting on her rock for a few centuries would persuade him to come back in time for the final rehearsals before the contest, and as long as he was playing for her, he'd be keeping in practice.

Meanwhile, Gwyndywr knew that it was time to start thinking about the wedding. He was going to have to act in place of the bride's father and to support his mother. Draiggoch was far too busy at the Welsh Assembly to come, and Porffyrion and Cadwallader were younger and less reliable.

He looked at his copy of the contract that they had signed and saw that he was entitled to a holiday every six months, and as he had been there almost that long already, he sent word to the Burgermeister to ask if he would talk to the head of the brewery company and see if he could have a couple of week's leave to attend a family wedding.

The answer came back that this could be permitted, especially if he could arrange for the bridal couple to spend part of their honeymoon on the Drachenfels. If so, the town would pay all his expenses for the trip. The Burgermeister and the head of the brewery thought that if they could promote the Drachenfels as a dragons' honeymoon resort they might be able to attract even more tourists, and Gwyndywr was careful not to disillusion them by telling them that this was the first known dragon wedding for several thousand years, nor did he tell them that he would not have any expenses. Any extra money would be useful, he thought, to buy a nice present for the happy couple.

He was afraid that his subterranean friend might miss his company, for they had been getting on well together, so he called down to him and told him that he would be away for a while.

'Miss you I will, and who will meat and beer provide while away you are?'

'You've managed to look after yourself for centuries. You should be able to manage for two or three weeks, surely. And you could come with me – you can be invited to the wedding.'

'To a wedding go? Be seen? Who from young men with swords and from wanderers with spears would protect me? No, never would I go, not even to Switzerland. People from abroad visiting there arrest they do. In the Dreck truly would I be. No, here I stay, safe from swords and spears, and no one do you tell about me, no one except your so beautiful mother. Her again I would like to see and that tell her you can.'

So Gwyndywr began to prepare himself for the occasion. If he was to give away the bride, and act as host with his mother to all the distinguished guests, clearly he must look his best. Living

alone on the Drachenfels, he had not been able to look after himself properly and even without a mirror he could see that those parts that were visible were looking a bit scruffy. Maybe there would be someone down in the town or the brewery who could help him? A quick email to the Burgermeister and another to the Braumeister produced useful results. There was a plating and polishing firm in the town with mobile equipment, and the brewery had a head bottle-washer and polisher. Both were willing to help.

With one on each side of him, each scale was scraped clean. He had taken a dim view of the initial suggestion that he should be immersed in a bath of pickling acid, and he thought that an anodised finish might be gilding the lily, and silver plating would be worse because of the cyanide involved in the process. And besides, he was proud of his white colour, which showed off well against the brown and grey rock and he didn't want any artificial colouring or plating. So his scales and his claws were polished to a high gleam, a process that he had enjoyed because the buffing wheel gave an invigorating feeling – 'Maybe that's what a massage parlour feels like to humans,' he thought.

'Might this be a money-making idea?' he wondered. Could he set up a polishing parlour on the Drachenfels for dragons? But to make it successful he would have to find some pretty young female dragons to operate it, and anyway were there enough male dragons around to make it a viable proposition? And then would he have to open a second parlour for female dragons, which would need young male dragons to operate that. Thinking about some of the hairdressing shops he'd seen at home, were there any male dragons with the right proclivities for such an establishment? And then what about power? He had lighting at night, but would that be enough to operate all the necessary machinery? They had had to run a high-voltage cable up the rock to work on him, and would the mayor stand for that as a permanency? And what about all the capital costs? It was unlikely that his friend below would be willing to lend him the necessary money, and even more unlikely that he could find investors in the town unless he could show that there was a constant flow of dragons demanding such a service, and even if there was, would the townspeople tolerate a constant flow of dragons to the Rock?

No, it seemed to be a good idea but. All the same it was worth bearing in mind and perhaps he could find a potential investor among the wedding guests. What about the Dreck Bank? Bankers were supposed to lend money, but they'd be sure to ask all sorts of difficult questions. There's been enough trouble recently about banks lending money to people without enough security and half the banks in the world were in the Dreck and the rest unwilling to join them there. The only possibility might be Northern Rock and maybe they'd be willing to lend to another Rock, but then they probably had enough dodgy loans on their books to want any more.

Still, he'd keep it mind and ask the dragons at the wedding how many of them might be interested in being customers and then he'd at least have an idea of whether it might succeed if he could ever set it up. Did they have massage parlours in China? And if they did, would Con-fu's family, hidden away in their own valley, ever have heard of them?

And with all these questions in his mind, he set off for the Dreckertal.

Chapter 4 – Blaellian’s Wedding

Indeed it was time to think about the wedding. The great cuckoo clock was almost finished and the Dreckthalers were beginning to ask when they were going to see their dragons and when Blaellian and Con-Fu Sion were going to come and inspect their living quarters and see if everything was just as they wanted it. They also needed to know the numbers expected at the wedding and any special dietary needs, not being sure what the Chinese in-laws would fancy. What, they wondered, was the dragon equivalent of chopsticks, and would they bring their own or would they have to provide them?

‘Can’t you send us pictures of their house over the Web?’ asked Wendy. ‘Any estate agent can do that nowadays, so surely a bank could.’

There was a rapid consultation and considerable debate at the Dreck bank, for it went against the grain to reveal anything to anybody on so public a medium as the Web. They decided to set it up, provided it could be doubly encrypted, and they sent a courier to Llanddraig with strict instructions that he was to give the key to Wendy herself and not to anyone else. The courier was a bit worried about this and only agreed to go on condition that Wendy sent a safe-conduct and that the bank provided him with a dragon-proof coat, plus insurance to cover every possible eventuality, whether caused by dragons or any other accident on the journey.

‘Hardly necessary,’ said Wendy to Marigold, ‘I can’t imagine anybody from a Swiss bank would be tempting to eat, not unless he was hung for a long time.’

When, after all this and the key had been safely installed on Wendy’s computer, they logged on to the site. There was a handsome looking chalet in virtual reality with large-looking rooms and a beautiful view up the valley to the high mountains beyond. They could move the screen around and look at the chalet from various directions, going in and out of all the rooms. There was a good sized bedroom and a living room, as well as a kitchen, store rooms and all the usual facilities, all specially designed to accommodate dragons, as well as a couple of spare rooms for visitors. There had been some discussion on whether there should be a library – did dragons read, and if so what? But a television room was an obvious necessity, with the latest wall-mounted flat screen. Checking the room sizes, they could see that there was plenty of room to swing a banker, and even room for Con-Fu’s grandfather, who was a very large dragon indeed. Checking, too, the specification, it was clear that everything was fireproofed to a high standard, and all was fully insured. There was a large garden area in front for exercise, big enough for a family landing ground, and also space at the back so that extension was possible, always a sensible provision when building for a married couple – clearly Swiss banks prepared for all contingencies.

Wendy and Marigold had by now drawn up the fifth list of possible guests and hoped that at last they had it right. Like any young man, Con-fu was vague about aunts, and uncles, and how many cousins he had and whether they had families of their own, so there had been many messages to his parents and more particularly to his great-aunts, who had an encyclopaedic memory for the ramifications of the family.

While Wendy and Marigold were checking the proofs of the invitations, correcting all the spelling mistakes perpetrated by Marigold's two young assistants (surely after an Oxford education they should be able to spell?) and by the printers, and setting Daphne and Asphodel to writing envelopes (surely they couldn't get those wrong?), Blaellian and Con-Fu decided they'd better go off to the Dreckertal and have a look round. Just how was this cuckoo-clock going to work? Would they be expected to pop out on a spring? Could any spring be strong enough to pop a dragon out? And if it was, what would they do? Hiccup?

The designers had thought of that. The dragon would be in a room at the top of the clock, with an outer wall which was really a door, hinged along the bottom, and which would act like a drawbridge. At ten seconds to each of the appropriate hours, the door would drop downwards to make a platform, supported on a projecting bridge of girders, Blaellian or Con-Fu would take four majestic steps forward and, at each of the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth seconds cough genteelly, sending a small cloud upwards, timing each exactly with the pips on the atomic clock, fixed beside them where they could see it. On the hour itself, he or she would roar, with a jet of flame. The clock was guaranteed accurate to one second in three million years and had only gone wrong twice so far.

Using the atomic clock had been resented by the Association of Swiss watchmakers, who said that their chronographs were just as accurate.

'But you use the atomic clock to prove your chronographs are accurate don't you? Why shouldn't we use it to check our dragon clock?', said the Drecktalers, who, being bankers, didn't have much time for watch makers. 'Anyway, how do you expect a dragon to wear one of your wristwatches? And if we chose one make of watch, all the rest of you would be even angrier at the free publicity that that maker would get'.

So the atomic clock it would be, and that could be set in a flame-proof container and its read-out projected to where they could see it.

'You don't expect us to roar as many times as the hour do you?' said Blaellian, 'We'd be all out of breath before we finished, especially if you keep a twenty-four hour clock and besides, the flame tank would need recharging.'

'Er,' they said. 'We'd not thought of that. What can we do?'

'I could drop something for each hour,' muttered Con-Fu to Blaellian. 'It is the Dreckertal, after all.'

'Don't be nasty', she said, though she couldn't help laughing. And aloud, 'Couldn't they just look at the clock's hands?'

'Hands??' they said. 'What do you think this, something old fashioned like you had in the nursery? This is a modern clock, with a digital display of numbers that can be seen from twenty miles away. It still works by clockwork, of course, what else would you have in Switzerland? But its display is digital.'

'Well, that's all right, then. All we have to do is roar once and that'll attract everyone's attention and then they can look at the numbers while we take four steps backwards and let the door close. We can do something more elaborate on special occasions when you have a visiting president or king, perhaps with both of us roaring in alternation, you know, hee-haw-hee-haw for the right number of times.'

The chief designer wondered if someone were trying to make an ass of him, but the bank directors, who had no sense of humour, thought it a wonderful idea.

But was there space for both of them in the room, and would the bridge take their combined weight for the special occasions when they were both on duty? Back to the drawing board, thought the designer, but still it would only need those small changes – the rest was strong enough. He'd better check the ramp up to the room, too.

With everything settled, and after plenty of publicity photos, with the directors all trying to get into the photo without getting too close to any risks, Blaellian and Con-Fu took off for home where, by now, responses to the invitations were beginning to come in. It was clear that so unusual an occasion was very attractive, and so far all but one was an acceptance. The only refusal had been from Gwyndwyr's friend who was guarding his treasure too carefully, to be willing to drop any into any wedding Donation Baskets, and he was too worried about wanderers and young men with swords to come out in the open. Was there going to be room for them all? Could the bank afford to feed them all?

'Afford it, yes of course,' said Marigold, 'think who all their customers were. They've probably got enough shoes in the vaults to shod them all, too. The problem is, will they? Banks get rich by accumulating money, not by spending it. A bigger problem is what do we feed them on? The locals will be OK – they can eat fondue and the local fountain can flow with wine. The lead pipes won't make it taste any worse than the flavour of iron filings already in it.'

'Dragons don't get foot and mouth and there's never yet been a case of mad-dragon disease, so get on to the Department of whatever they call themselves this week in London, and offer to take a

few infected herds off their hands.’, said Wendy. ‘That will save them from burning or bulk burying them, and give them some nice publicity and kudos for not polluting the skies and the earth. But remember some of these younger friends of the children have gone all with-it and turned vegetarian.’

‘What on earth does a vegetarian dragon eat?’ asked Marigold.

‘Heaven knows – ask Daffodyll, she’s daffy enough to have friends like that, and she’s a vegetarian herself.’

Marigold went off to find her.

‘Pumpkins, melons, squash, spaghetti, all sorts of things like that,’ said Daffodyll when she could be detached from her mobile phone (‘How do dragons send text messages?’ wondered Marigold, she’d have to ask her because if the children were going to be scattered all over the world, she’d have to learn how to do it herself). ‘Corn, too; that’s great fun, you just huff at it and there’s a whole cob of pop-corn. And pizzas, great big ones like cart wheels.’

The great day was getting near and people were beginning to gather. All the hotels for miles around had been booked out by press and special magazines. Daphne and Asphodel had earned their wages at last by playing one glossy off against another, telling each that Wendy had decided their main rival in their own country would be given an exclusive. As a result, the girls had persuaded each to prevent this by paying an enormous fee to stop it from being exclusive to any one. So they’d paid almost enough to cover the whole cost of the wedding just to be back where they’d been at the beginning, with all on equal terms.

Con-Fu had invited his parents of course, but it was unthinkable that so eminent a pair of Imperial Five-Clawed Dragons should travel so far alone and unescorted. Most of Con-Fu’s cousins, and his brothers and sisters, not to mention his uncles and aunts, had all decided to come, too, as well as the normal escort provided by the Honourable Society of Imperial Dragons. Considering the number of trigger-happy, SAM-toting soldiers and guerillas lurking between the far fastnesses of China where the Dragonry lay concealed and the Dreck-filled valley in Switzerland which was the destination, and their propensity for letting them off at anything larger than a seagull, it was lucky that the dragons had their own means of travel. Not for them the Great Circle route or the climb over the Pamirs and the long haul across the Gobi Desert. Dragons took the direct route, cutting a chord through the globe.

Navigation could be tricky. Volcanoes did not worry them of course – they acted as refuelling stations where they could breath in some fire instead of exhaling. It was the shifts in magnetic polarity that could cause confusion. Every time they went over or under an iron deposit, the compass needles wobbled; it was from their dragons that the Chinese were the first to discover the

compass, and so far the dragons had resisted the temptation to switch to satellite navigation. Still, even without such modern aids, they managed pretty well.

Instead of coming up in the Dreck, they surfaced in one of the vaults in the cellars of Zurich's most prestigious bank. Alarms went off all over the Canton and the bank was rapidly encircled by police, finance police, depositors, television cameras, and the top brass of the International Monetary Fund.

After frantic telephone calls at last they gathered together all six of the people who had the necessary keys and the four who knew the passwords to penetrate the furthest depths, rushing two of them back from Antibes and St Tropez. Gradually they worked their way down, working through the concentric rings of defences. First they opened the great vault doors, inserting each of the six keys into the appropriate holes. Then they released the guards stationed in the first ring, who of course had been locked in automatically ever since the alarms went off, sending them to the police station for their first meal in eighteen hours and the statutory three-day interrogation. They then pumped out the next ring which had flooded to full height. Next came the snake charmers to corral all the cobras who had been automatically released into the third ring. And finally the chief director came to utter the magic words which would open the last door. It was a pity they had rushed him back from St Tropez so quickly that they had not given him time to put his normal clothes on top of his bathing trunks because he'd developed a cold as a result, and for some time the door refused to recognise his voice. They had to find the junior clerk who entertained his friends by mimicking all the top brass, and then they had to persuade the chief executive to whisper the magic password to him.

'Can't do that – he's too junior. How can we trust a clerk with such a secret?' The argument went on for hours and it was only settled when one of the more intelligent directors said 'If the only problem is that he's too junior, make him a senior, for heaven's sake.'

And so at last the vault was opened and they found nothing wrong. All their deposits were untouched and, except for a slight smell of methane and rotten eggs and some empty picnic boxes and bottles, there were no signs of any disturbance. The dragons had had a peaceful night's sleep while the arguments had raged over their heads, and the gnomes who lived there had been helpful (luckily Wendy had thought of inviting them, too) and had guided the bevy of dragons on their way to the Dreckertal after they had enjoyed a leisurely breakfast.

The day had come. Wendy went in to see if her daughter was ready. Very sweet Blaellian looked, every scale shining. The Dreckertalers had built a stadium, big enough for an Olympic event (the bank had asked Wendy to invite all the senior Olympic officials, too, knowing that they would accept such an opportunity, and then maybe they might consider Switzerland as a suitable

venue for a future Games) with room for all the friends and relations in the arena, and for all the ordinary people in the stands. Wendy had persuaded the Llanddraig registrar to come to record the wedding so that it would be on the right books at home, and the pastor of the Llandraig chapel to officiate – both were old friends, and Blaellian was a local girl and brought up in Wales, and she should be married properly and not in some foreign way.

The massed alphorns and yodellers gave of their best as Wendy and Blaellian made their way into the middle of the arena where Con-Fu was waiting, looking very handsome.

Just as the ceremony was about to start, a belch of flame and smoke burst out from overhead.

‘Why didn’t you wait for us? What sort of manners have you got?’ came a stentorian voice.

‘Oh lord, it’s probably the Hawaiian cousins,’ said Con-Fu to Wendy. ‘What’s the betting they forgot the dateline again? They did the same thing at Uncle Albert’s third centenary and they started a riot that time.’

‘Watch out, they’re going to again,’ said Blaellian with a squeak of excitement as the newcomers started to set about those already present, trying to push their way into better seats.

‘Come on, we’d better get out of the way before we’re squashed underfoot,’ said Asphodel to Daphne and Marigold, ‘it’s getting like the aftermath of a bump supper back in Oxford. Maybe this is what that old boy was on about with his ancient dragon wedding.’

‘Well, we don’t want any scorched earth here. Where’s the fire brigade?’

The Dreck Feuerwehr, resplendent in their full-dress uniforms, shining brass helmets, gleaming boots, and dazzling white gloves, were stationed in the arena as a guard of honour for the mayor, but Marigold had made sure that they had their fire engines, with full tanks close at hand, as a precaution. She wasn’t sure what champagne would do to a dragon’s metabolism, even Swiss champagne, but she wasn’t running any risks. Powerful jets of water soon cooled the Hawaiians down and, with another flourish of alphorns, the ceremony was able to start.

The assembled television cameras sent the picture worldwide as the two handsome young dragons exchanged their vows, every word clearly audible through the excellent sound system installed by the local pop concert promoters (their name and address was printed on the service leaflet given to every guest, so they had been persuaded to provide all their services and equipment free) and, to the accompaniment of ecstatic yodelling, the happy couple flew off to their brief honeymoon, leaving the guests to eat and drink to their heart’s content.

The non-dragon guests were led off to some marquees around the perimeter of the stadium while some herds of cows and flocks of sheep were driven into the arena. It had occurred to the organisers that a barbecue on the hoof, as it were, might upset the more delicately nurtured guests.

The directors of the Dreck Bank had decided that, just for once, generous hospitality would pay off in good publicity and that it might be worth feeding everyone almost as well as they fed themselves every day.

Everyone in the marquees soon became quite happy and most guests were getting to the stage of maybe just one more cheese éclair and one more cup of coffee - cheese, chocolate and instant coffee had naturally been special features of the menu and large quantities of baby food had been brought in for the children – when they heard loud shrieks and roars from the arena. Rushing back to see what was going on, there they saw blackened circles all over the grass ('How are we going to get it green again for the bear festival?' wailed the gardeners), with some inebriated dragons trying to pedal emptied barrels on their sides round the running track around the periphery of the field, and in the middle a circle of dragons cheering on the Hawaiian cousins who were dancing an energetic hula.

'Show us how', some of the young Chinese were shouting, 'and we'll show you our dances.'

Guests in the stands had to keep ducking as other drunken dancers tried aerial stunts, looping the loop and buzzing each other. Eventually Marigold, who could see the bankers looking less and less approving, suggested to Wendy that maybe it was time to count the presents and close things down. A fleet of security vans had been hired to transport the presents and the Bank had offered the use of one of their larger vaults as storage until the happy couple got back.

Wendy took a deep breath and sent out a great jet of flame, aiming it carefully to make the bankers duck without actually hitting anybody, and a loud roar,

'Time for the Donation Dance and the Present Procession.'

Much to her surprise, all the noise and ructions stopped, and obediently all the dragons lined up ready to start the ancient ceremonial. Two by two, each carrying their wedding gifts, they stepped in a coil round Wendy and Con-Fu's parents, each pair ducking under the arches of outstretched wings made by Con-Fu's sisters and Blaellian's brothers, as they laid their gifts into large baskets at the parent's feet. Marigold had wondered whether to let the human guests participate in this ceremony, as she privately called it, but had encountered a certain amount of trepidation, so instead she had provided large bins and bank deposit machines, with signs Presents Here Please by each ticket-check gate and another by each exit just in case any of the assembled bankers and their guests had missed them on the way in.

When all had completed the circuit, they filed out of the amphitheatre and began to prepare for their journey home. While the security vans drove in and all the presents were being loaded up and transported to the bank, a horde of cleaners descended on the scene – everything must be clean and tidy for the following day.

Blaellian and Con-Fu had only been allowed a week for their honeymoon and everything had been got ready for their first appearance. Engineers kept testing the drawbridge – would it drop at the right speed? Too slow, they wouldn’t be out in time to take the four steps before the five cough-puffs preceding the roar on the dot of noon – too fast and it might bounce up and startle them as they started out – a hiccough would be unseemly and a roar too early might mean everyone in sight setting their watches wrong, unheard of in Switzerland. Then it had to rise up again as they retreated back into their house, and while a slow rise would do no harm, one that was too fast might hit them on the chin as they moved back, which could be unpopular. The chief engineer didn’t want to think about what unpopularity with a fire-breathing dragon might imply.

Come the great day, and at 9.00 am there was no sign of Blaellian nor of Con-Fu. Ten o’clock and people began to get worried.

‘Can anybody dress up as a dragon?’ asked the manager of the bank.

‘What with? a flame thrower?’ replied one of his assistants.

‘Got a stirrup pump handy?’ said one of the staff who’d been passed over for promotion often enough not to worry about who heard him.

People started rushing round in small circles trying to find fire-proof material to dress someone up in until at quarter to twelve two dots were seen in the sky.

‘It’s a bird, it’s a plane, it’s... Saved, it’s them!’ shouted the crowd of bank clerks. And indeed it was.

‘Hurry, hurry,’ shouted the chief chronotician.

‘Sorry we’re late – forgot to take a clock with us,’ apologised Con-Fu.

‘Don’t worry about that now, get in there, you’ve only got half a minute.’

‘Oh, that’s plenty of time,’ said Con-Fu, turning what few hairs the chronotician had white with anxiety. This wasn’t going to be as easy a job as it had looked when he was offered it – youngsters had no sense of time at all, and as for newly-married ones.... Why oh why had he left that job on the railway – all the trains ran on time, there. Better if he’d taken that post with British Rail where nobody was worried to the nearest twenty minutes.

But at last all was ready, the door dropped, the two dragons appeared, coughs were exactly synchronised, in precise alternation, and the first roar was exactly on time, followed by alternating roars precisely spaced. Rockets zoomed into the sky, alphorns sounded a rousing fanfare, the town band broke into the *Dreckscher Bank Marsch*, specially composed by Richard Strauss for the bank’s centenary some years before, and everybody relaxed except the chief chronotician who realised that two minutes past the hour was only eleven hours and fifty-eight minutes before the next one. What did that contract say? How often did they have to go through this? Could he perhaps persuade the

bank that once a day was enough. Maybe it would be if enough people complained at being woken up at midnight every day. Meanwhile, he could only hope that the kids would settle down and prove reliable.

A fortnight later the happy couple were sitting comfortably replete after an exceptionally excellent breakfast. A pair of unpleasant and very circumferentially challenged tourists, with three obstreperous children, had been visitors the previous day, and nobody was likely to miss them, and there'd be enough left over for their dinner that night. A gentle slithering sound broke into their reveries and a voice near the floor said 'It's a long time since I've seen anything your like round here. Where've you sprung from?'

'Who on earth are you?' asked Con-Fu, looking round to see who'd snuck up on them – there were supposed to be security people to stop curious visitors getting too close, for their own protection – the insurance company had insisted on it.

'Oh, I'm a myth,' said the voice.

'Miss who?' asked Blaellian, glad to think there might be another girl around the place.

'Not mith, myth', said the voice, 'I don't exist. I didn't think you did either, I'm down here, on the floor.'

'Eek!' said Blaellian as with a flap of her wings she leaped on the table, which promptly collapsed under her weight. 'Build the furniture stoutly', the designers had been told, but dancing on it had not been thought of.

'Sorry,' said Con-Fu, 'she's not usually like this, but you are a slightly unexpected sight.'

There on the floor was a long sinuous creature, almost as long from head to tail as Con-fu, but with no limbs except for two long arms ending in great claws, and a head like a dragon's, with two rows of long, glistening teeth.

'If you don't exist, what are you doing here, and what sort of a myth are you? We exist alright – there are so many pictures and statues of us that we must exist. Besides, we wouldn't be here if we didn't, would we?'

'True enough. You're here, so you must exist. So maybe I do too? Though most people don't believe in me, and though I can't be certain, can I?'

'He's a bit weird, isn't he?' whispered Blaellian to Con-Fu.

'Weird did you say? weird am I?' shrieked the voice, who obviously had good hearing whether he existed or not, and had quite lost his lisp with fury. 'If you think I'm weird, wait till you see my friend. He's often confused with me, though I live in the valley and he lives high on the mountains, and we don't look anything like each other. I am the real, genuine Tatzelwurm, and I've been the

only real, genuine Tatzelwurm for the past two thousand years. He's the imitation Tatzelwurm, that's what he is.'

'What's a Tatzelwurm?'

'What's a Tatzelwurm? I'm THE Tatzelwurm, not A Tatzelwurm. A Tatzelwurm's me, that's what a Tatzelwurm is. HE's not a Tatzelwurm even though people say he is. You know what a Wurm is don't you? Fafner's a Wurm – Siegfried said so, but Fafner's got legs, legs like HE has. Wurms don't have legs, do I? I don't have legs, so I'm a Wurm. HE has six legs, so he's not a Wurm even though he has got Tatzeln.'

'I'm getting confused – OK you're a worm because worms don't have legs and he's not a worm because he has got legs, but what's a Tatzel?'

'Don't know what Tatzeln are, and you've got Tatzeln, four on each foot, you've got, and five he'th got, I've only got three, but HE'th got thix legth and he'th got Tatzeln on all of them.'

'Ah', said Con-Fu, 'I'm beginning to get there. Worms don't have legs, but sometimes they have claws and then they may be Tatzelwurms – '

'May be? May be?' broke in the Tatzelwurm, 'I have clawth and I AM the Tatzelwurm.'

'Yes, yes, of course you are, and you're the only real one, and a very nice handsome one, too, and we are very honoured to meet you. How did you find us? By the way, I'm Sion Con-Fu, and this is my wife, Blaellian Sion.'

'Thion Con-Fu, Blaellian Thion, Thion Blaellian, Con-Fu Thion – who'th confuted, me or you?'

'No, no, it's easy. I'm Chinese and we put our last names first, but Blaellian's Welsh and they put their last names last.'

'Latht Welth, firtht Chinethe, I'm the latht Tatzelwurm, and my mother wath the firtht. Nobody knew what we looked like till they were building a tunnel under the Alpth and found where I'd buried her three thouthand yearth ago.'

'I thought you said you were two thousand years old?'

'I did – I am. But I was here for five thouthand yearth before that.'

Con-Fu thought perhaps it was time to change the subject.

'If it's been just you for so long, hasn't it got a bit lonely?'

'Well, yeth, but every onthe in a while we meet, HE and I. He cometh down from hith mountain and I climb up partway and we meet for a chat and have a theep or two together or a couple of pigth. That'th how we get theen occathionally, but who'd believe a farmer who thaid he'd theen a couple of thingth like uth on a dark night? They'd jutht athk how many thnappth he'd had. Tho who are you?'

'We're dragons who've been hired to imitate a cuckoo clock, and we're beginning to think cuckoo's the word,' said Blaellian, laughing at Con-Fu. 'But, as Con-Fu said, how did you find us?'

'Find you? can't mith you with all that racket. Dithturbth the countryside for mileth around, it doeth. And you're married, you thaid? How long for?'

'Two weeks and five days', said Blaellian, smiling at Con-Fu.

'Two weekth, and you're thtill married? it's not me that'th weird. My mother wath married for thix hourth and that wath quite enough for her. Anyway it wath good to meet you. I'll drop in occathionally if I may, and we can thare a theep or a touritht. We myth must thtick together, you know, or people won't believe we don't exitht,' and with a quick slither, or maybe it wath a thlither, he was gone through a small crack in the floor – it didn't look wide enough to take him, but clearly it had, and as soon as he was gone, it closed up behind him.

'Well, that's a good start', said Con-Fu. 'He really was a weird one, whatever he said about his friend. I wonder how many other surprises we're going to get. Bears may come over from Bern to meet us, and I suppose we'll have to treat them politely and let them go home again. It'll be nice to see the gnomes when they come over from Zurich, and then we can thank them for all their help to my family. But you never know what else may appear, just so long as we don't get flocks of cuckoos protesting about being put out of work.'

Chapter 5 – Cadwallader in Arizona

Cadwallader had an easy journey to Arizona. The initial worries about crossing the Atlantic were allayed by an introduction through an Irish friend to St Brendan. ‘Indeed and indeed, one mythological figure should help another, sure we should,’ he said. He arranged a chain of blest isles so that each day’s flight would not be too long for a young dragon to manage and provided an email address so that Cadwallader could get in touch direct for the return journey.

Once he had touched down in Newfoundland, Cadwallader could follow the Viking route to Rhode Island, where the managers of DaysofOldeland had arranged accommodation for a few days rest before the trans-continental journey, and while they finished his new home. The original idea of nesting on the transplanted London Bridge had had to be abandoned. The swarms of visitors they hoped a dragon would attract would obstruct traffic across the bridge (even if it wasn’t going anywhere) and it would be difficult to find space for Cadwallader’s living accommodation and for all the spin-off stalls they wanted to put round him. A much better solution would be to build him into their new rival to Disneyland, where visitors (male) could spend some days as knights of old, when nights were bold, and their damsels could learn the dulcimer and languish under the gaze of troubadours paid by the hour to improvise lays of admiration. The project, and Cadwallader’s inclusion, was still a secret and the landscape of Rhode Island, small as the state was, would be ideal as a resting place, they thought, in case of any fire hazard, and it was far enough off the beaten track to avoid any premature publicity.

The rest of the journey would be at night for safety and secrecy. They wouldn’t need to provide him with a map to get across to Arizona, because their flying club would escort him all the way. They would know where all the radar sites were, so there was no risk that he’d be mistaken for a UFO, nor for an Al-Qaeda suicide mission and they made sure that even if he wanted to do some sight-seeing they would avoid Washington and other famous spots for the time being. Once he’d arrived and been interviewed in all the papers and appeared on the Today show, he’d be famous and he could go sight-seeing then. Meanwhile he was secret and should stay that way. There were plenty of forests and National Parks where he could hide during the day, and they were full of deer that he could snack on. Cadwallader had been a bit doubtful about finding his way unescorted, so he was happy to hear that they had decided to bring over a posse of microlights to escort him – it would be better security anyway, because with a flock of them round him, he’d just look like one of the swarm and would confound the radar better.

When Cadwallader and his companions arrived in Arizona he found that DaysofOldeland was almost ready for its grand festival opening. A walled town full of mediæval houses and taverns

with, in one corner, a castle with a noble keep rising from a small mountain. Round the mountain was a walled bailey with a tiltyard and space for training grounds in all the knightly skills and pursuits. Within the keep were banqueting halls where feasts of oxen and boars (so described on the menus engrossed on vellum, though once cooked who could tell them from the steers and hogs they really were?), roasted whole on spits, which could be washed down with flagons of ale, mead and sack. Higher up were solars where the damsels could listen to the troubadours singing their songs of courtly love.

The town was carefully divided to suit all tastes. One quarter was for the really enthusiastic mediævalist with cannels in the cobbled streets flowing with carefully sterilized and hygienic sewage. The houses had floors of artificial mud, with plastic fireproof straw on top (changed daily while the tourists slept). Lighting was by rush dips and candles carefully made to ensure that they emitted no carcinogenic fumes. Skilfully placed refrigeration units combated the prevailing summer heat and sent the chill blasts of authenticity whistling through the glassless windows and round the residents' ankles. The plank beds had straw palliasses and the chairs had flat oak-plank seats.

This quarter was the smallest, and all save the hardiest and the most enthusiastic for mediæval life tended to move into the next quarter after a few days.

This quarter was rather larger. It looked much the same as the first, but the cobbles were nice and flat and the cannels were dry. Windows were glazed to avoid draughts, tapestries hung on the walls and lay on the floors, the rush dips and candles were powered by electricity. Beds had cord suspension and imitation straw, made of rubber tube, mattresses; chairs, some still flat-seated but with goose-down cushions, and others of cloth suspended from the sides like camp chairs. Everything was designed to suit those who liked the idea of being mediæval but without the accompanying hardships.

Most of the rest of the town was fitted up with all the comforts of modern life, the kitchens with electrically-powered spits revolving in front of gas-powered imitation wood fires. Visitors there could enjoy a five-star mediæval life with properly sprung mattresses on four-poster beds with proper duvets, nice armchairs, and the normal in-room bars and refrigerators.

A long and easily defended zigzag path ascended the castle mount, though of course federal laws of access to all dictated that there should be an internal elevator for those pedestrianally challenged. This was easily arranged, for the mountain was artificial and contained the powerhouse and all the other facilities which made DaysofOldeLand viable.

A small rocky hill outside the town contained a well-fitted cavern, labelled The Dragon's Den, with all the comforts and conveniences that Cadwallader could desire. Close to it was the area where damsels could be held captive until rescued by bold knights. Cadwallader was a bit worried

about this until he was shown the telescopically collapsible lances with padded tips and soft plastic swords which would be provided to the rescuers. Bows and arrows, crossbows and arbalests with their quarrels, would be strictly prohibited. He was assured that nobody would be allowed to come across the bridge from the neighbouring WildWestLand – the two holiday areas, which were under joint management, would be kept strictly separate, though he, like other members of staff, would be welcome to visit to and fro in his off-duty hours. Anyway all the carefully reproduced Frontier Model six-shooters could fire nothing more lethal than paint-filled pellets, and the paint was guaranteed by the suppliers as non-toxic and washable.

His cavern was of course fully flame-proof against any risk of accident. Though Wendy had had to provide a certificate that he was fully house-trained, there was always the risk of indigestion and hot-burps, especially after a Mexican dinner. The management specifically required, citing the local fire regulations, that all bursts of flame (a contractual requirement when damsels were in peril) should be directed away from the mountain and should be no more than eight feet long. Cadwallader was to be available to captivate damsels from 10.00 am to 12.00 pm and 8.00 to 10.00 pm five days a week, with provision for extra matinee performances, when required, at generous overtime rates.

Days of Olde Land was a success from the beginning and the presence of a real, live dragon drew the public like a magnet. Cadwallader found that he needed to keep to a high calorific diet to be able to imperil all the damsels who queued up to be rescued by their intrepid swains. Of course all the horses kept for their use on these occasions had been well-trained and had established friendly relations with Cadwallader. Things were sometimes more fraught when a customer insisted on using his own horse, and several damsels were left chained to their rock much longer than expected when steeds bolted, somewhat singed, carrying the swearing knight miles into the desert, much to the annoyance of those still standing in the queue.

Cadwallader enjoyed his days off, usually spending them with the professional cowpersons who looked after the visitors at the neighbouring WildWestLand. They were everything he had hoped for when he had persuaded Wendy to let him go so far away. Most of them came from neighbouring ranches and their ‘enemies’, who rode whooping round them, dressed up in feather bonnets, really were First Persons. They had their own village of buffalo-skin teepees where they greeted visitors with pipes of peace and sold them plastic tomahawks and other traditional artefacts, mostly imported from China. Both cowpersons and Injuns enjoyed the company of a genuine Welsh Dragon just as much as Cadwallader enjoyed theirs.

Because they were all from the area and knew the roads and trails, the cowpersons and Injuns made up what local police force there was, with a sheriff appointed by the company running the two attractions and authorised to appoint deputies and raise posses as required.

‘Just like the old days’, thought Cadwallader. ‘Please can I join you?’ he asked the sheriff.

‘How can you help?’ the sheriff replied, ‘You can’t ride or drive, and you can’t shoot.’

‘No, but I can fly, and I’ve a built-in flame thrower!’

Cadwallader proved his worth on several occasions. He was just as useful as a spotter plane would have been, and he carried a mobile phone so that he could direct the land-forces towards the fugitives. The sight of a dragon diving towards them belching fire and brimstone took all the fight out of them.

He was also ideal for search and rescue when idiots went out walking and got lost, or fell off their horse out of sight of the camps. He was so successful at searching and rescuing that the Days of Olde Land management agreed to let him drop whatever he was doing, whenever there was an emergency call-out, even if a knight was just about to spear him and rescue his damsel. The knight was consoled with a special ‘Rescuer’s Assistant’ medal and a free second turn.

Cadwallader kept secret the reasons for his success. He had made other friends as well as the cowpersons and the First Persons. The local eagles saw everything and since idiot tourists were too big to eat, they had no objection to telling Cadwallader where they were. In return, Cadwallader shared his coyote picnics with them and they acquired quite a taste for barbecued coyote instead of rotted. It was just as tender and they liked the smokey flavour. The only problem was that after one small boy had wandered off and then got a free ride home on Cadwallader's back, plus his photo in the local paper and on television, with his arms round the dragon’s neck, other boys started to lose themselves on purpose. After the first three, Cadwallader decided to make the next one walk home, with occasional puffs of flame at his feet to keep him moving at the trot, so word got round that the game wasn’t worth the candle.

One morning, at six o’clock, there was a heavy knock on his door and a loud shout, ‘Gid out of there!’

‘Mrrrr, who’s there?’ mumbled Cadwallader, still more or less asleep.

‘Gid out or I’ll come and git you out.’

Cadwallader stumbled to the door, rubbing his eyes, and looked out. There was a huge dragon, twice his size, with muscles bunching ominously under his scales and smoke spurting from his nostrils.

‘Awwk, who are you?’ squeaked Cadwallader in alarm.

‘It’s who are you I wanna know,’ roared his visitor. ‘What’s all this crap about you being the Arizona dragon?’

‘Well, I am, that’s what they hired me for, but who are you?’

‘I’m the only dragon from round here, and I don’ want young squeaks like you lousing up my territory.’

‘But they said there weren’t any dragons here, that’s why they brought me over here.’

‘Brought you over? Who brought you over and where from?’ The visitor was getting angrier and angrier and looking fiercer than ever.

‘I come from Wales...’

‘Whales? Whass that? You don’ look like you come outer the sea.’

‘Not whales, Wales, part of Britain.’

‘A bloody Brit, are you? We don’ want Brits round here. Americans, we are,’ he said, pointing to the little American flag pinned to his chest. ‘We don’ need no foreigners here. We got real red-blooded American dragons here an’ we’re gonna keep it thatta way.’

‘But they told me there weren’t any American dragons.’

‘Lotta crap that is. I’m here, I’m American, I’m a dragon, what more d’ya want?’

‘But where’ve you been? How come nobody knows you’re here?’

‘Wal,’ he said more peaceably, ‘I don’ show m’self much, not since all these white honchos come over the prairies. Mebbe they don’ know I’m here.’

‘Well, now you are here, come in and have some coffee and some breakfast.’

‘Breakfust? At this hour? Sun’s been up f’r hours, wadda ya doin’ still asleep mid-mornin?’

‘I was up late playing poker with the guys over the road and I don’t have to show myself till 10.00 am. That’s in my contract.’

‘Conrac’ you have? We’ll look at that. But coffee’d go down nice.’

So in he came, filling most of the cavern with his bulk.

‘That’s no way to make coffee,’ he said as Cadwallader spooned some powdered coffee into two mugs. ‘Didn’t yore ma teach you better’n that?’

‘Yes she did. But it’s difficult to get decent beans here, and this is easier.’

‘Difficult is it? I got friends in Colombia, ’n i’ll git you some over.’

‘Oh, that would be kind. I am getting a bit tired of this stuff, but it’s all they keep in the store here.’

‘No trouble, good to help a pal any time.’

Cadwallader was much relieved to be called a pal, and he hastened to put a pound or two of bacon and a couple of dozen eggs into a pan.

When they'd eaten and the visitor had put a large wad of tobacco into his mouth and was chewing contentedly, Cadwallader said,

'So who are you? My name's Cadwallader and I've been here for six months so that idiots can dress up as knights in armour from the Middle Ages and pretend to rescue their wives that I've pretended to capture. At least I suppose they're their wives but they usually look a lot younger than the knights.'

'Nights? We don't have nights in armor here, we only have nights when the sun goes down. We don't have armor, neither, nor no Middle Ages, whe're they?'

'The Middle Ages were five hundred years ago in Europe, and knights were men on horses who fought in wars and rescued damsels in distress – damsels were young ladies, so I suppose that's why they always bring young ones with them.'

'Wal five hunnered years ago all we had here was my Injun friends, and they didn't have no armor, no knights neither, an' they didn't have no hosses then, neither, tho' plenty of young wimmen, and nice they was and still is. So mebbe you do have a job to do, tho' any red-blooded American would rescue wimmen in distress, 'specially if they was young and pretty.'

'But you still haven't told me who you are and where you came from.'

'My name's Rex, 'cause I'm boss of all the dragons hereabouts, an' I bin here for always. I remember when men first came over up north. Thin and scraggy, they was, barely a mouthful, but they went on comin' an' spread down south, down Mexico way, and beyond till all the prairies was full of them and started to live off the buffalo. Hardly one of them left now.'

'I thought it was the white men that killed off the buffalo?'

'Wal, yes it was, when they began to build their railways, killed off most of the Injuns too, but the Injuns made a good start, eating the buffalo and wearing their skins, and I hadda travel further to git a good meal. But the Injuns learned to herd them for me when I was hungry, did it to stop me eating them instead, once they saw their arrows just bounced offa me. Different when the white men came. Their bullets bounced off, too, but they left nasty bruises and dented my scales, so I went off into the Bad Lands where they'd not find me, and I lived off coyot's and wolves and such, and what my Injun friends left out for me. *They* knew where I was alright, and they knew I was a friend. I scared some of the whites, alright, too. Scorched the pants off one, and was he wild? Tried to send me a bill for new ones but didn't get him nowhere. A real hick he was, built like an ox.'

'But why didn't the Indians tell me about you? I wouldn't have come here if I'd known.'

'Wal, they got their secrets, and me, I'm just one of 'em. There's a whole lot the whites don't know about the Injuns, an' they're not gonna tell them, neither. There's things live in the woods that

only they know about, an' they wouldn' tell you about them, neither. Big feet, some of them got, but keep well away from whites, they do.'

'I've heard of them, but most people don't believe in them. They say they're just a legend.'

'Wal, they call us just a legend, too, don' they? Reckon we legends should stick together and keep other peoples' noses outa our bizness.'

'True enough, my mother sometimes says the same, but she lives among them on a hill just outside a town, so she gets on with them alright, and my brothers and sister live among them, too, and so do I here. There are so many crowds of them in Europe, and in China, too, where my brother-in-law comes from, that it's become easier to try to get on with them and live off them, like I do here. They feed me and they pay me well, so I'm happy here. But I would like to meet some of your legendary friends.'

'I'll talk to them and see what they say. Might like to meet another legend from Yurope, show 'em they're not as alone as they thought they were.'

'Oh, do please. And now perhaps you'd better hide yourself because it's nearly time I was on call.'

'Hidin's easy,' he said, and in a puff of smoke he'd vanished.

'Oh, come back a moment, please. How do I find you again?'

'I'll find you', said a voice from nowhere, 'but any time you really need me, just rub these two stones together,' as two large stones dropped on the floor at Cadwallader's feet.

'Rubbing the stones together might produce more interesting results than rubbing two sticks, or two boy scouts, together to make a fire,' thought Cadwallader. After all he could make a fire any time he wanted to, but he couldn't make a dragon, or not unless he had a female one to help him. Maybe his new friend did know a few female dragons – 'That would be nice,' he said aloud, to be startled by a grim snort from behind him.

Cadwallader went on captivating damsels for several weeks, becoming more and more bored with the whole enterprise, boredom alleviated by only one rescue mission, when a tourist from the East Coast, who had strayed further than usual from the resort, walked straight into a rattlesnake – he hadn't recognised the warning rattle for what it was.

Cadwallader roared into the air, for he had been warned earlier of the need for speed on such an occasion, leaping up in to the air so fast that the knight, who was about attack him, nearly speared his damsel by mistake. He grabbed the startled tourist in his claws, and rushed for the nearest hospital, which had been warned of his coming. He was met on the landing ground by a group of doctors, who injected the man with anti-venom. The man quickly recovered and was conveyed,

more sedately by taxi, back to the resort. There he gratefully presented the rescue service with a large wad of dollars.

Next day, the rescue service's boss, the sheriff, and the chief director of the resort held a special ceremony, attended by all the guests, presenting Cadwallader with a handwritten certificate on vellum for his quick and successful response to the emergency. Cadwallader proudly hung it on the wall of his cave and described it and the ceremony in an email to Wendy.

He told her about his visitor, too, and she skyped him back, wondering where his visitor had sprung from.

'Was he a left over from the time of the dinosaurs?' she asked.

'Could be. His name is Rex, and he seems something of a tyrant,' replied Cadwallader, 'but he's not at all fierce, despite his big teeth once you know him.'

'Tyrant, am I?' came a voice.

'Oh, Mam, here he is,' exclaimed Cadwallader in some alarm at having been overhead. 'Rex, this is my mother, Wendy.'

'Pleased to meet you, ma'am,' said Rex, clearly on his best behaviour at seeing Wendy on the screen.

'How d'you do,' said Wendy, 'thank you for being kind to my little boy.'

'Not so little, ma'am. An' he seems nicely brung up for a younker. Polite to his elders and giving a good service to his fellows.'

'So who are you and how long have you been there?'

'Bin here as long's I can remember, ma'am. Once there was many of us, but some we ate an' some just died off. Very dark it was for a few years, an' they just up and died, big an' with long necks tho' they was. But I were always ornery, ma'am, an' me, I jes' kep' goin', an' here I still am. The Injuns kep' feeding me for I kep' the bears down so they wouldn' eat their kids, 'n I just kep' goin'.

'Well, I'm glad to have met you. Keep an eye on my boy, please, and see that he doesn't get into any trouble.'

'He's alright an' can look after himself. He's doin' good, but I'll keep an eye on him, never fear.'

Wendy signed off and Rex turned to Cadwallader.

'Would you like to meet some of my frien's?'

Rex asked.

'Oh yes, please. it's my afternoon off, that's why I'm indoors and talking to my mother.'

'Then come with me into th' woods and we'll see who we can find'.

They came to the banks of a muddy stream in the middle of the woods and Rex saw a footprint in the mud.

‘Ah, now that looks Bill an’ fairly recent, too.’

‘Biiiiill,’ he called. ‘It’s Rex here. By the stream.’

A sloshing sound could be heard, getting closer through the woods, and a giant, hairy figure came into view.

‘Aargh, wot’s that wi’ yer?’ it called, as it hesitated to come any nearer.

‘It’s OK, another legend like us, an’ a friend. Meet Cadwallader. he’s a dragon from Europe.’

‘Never see’d a dragon – heard of ’em, tho’.

‘Well, here one is. he’s harmless even if he smokes too much.’

‘Smoke’s no worse ner chawin’, and he donna spit like you.’

‘Well, spittin’s no worse nor splashing aroun’ wi’ big feet like you do.’

‘Each to his own, each to his own. We’m all got our habits.’

‘True enough. Any more frien’s around?’

‘Nah, saw yore daughter month or so back, but seen nothin’ since.’

Cadwallader pricked his ears up when he heard a daughter mentioned, but then he looked at Rex and thought perhaps a young tyrannosaur, even if female, might be too much of a good thing. Rex caught his glance, guessed what he was thinking, and grinned sardonically.

‘Not much use to you, boy,’ he said. ‘You’ll have to stay on your lonesome here. They call me a dragon, but we’re not the same sort as you.’

‘No, I suppose not, but you might introduce me to her if she ever appears round here. The cowgirls are too interested in the cowboys to look at me, and the knights look after their damsels too well. There was one, came down one evening, but her knight came down after her and took a pot shot at me with his pistol, so I dropped her and ran.’

‘Sensible thing to do. Even for me, don’ do no good to argue with a pistol. But if we see Claudie I’ll call her. You might find her too much of dragon, tho’, she’s almost as big as me and fiercer with them she don’ like. Bites their head off, she does, and spits ’em out. Soun’s like someone comin’, mebbe we better go.’

Bill vanished back into the trees and Rex and Cadwallader made their way back towards the resort.

‘Goodbye, and thank you very much for taking me to meet Bill. I’ll know whereabouts to find him another time.’

‘Shouldn’ go off by yourself into the woods. If you go down to the woods today, you never know what you’ll see, and some of ’em are fiercer than Bill. Could eat you up in moment.’

‘Alright, I’ll be careful and wait for you to take me again. Bye for now and thanks again.’

Chapter 6 – Daffoddyll in Scotland

One day, just as Wendy was dropping off to a nice after-lunch nap, she heard someone at the door and there was her daughter Daffoddyll.

‘Oh Mam, how nice and peaceful it is, it is here’, she said, ‘back for a rest I had to come, indeed I did. So noisy it is in my valley. Yak, yak, yak, all the time, not a cow to be seen, just a few sheep, nothing but yaks. And the monks talk to the nuns and the nuns to the monks and the monks to each other and the nuns to each other, yak, yak, yak, and not a word can I understand, and not a word of Welsh can they speak, and the children running around and flying kites all day. Pigeons they keep and whistles they tie to their tails, so yakking and whistling all the time it is.’

‘But why haven’t you learned Chinese?’ Wendy asked. ‘Your sister and Con-fu talk to each other all the time.’

‘Blaellian’s clever, not like me, not like me at all,’ said Daffoddyll sulkily, and anyway look you Con-fu cheats. A girlfriend from Scotland once he had, indeed to goodness, look you, so some English he can speak as well as having the Gaelic. Let me stay for a while, Mam, please, pretty please?’

Wendy was kind at heart, and it was nice to see her daughter again for a while.

‘Not for long’, she said, ‘not unless you’ve brought some yak with you. They’re getting a bit tight on food down at Llanddraig. How are they treating you in your valley?’

‘OK it is, though boring after a while is yak for lunch, buttered oatmeal for tea, yak again for dinner and buttered oatmeal tea again for breakfast. All they grow is oats for oatmeal and porridge, and barley for whisky, and turnips and neeps and neeps and turnips, boring it is, Mam, boring it is. Luckily never sure how many children they have they are, and makes an occasional treat that does, a change from yaks, for there aren’t enough vegetables for me to stay vegetarian up there. But every day they come and my feet they look at indeed, and my toes they count. Only four, they say, still only four.’

‘How many do they expect?’ asked Wendy.

‘Don’t you remember, look you? When they came, look after the Imperial dragons they said they used to. Five toes they have, not four like us, Imperial five-clawed dragons they were, and polishing the five claws on each foot was their task. Little dogs they have, like baby lions, and they use them to polish with. Forbidden I am to eat the dogs or even to huff at them when they yap. Royal dogs from Peking they say they are.’

So Daffoddyll stayed for a peaceful rest on Pendragon Hill, the only noises to disturb her the rooks as they circled round the trees below and the children at playtime in the school yards. One day a month later a trample of feet, a lowing of yaks, and a jangle of yak bells was heard.

‘Come, we have come, come to follow you, we have followed you, come to bring you back we have come. You can fly but we must walk, a month it has taken us to walk, for slowly yaks walk, but now we have come, and back with us you go.’

‘Oh mother must I?’ pleaded Daffoddyll.

‘What did we agree?’ asked Wendy, ‘I can’t remember.’

‘Turquoises’ said the chief monk, ‘her weight in turquoises, coral, and lapis her weight, and on them you are sitting, so back with us she must go.’

Wendy loved the blue and red stones and they made a nice crinkly surface to sit on and kept her scales well scraped. She wasn’t going to give them back in a hurry, but even right up on the top of her hill she could hear what Daffoddyll meant. A compromise was going to be necessary.

‘My Daffoddyll is a sensitive child,’ she started to explain, ‘loud noises frighten her and worry her, and she needs variety in her food, good Welsh vegetables like leeks and potatoes, and some sheep so that their wool keeps her stomach warm.’

‘Sheep she can, of course she can have sheep, but not please our children. We have not complained because we wish to keep her, but fifteen of our children she has eaten. How can we be hereditary keepers of the dragon if she eats our children she eats? I ask our people to make more children but they say not to feed dragons will they children make, not to feed dragons at all, at all. Potatoes yes we can give her, special Imperial diet we give her, but Imperial toes she does not grow. But the roofs of our houses leak in the rain they leak, and no more leaks will we grow, leaks enough we have.’

‘Take her back,’ said Wendy, ‘feed her well and give her a house of her own, away from the children so that she is not tempted and so that she does not hear them shrieking, and away from the yaks and the yak, and I will talk about toes to my son-in-law Con-fu and see if he knows some special food for toes.’

So Daffoddyll flew slowly back to the north, taking as long on the journey as she could, stopping for the odd snack on the way. Wendy had given her some cash to placate the farmers for what caught her fancy as she flew over. When she arrived, they gave her a specially green part of the valley, near the lake, where she could be peaceful, surrounded by fields where they could learn to grow leeks and potatoes.

‘Potatoes we know, potatoes we can grow, potatoes we can,’ said the yakkers to each other, ‘but leaks we will not. Ask the village, we must, the village ask.’

Next time they went down to the market to sell their yak wool in exchange for oatmeal, they asked ‘Leaks, how do we grow? Leaks in our roofs we have but not to grow them do we wish.’

‘Leaks we have also; all the boats on the loch leak, but the leaks are in the boats.’

‘Not eat can you the leeks in the boats can you? Our Daffoddyll to eat she wants the leeks.’

‘Eat them? Och, you canna eat them outwith the boats. The boats she can eat if you pay. Send her to look them over and then we see.’

Daffoddyll went along the lake to where the boats were tied up. ‘Leeks,’ she said, ‘leeks, not leaks.’

‘Leeks, not leaks? Och what does the silly wench mean?’ they muttered, and went off to consult the minister, who referred them to the local inspector for the Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Fisheries.

‘Leeks,’ he said with roars of laughter, ‘leeks are vegetables, not leaks, special Welsh vegetables; they grow them in fields between rows of spaghetti’, he said, with more hoots of laughter.

‘Seeds can you get us, seeds for leeks?’ they asked, ‘and for spaghetti, where do we get spaghetti plants?’

‘No, no, I was only teasing. Leeks grow in Wales, so they should grow here. Spaghetti grows in Italy and you need a hot climate for that, otherwise it grows too thick with holes down the middle. Leeks I can find you and licences to grow it I can sell you.’

And so it was arranged and with the seeds came a stock of ready harvested leeks to keep Daffoddyll happy while they grew. The children were set to weeding between the rows of leek and potato plants, a task that they were quite happy with because they didn’t have to stand ankle deep in water with fishes nibbling their toes like they did in the rice paddies at home.

Meanwhile, Daffoddyll found that she liked to watch the sheep nibbling the grass of her fields. She soon learned to shear them for their wool. Five claws might be desirable, but shearing was easier with four because an odd number of claws would make it much more difficult. Soon she had quite an accumulation of raw wool, but what to do with it she wondered? Bits of it stuck to her scales and when the wind blew some of it blew away, which was wasteful and then stuck to the plants and trees which looked untidy.

What did the villagers do with their wool?

She flew down to ask.

‘Och, we wash it, we card it, we spin it, and we weave it. Tweed we make.’

‘Can I learn to do it?’

‘Och, weel, and sure you can. We will show you. A quiet, peaceful job it is.’

Daffoddyll learned how to do it quite easily once the local carpenter had made a spinning wheel of suitable size for her and a loom to match. Weaving was easier for her than for the villagers because she could use all four feet at once, whereas they could use just their hands, and she was soon producing tweed blankets, enough to keep her warm in the frosty nights.

The yakkers' children liked to come and watch her while she was weaving, and she used to sing to them the songs she had learned at home in Llanddraig. She translated the words into English for them, because as they went to the local school in the village they were learning English better than their parents. Sometimes, too, she would tell them stories about her childhood and some of the Welsh legends she had learned from her mother.

Once she had enough for her own purposes, she flew over to the yakkers to see if they would like any of the surplus.

'Robes, our robes, thin and worn they are, thin and worn. With this new ones we can make, new ones we can. Bring us more, more you bring, grateful we will be, grateful. Bless you we will, and more food we will grow, more food for you and more blessing.'

So Daffoddyll found herself much happier, with spinning and weaving to occupy her time, and when she wanted a change of occupation, she enjoyed a stroll down by the lake and flights over its water, admiring the reflection of the surrounding hills in its smooth surface. An occasional dip of her head produced a few fishes with which to vary her diet.

It was a dark and stormy night, a few weeks later, and she thought a good blow would do her good. She was flying slowly down the middle of the lake, heading into a strong west wind, when almost straight in front of her a head surged up from the water.

'If ye canna look where ye're ganging, ye should no be oot alone. And where's yeer lights?'

'Oh indeed to goodness, who're you? And can you speak more clearly?'

'Of course I can – we Scots speak purer English than any of you sassenachs.'

'Sassenachs? what's sassenachs?'

'Sassenach's English, you English from the south.'

'I'm not English – don't you insult me like that – Welsh I am. English indeed, I'll give you English.'

'I wouldn't have them as a gift with a pound of tea. There they are every year, looking for me with telescopes and cameras. Americans are even worse, with depth sounders and diving bells and submarines and underwater television. But they've not found me yet and I'll go on fooling them.'

'But who are you and where do you live?'

'I live here, of course, in the loch. All the locals know me, but they won't give me away to the tourists. They know that they can make more from people looking for me in Loch Ness than they

ever would after I was found. But who are you? You're bigger than the eagles and seagulls I usually see, and much more beautiful, and slower and not as noisy as the planes that roar over the loch.'

Daffoddyll blushed golden and looked more beautiful than ever. 'A dragon I am, look you, a dragon from Wales,' she said, 'live with the yakkers up the end of the valley I do, but Chinese they are, and Welsh am I, come from Wales I do. But dragons they like to look after, they do, and so they ask me to live with them. But do you live always in the water? On land I live, and fly in the sky I do. Never to swim have I tried.'

'Swimming is easy', he said. 'Let yourself in to the water and push gently with your wings. Gently, not too hard, I'll hold you up. Yes, that's the way. Now, if you take a deep breath and follow me, I'll show you my cave. It's right down at the bottom, but once you're in it you can breath again, and I have beautiful pictures there that you can see.'

The yakkers were getting really worried when three days later Daffoddyll reappeared on the shore.

'Oh you look so happy', they said.

'I am, I am, and please fly south again and see my Mam I must. Oh so happy I am, and back I will be before you know I'm gone, I will again, I will.'

And like a streak of lightning or one of those planes that roared over them occasionally frightening all the yaks into stampedes, to the south she vanished.

Into the house she burst.

'Mam, oh Mam, wonderful news I have. So handsome he is and so beautiful he says I am, oh Mam come and meet him, please do come, quickly Mam, back with me please come.'

'Now what on earth have you been up to this time?' asked Wendy. 'First you don't want to go back, and now you want to rush back as soon as you've come, and not even a how are you or a cup of tea.'

'Oh Mam, please, do come, so wonderful he is, please come.'

'Now sit down, child, calm yourself, drink this and eat a bit of cake, and start at the beginning and tell me who he is and where he lives.'

So Daffoddyll told her of her flight over the loch (she wouldn't call it a lake now – there was never a more beautiful loch) and how she met this wonderful being, how handsome he was and how cleverly he had taught her to swim, and how beautiful his pictures were in the cavern at the bottom of the loch, and how good freshly-caught salmon and eels were, and how wonderful had been the three days she had spent there.

'Please Mam, do come and meet him, please come. Beautiful he is, Mam, and beautiful his home. Lovely pictures he has, and Mam, one of them looked just like you, it did.'

‘It did, did it,’ said Wendy. ‘And what was his name, this young man?’

‘Bryan MacHerbert he said. Isn’t it a beautiful name, Mam?’

‘He did, did he. I must have a word with this young man.’

‘Oh Mam, I know you’ll like him, you will, you will. When can we go? Please? Pretty please?’

‘We’re going now, and I’ll tell him a thing or two, this young man of yours.’

‘Oh Mam, tell him you like him, please Mam.’

And off they went, straight up the west coast, up above the clouds where they’d not be seen, till they got up to Daffoddyll’s valley and came out over the loch. Wendy folded her wings and zipped straight into the water without needing to be shown where to go, which surprised Daffoddyll, who was much clumsier in her dive, leaving a large splash and circle of white water behind her. Straight into the cave she shot, leaving her daughter lumbering behind, and confronted a startled Bryan.

‘Right, young man,’ she said, ‘what have you been up to?’

‘I, I haven’t d-done anything?’ he stammered. ‘Who are you?’

‘You know who I am, or if you don’t, look at that wall there,’ she replied, pointing grimly to where one of the pictures hung. ‘Where’s your father got to?’

‘My f-father? what’s he got to do with this?’

‘You’ll find out, and so will he. Where is he?’

‘He’s over in the States, cruising the Great Lakes. He likes to be seen there from time to time. Eerie, the local people think him.’

‘Up to that again, is he? Well, you’d better get him back here smartish. Email or text him straight away and tell him to come back right now.’

‘Mam, what’s going on, Mam? please tell me. Don’t you like Bryan, Mam? Nice he is, and kind. He only asked me to come and see his pictures, he did.’

‘He did, did he. And you fell for an old line like that! I thought I’d brought you up better than that, my girl. And where did you get all this Mam nonsense? ‘Mother’ was good enough for you and Mummy when you were small, until last year.’

‘Oh Mam, you know that was Roger apWilliams. Welsh he is, and Welsh we spoke every day.’

‘Roger, who was Roger?’ asked Bryan.

‘Oh, just somebody I used to know, just a friend at home in Llanddraig,’ said Daffoddyll, blushing a deep red which clashed badly with her normal yellow colour.

‘Oh was he. And how well did you know him?’ said Bryan in a rather nasty voice.

‘That’s enough of that, both of you. What I want to know is when is Bert going to get here?’

‘How did you know my father’s name is Herbert?’

‘How d’you think?’ said Wendy with a grim chuckle.

Communications being what they are nowadays, it wasn't long before a surge in the water outside announced the arrival of someone a good bit larger and heavier than Bryan.

'What's all this, and what did you have to interrupt my trip and bring me back here for? Can't I ever leave you on your own without you getting into trouble and having to shout for me? Why Wendy, my poppet, what on earth are you doing here? And who's this charming young lady?' as he looked round and realized that he wasn't alone with his son.

Daffoddyll looked all of a heap at hearing her mother addressed as 'my poppet' – what on earth had been going on? Surely her mother was too old to be called anybody's poppet?

'This, my love, is your son trying to get off with my daughter. Like father, like son, eh? What have you been teaching him all these years?'

'Good taste, I should think, just like his father's and his mother's, wouldn't you?'

'Well, yes, maybe. But it seems you haven't taught him enough, have you? Shall we sit them down and tell them a thing or two?'

'Maybe we'd better. Sit down you two, stop holding hands, and listen to us. A while back, young lady, another dragon came cruising round here. She was young then, and beautiful, which she still is, and I was young, too, and she said I was handsome. One thing led to another, and what those things led to was Bryan here. She left him here with me as an egg, and eventually, a few thousand years later, and one year when I was feeling a bit lonely, I decided to hatch him, and here he is, a handsome young man. There's his mother's portrait up on the wall to prove it, and here's her son beside you. You can see that he has miniature wings beside his fins. He takes after his father more than he does after his mother, I'm glad to say since he lives here, but he's got her beautiful eyes. So history repeats itself, and her daughter falls for my son, but he's her son, too, so I hope you've not been up to anything together?'

'No we haven't. He said he'd like to show me his pictures, and he did, so nicely he did, and we had a lovely time together, but he never did anything he shouldn't even when I wished he would. He's been a perfect gentleman,' said Daffoddyll, bursting into tears.

'Now come on, love, settle down, calm down now. All's well and you've met a brother, different enough from your other brothers to be a friend, and you can visit him here, and he can slip ashore when it's dark, and visit you there, so you won't be lonely with yaks any more. I'll tell the chief yakherd that fish is another thing that you ought to eat, and then he won't be surprised when you come down and spend time by the lake. Perhaps he'll build you another small house here, right by the water, so Bryan can come and visit you more easily.'

‘Oh mother, yes please. It won’t be the same but it will still be nice to have a sister, won’t it Bryan? Do let’s go and choose a nice place to build it where nobody will see you and try to take photographs of you.’

‘Well, we’ll have to see whether they settle down like that,’ said Wendy to Bert once they were alone. ‘I don’t have a lot of hope, do you?’

‘We’ll see. Not the end of the world if they don’t. We’re different enough, Nessie and dragon, that it won’t do too much harm – not like people, after all. I think they’d be happier if we leave them to sort themselves out in their own way, and anyway I’d like to get back to the Lakes.’

‘Oh yes? I know you, Bert. Who is she?’

‘A nixie, very charming in her own way, though she’s a bit young, only a century or two, and anyway you’re not one to talk, are you?’

‘Maybe not, maybe not, but Bert, I do think you should have told Bryan who he was, or at least who that picture was.’

‘Perhaps I should, but I never expected to see you again. A gull told me you’d gone off to Turkey. But now you’re back, why not stay for a while?’

‘What’s the point if you’re going off to the Lakes to join your nixie?’

‘Hmm, maybe she can wait a while and grow up a bit. It can be exhausting having someone so young around, always wanting entertainment, and where can you find dances and pop concerts at the bottom of Lake Erie? It means floating around just below the surface listening to music from boats and the shore, and that’s no fun, trying to keep just under water with waves bouncing up and down and fishermen trying to see what they can catch. Come on, let’s go off and see if there’s any sturgeon left – do you still like caviar?’

Sturgeons there were, and caviar in plenty.

‘So there was no urgency to go home was there?’ thought Wendy, and Bert was clearly in no hurry to get back to his nixie either. It was warm enough in the cave at the bottom of the loch, whatever the weather might be up top. The only question was, what sort of example would they be setting the kids? Well, if they didn’t know the facts of life by now, it was time they did, and at least there were plenty of rooms so if they were careful, whatever they did mightn’t be too obvious.

‘Let’s get the children sorted out, with the new house for Daffoddyll,’ said Wendy, ‘then we can be peaceful down here without them being underfoot all the time.’

So she flew up to talk to the chief yakherd.

‘Could you please build Daffoddyll a new house by the loch?’

‘Another house, again a house? Always a house we build, every week a house why again a house?’

‘Fishes are good for her to eat and if she has a house by the lake she can catch them more easily.’

‘Close to the lake, close already she is, close enough. But if closer still the house must be closer, closer we move the house. Quicker than build the house again than build.’

The chief called to the yakkers.

‘Yaks you bring, bring all the yaks, bring the yaks here. Ropes you bring, many ropes, long ropes you bring.’

Soon all the yaks were assembled and long yak-hide ropes were tied round the house and then to the yaks’ harnesses.

‘Pull, now pull, pull, pull.’

As they started to pull and the house began to slide across the grass, Daffoddyll burst out of the door.

‘Oh Mam, an earthquake it is, killed we shall be, and Bryan inside he is, and cannot come out in case seen he is.’

‘Don’t be silly, child. They’re only moving the house nearer the loch for you, to make it easier for Bryan to come and go. Go in and tell him what is happening, and lie down on the floor inside and then you’ll be safe.’

She did wonder whether this was sensible advice in the circumstances, for she remembered some fun in an earthquake once before, but with luck they’d be too young and inexperienced to think of such an activity.

Once the yaks were hock deep in the loch, the house looked close enough to the water for Bryan to be able to get to and fro with little risk of being seen on a dark night, so she called to the yakherds to stop at that.

‘Thank you very much,’ she said, ‘that should make it easy for Daffoddyll to go fishing.’ Fishing for what? she wondered.

Once all the yakkers had gone away, after untying their ropes, she went into the house.

‘Are you alright there?’ she asked.

‘Oh yes, Mam, and the house right on the loch it is now. Easy it will be for Bryan to visit me and for me to go and see him. Thank you, Mam, thank you, so kind to me you are.’

‘Well, thank the yakkers too, next time you see them, and take the yaks something they would like to eat, for they worked hard for you. And now that it’s getting dark, let’s all go an see what Bert has got us for supper.’

Back into the loch they went, where Bert had set out a good supper of haggis with whisky for Wendy and himself and something lighter for the youngsters.

‘Oh, Mam, happy will Bryan and me be, now. So good to me just now, he was. So wonderful he was, so kind and gentle. Oh, Mam, so happy I am.’

‘Well, it didn’t take them long, Bert, did it?’ said Wendy. ‘Let’s chase them back there so they can enjoy themselves and then let’s have another whisky, and I’ll stay for a few days before I need to get back to Llanddraig and you to your nixie.’

Chapter 7 – Wendy in Shunnam

Wendy decided that it was time for a little European tour to visit Blaellian and Con-fu and see whether their time-bound life was suiting them, having to clock on every day. Maybe Con-fu would have some magic recipe for growing extra toes, or have some old great-aunt back home who was into that sort of magic.

She was anxious, too, to call on Gwyndywr to see how he was doing on his rock and she decided to go there first. She had been concerned about him at the wedding. There he was, surrounded by all the prettiest young lady dragons and he seemed to take no interest in any of them, though they all seemed interested enough in him.

She sent word down to the post office to hold any letters for her, and to the mayor to say where she was going and wouldn't need any food for the time being and, much to the relief of the good people of Llandraig, took off into the evening sky. Night flights were best; she could see the lights of any aeroplanes in time to avoid them, and they couldn't see her. Luckily the overlapping pattern of her scales scattered radio waves so that she was even less visible to radar than the best American stealth patterns. Flying through Heathrow air-space from Wales to Germany would be a bit tricky otherwise. She arrived in time for breakfast next day.

'Why mother, how very nice to see you,' said Gwyndywr. 'Why didn't you tell me you were coming? I'd have tidied up a bit.'

Wendy looked with some disapproval at the scatter of dirty dishes and the packs of playing cards lying about.

'Doesn't anyone come up to tidy things?' she asked. 'I thought there was some arrangement that they would.'

'Well, yes, there was, but the last one they sent was very plump and quite young, and there'd been a shortage of lone tourists for a while, and I'm afraid I rather forgot myself. Since then, they've been a bit reluctant to send anyone, and I thought that as it was rather my fault, I'd better wait and let them forget what happened before I complained.'

'And what are all these cards, boy?'

'Well, mother, it does get a bit lonely up here, especially as the Lorelei has gone off on holiday to visit the Sirens. So I've been playing cards with my friend below. That's why there's so many cards – I have to have his hand as well as my own, and he has mine as well as his. He won't come back up here, and sometimes he won't let me get down to him, so we have to tell each other what cards we play. Same with chess and draughts – he tells me his moves and I tell him mine, and we each move each other's men on our own boards.'

‘And who wins?’ asked Wendy. ‘I don’t suppose you play for apples.’

‘For apples play we do not. Not even for the golden apples of the Hesperides play do we. For money we play and I that wins it is. For schnapps, too, we play, and his next six barrels of schnapps to me they come.’

‘Who’s that?’ asked Wendy.

‘My friend below,’ said Gwyndywr. ‘I don’t know his name – all he will tell me is that he went down there to hide from a young man with a special sword and any wanderers.’

‘My name better it is you do not know. What not you know, not you tell. Here happy I am.’

‘My friend, this is my mother, Wendy, who has come to visit us.’

‘My friend’s mother, welcome you are. A good son you have, kind to an old dragon he is and well he plays. Honest, too, he is and careful to share what from tourists he wins and from the village he gets. A good boy you have.’

Gwyndywr blushed with pleasure to hear such praise, which of course he had never received direct.

‘A Wendy once I knew, young she was and beautiful,’ the subterranean voice went on. ‘My name still I do not tell, but that Wendy forget I never shall. More beautiful than the dawn she was, the fairest of all the dragons.’

‘Why mother, you’ve gone quite pink,’ said Gwyndywr.

‘Well, that’s quite enough of that,’ said Wendy, ‘and if you’re who I think you are, quite a lad yourself you were, Faffy. We’d neither of us like my boy to hear too many stories of the old days, would we? Maybe we can have a quiet chat again, later. Meanwhile, I’m very glad to hear such good report of my Gwyndywr, but who is this Lorelei you mentioned?’

‘Oh mother, she is so beautiful, so wonderful,’ said Gwyndywr, blushing harder than ever, ‘and she sings so beautifully. She lives on a rock in the middle of the river, just beyond the bend down there, and so many people come to hear her. She tells me that her Mediterranean cousins, the Sirens, sing even more beautifully, and know lots more songs. She only sings one song, but I’m sure she sings it more beautifully than anyone else could, and Mother, she is so beautiful and talks so well. I hope she comes back from the south while you’re still here so that you can meet her and see how wonderful she is.’

Wendy began to be seriously worried. If Gwyndywr was infatuated with this watery wench, how could she marry him off to a suitable young dragoness? No good thinking of any of his new Chinese relations. If they hadn’t attracted him at the wedding, they weren’t likely to now. Where were the most beautiful dragons, and how could she get in touch with them? Maybe Con-fu could help with

this as well as on how to grow toes. If he'd had a Scottish girl friend, who else might he have known?

After spending a couple of uneventful days on the Drachenfels, Wendy moved on to the Dreckertal, timing herself to arrive at noon to see what they were up to. Wendy's clock was a cheap plastic one, but as it had a bit of quartz built in, it kept perfect time and she saw no point in buying expensive and old-fashioned toys of clockwork, however wonderful the advertisements said they were. Besides, hers had useful accomplishments like alarms and count-downs that the others couldn't match. What was the point of getting mugged or rolled for something almost as old-fashioned as a sundial?

Sharp on the hour a flourish of alphorns rang out, the happy couple appeared, rockets zoomed round the sky in all directions, and all went off as planned. As usual, when the ceremonial was over, the two young dragons received distinguished visitors, laughing with them gaily. One, a somewhat portentous senator visiting from abroad, asked them how long they had been married. 'Six weeks,' they said. 'And you are still so happy?' he replied. 'Yes and intend to remain so,' they answered.

Wendy waited till the visitors had gone. 'Oh Mummy, how lovely to see you,' said Blaellian. 'Honoured Mother, welcome indeed to our unworthy home,' added Con-fu.

'It's good to be here and to be peaceful after all the fuss and crowd,' said Wendy. 'Is it always like this with such crowds and fiddle-faddle?'

'No, only on special occasions. Today is the official First Bloom of the Edelweiss, so we have to be more formal than usual. Next month we have William Tell's birthday, and then the Leap of the Chamois, and so it goes on. Of course edelweiss have been in flower for a week or two, nobody knows when William Tell was born, and chamois leap all the time from crag to crag, but such occasions are good for tourism. They invent new ones all the time – someone suggested a Day of the Cuckoo Clock, but that was turned down quick because they want to sell cuckoo clocks every day, not once a year. Perhaps we can persuade them to have a Dreck Day. They'll probably call it the Dance of the Wooden Bears instead, though.'

'A bit disillusioned you sound, darling,' said Wendy.

'Not really. It does get a bit boring, but it's a good job and we're together. But how are things at home and how long are you staying?'

'Not long this time. I came for Con-fu's help as well as to see you both.'

Wendy explained her problems.

'Claws I can't help you on much. You have them or you don't, and we do. There was a time when ordinary dragons started to get ambitious. 'Why shouldn't we have five toes, too,' they said. They tried to start a send-a-claws movement which would bring presents from abroad, but no one

responded. One of them had the idea of carving an extra toe out of wood and ivory and sticking it on to each foot, but it kept breaking and looked rather silly, and when one of the flightiest of the young girls tripped over her own toes and fell off a cliff, everyone decided to give up.

‘Then some pig suggested that if they couldn’t have five toes, no dragon should have more than four, saying ‘four claws good, five claws bad’ and they started off with pairs of snips and cleavers to look for Imperial dragons. That’s when we Imperials went into hiding, and we’ve not been seen since. I’m afraid that Daffy will have to tell them it’s no go unless she can think herself extra toes. I’ve got a good many great-aunts, and they’ve got some good spells and magics, but nothing that good. I’ll see if one of them can produce a contentment potion that will achieve happiness with Daffy as she is. Or maybe she can persuade them that a brother-in-law is near enough. I tell you what: why doesn’t she invite some of my daffier sisters to visit her? That’ll prove that even if she isn’t Imperial she has the right connexions, and maybe they’ll see they’re better off with the dragon they’ve got.’

‘Oh, what a good idea. I’ll pass it on to her and see what she says, and if she’d like to do that I’ll email you and you can pass on the invitation.’

‘I’ll tell Di-Ver that she might get an invitation – she loves a change. And I’ll ask Great-Aunt Sub-Ver if she can produce a suitable spell to alter their attitudes.’

‘Oh that would be kind. Do try as quickly as possible, and I don’t mind what it will cost,’ said Wendy rather rashly, ‘but how about Gwyndywr?’

‘Well, the most beautiful and the most virtuous of all the young lady dragons I ever met came from a little town called Shunnam. It’s a very small place and whether there are any more like her and, if there are, whether they’d be willing to go and live on a draughty rock in the wilds of Germany rather than in a king’s palace I don’t know. You could go and see. But the one I knew they only found after searching the whole country.’

‘Well, maybe I should go and have a look round then,’ said Wendy.

‘Be careful, Mam,’ said Blaellian, ‘they have fences to separate places and people there, and mortars and helicopters with rockets flying around, some of them are Hammers or some name like that and the others won’t touch ham and keep trying to blow them up.’

Wendy said that she was always careful even though she was quite partial to a bit of ham if there was any going spare after it had been blown up. ‘Besides,’ she said, ‘it will be a chance to catch up on Cousin Arieah ben Dov. I’ve not seen him for a long time because his father was such a bear, always growling, grumbling, and snarling at people and trying to bite them. It’ll be good to see how he’s bearing up, particularly after he got his name in the papers after rescuing some tourists in a sand storm. We’ll see whether being lionised turned his head.’

So off she went and after an uneventful journey apart from the very satisfactory outcome of an argument with an eagle (free flight snacks are always a pleasure), she arrived at Arieh's cave overlooking the Dead Sea.

'Arieh', she called.

'And who wants my Arik?' a deep voice replied.

'It's me, Wendy,' she replied.

'Wentl, my love,' said the voice, 'come in and be welcome. The boychik is off galivanting, courting again at his age. This is your old friend Dov.'

'Dov, my old bear, and how are you these days?' said Wendy, thinking it better to pretend to be pleased, since the ugly old brute seemed to be glad to see her. 'How's life these days?'

'Better than it used to be, now that Arik has a clutch of beautiful daughters. As you get older a pleasant landscape makes you feel better every day!'

'An old rascal you are,' said Wendy, 'but to see you is why I have come. My Gwyndywr is sitting on a rock, all lonely, moping about a fishy singer who's gone off and left him. I was told there are some beauties this way, in Shunnam someone said, that might tempt him away from this doxy.'

'So why go over there? It means a long search, and anyway they're very grand over there, nothing but kings are good enough for their daughters, at least for the few that pass inspection. Look closer to home, look at my Shoshana, a real lily of the valley, or my Rivka, a rose of Sharon. You won't find beauties like that in Shunnam. They'll be home as soon as Rivka has finished watering the flocks. We have to grow our own food here, and unless there's water in the wadis she has to boil off enough water from the salts in the sea. Exhausts her it does, poor girl, and Shoshana can't help much as she gets hiccups if she huffs too hard. Come in and have some arak to recover from the journey. We have to keep plenty in stock to refuel Rivka.'

'A pleasure, and if you tank me up too, I'll go down and help her,' said Wendy, thinking it might be a good idea to see them at work, to judge how good either might be as a wife for Gwyndywr. There was no denying that he was getting fat and lazy on his rock, with all food provided and spending his time playing cards and drinking schnapps with that old rogue down in the basement.

So after catching her breath from a good slug of Dov's homebrew (made from sabra and other cactus, filtered through old sheepskins, he said), she flew down to the sea. One huff from her produced enough water for all their flocks and also drove off the cattle herders who were trying to horn in on what Rivka had produced. She introduced herself to them as a cousin from Wales. Shoshana was a real charmer with sparkling dark eyes and Rivka was one of the most beautiful dragons she'd ever seen with lovely dark red scales and bright green eyes. Either would be just right

for Gwyndywr. Luckily she had brought some suitable presents which they might like, so she gave Rivka a beautiful ring for her nose and Shoshana a pretty bracelet.

Wendy was getting on well with the girls, telling them of the beauties of Gwyndywr's eyrie overlooking the Rhine and how generous the locals were with cows and other foodstuffs. She thought it better not to mention the barrels of schnapps nor the crates of cigars, and certainly not the old creature in the basement.

A loud banging and crashing, with a few choice remarks, heralded the arrival of Dov's son, Arie. In he came with the most polished young lady dragon that Wendy had ever seen, a real glamour-puss. Every scale glistened, her claws were brightly enamelled with red lacquer, each tooth was burnished white, a cluster of shining gems surrounded each horn, and her eyes were beautifully made up with kohl and other colours.

'Wendy, you old trout, how lovely to see you,' he boomed, 'let me introduce you to my Abishag, a real smasher, isn't she? Shaki, this is Wendy, come all the way from Wales to see us, this is my old bear of a father – you'll have to watch him, he's a swift one with a pass, and these are my daughters, Rivka and Shoshi.'

'Pleased to meet you, I'm sure,' said Abishag with a pretty pout for Wendy and the girls, and a languorous sideways glance at Dov. 'Arik and I are such good friends, and I'm sure we'll all be friends, won't we, sweetheart?'

Arie took a quick look at Wendy to see how this effusiveness went down, but Wendy was too practised at meeting her own children's friends to show any reaction.

'Welcome, my dear,' said Dov, 'any friend of Arik's is always welcome here, especially when she's as pretty as you.'

Abishag looked pleased, for she was always happy to receive compliments. After all, there was no point in working so hard on her appearance if it didn't produce compliments, was there? 'Thank you,' she simpered gracefully, 'I'm sure I'll be very happy here with you and Arik, specially with such nice daughters to look after me, won't I, lovie?'

Rivka and Shoshana looked at each other. It was clear that there wasn't going to be any help with trips to the shore here. Still, she wasn't the first bird that their father had brought home, and like all the rest she wasn't likely to last long.

'How about a couple of sheep?' said Arie.

'Ooh, how lovely,' cooed Abishag, 'I love lamb, don't you, sweetie?'

'More like old mutton dressed as lamb,' muttered Dov.

'Wouldn't you like to come and help,' said Rivka.

'Ooh, I couldn't, could I, pet,' cried Abishag, 'the sight of blood makes me go all swimmy.'

‘Don’t you worry your pretty head, Shaki,’ said Arieah, ‘I’m sure the girls will manage without you, and you can sit here and entertain us.’

‘Huh,’ said the girls to each other as they went off to slaughter and grill the sheep, much encouraged by a broad wink from Wendy and a grin from Dov. About a week, he guessed, for this one. Looked a bit tougher than the last, who’d only put up with Arik for forty-eight hours.

Wendy went off after the girls to give a hand if they needed it, but more to see how good they were. Both were clearly well experienced and between them they produced a delicious lunch, the lambs well flavoured with rosemary and garlic and cooked just right, well done and crisp on the outside and pink and tender inside. Either would suit Gwyndywr, she thought, both were beautiful and Shosh was the charmer and Rivka the steadier.

A week later, Shaki was still with them, still as glamorous and polished as ever, and Arik still besotted with her. Dov was pretty sure that it was one-sided but that she knew when she was on to a good thing, a nice farm, a lover she could twist round her little claw, and an old father she thought she could charm when she needed to. Let’s see how she holds up, he thought. So he had a quiet word with Wendy.

‘Why don’t you take the girls to visit that lad of yours,’ he said with a wink towards Shaki.

‘That’s a nice idea. How would you like that, my dears?’

‘It sounds like fun, and a holiday would be great,’ said Rivka, with a pleased smile from Shoshi. ‘You’ll let us go, won’t you, Dad?’

‘Sure, off you go and enjoy yourselves. Shaki will look after us, won’t you, honey?’

Abishag didn’t look too pleased with this. She’d enjoyed being pampered, a nice change from the crowded conditions of her mother’s cave with seven younger draglets all squabbling all the time. Lucky Arieah had never tried visiting her at home to see where she’d been brought up, but only met her when she was all glammed up for parties. Still, she could probably cope, and anything was better than going back home to that lot.

‘Stay close to me as we fly, girls,’ said Wendy, ‘there are some dodgy bits on the way, and the Americans get a bit trigger happy if you go too close to their ships and bases.’

But their journey was uneventful save for the luck of meeting a flock of griffons, enough for three each, as they flew over Albania.

‘One of the advantages of the Israel trip is that you eat quite well,’ Wendy called to the others as a cloud of slightly singed feathers floated gently earthwards.

By the time that they reached the Rhine and circled round Gwyndywr’s rock the two young dragons were quite tired and looking forward to a rest. Wendy led the way down and into Gwyndywr’s cave, but it was all dark and cold. Half a cow was sitting congealed on the floor and

had obviously been there some days. ‘Drat the boy, where’s he gone?’ thought Wendy. ‘When I’ve taken all this trouble to make him happy he has to vanish. Not the way to make a good impression on these girls, especially as it means calling up Fafner to see if he knows where he’s got to’.

‘Faffy, oh Faffy old friend, it’s Wendy here. Have you seen my wandering boy?’

‘Wanderer? Wanderer? Not again, please, not again. Hide quickly let me. Down further go must I.’

‘Not Wanderer but Wendy looking for her son,’ called Wendy quickly, hoping to catch him before he vanished, ‘Where has Gwyndywr got to?’

‘Ah, wauling three days ago there was, wauling like a cater on hot bricks and off he went, in the middle of a game we were, but off went he. Since then waul upon waul. Hear them now you can.’ And sure enough Wendy could hear soprano and tenor voices blending sweetly together drifting up from the valley below. ‘I’ll soon put a stop to that,’ she muttered to herself.

Down she zoomed, buzzing the rock so close that both singers ducked and the close harmony stopped with a jerk

‘Is this the way to greet your poor old mother? Here I come all this way and not a cup of tea, not a bite to eat, not even a kiss for your old mother to warm the cockles of her heart do I get.’

‘But mother, I didn’t know you were coming, and anyway there aren’t any cockles in this river and your muscles are quite strong enough to make a cup of tea for yourself, and there was half a cow up there, quite enough for a bite.’

‘Enough cheek out of you that is, indeed, and here are two friends I’ve brought to meet you and what did we find but bits of cow lying around and the floor itself not swept for a week. And who is this?’

‘Oh Mummy, this is Lory, and she sings so beautifully, and look, she has a tail just like our’s even though her top half is different. We’ve only just started singing together – I’m sure it’s only a few minutes.’

‘As fishy a story as I’ve heard in a long while, and that cow’ (with a sideways glance at Lory) ‘has been lying there for at least three days. Anyway come up now and meet my friends.’

Gwyndywr had a good idea what friends of his mother’s might look like. Real dragons they’d be, he was sure. Horrible old frumps who’d pat him on the head and call him a good boy. Might even kiss him. Still, it was no good arguing, as he knew only too well, so telling the Lorelei that he’d be back as soon as possible, off he went. His eyes popped out as soon as he saw the girls. Not the usual standard for mother’s friends at all, at all, and maybe the odd kiss wouldn’t come amiss and might be a pleasure for a change.

‘These are Rivka and Shoshana Bat Arie’h,’ she said, ‘We’ve come all the way to see you from Qumran, and what do we find? There you are singing duets with a doxy! But now we’re here you can make us welcome, so you can.’

‘Indeed you’re welcome, Mam, and your friends with you. Let me see what we have in store.’

A couple of sheep, a bushel of potatoes, a sack of cabbages, and a barrel of beer soon eased the atmosphere. Rivka and Shosh took to the German beer, and though they were a bit hesitant about the schnapps, Wendy appreciated it. As the noise and laughter grew, a fierce rumble came from below.

‘What my rest disturbing this is?’

The girls were quite frightened but Gwyndywr hastened to reassure them, ‘It’s only my friend in the cellarage, he’s a nice chap really and he won’t hurt you – just’ (in a whisper) ‘a bit old and doesn’t like to be disturbed.’

Shoshana, always the more adventurous of the two, said ‘Ooh, can’t we meet him? It might be fun and he can’t be worse than Saba – our grandfather is always difficult when he’s distracted from what he’s doing.’

‘I don’t know – he’s always hiding down there, he’s frightened of an old Wanderer and doesn’t like to be seen.’

‘Oh, please, we’d like to meet him if he’s your friend.’

So Gwyndywr called down, ‘My friend I’ve got two charming girls here, the prettiest dragons you’ve ever seen and they’d like to meet you. Will you come up or could we come down?’

‘Why two? Three voices as well as yours I hear. Wendy, too, pretty and charming she was when her last I saw. Down, though dark it is, come you may.’

Down they went, Gwyndywr giving an occasional huff so that they could see their way. As they got further and further down, it grew darker and murkier, and as they got to the bottom suddenly a bellow of low brass instruments rang out. The girls clung to Gwyndywr with fright.

‘Left to look after myself,’ muttered Wendy cynically to herself, as Gwyndywr happily patted them both to soothe them.

‘Ooh, what’s that horrid noise,’ said Rivka as it boomed out again.

‘Only Richard it is. With it cursed me he did. Whenever seen I am, heard it must be. A reason it is that never above where seen I am, I go.’

As the noise died away with a mutter of drums, they saw the old man, coiled round the sides of a cave, the walls of which were festooned with architect’s drawings of a magnificent castle.

‘Wendy, beautiful to these old eyes still you are.’

‘You old fraud, you’re not so old yourself. You were noble once, too, and not so bad today.’

Fafner had a good look at the two girls and began to wonder whether it might not have been a mistake to hide himself too long, but then he remembered the dangers of being seen by old wandering men and young men with swords and thought better safe than sorry.

Though they'd enjoyed the thrill of meeting him, the girls soon decided they were tired of the gloom and murk, so they made polite farewells and climbed back up, round and round the long spiral ramp until at last they came back into daylight. There they could play games with Gwyndywr and enjoy themselves. Wendy thought they made a pretty sight, the three of them flying round and round the crest of the mountain, weaving in and out and seeing who could catch the other, or playing blind dragons' bluff. The villagers below seemed to enjoy it, too, and made no objection to the requests for extra food and beer, and even sent up some of their oldest and strongest schnapps for Wendy's benefit.

After all this had been going on for a couple of weeks, it was clear that Gwyndywr had quite forgotten the watery attractions of the Lorelei and was getting on very well with Rivka and Shosh, maybe too well. So well in fact that Wendy had begun to wonder whether she should start thinking about wedding bells again and how this could be arranged. Might she be able to sweet talk the locals into laying on a binge, even if not as elaborate as at the Dreckenthal or would she have to put it up to Arie, assuming he had any money left after Abishag had got her claws into him, and his dissolute old father? And there was the intriguing question of which one would it be. Both seemed to have fallen for her little boy, and he didn't seem to favour one above the other, blast the brat. Might he demand the age-old right of dragons, wherever they lived, to have more than one wife? It was a long time since anyone had claimed that (less formal liaisons, there'd been in plenty, Wendy admitted to herself with a slight blush) but a formal poly-marriage had become a rarity, even for dragons in Utah. As for a simultaneous double wedding, she couldn't remember whether there'd been such a thing since all the fuss at S'dom, and that had kicked up disapproval all over the place.

And how would it go down among other dragons? There weren't that many pretty young dragonesses around and the young dragons had been complaining for some time about the shortage of birds. If her lad mopped two of the best, it wasn't likely to be popular. And how would the girls take it? Would they be willing to share him? And would whoever came second be jealous of the other? What if he came to prefer one over the other? There was an unfortunate precedent for this in the area they'd come from, though luckily not among dragons.

Meanwhile, here were Rivka and Shoshana making glad-eyes at her lad, not surprising of course, a handsome young boy like him even if he was white all over instead of red like a real Welsh dragon, and he basking in all the attention like a blasted moon-calf. Some talking she'd have to do! And which should she start with, the chits or the brat?

One day, Rivka said to Gwyndywr, ‘Next week we won’t be able to eat bread or drink beer. What else can you get instead?’

‘Why on earth is that?’ asked Gwyndywr.

‘We come from Israel, and while we eat our meat on the hoof like all other dragons, we don’t eat leavened bread or anything like it, like beer, during Passover. It’s only once a year so if we’re going to stay here’ (Wendy pricked up her ears at that) ‘you’ll have to get used to it. It’s not as bad as our cousins across the sea at home. They can’t eat in daylight for a whole month each year, though they do make up for it with a binge each night. That’s quite fun even if they don’t drink wine.’

‘So what can we eat and drink?’

‘Some sorts of biscuits and cakes are fine, especially if they’re made of almonds or walnuts. Sheep and cows are still good. Wine is good, too, and we might even try the schnapps if it’s made from potatoes.’

Gwyndywr sent a message down to the Burgomaster explaining the problem, and Wendy thought she’d take this as an excuse to go and have a chat with their father and bring back a stock of suitable food.

‘Arieh, Arieh,’ she called when she’d got there.

‘Not here,’ growled a familiar voice, ‘who wants him?’

‘Oh Dov, it’s Wendy back again.’

‘Wentl, my love, back so soon, shalom, shalom, baruch haba, come in, do. He’s gone off again and that wench with him. Didn’t last long, she didn’t, couldn’t stand doing all the work.’

‘I’m not surprised. She didn’t look the sort to work her claws to the bone, did she.’

‘No, and I think it was the water carrying that did for her in the end, that and washing up and having to clean up. Arik didn’t help of course, bone lazy that boy, expects his wench to wait on him, hand and foot. His ma spoiled him of course, did everything for him, like any Jewish mother. So he’s gone off to find a better wench, one that’ll look after him properly, as well as being decorative. Anyway, what brings you back so quick, and how are my Shosh and Rivka doing?’

‘Your grand-daughters are fine and they’ve both fallen for my boy, and he for them, and they want to stay there, for a while at least. That’s why I’ve come. They say it’s Passover next week and they can’t eat ordinary food, so I’ve come to get what they need.’

‘Ah, you’ll have to go up to Jerusalem for that. No kosher shops round here, not like there used to be when all this area was lived in. Strictly kosher, they all were. Go into any of the supermarkets and look on the Pesach shelves and stock up there. Hold on, I’ll give you a list of what to look for.’

He rummaged for a pad and wrote a quick list, with suitable quantities for three dragons to last them a week.

‘But I can’t read that – can’t you write it out in English?’

‘I speak it alright, but writing’s more difficult, never remember how to spell anything. Tell you what, I’ll read it and you write it down.’

‘That seems an awful load,’ said Wendy after it was all finished.

‘Matzas are light even if they’re bulky, but don’t drop them or they’ll break into bits, and if your boy eats like mine, you’ll need it, and the girls are healthy feeders, too. Ask them for a cargo net and you should be OK, but be careful going back or they might think you’ve got a load of bombs in it, though they’re used to people travelling with large loads of Pesach shopping. And better sneak up to Jerusalem over the hills because they’ve got security barriers on the roads.’

‘Alright, thank you, ArieH. I’ll be careful and I’d better get back quick so they’ll have time to prepare everything.’

‘So come again soon and stay longer. Hag sameach, shalom, shalom, and give those girls my love.’

‘I will, and thank you again.’

It didn’t take Wendy long to slide up to Jerusalem, and once she found a supermarket she saw that it would be easy to get what she wanted. She had to stand for a long time in the queue at the check-out and she was a bit staggered at the high prices for the special food, but it was all packed away soon enough.

She didn’t have any trouble on the journey back, though a couple of fighter jets zoomed past and looked at her a bit suspiciously.

‘Presumably they don’t think a dragon a security risk,’ she said to herself, ‘lucky I thought to drape an Israeli flag over the load.’

She was quite tired when she got back to Drachenfels, for carrying the bulk of that lot, swinging from in her claws, had slowed her down.

‘What I do for my children and their friends,’ she thought, ‘a right glutton for punishment I am.’

‘Girls, I’m back,’ she called. ‘Here’s all your Passover shopping, and ArieH sends you his love. Now I’m going home to put my feet up. Enjoy yourselves, look after my little boy, and see you again soon.’

Chapter 8 – Porffyrion in Australia

With Glyndwyr on his rock (was he still with the two girls, she wondered), Blaellian in the Dreck, and Cadwallader in a state, it was time to get Porffyrion settled. Wendy sent Asphodel off to Australia House to ask about visas and regulations, and told Marigold to get on to the people who'd made the initial offer. She hadn't made much note of it at the time, but who were they, were they reliable, did they have the money? Woolla Downs sounded as though they might be a lot of sheep-farmers, and while wool could keep you warm and mutton keep you fed, a new nylon or a stampede away from animal products and a campaign against leather and meat could lead to the bottom falling out of the market. Nobody ever got tired of gold, on the other hand.

Asphodel puzzled the officials at Australia House initially. A beautiful West African over six-foot tall with an impeccable Christ Church accent was not a type of visitor to which they were accustomed, but after seeing photographs of Porffyrion they became enthusiastic.

'Would she eat rabbits?' they asked. 'Could we be sure that she'd know the difference between rabbits and sheep? We don't mind the odd one or two for a change of diet, but sheep are money and rabbits too many. And koalas are a protected species and mustn't be molested. And what about kangaroos? We don't publicize it too much because people always associate kangaroos with us, but there really are too many of them in some areas, and she'd be welcome to eat some of them, and camels too.'

'Since she has never had the opportunity to try them, there's no way to tell,' said Asphodel, 'and if you can produce some samples, we can let her taste them, though no doubt fresh-roasted down-under will taste different from frozen and microwaved in London.'

'We will see what we can do. Meanwhile, what sort of accommodation would she need and what can she offer us?'

'While we're discussing all that, why don't you give her a tourist visa and arrange some free accommodation out there, and let her see what she thinks of the place?'

'That's a bonza idea. When could she go?'

'I think she and her mother are free for the next week or two – she's a bit young to go off by herself the first time – so how about straight away?'

'Leave it with us and we'll ring you tomorrow.'

It was soon all arranged and Wendy and Porffyrion started to make their flight plans. They thought it would be more fun to fly themselves, stopping off here and there to see some of the cousins, than to take a ship or go any other way. They could spend the first night with Gwyndwyr on his rock, the second, even though it was only an hour or so away, with Blaellian and Con-fu, and

then go on to the Hungarian cousins. They'd need to give them some warning for they were a fairly spiky lot, but they could probably give good advice over the next part of the route. Meanwhile they had better pack whatever they'd need for a week, and Asphodel could take it to Australia House and see that it was shipped out air-freight to await their arrival.

Wendy emailed István to tell him that they would like to stay for a few nights and would like his advice on the next stage of the journey. The reply came quickly.

'Wentl, my love, come and be welcome. it'd be lovely to see you again,' so that was fixed, and she was sure that they'd get good advice on how to continue, for the Hungarians always knew what was going on all around them.

Gwyndywr was pleased to see them and so were Rivka and Shoshana, who were obviously well settled in and intending to stay. Not surprisingly, Gwyndywr was looking thoroughly contented, and the sleek sheen on his scales showed that the girls were looking after him well, and, if the dinner that they provided Wendy and Porffyrion with was anything to go by, keeping him well fed with delicious Israeli cooking, plenty of hummus and olive oil (where did they get that from, she wondered?) and nicely flavoured skewers of a sheep and half a cow.

'I do miss the odd pig or two,' Gwyndywr whispered to his mother, 'but the girls won't touch them, and it means no bacon with the eggs for breakfast either, and eggs alone don't taste the same, but the rest of their cooking is so good that I put up with it.'

'Sneak downstairs and have an occasional snack with Faffy,' she said, 'I'm sure they won't mind if you do that.'

'Well, they're trying to persuade me to keep kosher, and maybe even convert and join them. They asked a rabbi to come up from Frankfurt and talk to me last week, and maybe I will one day.'

'Be careful, boy, it might put you out of action for a few days if you did.'

'Er, I'd not thought of that, yes, it might be uncomfortable for a while. I wonder whether he'd be able to do it on a dragon? I'll bet they've not thought of that!'

Things were obviously getting quite serious there.

'Oh well,' she thought, 'they're nice girls both of them, and he could do a whole lot worse, and he's too far away from Qumran for any brothers to come and slaughter him while he was recuperating, as Dinah's brothers had done back then.' She was Chapel herself and knew her Bible, but she was broad-minded enough not to worry about such eventualities, so long as he was happy.

Next day they flew on to the Dreckerthal. All was well there, too, the clock keeping good time, and Blaellian had a special glow on her.

'Ah ha,' said Wendy to herself. 'There'll soon be some good news there. About time, too.'

‘Oh, Mam, I’m so happy,’ said Blaellian. ‘Con-fu is so kind to me. Gets me all sorts of special food, he does, anything I want.’

‘So he should. A husband should look after his wife, especially when she’s feeling delicate.’

‘Oh, Mam, you’ve guessed. We weren’t sure whether to tell you yet.’

‘Why not? I’m your mother aren’t I? Call me if you ever need me and I’ll come straight away. Make sure he does more than his share on the clock, or I’ll have a word with him. You need to be careful at this stage, with no sudden jolts if the gate comes down too fast.’

‘Oh, he does, he does, he always takes great care of me and he won’t let me take any risks.’

‘And so he should, but I’m glad that you’re in good hands.’

Leaving the happy pair in their valley, Wendy and Porffyrion flew on to Hungary. István welcomed them with open arms.

‘Lovely to see you. Stay as long as you like. Dump your bags here and let’s go and eat.’

The Hungarian cousins had laid on a delicious banquet to welcome them and were delighted to have the opportunity to show off the superb standard of cooking that was still characteristic of the surviving aristocrats, such as they were, of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire. To improve on the occasion they had invited some of the Serbian and Macedonian relations, who might have some good advice on the next stages, and who didn’t normally get food of such quality at home. Not, of course, that this would be pointed out, but they were sure that it would merely become obvious as the evening progressed. And indeed it did, with large quantities of roast goose, followed by strudels and sachertorte, all washed down with Bull’s Blood and Tokay. They had even invited the local gypsy band to accompany the dinner with the traditional music of the area.

Next morning it was time to get serious advice about the next part of the route. All the way down to Greece was a dicey area, so it would be best to stay over the sea till they got that far. The Albanian cousins didn’t speak to the Serbs and the Serbs didn’t speak to the Kosovans, and the Bosnians were leery of everyone else, and they were all well equipped with rockets and guns and liable to shoot them off at anyone they thought doubtful about.

Then there was general agreement that Turkey should be avoided. Wendy wasn’t sure how Karim’s family would receive her after what had happened to him and wondered whether they blamed her for it. There was also the question of whether St George had ever existed or not. This might be debatable, but there was no doubt at all that Great-Aunt Netta had existed, and a formidable old dragon she had been, but where was she now? And if it hadn’t been St George who had done for her, who had it been? No, Turkey was definitely a no-fly zone. And then there was the next lot of no-fly zones. The Iraqis had plenty of SAMs and were always trying to pot a Yank, and so were the Iranians, and could any of them be trusted to tell a pair of dragons from a pair of

planes? And as for the Americans, they were a trigger-happy lot, saying ‘no fly was no fly’ and if it looks like a dragon it’s probably an Al Qaeda in disguise. If it flies, it’s not for long, was their motto.

However, if they went too far north of there, the Russians would probably think they were a new sort of Chechen, and they’d be as badly off.

‘Weren’t there some distant cousins among the Armenians?’ Wendy asked, ‘and were they still making their carpets?’ She remembered that they used to supply the Persians with them, and if they could hire a carpet there to take them on the next stage, it would give their wings a rest.

‘That’s a good idea,’ said István. ‘I’ll give Kakakorian a ring and ask him.’

‘Kaki,’ he said when they were connected, ‘it’s István here. Are your people still making those special carpets you used to sell to the Persians before they got rid of the Shah?’

‘Not nowadays, Steve, there’s no market for them there as the Ayatollahs don’t approve of them and won’t let people use them. We’ve a whole warehouse full of them and they’re selling very slowly.’

‘Oh, wonderful. D’you remember Cousin Wendy from Wales?’

‘Yes of course I do. Who wouldn’t remember someone so beautiful? I haven’t seen or heard of her for centuries, though.’

‘Well she’s here now, and she’s on her way to Australia with her daughter, and she wondered whether she could hire a couple of carpets to help her on her way.’

‘Yes, of course she can. A special price, too, as they’re a drug on the market here, and keep them as long as she likes. In fact she could buy a couple cheap enough, and keep them to use for other journeys.’

‘Excellent, now do you have any advice how to get to you without going through any no-fly zones or other risky areas?’

‘Best way I can think of is to go over the Black Sea and either go over Eastern Turkey or slide down the border between Georgia and Turkey, and then here you are.’

‘Thank you, I’ll tell Wendy and she’ll be with you in a couple of days.’

‘Fine, Steve, nice to talk to you, bye for now.’

‘So there you are, Wendy,’ said István. ‘All nicely settled. A bit circuitous, as you’ll have to turn left over Greece and then go down the Bosphorus and across the sea, and then turn right over the end of Turkey, but that border area between them and Georgia seems fairly quiet nowadays. Now let’s have another feast to feed you up for your journey.’

‘Thank you, dear István, you are kind,’ said Wendy.

‘Always a pleasure, my dear.’

And after another day's feasting and other enjoyable proceedings, off they went, down the Adriatic and, to make sure they didn't go anywhere near Turkey, across Bulgaria and over the Black Sea that way.

'Now, where are we?' said Wendy. 'Don't want to go too near the Russian side, nor the Turkish, and how do we pick up our right turn?'

'Why don't we ask some seagulls?' said Porffyrion. 'They should know their way about.'

'Clever girl,' said Wendy, 'so they should.'

And so they did.

'This way,' they said, after an easy flight across the sea. 'D'you see that white painted stone there? That's the border between Georgia and Turkey, and if I were you, I'd stay about ten miles on the Turkish side; Georgians have been a bit trigger happy since the Russian invasion and two or three of us got shot at, so something your size might bug them.'

Wendy thought that end of Turkey was far enough away from where Karim had lived that they'd be safe enough. Down the border they went, and before too long they saw a building with, painted on its roof, a large sign that said KAKAKORIAN – ARMENIAN CARPETS.

'So that's why he was eager for us to buy one,' said Wendy, 'he sells them himself. Oh well, it's nice to know where one is.'

They landed on the car park outside the building and went in.

'Is Mr Kakakorian here, please?' said Wendy to the receptionist. 'He's expecting us.'

'He is, I am, Wendy, my sweet, welcome, welcome. Many a long century since I've seen you.'

'It is, it is, but you've not changed a bit, Kaki. Just a little more bald on top and distinctly rounder lower down. Business must be good.'

'Ah, not what it was in the old days, not at all what it was. Would you believe it, everything has to go through Customs these days and be searched for bombs and things. All the old border crossings we used to use have been closed and you can't slip anything through quietly these days. So everything gets invoiced, and then the tax people see it all. Not good for business at all, that isn't. One set of books doesn't get you anywhere. Why I remember when I had three sets, one for me, one for the tax people, and one for the old girl, bless her heart, so she wouldn't know how much I was earning. But come in, rest yourself, and meet my son who looks after the retail side. You've not met him before, he's quite new. Manny, meet my beautiful Wendy and her almost as beautiful daughter. Wendy, this is Manoug, and what's your daughter's name?'

'She's called Porffyrion, and that's quite enough of your flattery, Kaki. I remember you now from the old days, and flattery didn't get you very far then, and it won't now, either. And what happened to your old girl, as you call her?'

‘Oh she went off, as old things do go off. She went with an old Kurdish flame, and I’m happy enough by myself, now, especially as you’re here.’

‘Oh Mam, isn’t he handsome?’ whispered Porffyrrian. ‘The most beautiful dragon I’ve ever seen.’

‘Oh lord,’ thought Wendy, ‘here we go again.’

‘Let’s go and have some lunch, Wendy,’ said Kaki, who had caught Porffyrrian’s whisper, ‘while Manny shows your daughter round the workshop. Then maybe I can show you some of my etchings.’

‘Oh no you don’t, I’m old enough now, not to fall for that one again. Lunch yes, etchings no, or not today, anyway.’

After a leisurely lunch with lots of dishes of all sorts of delicious food and plenty of wine, followed by cups of Armenian coffee and a glass or two of Armenian brandy, they strolled back to the workshop, and there were Manoug and Porffyrrian sitting on a pile of carpets looking slightly dishevelled but very happy together.

‘Now come into the back room,’ said Kaki, ‘and see some of our special models.’

He took a large bunch of keys from a pouch on his belt and opened a heavy door which was well secured against intruders and carpet pirates, with three separate locks.

‘Now these are all our models,’ he said while switching on some lights and pointing to one side of the large room. ‘On this pile our Family Model with plenty of room for four, but we can make larger ones to order for bigger families. Quite fast, but not enough so to frighten the children, and only needing recharging every five years or 200,000 miles. On this pile the Sedate Model for families with elderly in-laws who don’t like travelling fast. Same recharging conditions and guaranteed draught free. As you see, there’s a wide choice of colours and patterns, enough to suit any taste.’

‘We used to make commercial models, too, but the bottom fell out of that market when the Ayatollahs took over. We made buses and had thought of trying double-deckers, and we also made trucks of all sizes. You’d think there’d be a demand for them, with oil prices where they are, but there isn’t. We do sell a few mini-buses still, mainly to the Haredim who have such large families, but most such families locally now prefer to use our extended Family Model, which, as I said, are available on special order. They can be extended in our own workshops as the family grows, which you couldn’t do to the mini-buses, which came only as 12-, 14-, or 16-seaters.’

‘Also as special orders, we can make armoured models for those important people who feel threatened and aren’t convinced of the efficacy of all our built-in protective anti-missile features.’

They tend to be slow, of course, because of the extra weight of the armour, and as a result their range is rather reduced between charges, so we don't make many of them. They're expensive, too.

'Now over here are the Speedsters, on this side the two-seaters,' with a glance at Manoug and Porffyrion, 'and this side the one-seaters. Because of the extra speed they need recharging every three years, but the same mileage is guaranteed.

'And over here is our special model, something that nobody else can make except us, the Super-Speedster, guaranteed supersonic and can outfly anything else in the world, American, Russian, Chinese, and guaranteed, too, to go faster, if you push this emergency button, than any rockets or missiles yet built. We can supply armour plating with the other models if required, as I just said, but this one doesn't need it, which is just as well because the extra weight would make it difficult to achieve that speed. The only trouble is that the high speed uses a lot of extra power, so it needs to be recharged every year and every 50,000 miles. But as you see, it has a built in lamp, and if you rub that the quick-recharger will appear, and thus you only need to bring it in to us to recharge the lamp every five years or 200,000 miles, just like the others. Mostly we make these ones single-seaters, but there are a few two-seaters over there.'

'What do you do when it rains?' asked Wendy.

'The Speedsters and Super-Speedsters have an automatic seal which cuts in when you go over a certain fixed speed – they have to do that because of their speed through the air, and also, for the Super-Speedsters, to keep the air pressure constant at high altitudes. That keeps the rain off, too, of course. And on all the models, if you want the seal, you only have to say to the carpet "Seal", and it does. That's especially useful on the Sedate Model, because even at anything over a walking pace, elderly relatives don't like their hair to be blown about.'

'Wow, can we try one?' said Porffyrion.

'Sure you can, but Manny had better take you up at first so that you can learn how to control one. He'll teach you the words to use and how to adjust the speed and height.'

'Ooh, yes, please, and can we try the Super-Speedsters first?'

'No, not till after you've learned how to control the ordinary ones properly, because if you're not careful, they go so fast that you could find yourself over dangerous territories before you know where you are. You'd be safe enough on one, with all its protective features, but we find it best not to worry the radar and air-control people too much and too often. Get out one of the dual-control two-seater Speedsters, Manny, and make sure that it's fully charged, and has its L-plates on. What pattern would you like?'

'Oh this one please.'

‘Very suitable, and it matches your scales very nicely. Notice that it has a stealth pattern woven in, like they all do, so that it makes it difficult for radar to detect it, but you do have to be careful what you’re carrying, because any large amounts of metal might be spotted.’

‘We had a family party chased by jets the other day,’ he said to Wendy, ‘because they had a large aluminium picnic box with them and a couple of water pipes. They didn’t get caught because they had the sense to jettison the picnic box and the hookahs, and so they vanished off the radar, but it was a tricky moment.’

Manoug took Porffyrion and the carpet she had chosen outside and sat her down carefully.

‘These are quite light carpets,’ he said, ‘and you have to keep them balanced. With the family ones you can sit anywhere and children can run around as long as they don’t go over the edge, and we have special edging built in to prevent that – we have to think of every eventuality – but these are like canoes, if you know what they are, so you have to sit close together in the middle to stop them being head or tail down or tilted to one side. Now you say this to it, quite quietly, and off we go,’ as he whispered the secret words to her.

Up they went.

‘Now all you have to say is ‘faster’ or ‘slower’. We’ve tried to build all known languages into its control pattern, this patch just in front of us. If you want to go up, lean back.’

‘Not so hard,’ he said hastily, as they zoomed up almost vertically. ‘Little by little is all you need. Just say Eric to yourself, to remind you. Now to turn, just lean gently to one side or the other, like cyclists do down there. Lean a little left, and we’ll circle round before we cross the frontier. Steady now, upright again. that’s fine, you’re doing beautifully. Easy, isn’t it?’

‘Ooh yes, and you teach it so well.’

‘Well, of course. We have to teach every first-time customer when they buy or hire one. If we didn’t, and if there were any accidents, we’d lose our licence. But you learn very quickly.’

‘I expect you say that to all of them, don’t you.’

‘Yes, of course, but you are much quicker than most.’

‘That’s probably because I’m used to flying, whereas ordinary people aren’t. But don’t ordinary people find it frightening to be up with a dragon?’

‘No, they know what to expect when they come to us. They can go to an ordinary dealer if they want to, but they know that they won’t get the same quality as we supply. After all, magic people produce better magic wares than ordinary people can. And we have special weight-distribution panels for when we take ordinary people up because we’re so much heavier than they are.

‘Now there are some other controls you must learn. If you say this, the carpet will hover, and then special balance controls cut in, so you can move around without unbalancing the carpet. It

allows you to lean across and look over the edge without tipping up so that you see where you are, and it allows you to lie down and take a nap, like this.’

After a very pleasant interval, Manoug thought it was probably about time to get back before Wendy got worried that they might have crashed.

Wendy hadn’t worried, in fact. Kaki had plied her with Armenian coffee, more brandy, and other pleasant activities.

‘Just like the old days,’ she thought. ‘He hasn’t changed a bit’, and nor had she.

When the others got back she asked Porffyrrian how she had enjoyed it.

‘Oh it was lovely, Mam,’ she said, blushing enough to clash very badly with her natural colour, ‘I enjoyed every bit of it.’

‘So shall we choose two singles or a double for our journey? And which model?’

‘Oh must we, Mam? Can’t we stay here? Please, Mam, please.’

‘No we can’t. We’ve promised to go to Australia, and go we must.’

‘Oh please, then, let’s have two of the Super-Speedsters. Then we won’t have to worry about what’s underneath us, and you can go home on yours when you want to.’

‘I suppose that would be sensible. Run off with Manny while I talk to Kaki. If I know Armenians, this’ll take some time.’

The children didn’t need any urging and off they went, Porffyrrian persuading Manny to let them try the supersonic model while their parents chattered.

‘So, Kaki, what are you going to charge us?’

‘To you, Wendy, a special rate, very special.’

‘I know your special rates. Come on, then, out with it.’

It took several more cups of coffee before both sides were happy with the bargain. Just as they finished, the others reappeared.

‘Oh, Mam, you won’t believe how fast we can go. We went all the way to India, and Manny showed me the Taj Mahal, and look Mam, I’ve bought you these earrings, aren’t they pretty?’

Wendy noticed that someone had bought Porffyrrian a very nice diamond nose stud, but she decided not to say anything about it, not immediately anyway.

Off they went and in a surprisingly short time they were over Woolla Downs, the township that had expressed interest in having their own dragon.

It looked rather dusty

After three days Porffyrrian said to her mother, ‘Mam, I don’t like it here very much. Rabbits are barely a mouthful, you have to catch an awful lot of them for a meal, and then so much fur tickles my throat. And I don’t like the taste of camel, and Fosters isn’t as nice as Guinness. It tastes much

thinner. And look, Mam, they don't like us much, either. Look at that sign there,' she said, pointing to a large sign painted rather crudely POMMIES GO HOME.

'They call us Pommies, don't they, Mam, and look,' pointing to another saying DRAGNS NOT WANTED HERE, 'they don't want me, either. And, Mam, the flies get through, in between the corks all the time and I'm tired of keeping on brushing them out of my eyes.'

'Hmm,' said Wendy, 'doesn't look much like they want you, does it. I wonder why that man said they were interested?'

'Maybe he got his places mixed up and sent us to the wrong Downs down under? We have lots of downs at home, don't we, Mam, and perhaps they do here, too. But please, Mam, can't we go back to Armenia? Nice it was there, and they were so friendly.'

'Yes, I noticed that,' said Wendy.

'But you seemed to be very friendly with Kaki, too, Mam, and I know you enjoyed yourself.'

'Enough out of you, my girl, but I agree we don't seem to be wanted here. Would you like to see a little more of Australia before we go back?'

'Must we, Mam? It's Manoug I'd like to see more of, please can we go back there, Mam.'

'I'd better go and see the people here and make sure they won't be too offended if we leave so soon.'

And she went down into the town to see the mayor.

'I'm afraid that we didn't think a dragon would be quite so big, and we didn't realise how much you would eat or drink, and the farmers are worried that Porffyrion would start eating their sheep if she got tired of rabbits and camels. So, no, we won't be offended if you leave again, but I hope that you haven't spent too much money on coming here,' he said, thinking about the small amount of money there was in town to pay for disappointed travellers.

'No, that's OK. We had a nice journey and visited several old friends on the way.'

'Oh, good-oh, and thank you for coming.'

So out came the carpets again, and off they went.

'Let's go the other way round,' said Wendy. 'We go so fast that if we do that we'll get back there yesterday.'

'Oh so we will, and that'll make the journey much faster, won't it, Mam. If we went round three times, would we get back the same day we started?'

'No, it doesn't work quite like that, child. It's only the date it affects.' Anyway, Wendy couldn't remember for sure which way did what, and thought that perhaps they'd get back tomorrow instead of yesterday.

'What a pity. If we could, Manoug wouldn't even know we'd been away.'

‘Well, we’ll see if he’s missed you. If he’s like his father, he’s probably found someone else by now. After all, you’ve been away several days.’

‘Oh, Mam, he’s not like that, I’m sure he’s not. But let’s get back as quick we can, please, please.’

So setting the controls for maximum speed, it was only a few hours before they were back at the Kakakorian workshop.

‘Back so soon? Nothing wrong with the carpets I hope?’

‘No, nothing at all, Kaki, but they didn’t seem to like Porffyrion down there, and she wanted to come back and see your son again, so here we are.’

‘Oh dear, he’s just taken off to show another customer how to fly. Pretty girl, she was.’

‘Oh he has, has he,’ said Porffyrion with a nasty glint in her eye. ‘I’ll soon see to that.’

‘Now steady down, girl,’ said Wendy. ‘It’s his job selling carpets and teaching first-time buyers how to fly them, and you’ll just have to get used to it. And anyway there’s no use acting like that round another dragon. You know perfectly well how they behave. Why, you’ve seen enough of us haven’t you? Just settle down and wait for him to come back. They usually do, sooner or later, unless some idiot shoots them down like that man did to your father. If you’re going to live for another few thousand years, you’ll just have to put up with it, like I’ve done, and like István and Kaki have done. You know that your sister and Con-fu were the first dragon wedding for longer than anyone could remember, and you’ve seen your brother with that fishy wench downstream and now with his two doxies. If you live long enough, you’ll learn to enjoy yourself and take what comes when it comes. And here comes Manny, anyway.’

And there he was, as his pupil made a rather bumpy landing.

‘I flew better than that, didn’t I, Mam.’

‘Indeed you did, silly. Now wipe your eyes and smile and go and say hello to him like a sensible girl, while his father tries to sell her that carpet.’

‘Porry, you’re back, you’re back, oh wonderful,’ cried Manny as he saw her. ‘Just wait a minute while I take her in to see Dad.’

In no time he dashed out and clasped her in his arms.

‘Oh it’s wonderful to see you again so soon. I’ve missed you every minute you’ve been gone.’

‘Oh have you, oh, I’m so glad. Now can I stay here, please? Can I?’

‘Well, you’ll have to see your mother and my father about that, but I hope you can.’

And Wendy drifted off into the warehouse, pretending she wanted to get her lamp recharged so as not to be in the way of this happy reunion.

‘That’s got them all settled,’ she thought, ‘for the time being anyway. Now I can go home and sleep in my own bed for a while.’

It didn’t take long to arrange things with Kaki, and soon enough, with her lamp fully charged, she was on her way home.

Chapter 9 – Draiggoch and his Prince

One day when Wendy was sitting quietly at home, she suddenly heard a voice, ‘Maman, maman, where are you now?’

‘Draiggoch, my son, what are you doing here? You’re supposed to be in the Assembly. Surely you’re still sitting now?’

‘Resigned I have now, my seat given up, look you. So badly they have treated me, no more can I stay.’

‘What have they done to make you so angry? You were so hard working, never a day off, always attentive, often speaking. I used to read all your speeches in the papers, and they were always sensible and always trying to help people, especially when officials were trying to bully them.’

‘That was the problem, that was. A nuisance, now, they thought me. Not like the old days, look you, with Nye-bach and the like. Now they all want to charge for new houses, one for them near the Assembly, look you, and one for them at home, and both paid for by the Assembly. One house is enough for me, and one enough for them it should be, and if they want two or three, indeed they can pay themselves, they can. Well paid they are, better than those who pay for them, and pensions they have, so moats and duck houses pay for themselves they can. Scandals there are, in all the papers, look you. Be like us, they say, have two homes, so all together we are.

‘Rocking the boat, they said I was, and do the same as themselves I should. Work the system I should, like them, they said. But work enough I had, look you, and the system work without me it could. Work without them, I can, too.

‘And then a smokeless zone they have declared our Assembly, look you, and not a one cried “no”. Forbidden I am now to breathe, not a huff can I make. “Stand outside you can,” they said, “be our emblem”. “What am I?” I replied, “a walking statue?”. “Like you elected a member I am, indeed, a member, not an emblem, and look you a seat I have.” “Too big for it you are, and a nuisance you have been, delaying our votes with objections. filling the room with smoke and trouble. A symbol and an emblem elected you were, indeed, not to trouble our debates, so go and a symbol become.”

‘Maman, I went but look you now, to stand outside on three legs all day I will never agree. “Welsh I am,” I told them, “and a dragon, the first red dragon to be born in Wales in a thousand years, and no more will I stand outside your house than hang outside an English pub. Never will I sit here again until like a real red dragon of Wales you wish to treat me.” Then with a huff that burned the Speaker’s chair from under him, I left, Maman, and here I am.’

‘And here you are welcome to be, but can you just resign? Are there no formalities?’

‘I don’t know. Find out, I must. Perhaps Jones the Library will know, or Williams the Law. In England hundreds of Chilterns they have, but here in Wales not even a dozen do we have.’

‘What will you do next? and how will you spend your time? A holiday is all very well, but you would get bored if you stayed too long.’

‘Some penillion I could write. At the next Eisteddfodd give them I could, and Gorsedd they would elect me. And after that, crowned a Gorsedd, perhaps the Tourist Office or the Chamber of Commerce as a Welsh ambassador employ me they would, or even our Prince make me his herald, he might. Work, indeed, for a true red dragon of Wales should not be hard to find, look you.’

‘Write to our Prince, then, and ask for his help. See if he will speak to his mother and find a post for you. Or perhaps he will make you an ambassador for Welsh people everywhere.’

‘Write now I will, this minute and a stamp you will give me. Kindly he spoke to me whenever he visited the chamber, then.’

Three weeks later a formal letter arrived.

‘Look, maman, a letter from London I have. Roving ambassador I will be, it says, to visit Welsh people in other countries, to remind them of Wales and to greet them from our Prince. To America first, go I must, to tell them that next month he comes.’

‘A long way, my son. Can you fly so far?’

‘Wherever my Prince sends me, a true Welsh dragon can fly. Magic it is. Welsh cakes I can carry, and a barrel of Welsh mead. Tomorrow I go.’

So Wendy spent all night baking Welsh cakes and brewing Welsh mead, and next morning waved farewell to Draiggoch. Three days later he was in Washington, arranging a visit to the White House, where next morning he found the President, several dozen press men with cameras, and the President’s security men waiting for him, while hidden round the corner were three fire trucks just in case he forgot himself and huffed at the rose bushes.

‘Wal now, pal, how do you say your name? Dry gulch?’, the chief of protocol asked. Draiggoch told him and after three attempts she got it near enough to announce him to the President.

‘Madam President, it is my great privilege to present to you the distinguished ambassador of the Principality of Wales and honored emissary of its noble Prince, the Honorable Draygush.’

The President blanched slightly, not being certain whether to try to shake hands with the raised claw of a bright red dragon who towered over her, standing hieratically on three legs.

‘Honoured to meet you, I am, madam President, and to bring you greetings from His Royal Highness, my Prince,’ said Draiggoch while the cameras flashed and the televisions zoomed to and fro, and the security guards stood tensed to rush flame-proof screens between him and the President at the first whiff of smoke.

‘One day my Prince will come. In three weeks, look you, he will be here. At all the events, he wishes me to be present. No security men he will bring,’ with a scornful look at the horde surrounding the President, ‘one Welsh dragon will, he says, suffice.’

The guards looked even more nervous, wondering what hidden powers this ferocious-looking creature might possess.

‘We shall be glad to welcome him to our country, to the center of the Free World,’ said the President, ‘as a token of our admiration for the spirit of independence shown over the centuries by your dauntless Principality in its struggle for freedom from the domination of a greater power,’ (the President seemed a little confused about the relationship between the prince and his mother), ‘and now I will leave you to discuss arrangements with my chief of protocol.’ And the President beat a somewhat hasty retreat to the security of her Oval Office through a series of flame-proof doors that had been hastily installed for this visit.

The press crowded round Draiggoch with a barrage of questions, ‘Say, do you always stand on three legs?’ ‘Do those wings really work?’ ‘Do dragons blow fire?’ ‘Is that red paint?’ ‘Are you a Red?’ ‘How do we know you’re Welsh?’ ‘Where’s Wales anyway?’ ‘Is it part of Yurru?’ ‘How d’you say your name?’ ‘How come you speak American if you come from Wales?’

Draiggoch was annoyed with all the questions which left no time for answers, and thought the President might have stayed to introduce him properly to the press. He grabbed the chief of protocol in one claw and took off with a whirr of wings, and vanished into the wild blue yonder.

‘Let me down,’ she cried, ‘you’re hurting me and I can’t stand heights.’

‘Oh so sorry I am,’ said Draiggoch, ‘only trying to get away from those idiots down there I was. Hold tight and down quick I’ll have you. Where to drop you do you want me?’

‘Don’t drop me, don’t drop me, please, please don’t,’ she screamed in a panic.

‘Don’t be silly, of course I won’t, only where to put you down I meant?’

‘Oh, by my office, next to the White House, please, and then let’s talk about the Prince’s visit.’

‘He’ll be here in three weeks, he will, and by the morning Concord he will fly, so here before he leaves he’ll be. Coming by himself, he’ll be, and a secretary he’ll borrow from the Embassy and a bed the Ambassador can give him.’

‘Oh I’m sure we can find him a bed at the White House, it will be an honor to have him.’

‘No, at the Embassy, better it will be, no idiots there with silly questions and not waiting then for answers, look you, and to his mother he can talk, and live in the garden there I can, to watch over him.’

‘Perhaps that would be better, as if you lived here people would crowd round to look at you and the security people would be worried and the fire service would charge us overtime. Now how do we greet the Prince? Last time we could not find any pibcorn players and had to make do with serpents, and he seemed surprised at them.’

‘Old friends of mine serpents are, so I will speak to him, look you, and happy with them he will be. Welsh cakes he loves, and Welsh rarebits he eats, and Cornish pasties, for Duke of Cornwall he is, too, and Scottish haggis, for Duke of Rothesay he is too. Even English food he eats as well. Welsh mead he drinks, and Cornish cider and Scotch whisky, as well as English beer. Whatever the President eats and drinks, eat and drink he will, for always polite he is. A real prince, my Prince, he is.’

‘Oh I’m sure he is, and we’ll take good care of him. So here is my phone number and my email, and call any time you think of anything else, and I’ll look forward to seeing you in three weeks.’

So Draiggoch flew back to London and reported what he’d done and arranged. He had talked to the Ambassador as well, and the Embassy would be happy to accommodate the Prince and would provide a secretary, though the Ambassador’s wife hadn’t been too happy with the idea of a dragon trampling over her flower beds. Draiggoch had promised to look where he was going and not to huff anywhere near the flowers unless there was a security emergency, and the Ambassador’s small son had told his mother what fun it would be to have a real dragon round the place and how he’d be the envy of all the other boys at his school. Draiggoch had promised to tell him Welsh stories and to give him occasional rides over the gardens. The Ambassador reminded his wife that the Red Dragon was the best pub in their village at home, so in the end everyone was happy. His Royal Highness agreed to put up with serpents – after all they still had some in Wales, and he was Prince of Wales, not of Ireland where they hadn’t had any since St Patrick had seen them all off. He was sorry that he couldn’t take his harpist with them, but agreed that there were enough harpies in America without importing any more – he’d met enough of them on television programs on his last visit to wish for any more. And besides, Concord was cramped for space and they might have had trouble fitting in a Welsh harp. A crwth, yes, but he hadn’t managed to persuade the Eistedfodd to lend him a crwth player – harpists now were two a penny and some of them Welsh, but crwth players were few and far between.

Three weeks later they were off, with Draiggoch flying above and behind the plane with a watchful eye. Even with his best strength he found it difficult to keep up with Concord, but by keeping in the slip-stream he could just about manage it. He was so exhausted when they arrived that he could only just manage a small ceremonial huff on their arrival. ‘Just as well,’ he thought. American airport security was trigger-happy enough, without too many belches of flame aimed at the welcoming party. A slither of serpents tooted their way through *Land of our Fathers*, and the marine band played *Our Country, ’tis of Thee*, as a double-edged compliment to the Prince’s mother as well as the host country. The Prince inspected the guard of honor, speeches were made (too many as always, and too long), and everyone drove off, with Draiggoch flying over the Prince’s car, to the consternation of those in the streets who’d never seen a dragon before and to the shrill whistles of the police who knew there was a city ordinance against low flying.

Next day, the Prince went to the White House, where he and the President had amicable discussions on matters of moment to them both, while Draiggoch mounted guard in the garden outside. He knew that his Prince would be safe inside, under the eye of the usual security people, and anyway any dangers there might be would come from outside.

Eventually the Prince reappeared and drove back to the Embassy, Draiggoch flying above as before and the helicopters they used to put out forest fires flying above him to make sure that the Brits weren’t going to burn down Washington again. Nearly two hundred years it had

been since last time, but once was quite enough, thank you, and they'd make sure it wouldn't happen again.

Once at the Embassy, the Prince told Draiggoch to relax for the rest of the day because next day they would be going off to Mexico and then south to all the countries where Welsh people had settled, though not right down into Patagonia because too much of it was in Argentina, and nobody wanted to stir up any trouble there again. They didn't expect to have any trouble in the other countries, but Draiggoch should always stay alert because south of the border, down Mexico way, anything could happen.

They were welcomed in Mexico City, with plenty of chillies in the food to make sure there was no chilliness in their reception. A re-enactment of one of the ancient Mexican ceremonies was staged at one of the surviving teocallis – there was always a few banditos to be disposed of, so the ceremony could be quite realistic.

On they went on their journey, meeting parties of Welsh descendants from time to time and being serenaded by Welsh choirs. Draiggoch remained on the alert all the way in case of any trouble. He also got quite used to making speeches in Spanish, for one of his duties was to introduce his Prince at every ceremonial welcoming. It was not until they reached Colombia that any of his other talents were required.

They were driving peacefully along what was rather optimistically called the highway when, rounding a bend, there was a road block with a crowd of unshaven thugs, heavily armed with assorted rifles. Draiggoch zoomed into the air and dived straight at them. His first burst of flame eliminated half of them, and a second took care of almost all the rest, only two or three managing to escape into the forest that bordered the road. Draiggoch reared up and sent another burst of flame ahead of them, cutting off their escape. Down he flew, grabbing each in a claw, and flew them back to the Prince, who was sitting calmly in his car, surrounded by an agitated posse of police who had been supposed to be escorting him on his way.

Once all the shouting had died down a bit, Draiggoch asked the chief of police to ask them why they had tried to attack his Prince.

'A Prince, a Prince? We thought it was the FBI coming to close our cocaine plantations. Señores, Señores, apologies, many apologies, we would never try to attack a Prince. A moment, please, we will radio our friends down the highway to remove their roadblocks. We are honoured, Señores, to have a Prince visit our country. Would he wish to visit our plantations? Coca we have, of the best, if he wishes. Señoritas, too, of the most beautiful if he wishes.'

Draiggoch made a graceful little speech on behalf of the Prince, expressing gratitude for their offers, and managing to decline them without causing offence. They drove off to the accompaniment of bursts of machine gun fire into the skies, with only a couple of cows being killed by falling bullets.

The Prince congratulated Draiggoch for the volumes of fire he had managed to produce, long bursts of bright red flame.

‘Thank you, Your Royal Highness, due to all the chillies we ate in Mexico it was. Very fiery they were, well stoked up I am, and a bagful I have for refuelling, when need I have.’

They went peacefully on their way, saluted by bursts of fire into the air from the assembled AK 47s at each dismantled road block that they passed. Draiggoch thought very courteous the local population was, whether they were Welsh or not.

All went well until they came to Peru. As they drove down the coastal road, at each port they came to they saw a muttering crowd, scowling at them as they drove by.

‘They don’t seem to like us, I wonder why?’ said the Prince.

At one of the fishing ports a larger crowd, carrying banners, blocked the road.

‘Now what is it,’ muttered Draiggoch as he readied himself for action, stuffing into his mouth a good handful of chillies from his bag.

‘Whales are ours, not yours,’ they were shouting. ‘We don’t want any Prince of Whales here. Keep our whales, no princes will take them.’

The Prince burst into a roar of laughter. ‘Explain to them, please Draiggoch, tell them it’s Wales not whales.’

‘Yes, Sire,’ said Draiggoch, and zoomed up into the sky again where he proceeded to sky-write with a long plume of smoke ‘We are Wales, not Whales.’

‘Ah, Señores, apologies, apologies. Be welcome, Wales.’

So on they drove, stopping as before wherever there was a colony of Welsh descendants, where they were greeted with all the usual hospitality. They carefully skirted round Argentina, through Bolivia and Paraguay, where they found the largest number of Welsh that they’d met so far, and into Brazil and then down through Uruguay, to Montevideo where the Prime Minister had sent a cruiser to pick them up and carry them home. When they got on board the Prince thanked Draiggoch for all his help and said how pleased he was how quickly Draiggoch had learned Spanish and Portuguese, and said that he would now become a permanent member of his staff and accompany him on all his journeys.

A sea voyage was just what the Prince needed after so long a trip, especially as his children had come along for the ride. They were very pleased to see their father again, and excited to see Draiggoch, who was a great favourite of theirs, for he had taken them for a couple of short ride before he had left London. He was always fond of children, even of the ones who had clamoured round him while he was in the Assembly, and especially of little girls, and was happy to please them with treats.

‘Give us a ride, please give us a ride,’ they clamoured when they saw him, but he wouldn’t take them out over the sea, much to their disappointment.

‘You might fall off,’ he said, ‘and then what would we do? Fly I can, but to swim I’ve never tried, and how could I rescue you if in the sea you fell?’

‘Please, Your Royal Highness,’ he said, ‘now that you have the navy to look after you, may I please stay here for a few days? I can fly home afterwards and be at Portsmouth to meet you when you arrive.’

‘Certainly,’ said the Prince, ‘and you don’t need to hurry back because I’ll be at home for a fortnight, but please be back by then because we are going to Copenhagen for a conference on Global Warming. But why do you want to stay here?’

‘I thought I saw some dragons in the distance while we were going through Bolivia, up above the mountains, and I’d like to go and see who they are. I didn’t know there were any in this part of the world.’

‘So go and enjoy yourself and tell me about them when you get back.’

With a kiss to the Prince’s hand and another to each of the children, Draiggoch flew off, back the way that they had come, up through Brazil, carefully skirting round Argentinian air-space. As he neared the Bolivian border, there far in the distance he saw a wreath of dragons circling round a mountain peak. As he got nearer, one of them spotted him and they came roaring towards him, strung out in a V-formation, with powerful huffs of smoke jetting from their nostrils.

‘Who are you and what are you doing here?’ shouted the leader, coloured as red as Draiggoch himself, as they came into earshot.

‘My name’s Draiggoch, and I’m a true Welsh dragon, escort to his Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales. And who are you?’

‘I’m Daffyd ApEmrhys ApHughes, and a real Welsh dragon am I. Settled here near five thousand years are we, in this the true land of our fathers, the New Wales.’

‘So you are the lost tribe, the descendants of those who left our country when they began to build the dragon traps!’

‘Lost we are not – always here we are found, look you. Are you a descendant of those who bowed to the invader, too lacking in courage to seek a new home?’

‘Lacking in courage we have never been. The old traditions we have preserved, the English we live off, our Prince we serve.’

‘English, what are they?’

‘No time for a history lesson, this is. Tired I am, a long flight this has been. Do you make me welcome or back do I fly?’

‘If Welsh you are, you say, and a true Prince of Wales you serve, welcome perhaps you may be – more we shall discover, but now come you to our home.’

They flew off together, the others keeping close formation around them, for they did not wholly trust Draiggoch.

They came to a small valley between the mountains, green and fertile with a small river running through the middle, with a row of dragon houses along its bank, surrounded by fields with Welsh cows grazing and sheep mixed with llamas and alpacas in the pastures up the slopes. Down they went and landed on the playing fields on the other side of the river, as a horde of dragons and draglets poured out of the houses.

‘Who is this you have brought? Another red dragon is he? Where does he come from? Is there another colony we do not know of? Where did you find him? What’s his name?’

‘Quiet all of you. How can I tell you if speak at once you all do? Come to our hall, and all we will tell.’

Once they were inside and all settled down, the elders at the front, the females at the back, and the draglets scabbling around under everybody’s feet, Daffyd ApEmrhys ApHughes started to introduce Draiggoch and explain where he came from.

‘From the Land of our Fathers he says he comes. Serves the Prince of Wales, he claims. Now let him tell us what has happened since we left.’

While Draiggoch tried to give a brief history of all that had happened, how the dragon trappers had in their turn been trapped by first the Romans, then the Sais, then the Normans and how now most of the country was English, with some Cornish, Welsh and Scots in the corners, the older females passed round mead and Welsh cakes, Draiggoch taking sips and bites as much as he could while he talked, for he was hungry after his long flight. He looked round the audience as he spoke, seeing many very agreeable sights in the back of the hall.

After he finished, Daffyd ApEmrhys ApHughes made a speech of welcome.

‘A true Welsh dragon you are indeed. Welcome here you are, for cousins we are, and welcome you and your family will be when you come. Now stay with us and tell us more.’

‘Not long can I stay, for serve my Prince I must. Ten days only can I stay, for then back I must go to join my Prince.’

‘After near five thousand years ten days short it is, but back again one day you will come.’

‘Only just have I my Prince begun to serve. Not yet do I know what leaves I will have. Always when he travels my Prince must I accompany and guard and sometimes ahead he sends me, arrangements for him to make. But return I will,’ he said, with a side glance towards some of the more obvious reasons for a return visit. ‘My mother, Wendy, will I bring and happy to see you she will be. Of all the dragons the most beautiful she is, and of all our history the most she knows.’

‘Welcome she will be indeed, and if of other cousins she knows, welcome all the more, for few of us here there are and others glad to meet we shall be.’

‘Few you say you are, but more here I see than ever I saw before. Preserved our people you have, and home again some must come.’

‘That we shall talk of in time to come. But now welcome be, others of our people you must meet and friends you must make.’

Looking around him, Draiggoch was sure that this last suggestion was a good idea. He saw that there were several friends that he would like to make.

Daffyd ApEmrhys ApHughes made him welcome in his home and introduced him to his sons, who were very envious of all his travels and wanted to hear many stories of what life was like in their old homeland. He also introduced him to his daughters, among whom, Draiggoch was pleased to see, were several of the most beautiful of those who had already caught his eye. Perhaps they would show him round the settlement, he thought.

After he had eaten and had rested a little, he suggested this to David ApEmrhys ApHughes.

‘But it is growing dark and not much in the dark will you see.’

‘The moon is full and some we shall see, and after my flight, good to walk a little it would be.’

‘So walk then but in the river do not fall. Olwen and Rhiannon, our visitor will you take?’

Draiggoch was glad that he had chosen the two most beautiful, and even happier when both agreed to escort him. A very pleasant stroll they had, even if they did not spend all their time walking, for the weather was warm and the grass was soft and the moon was bright, and everyone else was safely tucked up in their houses.

The ten days passed very happily, and it was a sad parting on both sides when at last Draiggoch said he must leave.

‘Home I must go, my Prince to join, and first my mam I must see and tell her of all your kindness. Back one day I will come, perhaps with me my Prince, for more Welsh dragons will he be pleased to see. Another time my mam perhaps also will I bring,, for whenever I can, back I will come.’

Back to England he went as fast as he could, for he wanted time to talk to Wendy about Daffyd ApEmrhys ApHughes and his people, and especially about Olwen and Rhiannon.

‘Maman, mamam, back I am and much to tell you I have.’

‘Now what have you been up to? Something scatty as usual? And how did you get back so fast, for your Prince has not arrived yet. He should be back here tomorrow they say.’

‘Fast I came, you to see before my Prince I must join. Oh mamam you will not believe, our lost tribe I have found. In Patagonia they live, many of them, all true Welsh dragons, in their own valley they are, and welcoming they were, pleased to see me and of our own land to hear. Beautiful some of them are and to meet you, all they wish. Oh, Maman, so beautiful two of them are and back soon I must go, again to see them.’

‘Trust you, my boy, to find the beautiful ones.’

He told her as much as he could before rushing off to join the Prince, without even having the time to tell her where they were going next.

‘Well’, she thought. ‘Time he settled down, and perhaps if he brought a suitable bride, the Prince would agree to an escort for his Princess, and even another for their children. We’ll see.’

Chapter 10 – Wendy in Copenhagen

Draiggoch had gone to meet his Prince, and Wendy was left alone at home on the top of Pendragon Hill in Llandraig. She had settled there because she thought it a very appropriate place to live, for she remembered St Draig very well. He had acquired that name, due to his reputation for clearing the dragons from the area, instead of his original name of Ruddy Jones, for he was red-haired and always something of a nuisance. He had achieved his skill with the dragons by brandishing bell, book, and candle and pronouncing anathemata at the top of his voice while surreptitiously handing over a small brown bag of gold. Wendy and several of her friends had kindly obliged him for that consideration, and stayed clear of the region over the years, and now that he was long gone, she thought it a nice tribute to him to come back and live on the hill outside his town, from which she could see the church that they'd named in his memory.

One day, when it was raining as usual and Wendy was beginning to feel bored with a steady diet of mutton, she had a message from her son that there was to be a Global Warming Conference in Copenhagen. 'Denmark,' she thought, 'herrings were nice there, and plenty of cows, all black and white they were, and it might make a pleasant change from mutton dressed as lamb.' One snag, though – she remembered meeting a mermaid there and mermaids were always rather fishy characters, up to no good. 'Was she still there?', she wondered, 'and if so would she have to meet her again?' Certainly she had been cold and clammy way back then, and she would be no help at all with global warming. More warmth would be nice, and she well remembered times when the globe had been quite a lot warmer than it was now and much pleasanter to live in. Then a lot of ice had arrived and while in the end she and Merlin with her friends had been able to drive it back north and out of Britain, the whole place was still a good bit colder than she liked, as well as wetter. She was sure that she'd be able to offer some help and advice if these people were conferring about warming the place up again.

So she decided to go and see what was going on. She told the mayor that she'd be away for a while and asked him to keep things warm for her while she tried to warm the place up for him. She dug her Kakakorian carpet out of the store room, unrolled it, and set off.

When she arrived, she cruised round a bit, looking for somewhere fairly inconspicuous to live. There was that dratted mermaid still sitting on her rock, looking a bit depressed, she was glad to see, and not surprising considering all the empty food packages and drink cans littering the area, not to speak of the blobs of discarded chewing gum all over the pavements. 'There must have been some English tour parties come to see her,' she thought. 'Serve her right.' She'd been a moping misery when she was alive and deserved to be kept miserable by her surroundings. At least she couldn't be difficult now that she was bronze and stuck down on her rock.

Wendy decided to base herself on a nearby island, not to gloat of course, she was much too nice-natured for that, but at least to make sure she couldn't get up to any mischief. It would be

nice to have the world a bit warmer but not if it meant making it more watery and only fit for merpeople.

Now how to make some contacts and meet people? ‘Was Draiggoch here representing his Prince?’, she wondered. ‘and if so, how to find out where he was staying?’ She decided to text him and see if he replied.

For once he replied straight away. ‘Maman, nice 2 hear frm u. where r u?’ ‘copenhagen,’ she replied. ‘y so am i,’ he answered, ‘cum nd see me, im at th hilton.’

‘Must be on expenses,’ she thought. ‘No way could he afford the Hilton otherwise, especially as his room would have to be specially fireproofed or the insurers would have a fit, and the more nervous guests might change to a rival hotel.’

A very nice room it was, up on the top floor so that he could fly in and out without having to go down in a lift to the lobby. It was a suite in fact, as a normal Hilton room wouldn’t have had space to swing a cat, let alone a full-grown dragon.

‘So what are you doing here, to goodness, Maman?’ Draiggoch asked her.

‘I heard that there was to be a Global Warming Conference here, so I’ve come to see if I can help to warm the planet,’ she replied. ‘It gets chilly enough nowadays that a bit of warming would be a good thing. It’s been colder the last ten years than I remember for a century or more. We’ll soon be back to roasting oxen on the Thames at Westminster Bridge.’

‘Maman, that’s not what we’re here for, look you, the planet getting warmer it is, and stop it they want to. The ice is breaking up all around, it is, and flooding the world, it will be, and we shall all be swimming like fishes soon enough.’

‘Nonsense,’ Wendy replied. ‘Why I remember when this was covered with tropical forest, and look at it now, nothing but sand and pine trees. We’ll soon be back in the Ice Ages at this rate, and I’ll have to wake up old Merlin again to get us out of it. And as for flooding, when I was a girl there were hippopotamuses swimming around where Trafalgar Square is now in London, and nobody was worried about them then. It might do the world good if they were back there again, for they were good eating, I remember.’

‘Maman, not understand, you don’t. Living there now, people are, and not all to swim they can. And islands there are, almost underwater already, they are, and altogether if more ice melts, they will be.’

‘Well, there are more islands they can go to, aren’t there? Islands always do go up and down, Atlantis did, and what a fuss they made about that, and others did and will. And as for ice melting, it’s the sun does that and you can’t turn the sun up and down like I do my oven, however much you talk. The sun does what it wants to do, up and down like a yoyo, and neither you nor I, nor your Prince, can make it change its mind.’

‘But Maman, all this travelling it is that makes the air bad and makes the sun stronger, and all the cows and sheep belching, so trying to persuade people to stop travelling so much we are, and stop eating meat so less cows and sheep to belch there will be.’

‘So why do you all travel here instead of email conferencing? And if there are fewer cows and sheep what will we do for milk, butter, cheese, and wool? You can’t have milk without calves, and either you eat the calves or you waste them.’

‘Oh Maman, understand you never do. People never agree unless to talk to each other they do, and talk to each other they never do unless a nice holiday at the same time they can have, in a nice place, and of course travel they like to, if someone else pays for it, look you, and stay in a nice hotel like this, indeed. And eat better here, they do, than at home, and someone else to pay for it. With email conferencing they live at home, look you, and pay for all their meals themselves.’

‘That they never do, my son. All their meals they charge along with their second and third houses as you know full well. Why else did you leave the Assembly?’

‘Yes, but charge more here they can, and eat better if they want to, they can, or eat normally and charge for better. That’s why to travel they like.’

‘Always a lot of crooks, just like our Parliament at home, so bad cess to them all, as the Irish say, and they’re the worst of the lot, for they charge and then won’t take their seats. Maybe I’ll go home again, for if they don’t want the world any warmer, they won’t want my help.’

‘No, Maman, stay a while, please do, and meet these people from the Islands. Nice, they are, and friendly, and no longer eat their visitors they do, not even in sandwiches do they eat them.’

So Wendy agreed to stay, and Draiggoch suggested that they should meet some of the islanders next day after lunch. Wendy went off for a swim and to see how many herrings she could catch for her dinner. A quick huff roasted them to a turn and she ate them in front of the mermaid, just to make her jealous, now that she was bronze and stuck to her rock and could no longer fish for herself. It was a slightly wasted effort, for the mermaid wrinkled her bronze nose as much as she could, as she preferred her herrings raw.

The islanders were indeed nice, and as their leader had taken a degree in jurisprudence at Wadham in Oxford, she had no difficulty in understanding them. Wendy had been a bit worried about this, for pigeons she knew, but pidgin was another matter. She became so interested in what they told her, about all the beauties of the Islands (Draiggoch seemed quite interested in some of the beauties, too), that she eagerly accepted their invitation to travel home with them and see them for herself, and asked if she could bring Draiggoch as well. He wasn’t sure whether his Prince could spare him, but a few quick exchanges on the secure email link at the embassy assured him that there was nothing urgent coming up and that he could have a month’s leave.

‘So where to do we go?’, asked Wendy.

‘To the Islands,’ replied Tuo’i, as he was called while in Europe for his full name was too long for anyone to remember.

‘But where are they?’

‘Out there,’ he replied with a vague south-easterly gesture. ‘It’s easy to find one island from another, you just follow the stars, but to get to the Islands from here, I get on the aeroplane and it knows where to go. Can’t you just follow us?’

‘Well, how far is it? I can follow you some of the way, but if it takes too long I’ll get tired and need a rest. Draiggoch may be alright but I’m not as young as I was.’

‘Nonsense, Maman, not a day over a hundred do you look.’

‘Enough out of you. Hold your tongue till you’re spoken to, my boy, and don’t cheek your mother – you don’t know how old I am, and I’m not going to tell you either. So how far is it?’

‘About thirty hours flying,’ said Tuo’i, rather doubtfully, for he usually slept most of the way. ‘Doesn’t make much difference which way you go, either, past Australia or across America. Either way’s difficult. The Americans want all sorts of papers, fingerprints, and visas even if all one’s doing is flying across, and it takes hours to go through security at check-in and on arrival, and the Aussies want to be sure that we islanders are going straight out if we’re coming in.’

‘If it’s like that,’ said Wendy, since she only had a single-seater carpet and didn’t want to have to go back to Armenia and buy another one just for this trip, ‘it’d be easier and quicker to go straight through and come out the other side. Dragons don’t have fingers to print, and they might not like claws. Draiggoch has a diplomatic passport, but I haven’t. Can you show me on a map where I’m going to?’

The embassy managed to produce an atlas and Wendy plotted her destination on her sat-nav. She reckoned it was a three-day trip and emailed a few of her underground friends to arrange for beds on the way. One of the advantages of age and experience was that she had friends everywhere.

‘OK, so when would you like us to arrive?’, she asked Tuo’i.

‘Any time after next Thursday,’ he replied. ‘It’ll take us that long to get there and arrange a fire-proofed palm-leaf house for you. We don’t want you burning down the village, so we’ll put it a bit outside and put a taboo circle round it so you don’t get plagued with too many children coming to stare at you.’

‘Oh, like children we do,’ said Draiggoch, ‘Not enough of them do we get over here.’

‘Well you can’t have them in the Islands, either,’ said Tuo’i, ‘We know how many we’ve got and we want to keep them. We don’t eat the spares nowadays like we used to, so be careful of them, please. We’ve enough pigs, and there are plenty of sharks in the lagoon if you get hungry, you can eat as many of those as you please and the more the better.’

‘I thought sharks were an endangered species nowadays,’ said Wendy.

‘Yes, well around here they say so, but it’s all very well to say that in Denmark, but it’s a bit difficult to see it the same way when you want to go spear fishing in the lagoon and the sharks want to go fishing for you, so you can forget about all that nonsense when you’re with us.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Wendy, ‘And we’ll see you next Friday. And Draiggoch, bach, just stop making tactless remarks about children, if you please. It’s not like it was in the old days, now.’

So Wendy spent a day or two shopping for presents to take to her friends on the way, a few bottles of Aquavit to make a change from molten sulphur, which always gave her indigestion, and a few bushels of herrings as well as a cod or two.

‘Follow me, boy,’ she said to Draiggoch, ‘And keep close so you don’t get lost. Straight down and we’ll bear a bit right to make sure we miss Nibelheim, nasty lot they are, always looking for rings and wanting to search your pockets.’

Off they went, and the journey was quite uneventful though it got a bit warm and dense in the middle. Wendy’s salamander friends were all glad to see her and made her and Draiggoch very welcome, though Draiggoch, who’d never been that way before, found the food a bit indigestible and rather too hot for his palate – this was much hotter than even the hottest chillies the Mexicans had given him when he’d been there with the Prince. Wendy managed to pick up a few bags of fire opals and other stones that she thought might please the islanders. Her sat-nav brought her out, just where she wanted to be, half a mile offshore from Tuo’i’s island home.

As soon as he saw her appear, Tuo’i set off in his canoe, followed by all the local chieftains to make a formal welcome with songs and garlands for their visitors. The flotilla escorted them to the beach where the rest of the population were waiting to greet them, for Welsh dragons were a new species to them and Tuo’i had impressed on them the importance of the Prince of Wales’s own representative coming to see their plight for himself. Wendy was rather amused at being an appendage to her son and was pleased to see how dignified he could appear instead of the scruff she’d remembered from his younger days at home.

First they were taken to their nice new house, open-sided like all the other houses, with mats that could be let down from the rafters to give them privacy when they wanted it, with palm tree pillars supporting a high roof covered in pandanus leaves. When they’d sorted out their things, they were escorted to the great feast that had been cooking in underground pits for a couple of days. Speeches of welcome were made, which Tuo’i translated for them, compressing every ten minutes of verbosity into thirty seconds of substance (he’d won prizes for précis writing at school and he’d always found that skill useful when listening to lawyers in court). After the meal, there were dances, first by the men, and then by the girls. Beauties they were indeed, and Draiggoch’s eyes lit up when he saw some of them, for their clothing was little more than a band of flowers round their waist and another round their heads.

‘Steady, boy bach,’ said Wendy, ‘You’re deputising for His Royal Highness here, so don’t do anything he wouldn’t do.’

‘Alright, Maman, I’ll remember, but in window-shopping no harm is there? The scenery is getting more beautiful all the time, look you, and admire it, we’re expected to.’

After everything was over they were escorted to their house with a torchlight procession and the promise of an exploration of the island in the morning.

Next day, after a dawn swim in the lagoon and a shark each for breakfast, Tuo’i and the two most important of the chiefs showed them round the periphery of the island, Tuo’i riding on Wendy as they flew, and the chiefs on Draiggoch, as became their status. The chiefs had

never flown before and one of them was rather frightened beforehand, but Tuo'i, who'd been on the great ride in Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen, persuaded him that it would be an easy way to do the journey, for the island was about twenty miles round, too far to walk, and Draiggoch had promised not to perform any aerobatics. They saw that except for the mountain in the middle and the slopes up to it, the rest of the island was no more than two or three feet above sea level, and even Wendy began to realise that the islanders' fears might be well-founded.

'So what's wrong with the mountain that you can't live round there?', she asked.

'There are two problems,' Tuo'i explained. 'One is that it's a long way from the sea so fishing is difficult...'

'Maybe it won't be for long,' interrupted Wendy, 'One day the sea may be on your doorstep up there.'

'And the other,' went on Tuo'i imperturbably, 'is that the mountain is sacred and we don't go up there.'

'Why not?', asked Wendy.

'Well, nobody has for a century or more, and they say that when people do, they vanish and don't come back. So nobody wants to go there and see what happened to them.'

'Tuo'i, you're a grown man with a degree in law,' said Wendy, 'and do you mean to say that you really believe a story like that after studying with someone like Peter Carter? You were at Wadham, not Keble or Oriel – surely you've got more sense than that.'

'Well, you know how it is, when you've been told something from your childhood and it's part of the tradition of your people, it gets built in. And also for me to go there would offend anyone who saw me because it would be trampling on their superstitions, rather like walking on the grass in Front Quad, only much worse.'

'So would it offend people if I went and looked?'

'I shouldn't think so, especially if you flew, but don't blame me if you don't come back! After all, most legends are founded on some sort of fact, and there's no doubt that nobody ever saw my great-great-grandfather again.'

'Oh, so it was one of your family was it? And haven't you ever wondered about it?'

'Well, yes, I have, to tell you the truth, but not enough to defy the local customs.'

'So do you want to come with me? You could ride on my back and people probably wouldn't see you. Do you want to risk it? It might be good to have a local witness in case I do find anything useful, and you could bring a video camera with you. Are you brave enough?'

'Trying to snaggle me into it, aren't you. Alright, I'll come, and after all, if anything happens to me I've no dependants except a month's rent and an overdraft at the bank, and the landlord and the bank can look after themselves.'

'Right, no time like the present. Draiggoch, bach, stay here, look after yourself, remember the Prince and don't do anything silly, and if we don't come back, you can tell people where we've gone and that the silly superstition isn't so silly after all.'

So Tuo'i climbed on to Wendy's back and off they flew. It was a bright moonlight night and Wendy kept low so as not to be seen against the moon, only climbing gradually as she reached the foothills.

Draiggoch, meanwhile, wandered into the middle of the village, looking around him with interest as he went. Quite soon he saw a bevy of very pretty young ladies and headed towards them. They screamed and scattered as he approached, but since he seemed peaceable enough they soon got over their alarm and came towards him.

'A nice evening, indeed, it looks,' he said. 'To show me the way to the beach, would any of you like?' He knew perfectly well where the beach was, but this seemed a useful opening line that might lead to a pleasant evening.

Two of the braver volunteered, the two prettiest as it happened, and off they went side by side, down the slope to the beach where they settled on the sand, shaded from the moon by some palms.

'Nice it is here, and nice you are,' said Draiggoch, and nice indeed it was, with no risk of saints or knights galumphing towards them with lances and swords, for there was not a horse on the island, nor a lance either.

Wendy and Tuo'i soon reached the top of the mountain, and Wendy saw that the top was a small crater, as she'd expected, for she knew that many of these islands had once been volcanoes. Down she spiralled and settled by the small lake in the centre. Tuo'i clambered down from her back and they stood there looking round. In one of the side walls of crater they saw a small cave.

'Shall we look in there?' said Wendy.

'OK,' said Tuo'i, 'but ladies first, please.'

'Coward', she replied, and peered in. There was just room for her so she told Tuo'i to keep back a bit, for there wasn't room for her to turn round and if she had to back out she didn't want to trample him. Her body blocked out all the moonlight so she let out a small huff of flame to see where she was going. It looked clear enough ahead of her, sloping gently downwards, but she could only see a few yards for the passage soon bent round to the left.

'Be careful,' called Tuo'i from behind her, peering between her legs. 'Sometimes there are pits in cave floors'.

'I will,' said Wendy, and went cautiously forwards towards the bend in the passageway.

'The floor's a bit muddy, so don't slip, and I think I saw footprints in the mud – somebody's been here before us – maybe it was your grandfather.'

She reached the bend and cautiously put her head round. She couldn't see anything, so sent another small huff ahead of her.

'Aaargh, who's burned my toe?' roared a voice. 'I'll teach you to burn your betters.'

'Who are you?' asked Wendy, 'I'm sorry I didn't mean to burn you – I just wanted to see where I was going.'

‘Ro’oli they call me here, and anyone who disturbs me I eat,’ the voice roared, followed by a great gout of flame that singed one of Wendy’s eyebrows and made Tuo’i retreat so hastily that he tripped and fell on his back in the mud.

‘Not the Rolli who used to live on Cader?’ said Wendy.

‘Now who remembers that?’ asked the voice, with another gout of flame.

‘It’s Wendy, you old fool and you’ve singed both my eyebrows now.’

‘Wendy, you old trout, what on earth are you doing here?’

‘Come to look round the island and see why it’s sinking,’ she said, ‘and why did you leave Cader Idris and how did you get here?’

‘Well Cader went cold, and I wanted to go somewhere warm, so I searched Google to look for somewhere nice, and this seemed ideal. I came straight here to have a look round, stopping off for a while in the middle to warm up. Very kind and friendly the salamanders in the centre were, so I stayed with them for a few millennia and they suggested it might be nice here, too. They said it should still be warm, as indeed it is, and nice and peaceful. Or it was till a century or so ago, when someone came up and trod on my tail. So I shut him up in that cupboard there – nuisance he is, still shouting occasionally, so I huff and that shuts him up.’

‘Do you suppose my great-great-grandfather could still be alive here?’ said Tuo’i excitedly.

‘Anything’s possible with Rolli around,’ said Wendy, ‘He was the best necromancer in Wales, and we’re all pretty good there. Do let him out, please, Rolli, there’s a dear old boy – I’ve brought his great-great-grandson to meet him, and he’ll take him away so he won’t disturb you any more.’

‘Alright, alright, he was so scraggy that I thought I’d keep him for a while in the hope that he’d get fatter and be worth eating. The others that came here before him were all nice and juicy, but he wouldn’t have filled a hollow tooth. Come on, out you come, you scrag, and see my lovely old friend, my dear Wendy.’

‘Flatterer, you don’t change any, do you?’ said Wendy, ‘always on the make you were, and I wasn’t the only one you flattered, was I? I remem...’

‘Now don’t start remembering things you didn’t ought to, or maybe I’ll start remembering things too,’ said Rolli, with something of a smirk.

‘OK, OK, let’s both forget each other’s past, and think of the future. This island is sinking and I want you to help jack it back up and then prop it up so that it stays up, and if that doesn’t work to allow the people to move up into the foothills and rebuild their villages there so that they don’t get washed away if the sea comes up.’

‘I suppose I could let them live up here, provided they don’t disturb me, and on condition that they pay me a rent of a few pigs a month and bring them up and toss them into the crater – let’s say every full moon. That’ll save me having to climb down and catch them like I do at night now. And it would be easier than propping up an island this size.’

‘So that’s why pigs used to get scarce occasionally,’ said Tuo’i, ‘we used to wonder what caused it. And is this really you, great-great-grandfather?’ he said as a scrawny old man crawled out between Wendy’s legs and round her tail.

‘How would I know when you weren’t born before I climbed up here? But you look like I looked then, so maybe I am and maybe you are.’

‘Well, wrap your beard round your throat to keep warm, as it’s chillier outside, and anyway it’ll keep it from trailing in the mud as it is now. Ro’oli, we’ll pay you the pigs you ask, and only those who bring them will come up the mountain, and if we disturb you with our singing and dancing, let us know and we’ll keep the noise down. And thank you for letting us move up here, and if you can think of any way to stop the island sinking, do please try to do so, and if you can help the other islands, too, we’d all be very grateful.’

‘I’ll try,’ said Rolli, ‘I’ll ask my friends underneath and if they can help, they will. After all, they don’t want islands dropping on their heads any more than you do. Wendy, love, won’t you stop for a while and keep an old friend company?’

‘A week or two,’ said Wendy. ‘My son, Draiggoch is down below, but he can look after himself. He’s probably found some pleasant company in the village by now, if I know him, and he’s got a month’s leave from his duties with the Prince of Wales. Tuo’i, tell him where I am, please, and that I’ll see him in a couple of weeks, and I’m afraid that you’ll have to walk home.’

‘We’ll manage,’ said Tuo’i, ‘it’s all downhill, and great-great-grandpa would probably like to stretch his legs after being shut in that cupboard for so long. It’ll make it seem easier now that we’re bringing such good news. Thank you so much, Wendy, for arranging it all. Enjoy yourself here and we’ll see you back in the village soon, and we’ll arrange another feast so that everyone can thank you.’

‘We will, I’m sure. Go carefully, the sun’s rising so you should be able to see your way.’

After a very pleasant couple of weeks, Wendy flew back down the mountain, to be greeted with cheers and thanks for her help, and the feast that Tuo’i had promised.

‘Time we went home, boy,’ she said to Draiggoch, and all the young men cheered again, for they’d had a lonely time of it with all the prettiest girls clustering round Draiggoch, who was looking very pleased with himself.

‘Fostering good relations have I been, look you, Maman,’ he said.

‘Good relations with all the population you’re supposed to foster,’ said Wendy, ‘not with just half of it and the younger ones of that half at that. Fostering will be the word, if I’m any judge,’ with a look at all the young ladies weeping their eyes out at parting with him.

‘Come you, let’s be off. Which way shall we go? Do you want to go back the way we came or would you like to visit your brother in Arizona or your sister in Armenia?’

‘Not my brother or sister, Maman, I think. Another time my brother and sister we’ll see. My month’s leave nearly over, it is, and no more than a day two with either could we stay. But please to my new friends in Bolivia may we visit? Daffyd ApEmrhys ApHughes and his daughters you must meet.’

‘Oh ho,’ said Wendy, ‘I must, must I? That’s how it stands is it?’

‘Yes maman, please maman, pretty please.’

‘Alright, but quick we must go if you are to be home in time, so set your sat-nav, hold your breath and follow me.’

‘Come again,’ called Tuo’i, ‘any time you’ll be welcome, and I’m sure that Ro’oli will say the same.’

After a very fast flight, not even stopping for snacks, they soon arrived at Daffyd ApEmrhys ApHughes’s village.

‘Daffyd, my mother Wendy this is. Come to meet you have I brought her.’

‘Welcome she is, and you again. so soon. Stay longer this time I hope you will. Perhaps Olwen and Rhiannon pleased to see you may be,’ said Daffyd with a wink at Wendy.

‘Oh I wish I could, but awaits me does my Prince, and back on Monday must I be, look you, so Sunday we must leave. My duty must I do.’

‘So welcome be you when you go, and farewell when you come. Short it will be and next time longer, I hope. Wendy, have we met before? Your face familiar it seems.’

‘Yours does to me also. When you were a child in the Old Country, do you remember one day looking for rabbits by the river? And a girl who was with you and dared you to try to swim?’

‘Was that you? Trying to swim I remember, and a girl who had to fish me out when too much water I swallowed.’

‘Me it was, and you kissed me after to thank me, you did.’

‘Then, old friend, again to kiss you I will, and again here you must come, and soon, and old friendships revive we will, though swimming, not again.’

Chapter 11 – Wendy’s holiday

One day Wendy felt like a holiday. Life had been hectic, trying to get all the children settled, so why not a holiday off by herself and some pleasure and enjoyment? But where should she go? She’d always had a slight hankering to visit Venice even though one of her family had had an unfortunate experience there. Her great-uncle Giacomo had been living there happily and peacefully with a young lady called Caterina. A pretty little thing, she’d looked after him very nicely, polishing his scales, flattening all the sharp ones and sharpening the flats. Uncle Jack had spent the evenings happily telling Kate tall stories about his younger days, when there was still the odd brontosaurus around, sticking its long neck up over the waters of the lagoon, and Kate telling him about her boyfriend who kept neglecting her, puffing glass tat for Phoenician tourists through a blowpipe on one of the neighbouring islands.

This harmonious life suddenly came to a sticky end when an oaf called Zorzi took exception to a dragon living with a young lady and came galumphing up on a horse. A horse, I ask you, thought Wendy, what would anyone want with a horse in Venice? A whale would be more to the purpose. So what did he do but stick poor old Uncle Jack with a bloody great spear, leave him writhing on the deck, and carried off dear little Kate, who was screaming at such an assault and in floods of tears. She spent the rest of her life in mourning for Uncle Jack, and as for that idiot Zorzi they made him a saint and dedicated a whole island to him. Made him the patron saint of England, too, so thank God she was Welsh!

So no to Venice. It would be too painful to visit Uncle Jack’s haunts and see all those statues and carvings praising his killer, not to speak of a whole church with a dome and a tower on his island that would remind her of Zorzi’s spear. So where else? Where might she feel welcome with nice scenery and people who didn’t count their sheep and cows too carefully? Or somewhere by the sea with plenty of fish around. Wasn’t there a Count Draco around somewhere? Maybe he would be pleasant company. Or maybe not, wasn’t he something of a blood-sucker? She could do without a rapacious landlord for a holiday.

What about Ireland? Not too far to fly, the leprechauns were always friendly and a banshee made a nice snack even if a bit noisy on the way down. It was a bit boggy, of course, and usually raining, but her scales were waterproof enough and they said that Irish eyes were always smiling.

What about looking up some old friends? There were several she could think of that she’d not seen for years, not thought about either, come to that. There was Rolevant who used to live on Cader Idris, but he’d left there years ago, and she knew where had Rolli gone now, and she’d seen him quite recently. But there was Archibald who’d had a home in what was now Uffington – they

still called it Dragon Hill, didn’t they, but what had happened to Archie? She’d not heard from him for a long time not since they’d carved that picture of him on the hillside – didn’t look much like him, he’d said, no tail for one thing and no wings either, so he’d taken umbrage and left in a huff (and that hadn’t done the carvers much good, he’d been pleased to see) and upped sticks and left, but where to? And then what about Williczek? Somewhere unpronounceable in Bohemia he’d lived, Plzn or some such string of consonants without a vowel in sight, it’d been. And she really ought to go and call on Karim’s family and make some amends for that cretin who’d shot him down – maybe find the oaf and take them his head as a present. Karim had had a lot of cousins in Anatolia and many more across the border in Armenia, so maybe a visit there would produce some more Turkish delights?

First thing was to search for some of those old friends and see if she could find where they were now, and then perhaps arrange a tour, winding up in Turkey – at least she knew where Karim’s family lived. Perhaps some of them had a website – after all she had one – or maybe they’d be on Facebook. She’d have to have a look at her home page and see if she could find them as friends or as friends of other friends. Trouble was how could she type in an email address when that was what she wanted to find out?

But there was Archie, sure enough, though with no indication of where he was living, silly ass. So was Osbert, she’d forgotten him, but there he was, still squattering around in the Fens, getting his feet muddy every day. Well, anyway, she’d wait and see if Archie got in touch, and then she’d know where two of them were. Now what about Williczek? Willie’d been a right character in the old days, hard as anything but always great fun, and as he’d had a controlling interest in a brewery there’d been some good evenings and memorable nights. Was he there? Yes, he even had his own website with a picture of a great crag with a castle on the top. How many dragons did she know with their own castle? How about family? No, there was no mention of a Mrs Willie, though unless he’s changed a lot there’d probably still be a few Misses around. He’d certainly go down on the list for a tour. And here was Archie on gmail chat: nice to hear from her, keep in touch, let’s meet sometime, and where was he? In Edinburgh now? Up on Arthur’s Seat? Fine, what about next week? OK, Tuesday, and see you then.

So there was a start, so let’s see if she could line up Osbert and Willie and then wind up in Anatolia.

All went well. Osbert had a lair at the top of the University Library tower in Cambridge, drier than the Fens, and where all the theses festering underneath kept him warm, and a contract to keep the pigeons from roosting on the spires of King’s College chapel and from being a nuisance in the market, so that kept him fed, with the occasional bonus of an alpinist student for a more solid meal.

Willie’d be delighted to see her and he was laying in a few extra barrels in anticipation, and he’d swap one of them for a few bottles of Tokaj from a pal over the border. Karim’s family would be pleased to see her, too, for they didn’t blame her for what had happened.

So, could she trace that murderous cretin? Which pub had he been staying in? He must have signed the book and maybe he’d been one of the few that had given a true address – several of the others had left false names and addresses and then absconded without paying their bills.

It was easy enough to trace him. A fire-breathing dragon had only to make the mildest of threats before a half-timbered pub with a thatched roof provided anything asked for. One of those glass-walled penthouses overlooking the Thames in Docklands, it was, and that should be easy enough; one swipe of her tail and she’d be in, unless of course he was off trying to overthrow some government in Africa, or in jail by now like that other mercenary in Africa. Mercenaries seemed prone to such holidays nowadays. Anyway, no need to worry about that until she was on her way to Bohemia’s woods and fields. She’d have to borrow some freezer space from Willie or else he’d spoil and damp the festive atmosphere before she could move on to Turkey, and the fact that she was taking him to Turkey to make amends would stop Willie being jealous of whom she was going to see there. Maybe he’d keep better if she smoke-dried him first? Still, there was time to think about that between now and then.

So Wendy got herself packed, got out her Kakakorian carpet, sent word down to the mayor to tell him she’d be away for a few weeks and would email him a few days before she got back so that he’d have time to stock up on food for her, and set off.

Archie would be easy enough to find – you couldn’t go to Edinburgh and miss Arthur’s Seat, though how he managed to hide himself and so how she’d be able to find him if too many other people couldn’t, she didn’t know. A phone call when she got close was probably the answer.

‘Archie, where are you? Can you see me and guide me to you?’

‘You’re about 200 yards off and south-west of me.’

‘But where are you? All I can see is a little old man in a kilt too big for him.’

‘That’s me and not too much of your “little old man” either if you please.’

‘But what’s happened to you? A fine upstanding dragon you were at Uffington.’

‘And so I still am at night or when there’s no one around to see me. Wayland at the old smithy up on the Downs, along the Ridgeway beyond where I used to live, taught me how to disguise myself and very useful it’s been. He’d been a powerful chap in his day, but when he came down in the world he found it useful to look like a common or garden blacksmith, but if anyone took the mickey out of him, or failed to pay him, he could change back in a twinkling and give them a real what’s for. So here I am disguised as the Hermit of Arthur’s Seat, in all the guidebooks, and

charging a bob a look and half a crown for a photo, and doing very nicely thank you with all the tourists. It’s even better in Festival times, for they come up here in hordes. And then couples sometimes come up at night for a quiet snog, and I’m not looking like a hermit any more, so I have a nice snack, they’re still together, and their families think they’ve run off to Gretna Green and they’ll hear from them in a week or three, and nobody worries. It’s a nice easy life here! But come in and have a dram.’

Down inside the rock it was warm and comfortable and Archie clearly had good taste in whisky. A special brew, he said, that was bottled with a picture of him as a dragon on the label for the single malt, and another as the hermit for the blended, in return for which he got a barrel of each every six months. Very popular the malt was in Japan and elsewhere in the east where dragons were respected, and the blended was popular in India and other places where hermits were valued. Plenty of food in the larder, too. One of the fringe groups had tried to stage a show up on the Seat and as nobody could be bothered to climb up there to see them, no one had missed them when they disappeared. So some were fresh in the larder and others stashed in the freezer, quite enough to keep them going for a while.

They had a good time together, catching up on each other’s news and renewing an old friendship, and Wendy told him about her children and where they all were. She was sure that each would welcome him whenever he felt like a holiday, and he told her to ask Draiggoch to get in touch whenever the Prince came north, for he was Duke of Rothesay as well as Prince of Wales. They could have a pleasant time together while the Duke was stalking or fishing and didn’t want Draiggoch underfoot, frightening the deer or distracting the fish.

After a couple of weeks, the freezer was looking a bit empty, and Wendy was starting to get a perpetual hangover from all the whisky, and she thought it was about time to move on, especially as Archibald followed the usual practice of the area and locked up the whisky at midnight on Saturday till Monday morning so that there was no hair of the dog available on a Sunday – now that she’d been there for some days she no longer counted as a bona fide traveller who was entitled to drink on the Sabbath.

So she flew down to Osbert’s lair on top of the UL in Cambridge. Term was just starting, always a good hunting time, Osbert told her, with plenty of new students who didn’t know their way around and hadn’t made any friends yet who’d miss them. As it was the custom for students to live out of College in their first year, landladies wouldn’t miss them either as they could let their empty rooms to someone else, and the dons never really knew how many students were supposed to be in their lectures. Anyway, most of the science lecturers couldn’t count beyond ten (Mathematics wasn’t concerned with simple arithmetic) and the humanities ones weren’t troubled with such mundane

matters as numbers, they were too busy with Higher Thoughts. Students were a necessary nuisance but the less they saw of them the better unless they were prettier than the usual run of the mill, or to suit some tastes, more handsome.

Life in Cambridge was a great improvement over the Fens, Osbert said.

‘Monks got a bit scarce after all the monasteries were abolished, and most of the lampreys have become scarce even though there was once a surfeit of them. Eels and fish are tasty enough, especially in a pie, but you do need a lot of them to make a good meal, and my pastry is nothing like as good as yours used to be.’

‘That’s one of the things my mother did teach me,’ said Wendy. ‘You need cool hands and a light touch to make good pastry.’

‘Cool hands and a warm heart,’ said Osbert, ‘and I know your heart was always warm enough.’

‘Go on with you, you old varmint. We’re getting a bit old for that nowadays.’

‘Not so anyone’d notice, or not around you anyway,’ responded Osbert as he made a quick grab.

It was a good holiday so far, thought Wendy contentedly. How had she forgotten to keep in touch with such good friends? She really must keep up her Facebook page, and maybe see who else was still around and lively. She’d got so used to living alone since she moved to Llandraig and launched the kids into the world, apart from that one fling with Karim, that she’d forgotten what it was like to have a friend around. Now that she was reminded, she must start inviting people to stay from time to time, and if the mayor didn’t like the idea of providing extra rations for her visitors, he could lump it. A few extra dragons around were a good advertisement for the town, and the more the visitors, the better the pubs and restaurants would like it.

As term progressed, the supply of new students started to dry up and the steady diet of pigeons began to get boring. Osbert tried to vary it as much he could, pigeon pie, roast pigeon, smoked pigeon, fricassée of pigeon, alpinist on the spit (a rare treat, that one), pigeon and spinach, potted pigeon, grilled pigeon, pigeon fondue (a contribution from Blaellian in Switzerland), pigeon cholent (Arik’s mother had taught him that one), pigeon tikka, even pigeon and chips, but it was all pigeon, pigeon, and pigeon and the feathers began to stick in her craw. Osbert was nice enough, but it was time to move on.

‘Willie, how do I find you?’ she emailed to Williczek.

‘Set these co-ordinates into your sat-nav and you’ll get here easily enough,’ he replied.

She had to decide which route to take, whether to go straight there or to drop in on either of the children at the Drakenfels or Dreckertal, or even both, for each was near enough to the direct line from Cambridge. However, she decided to leave them till the return journey, for she had had seen

both quite recently and didn’t want either of them to think her an interfering mum, checking up on prospective marriages or empty cradles.

Bidding Osbert a fond farewell, with a promise to meet again soon, she set off. On the way she overtook a flight of storks, starting their migration from Europe to their winter homes. ‘I do like in-flight snacks,’ she said to herself as a cloud of feathers drifted downwards. Soon her sat-nav told her to start her descent, and sure enough, there was an imposing castle surmounting a beetling crag. Flags fluttered from turrets and as she spiralled down, a draw-bridge lowered and a portcullis lifted. A file of horn-blowers, dressed in imposing liveries, marched out of the gateway to greet her with a flourish of fanfares, and there behind them was Williczek, handsome as ever, with arms outstretched to welcome her.

‘I thought things would be different here nowadays.’ she said. ‘Haven’t you had Communist governments here? I know there was a spring in Prague a few years back, but I’d not realised that you’d still be able to live like this, Willie.’

‘Well,’ he said, rather vaguely, ‘it’s all a question of whom you know, how well you know them, and what you know about them. I’ve done quite well here, and nowadays tourists and dollars are important, so some of us were allowed to keep up the old ways, first to impress the Gauleiters, then Commissars, and now the Americans and Japanese.’

‘It certainly impresses me – how on earth did you do it?’

‘Come in, refresh yourself from your flight, and I’ll tell you all about it.’

Once she’d been shown her room in the great tower, just across the corridor from Willie’s, with a fine view across the town at the foot of the crag to the forested mountains in the distance, an imposing major domo escorted her down to the great hall where an impressive meal was laid out, carcasses of roast boar and deer, with flagons of the local beer. A bevy of attractive local maidens (‘Give them the benefit of the doubt,’ she thought, ‘they might still be maidens,’ though she knew enough about Willie in the old days to have her suspicions) looked after them, keeping the flagons topped up and passing an extra boar when it looked needed.

‘You know how it is,’ said Willie. ‘There’s always been a good network of dragons with plenty of underground connexions, and we do usually know what’s going on, and who’s been up to what. So one can drop a few hints and then things get arranged quite easily. And of course when one’s built up a hoard over a few centuries, that helps too. The Commissars wanted to steal it at first, just like the Gauleiters had, but every time they tried to come and collect it, I just vanished the castle and them with it, so they soon got tired of that and settled for a small and steady trickle, much less than the dwarves produced each year.’

‘So you’ve kept up all your old magic, still, have you?’

‘Yes, my father trained me well, and once learned you don’t forget. This has always been a good part of the world for magic, black, white, green, any colour you like. Once you’ve turned a few of them into werewolves, and set the witches on to some of the others, they soon come to heel.’

‘I sometimes wish I could do some of that in Wales,’ said Wendy.

‘It’s different here. You’ve had druids and bards, we’ve had vampires and witches, so there’s a different atmosphere. Not sure which I prefer, but there’s no doubt which is more useful when you need proteksia. But let’s forget all that and enjoy ourselves.’

‘Still the same old Willie.’

‘Sure, why not? There’s the usual coachloads of tourists coming this afternoon, and since they all pile out and wander around and then get back into different coaches, they never know how many of them there are, so you look round for likely prospects that way, and I’ll look this way. Americans are better than Japanese, a lot more meat on them, and fewer cameras to spit out.’

‘Don’t they ever notice there are more empty seats on the buses on the way back than there were on the way out?’

‘You’d think they would, but they don’t seem to. I suppose once they’ve taken their money the bus drivers don’t worry too much. I go down the town occasionally, too, in the early hours of the morning. We get a lot of British stag and hen parties now that Ryanair is using the local airport, and they’re so drunk by then that they’ve no idea how many they are, and very tasty they are too, well pickled already.’

That afternoon they had a good hunt, a brace of tourists each, so they feasted well again that night and for several days afterwards. Williczek lived in good state, plenty of pretty girls to keep the castle clean and tidy and cook the food. They’d been well trained at home and as they came from over the border in Hungary, in Vlad’s district, they didn’t worry about what sort of food they were cooking.

The tourists were always fascinated by the torture chambers, and there were occasional special high-cost evenings, discreetly advertised in top-shelf journals and over the internet, for visitors with unusual tastes who hankered for old-fashioned practices. On these occasions the visitors were allowed to try out any of the gadgets that interested them, all of which were kept in good working order, and the girls were happy to be paid extra overtime rates to clean up afterwards and store any worthwhile results in the freezers. Even in the daytimes some of the tourists got lost while wandering round in the maze of dungeons in the basements, or fell into oubliettes, and these were all grist for the freezers, too.

Wendy enjoyed herself very much, hunting by day, feasting and other pleasures every night, and the time passed swiftly. She thought that maybe she was overstaying her welcome, but Willie

persuaded her to stay for Christmas, when he always had a big party for all the neighbours on Twelfth Night, and all the children came up from the town for presents.

‘Now, be careful,’ he said. ‘We mustn’t shock anyone, and we must make sure that all the children get home safely – what would the neighbours say if they didn’t all get home OK? So we can enjoy what we like from Christmas to Twelfth Night, and then it’ll be an ox-roast with side dishes of boar and venison, after which we can go back to more interesting dishes.’

‘I think I’d better go off after the party and make my reparations and apologies to the Turkish family by then. I’ll email them and see if that date would be convenient.’

‘What reparations are these?’ asked Williczek.

‘A few years ago I had a visit from a friend in Anatolia, and while he was giving a young local wench a flight round the town, an idiot shot him down. They’d hired him to rid the town of me and my children, but he shot Karim instead. I managed to trace him to his flat in London, but he didn’t seem very pleased to see me again, oddly enough. However, I didn’t let that deter me and I picked him up (he was a bit noisy but I soon stopped that) and I took him to an empty mud flat and smoke-dried him. I wrapped him up in bubble-wrap so he wouldn’t get damaged on the journey.’

‘Oh that’s what that bundle is in the bottom of the freezer – I thought maybe you’d brought some extra provisions with you.’

‘Well they can use him for that if they want to, or they can put him in a glass case like that man in University College, London, as an example of what happens to people who slay dragons.’

They had a good time over Christmas, bright sunshine with clear bright skies, and all quiet and peaceful, for although the castle was shut to tourists, the freezers were well stocked and so were the cellars. The morning of Twelfth Night dawned with an overcast sky and a few seasonal snow flakes drifting down, just enough to whiten the ground and the battlements and make the scenery romantic, but not enough to deter the guests. A great tree towered in the great hall, with a pile of presents for the children at its foot. Banners hung from the walls that were lined with suits of armour of all periods, and German and Russian uniforms, all relics of visitors who’d annoyed Williczek over the years. Neighbours began to arrive, bowing to Willie as they did so, and with a pleased expression as they saw Wendy beside him – perhaps their landlord was going to become a respectably married dragon at last, and Wendy looked as though she’d be a charming consort. They seated themselves at the rows of long tables and were soon enjoying all the traditional foods of the season, much to their relief, for over the years there’d been many rumours of what was normally eaten there. Willie was a popular and generous host, but guests did sometimes wonder what they were eating at his table.

The children had soon demolished all the food on their own tables and were roaring around, getting under everybody’s feet and even the adults were becoming sated.

‘Present time!’ roared Williczek at the top of his voice. ‘Children line up, smallest at the front, tallest at the back, girls on the right, boys on the left.’

There was a fair amount of scrimmage as taller ones tried to shrink themselves so as to get further forward, but a warning huff quietened them and sent them into order.

‘Now, Wendy, I’ll pass the presents to you and you can start to give them.’

So Wendy began to hand out the presents. The smaller children each got a soft toy dragon, the boys one in Willie’s colour and the girls one in Wendy’s, with appropriate anatomical differences. One small girl burst into tears.

‘I want a willie,’ she sobbed.

‘You’re a girl and girls don’t have them, so you can’t,’ said her brother scornfully.

‘But I want one, I want one, I want one.’

‘Hush, darling,’ whispered Wendy. ‘Girls are much nicer than boys, and I’m nicer than Willie, aren’t I?’

The little girl flung her arms round Wendy’s neck and kissed her.

‘Ooh yes, you are. Can I call her Wendy, just like you?’

‘Yes, of course you can,’ said Wendy, kissing her back, while she thought that it showed that Willie had quite forgotten what children were like, trying to give them different presents, though when she saw two boys squabbling over theirs, she remembered that even that didn’t always help.

‘Yours is much nicer than mine,’ one of them was screaming.

Willie went over and knocked their heads together. ‘They’re both exactly the same, and any more nonsense from you and I’ll have them back,’ he said, and when that didn’t stop them fighting over them he bundled them out of the hall into the courtyard where they could roll in the snow and with any luck fall down the well.

The larger children each got a carefully graded set of Williczek’s Magic Tricks and were soon happily turning beetles into mice and crumbs into earwigs and dropping them down the girls’ necks.

Some of the bigger boys started looking speculatively at each other, so Willie said, ‘Time to go home everybody, the party’s over,’ and the guests began obediently to take their leave. Each family thanked Willie and Wendy, who overheard one child saying to her mother, ‘What have we got for tea when we get home?’

‘Children never change, do they?’ she whispered to Willie.

‘Don’t know,’ he said. ‘I’ve never had any, thank God.’

Soon all was peaceful again and Wendy began to sort out her packing. Next day she bade Willie a fond farewell, thanking him for a lovely visit.

‘Don’t leave it so long till next time,’ he said. ‘Remember your old friends at least once a century.’

‘Oh I will,’ she replied. ‘I’d quite forgotten how nice it was to see you and all my other friends. When the children are small one gets into a rut, but now that they’re grown up and out in the world I really must get out more.’

‘Indeed you must, you’re as spry as ever, and whenever you feel you need a new rut, why, give me a call.’

‘You’re a dear, Willie, and I will. So goodbye, and see you again soon,’ and off she flew.

Soon she was over the Bosphorus and then the Black Sea, heading towards the mountains. She called Mustafa, Karim’s brother.

‘Can you hear me, Mustafa? If so, can you guide me in, please?’

‘I hear you good. On you go..... now south little..... OK, down.’

‘Here you welcome. Karim friend always welcome.’

‘Thank you, Mustafa. I bring you a gift. This was the man who shot Karim.’

She deposited her bubble-wrapped package on the floor of Mustafa’s house and unrolled it. Out fell the smoke-dried corpse of the mercenary, browned and a bit ragged at the edges.

‘Ah, good, very good. Here put him. Outside, all can see. Children, come you all. See this – man killed your uncle. Mud you throw. All who pass, throw mud. Every time you pass, throw mud.’

‘That’ll show him,’ thought Wendy, ‘wherever he’s got to, I hope he can see what they’ll do to him. And at least he won’t shoot any more friends of mine.’

‘Now eat we,’ said Mustafa. ‘Feast of memory. Family meet now.’

Gradually the family gathered, Karim’s six other brothers and their wives and children, and last of all Karim’s mother hobbled out of her house. All the family bowed to her and Wendy followed suit.

‘Wendy, child, Karim he love you. Now we love you, all. Karim in peace. You be peace also. You welcome ever. That we keep remember Karim. To bring it we thank you. Now all here your family – Karim family your family. Kemal, my son, you closest Karim. Make Wendy welcome. All make Wendy welcome,’ and she bowed to Wendy, followed by all the family who one after the other came up to Wendy and bowed to her.

‘Indeed, Wendy, you are very welcome,’ said Kemal. ‘And we are very grateful to you for bringing that thing with you. We should have liked to have dealt with him ourselves but we did not know how to find him, so we are very grateful to you for having done it for us and for bringing it with you. Bless you for it.’

‘Wow,’ thought Wendy. ‘He speaks good English and he’s even more handsome than Karim, a real Turkish delight. This visit was a really good idea and maybe I’m going to enjoy myself here.’

‘That’s very kind of you, Kemal,’ she said, ‘and where did you learn to speak such beautiful English?’

‘I met a man from Oxford who was researching the ancient Anatolian civilisations. As I could remember where they’d all lived, I could tell him where to dig, so he hired me for a couple of seasons and we travelled all round the area together. We used to talk over his discoveries each evening in the camp, and I could tell him what all the things were used for and how the people lived, so I learned English from him at the same time. I could draw pictures for him of what the cities and houses had looked like. He sent me a copy of his book after he’d got home, and he’d used some of my drawings in it. Of course he said that they were by Kemal and thanked me as a local guide without saying who I was. He was very careful to make sure that I didn’t appear in any of his photographs as he didn’t want his stuffier colleagues at home to think he was crazy. But he recommended me to some of his more sensible students and I’ve been able to help them too, so my English has got better and better. Very pretty some of his favourite students, were, too. None of them were as beautiful as you, though.’

‘Well, they weren’t dragons, were they, at least I hope they weren’t,’ said Wendy, blushing slightly as she spoke, ‘and you’re rather handsome, too, even more than Karim was.’

Clearly they were off to a good start, she thought, and as the evening wore on with a feast of local delicacies and plenty of arak he stuck close to her side, introducing each of the other members of the family to her. None of them had much English so she couldn’t say much to them, though one of the young girls overcame her shyness enough to say ‘You very beautiful, very more beautiful than Turkey dragon.’

Wendy thanked her and complimented her on her English.

‘Kemal I uncle, Karim I uncle, they teach. Teach other children, they more stupid. Mustafa I father. I clever.’

‘You are clever, my sweet,’ said Wendy.

‘I you sweet? Kemal you sweet too?’ she asked.

‘I hope so,’ said Wendy to her in a whisper, ‘but don’t tell anybody yet,’ and they grinned at each other, girls together.

By next morning indeed he was.

Wendy stretched herself lazily; what a night it had been. Wonderful food and drink, wonderful Kemal, even better than poor Karim, great dragons the Turkish, no wonder the Turks had conquered half Europe with dragons like that to help them. How long could she stay, she wondered? She

supposed she’d have to get back to Llandraig one day but there was no hurry. The mayor could look after her nest and one day she’d go back and incubate the next batch of eggs, but for now she could stay where she was. They were Karim’s, those eggs. Maybe she should go back for a flying visit and bring them here so that they could grow up with Karim’s family? She’d have to think about that, for it might be nice for them to be part of a large family. She could keep tabs on the kids with Facebook and if any of them needed her, they had her email address. Kemal might get tired of her one day, or she might get bored with no one else to talk to, but meanwhile she could teach the brainier children to speak English, and maybe even some of the other brothers too. The friendship here was so good and it was nice to feel part of an extended family after so many years by herself. She could barely remember her own family; most of them had emigrated when the newcomers had started to build henges as dragon traps, first of wood and then stronger ones of stone.

‘If they don’t want us, they needn’t have us,’ the family’d said, and some had gone off to Greenland’s icy mountains, where the Eskimo had known better than to interfere with them, and where there were plenty of whales and polar bears to keep them fed, and others, as Draiggoch had discovered, to Bolivia. Only a few of the more courageous ones had stayed behind, canny enough to avoid the traps and keep the old traditions alive. But here in Anatolia they still thrived and it was good to be with them.

Maybe, though, she should check on just what was happening to Porffyrion and whether she was still happy with Manoug.

Chapter 12 – Wendy the Magic Carpet Seller

After her holiday and another lazy, well-fed, and very enjoyable couple of weeks with Kemal, Wendy felt she really had better see what was happening in Armenia. The child hadn't liked the Australian desert – would she have settled comfortably in the Armenian wilderness? And was she safe between all the wars that seemed to be going on in that part of the world? With many promises of back again soon, out came the carpet for the short trip across the mountains. No difficulty finding the place now because Kaki's carpets all had sat-navs with his address built into them to make it easier to go back for recharging.

'Oh, Mam, how lovely to see you back so soon – Manny, darling, come and look who's here,' was her greeting from Porffyrion.

'Looks like I needn't have bothered to leave Kemal,' thought Wendy, 'if they're still like that after all this time,' but 'How are you doing, my love?' is what she said.

'Oh, Mam, it's lovely here, so peaceful and so beautiful it is,' as she looked round the bare hills and distant mountains.

'So how do you spend your time out here?'

'Oh we talk, and we go on short trips to different places, and sometimes we have customers coming to look for carpets or to recharge them, but I love it here, and Manny is so kind to me. It seems only a couple of weeks since you went away. How have you been?'

'I've been wandering around, seeing some of the family, and enjoying myself, but I thought I should come and see if you were still OK and if you liked it better than Australia.'

'Oh yes, Mam, it's lovely here and please let me stay on.'

'Well, I'll talk to Kaki and maybe have a few words with Manoug too.'

'Oh please be kind to Manny, I like him so much and I'm so happy here, pretty please, Mam.'

So Wendy went off to find Kakakorian and see how the land lay for their children.

'She's a nice child and the two of them seem happy together. I like her, she cooks us nice things we've not met before, like Welsh cakes and Welsh rarebits, and she likes our Armenian food as well. I've started teaching her to weave as well and she's doing very well at it, a nice delicate hand and she's already started to devise some new patterns. She's becoming quite a good carpet seller, too, and it's useful to have a girl as a driving teacher because some of the women don't like going up by themselves with a male, or rather their families don't like them to. It'd be nice to expand into the woman driver market – after all, they're not allowed to drive cars in Arabia and some other places, but nobody sees who's up there on a carpet. So she's a real asset and welcome to stay as

long as they remain happy. What about you? Wouldn't you like to become a travelling salesman for us? You'd take to it like a duck to water, my love.'

Not a bad idea, thought Wendy. She quite liked travel and visiting new places, and while she'd had a lovely time with Kemal, he was a bit young for that to be likely as a permanent arrangement, whereas she could always go back there for visits. And if she could talk Kaki into a fairly generous commission agreement, it would keep the Mayor of Llandraig happy to know that she could pay for some of her food. Besides, with rail fares zooming ever upwards and petrol and diesel sky high, maybe she'd sell a few carpets at home too. She could teach people to drive them as well, which might make a few quid in the hand. Talking commission with an Armenian might be tricky, but she wasn't born yesterday and she had a few tricks up her sleeve, too.

'Well, if I did, Kaki, what would you offer? And who else is doing this in other countries?'

'Nobody else, I promise you. We've always expected customers to come to us, but nowadays travel is getting a bit difficult in this part of the world, so they're getting fewer, which is why I thought foreign sales might help us. As for an offer, ten percent is the usual.'

'Not when you've got a barn full of out-of-date models to get rid of and nowhere to put new stock, it isn't. Come on, you old skinflint – seventy-five percent on old models and fifty on new ones is nearer the mark.'

'Aie, you want to ruin me? All that weaving, all that magic, and all the new gadgets customers expect? All the stealth technology, anti-radar, anti-missile, costs a fortune, and the other modern needs such as air-conditioning are expensive too, especially if you have to design it so it doesn't eat into the recharging.'

'Well, do you want to be rid of them or not? What are they doing now, just getting moth holes that the customers will drop their kids or handbags through?'

'40 and 25'

'You're wasting my time, Kaki. You want me to travel all over and sell carpets for you that you can't sell here, and that's all you can offer? Not a penny less than 60 and 40 would make it worth my while.'

'OK, 60 for the old ones – I do need to get rid of some, but nothing more than 25 for the new ones. They take a lot of work to make.'

'Come on, make it 30. Then it's easy to remember, one half the other.'

'I've got a better idea. Why don't I print you up a list of what you pay me and then you charge what you like on top? Nobody out there will know what they cost here (we've never had an online catalogue) so you can price them just as you like. That'll be easier than worrying about per cents.'

But please try to get rid of old ones first while you try out the market.'

'Done. And I think I'll try at home first. Fuel and taxation for cars is sky high in Britain, all the roads are congested, and maybe people might be interested there. But how do I get the carpets to Wales? We've got all sorts of customs duties and import regulations.'

'Customs don't worry about, nor import rules. We've got a few container carpets back in the store and Manny and Porffy can fly them over, and then no one's the wiser. Tell them the elves are making them for you, or some such story, and leave them to find the factory.'

'OK I'll think something up. Now what about prices? Do keep them low – remember I've got to charge 20 per cent VAT on top, and we'll be competing with second-hand car prices. And if I start selling too many they'll invent a special carpet tax on top.'

So Wendy went off to think up a good story about a factory they'd never be able to find. Oh for the good old days when the gentlemen went by, sneaking things in past the revenueurs. Life for a business woman was a lot easier when it was just brandy for the parson and baccy for the squire! Now where could she say she got them from? Merlin, maybe? The People of the Hills? That might answer. Maybe she could say she put an order out at night with a bowl of porridge and a jug of milk, and in the morning, there they were. No, she didn't know where they came from; each batch had an invoice, and she left a cheque out next time she put in an order, and here were her books (she wouldn't say which books of course), with all the prices and sale figures, neat and tidy, and here were her VAT returns, and what more did they want? Asphodel was from Nigeria, Marigold had contacts in the City, and Daphne knew people in Parliament, and if they didn't know how to get round the rules, she'd soon find someone who did.

Soon an advertisement appeared:

Keep off the Roads
Save Fuel the new MAGIC WAY
Stop Pollution
Avoid Congestion
Contact Wendy, Llandraig

Response was slow at first, very slow, in fact none at all; there'd been too many dodgy advertisements of late, and this looked a bit like yet another save-the-planet scam. Wendy decided she needed some publicity, so she emailed the local paper to tell them what she was going to do, and maybe it would make a nice story, and then sailed down on the best of her older carpets to have a talk with the mayor. She spiralled down, circling slowly over the town so that everyone would see her, and then settled gently in the middle of the market place, where she was immediately deluged

with small boys.

‘Give us a ride, give us a ride!’ they all shouted.

A surge of mothers poured out of all the doors, ‘Oh no you don’t, over my dead body, get off there before I wallop you!’ was the burden of the chorus of imprecation.

‘Not now, boys, maybe later when your mothers have seen how safe it is,’ said Wendy. She turned to the mayor.

‘I expect you saw my advertisement about these carpets,’ she said, ‘and I thought you might like to be the first to have a test flight, Mr Mayor.’

‘Me? On a carpet? how can it fly? where’s its wings and its engines, for goodness. Never would I go up on something out of the living room, look you. Carpets are for sweeping dust under not for flying and what’s to stop me falling off? Oh, be off you two,’ he said, turning to the reporter and his camera man, ‘you’ll not get a picture of me on that thing, not no way.’

‘But Mr Mayor, think what good publicity it would be for you and Llanddraig. You’d look smashing up there on it in your robes and chain,’ said the reporter. ‘You saw Wendy flying down on it just now and how safe and steady it was.’

‘If you think so safe it is, why don’t you get on it?’ said the mayor, thinking quickly for more excuses to avoid going up himself.

‘Well,’ said Wendy to the reporter, ‘why don’t you? Your colleague could get good pictures of you on it and then you’d have your picture in the paper as well as your by-line.’

‘Er...,’ he replied, trying frantically to think of a good reason why not, his bunions, not suitably dressed, what his ma would say....

‘Oh go on, Bert,’ said the camera man. ‘I’ve got plenty of film and think how pleased the editor would be with the story.’

Before he could produce any excuses he was bundled on board and Wendy took off, rising slowly so as not to frighten him any further, and banking gently to make another circuit of the town. He began to enjoy himself; seeing the town from above the roofs was a new adventure.

‘Could we go down that street?’ he asked, ‘Then I can see if I’ve got any slates missing or a cracked chimney.’

When they got back to the market where the camera man was taking pictures all the time, ‘Great it was,’ he said, ‘What do these things run on?’

‘Their own power, and it’s free for the first five years. After that you have to bring them in to recharge them.’

‘Wow, and not even the cost of new tyres,’ he said, thinking rather bitterly of the number of

punctures he'd had on his bicycle, riding over the roads and farm tracks of the area.

'Now, would some of the children like a short ride?' asked Wendy. 'You all saw how safe it was.' And before the mothers could stop them, half a dozen had piled on and she was off.

'Keep still and don't lean over the edge like that. You can't fall off, but we have to keep balanced. And if you're going to be airsick just lean your head over – DON'T do it on the carpet.'

By the time she got back, only two had been sick, only one had a black eye and another a bloody nose after fighting whose turn it was next to steer the carpet.

'Thank you, thank you, lovely it was. Please come down with it again soon.'

Nice to see they all had good manners, she thought, and hoped that not many of them would have sore bottoms for tea after their mothers had caught up with them.

It was two weeks after the story and photographs had appeared in the paper, once the reporter had persuaded his editor that he hadn't spent the day in the pub faking it up, that Wendy saw three figures trudging up the path through the usual slight drizzle. They were clad in raincoats and bowler hats, each carrying a furred umbrella and a brief case.

'Hmm, don't look much like customers,' said Wendy to herself. 'Trouble more like.'

When at last they arrived, Wendy said, 'Well, gentlemen, good afternoon, and what can I do for you? Would you like a cup of tea while you recover your breath from the climb?'

'Thank you, madam, that would indeed be welcome.'

After the appropriate pause for consultation about milk and sugar, and when they were suitably refreshed and their coats, which they refused to remove, were steaming gently in the warmth of the cave, the older of the two opened his brief case and took out a copy of the local paper's story.

'We have come in response to this, madam,' he said.

'Oh good. What sort of carpet can I show you? A two-seater or a family four-seater model?'

'Not exactly, madam. I have come from the Inland Revenue and my colleagues here are from the Air Ministry and from the Airworthiness Board, and we each have some questions to ask you. I would like to see your business registration documents, and my colleagues here are interested in your pilot's licence and the airworthiness registration of your carpets.'

'Well, I haven't had any business to register as I haven't sold anything to anybody. I've never tried to steer anybody up the river so I'm not a pilot, and the carpets just go up and stay up.'

'But madam, you can't just fly people around, especially children, without a pilot's licence,' said the second man, 'and you can't fly anywhere without filing a flight plan – why what would happen if you collided with a proper aeroplane?'

'And you can't fly anything until it's been taken apart and put together again to check its

airworthiness,' chimed in the third.

'The only time an aeroplane ever flew over Llandraig was when a German bomber got lost on his way home from Birmingham via Beachy Head, and one of the Home Guard shot him down with a Bren gun. You can go and see the tombstones in the churchyard. And nobody is going to unweave my carpets just to see if they can fly, and I've been flying all my life.'

The three of them ducked as Wendy zoomed up out of the cave with a flap of her wings.

'See?' she said as she settled back down again. 'Or do you want to come up on a carpet with me?'

'Madam, it is not whether you can fly or not, but whether you have a licence to do so, and whether you have a separate licence to fly passengers as well as yourself.'

'And whether you are registered with Company House to sell carpets, and whether you have an import licence for them, and whether you have paid import duty on them, and whether you are registered for VAT to sell them.'

'And whether they are certified as safe to fly.'

'Meanwhile, here are all the forms to fill in before you can import and sell them.'

'And here is the address of the nearest flying school so that you can get your licences.'

'And you can make an appointment at this address to take the carpets to Farnham for testing (but I warn you that there is an eighteen months waiting list for testing) and you are forbidden from flying them there until they have been tested.'

'Good day to you, madam,' they said in unison. 'And thank you for the tea.'

'So,' thought Wendy. 'No way to sell carpets here, and just as Williams the Post had brought a sheaf of enquiries about them. Where could she go with them? Where was there without forms to fill in or palms to be greased so that a dragon could do business? How about the Eskimos? No, you couldn't spear seals from a carpet. Nor Lapland, the reindeer mightn't like them, though come to think of it they were happy pulling sleighs through the air – might Father Christmas like something less draughty than a sleigh? After all, the carpets had air-conditioning built in. No, the Christmas trade would object to redesigning everything. How about the Caribbean? Might provide cheap transport between the islands. But, no, still vexed there, she wasn't sure how carpets would react to hurricanoes, and anyway too much drug trade in that area. Ah, what about Draiggoch's friends down in Bolivia? Now that was a real idea; there were various Welsh colonies down there and this might be good way of keeping contact between them.'

Wendy rolled up the sale carpets and stored them with a good selection of Welsh produce in the back of her own carpet. She told the mayor she was off for a while and that if any officials came

from any other Ministries he could tell them that she had vanished in a puff of green smoke and that they could do what they liked with their forms.

And off she went, setting the stealth controls so as not to upset the poor dears at traffic control. She knew that once that was done, radar beams would just slide round her.

As she set down in the valley, all the girls came rushing out to meet her.

‘Oh, but it’s you. Lovely to see you, it is, but we thought it was Draiggoch come back.’

‘I’m afraid not,’ (seeing their disappointment), ‘but I’m sure he’ll be here again soon, as soon as our Prince can spare him. Perhaps one day your Prince will come. Is Daffyd around?’

‘He’s gone fishing, but he’ll be back tomorrow or the next day.’

Wendy thought it more tactful not ask what he might be fishing for, up in the mountains, especially as he’d said not in the river again, so she just asked if she could wait for him to return.

‘Of course, of course, and welcome you are any time. But why do you fly on that instead of your wings?’

‘Well it’s easier for long journeys, less tiring, and besides there’s so much radar everywhere now that it’s better to travel with equipment that makes sure nobody can see you. If I’m flying myself I have to dodge round anywhere that I might be seen, which makes the journey longer, but the built-in screens make sure that I’m invisible. I was going to show all that to Daffyd when he comes back and see whether it would make it easier for you to visit other dragon villages down in Patagonia, for instance, if there are any there.’

‘Oh I think there are – the condors tell us about them occasionally but as we don’t know where they are, and it’s such a long way, we can never go down there to visit them. It’s a pity, because look you the boys here are all so boring, indeed they are.’

‘Not as boring as some of the girls,’ came a muttered bass voice. ‘Could we get carpets like these?’

‘That’s what I came to see Daffyd about. I am an agent for Kakakorian’s best Armenian carpets and he’s got lots of them to sell, two-seaters, four-seaters, and family models, all with full stealth controls and satellite navigation built in.’

She wasn’t telling them that these were old models. If she could sell some now, she could come back in a few years and sell them later models. Maybe some of the sportier young men would like a new carpet each year, just like some people bought a new car every year. She was sure Kaki could design new features all the time, and Porffyrion could produce new designs which would make older carpets look new even if there weren’t any new features.

So she settled into the guest house for a few days, spending some of the time taking boys and

girls up for trial flights. She took some of the older dragons as well, to show them how safe the carpets were, and even flew over the airport in La Paz to prove that the invisibility controls were as good as she'd said.

Eventually Daffyd came back at top speed, looking slightly bedraggled. 'Why didn't you tell me you were coming, my sweet?' he said.

'How was I to know you'd be off on the razzle?' she replied. 'Here I've been waiting for you days and days.'

'Aye, and upsetting everyone with tales of carpets. Emrhys ApWilliams emailed me all about it. That's why I came back, indeed.'

'And I thought you came back to see me,' she said with a sidelong look.

'Well indeed to goodness, that too. But what is all this?'

'I thought that there might be other dragon villages that might be too far to visit, and too visible and dangerous as well if you tried to go there.'

'There are indeed. The condors tell us of them, but never since my father's time have we tried to visit them. My uncle Mervyn ApHughes tried once before I was born, centuries ago, and he was never seen again, look you, so we don't know whether he liked it so much that he never came back or whether he met some trouble on the way. No contact with them have we had. We have tried to find them on the Web but they keep their addresses a secret as we do, so they haven't found us either.'

'Maybe if we ask the condors to tell them that I am the mother of our Prince's personal dragon and that our Prince has asked him to find them, might that work? Would the condors keep our secret?'

'Oh yes, the condors are used to keeping secrets. They know all about us and they've never told anyone.'

'So let's try it and ask them for their location so we can set the sat navs. Meanwhile, do you think anyone would want to buy a carpet? If so I can ask Kakakorian to send some over. How many do you think we'd want? And how can you pay for them?'

'Paying easy it is. Gold and silver in the mountains up here we have and melt out whatever we need we can, and secure credit cards as well we have.'

'Gold and silver I'm sure would be ideal as there'd be no exchange rate problems and he'll probably give discounts for cash, especially gold which he can sell on at a profit in India.'

'Well, let's see what's available and then if we hear from the condors we can put in an order. Can you show me how they work while we're waiting?'

So Wendy took him up on her own carpet and showed him all the controls.

‘Can we just hover up here? It’s so quiet and peaceful, and there’s so little privacy down there.’

‘Oho,’ thought Wendy. ‘But why not?’ It was weeks since she’d seen Kemal and she’d not had any exercise since she’d arrived here. As Daffyd said, there was no privacy down there, and most of the women kept a very beady eye on the men. She’d had some come-on looks, but looks don’t get you very far, not with being expected back for tea or else.

After some very pleasant privacy they sailed back down to the valley and started to look through Kaki’s lists.

‘I’d like one like yours, please, and suppose we ask him what he’d charge for a bulk order, look you, of two or three two-seaters, four four-seaters, and see if he’d hire us a coach so we could make a group visit.’

‘I’m sure he’ll give us a good discount for that and for cash, and I will, too – anything to help an old friend.’

‘Not so old, not so old, and nor were you, my love, nor were you, indeed.’

Just as he said that and before Wendy could reply through her blushes (she thought she’d stopped blushing a few centuries ago) a condor dropped a note with latitude and longitude scrawled on it. So she skyped an order through to Kaki, and next day a huge container carpet dropped through the sky.

‘I thought you’d do us proud,’ said Kaki as he stepped out, ‘and sure enough you have, so I came myself. I’ve brought a batch on sale or return, and a couple of coaches that you can keep as long as you need them. I brought two so that you can leave one at the other end for them to make return visits, and maybe you can sell some personal ones down there, too. Give me a ten percent deposit on the lot, and then you can pay for the rest as you sell them. I won’t charge much hire on the coaches – we don’t use them much nowadays. It’s not like the old days when we had a twice-daily regular run from Baghdad to Aleppo and three times a day to Damascus. People don’t seem to want to travel there now.’

Daffyd went off to the mountains with two of his sons and a bucket of the local firewater in case they wanted refuelling and soon came back with the bucket full of gold instead of liquor.

Wendy took Kaki aside and said, ‘Alright, how much you old thief?’

‘Well, if it’s that easy, as much as you’ll give me.’

‘Let’s split it, two thirds to you and one third to me.’

‘I suppose – there’s more to come, so I’ll be generous for once.’

‘You’d better be – you know perfectly well you’ve not seen this much cash in a decade, and anyway you’ll make at least fifty percent profit on it when you sell it on – just don’t let on where it

came from.'

'I'll try not to, but they'll be able to see it's South American from its make-up. I'll have to cook up some story of melted down Spanish treasure – that should work. Now here's a self-directing post carpet – when you sell some, just put the proceeds in that and send it off, and I'll send another post-carpet back to you each time I get it.'

'OK, and would you like some alpaca wool to weave more carpets? It's even finer than cashmere.'

'Let me try it, and if it's good you can send more as well as gold. Your daughter might like it for her weaving.'

And Kaki got back into the container carpet, now much lighter, with his two thirds of the bucket and a bale of wool looking lonely on the empty floor, and off he went.

A few days later they were off. A convoy of carpets, Daffyd in the lead followed by two of his sons, then the two coaches, some more of the younger dragons, and finally Wendy where she could keep an eye on them in case any of them got into trouble, for none of them were experienced carpeters yet. She'd set the destination into each sat nav herself, so if any did get lost they should still get there without trouble, and they all had their home valley set in as well.

'Set your speed controls for 600 knots so that we keep together, and make sure you can all see each other,' she'd told them. 'But stay a mile or so apart – if we're too close together a large blob of invisibility might show up on radar and we don't want the Argentines to think the Falklands were coming to get them. And keep an eye out for other dragons in the air – that's how Draiggoch found you and there are some Welsh in Argentina, too, so we might pass more dragon groups there.'

A few hours later they were all circling the new valley and came in to land one after the other. They were greeted by a very handsome dragon.

'Welcome you be. Rhys ApMervyn ApHughes I am.'

'I'm Daffyd ApEmrhys ApHughes – are we cousins? Could you be Uncle Mervyn's son? He left us centuries ago and we never heard from him again.'

'Could be, it could. Never told us much of his past he did. Just said from the north he came and that his father a strong man and strict he was. To get away from him, he left, and a long and difficult journey he had, flying every day and living off llamas until he saw our valley. Never did he want to return, happy here he was. And then one day, here he was not, and nor was Gwendolyn, the most beautiful young dragon in the valley, and neither of them have we seen since. But come you, eat and drink and meet everybody.'

All the younger dragons were already mixing well and the older generation plying each other

with food and drink and swapping recipes.

‘How long have dragons been here?’ asked Wendy.

‘Too long to remember,’ said Rhys. ‘A family had a quarrel with Merlin, over eight thousand years ago it must have been, and decided Wales was too small for both of them and left to find a new home. Nothing of Wales have we heard since then, but still Welsh we are. Some of our boys and girls have made friends with Patagonian dragons, but still red and still Welsh we are. Sometimes we think to go home, but Merlin we do not wish to see again. And Mervyn said never go back to Hughes he would, so here I stayed. But tell us now of this Prince.’

Wendy gave him a quick history of all that had happened since Merlin had vanished, and all the changes she had seen since then. It made her feel rather old and she began to wonder what she was doing here, so far from home and her children. Maybe, she thought, now that she had introduced one group to another, and also had set up the link with Kaki, she could leave them to manage things on their own. Daffyd seemed honest and trustworthy, so if he and Rhys wanted more carpets they could order for themselves and either Daffyd or Kaki could send her share over to her from time to time to keep the mayor happy. Daffyd was a nice boy, but having to fly into the air to get any privacy wasn’t a recipe for a long-term affair.

‘Daffyd,’ she said, ‘I think it is time for me to go home. You have Kakakorian’s address any time you want more carpets, and remember that they have to go back every five years or 200,000 miles for recharging – be careful to go a little sooner than that, because losing power over the sea or mountains could be dangerous even though they always a reserve that takes them back to Armenia automatically. When you order new ones, you can send me a few lumps of gold as commission, and if you have any trouble just email me and I, or Kaki or his son Manoug will come and sort things out, but in the meanwhile I think you can look after yourselves. Now that you know how to find all the different groups you can carry on doing that, and perhaps one day you will all come back home for a visit and Wales will see all its dragons together again.’

‘Wendy, my love, sorry to lose you I’ll be, and one day yes all come home we will and Wales will see us all together. Keep well and ask Draiggoch to give our respects to our Prince. All welcome will you be here again.’

So Wendy packed up her things and flew back to Llandraig. Selling carpets was tiring and she’d had some wonderful journeys, but maybe too many and too close together. She’d have enough to live on for quite a while, now, if they went on buying carpets down there at this rate. A little peace and quiet was what she needed for the next century or so.

The End