

**Yona and the Beast**

**by**

**C.C. Hogan**

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Fourth Edition

To an old friend who brought a little peace to our valley

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## **Author's Note**

This is a standalone story set against the backdrop of the events of Dirt, series one. For those of you who have read those books, you will recognise some elements. For those that haven't, it will not matter, and you will find the connections when you read the main books at another time. So, whether you are new to Dirt or not, enjoy the story.

For those of you unknowing of such things, a Calliston is a huge, six-limbed creature that lives in quiet communities either on plains or in forests. They are the rarest of the intelligent peoples of Dirt. Please see the Calliston article on the A World Called Dirt website here: <http://aworldcalleddirt.com/abbey/history/natural-history/calliston/>

## Escape

Yona was cold. She was so cold that even with her hands pushed beneath her shirt and buried under her armpits she knew her fingers were blue. She could feel they were blue, feel their numbness. The cold squeezed tightly around her like an ice blanket, unrelenting, uncaring, permanent. Phoran, her man, he was cold too, and colder than she was. He had stopped shivering in the night and that was bad; he was losing the fight. A few had already been lost to the cold. They had moved them gently to the rock wall of the room using the weak light from the simple oil lamp hung from the ceiling. The room was not very large. Yona suspected that it was a storeroom normally. It was built against the cliff of the gorge and the rear wall was cold, dark granite that sucked out what little heat there was. Yona wished the room was smaller as perhaps then the heat from their bodies would keep them warmer. As it was, they were all losing the fight.

“Hold tighter, Phoran. You must stay awake.”

“I am so tired, Yona. I am not built for this life-sucking cold!” He chuckled a little. They were from the tiny, isolated village of Maernen, hundreds of leagues south on the coast of South Homeland. It was a poor, simple, fishing community that had nothing much to do with the rest of the continent of Bind, but Yona and Phoran had been travelling up the river Kane with their ponies to buy cloth and other material their community needed from Mellorn in the Long Valley hills. The slavers had caught them while they camped under the trees one night. It wasn’t much of a fight. They were grabbed, beaten, tied up and walked north. They were the first, but by the time they had reached this frozen place in the North Hoar Ridge, there were thirty of them. Now, five had died, and Yona was certain that they would lose more tonight or tomorrow.

“I miss the sun,” said Yona, cuddling her man. “And the sand and the warm wind and the sea! Oh, I miss the sea so much!” she whispered into Phoran’s ear. They had already been yelled at through the door once to keep quiet. A sudden wheezing breath, ragged, uncontrolled, echoed around the small room, and she heard a young whimper of pain. They had lost another one, and Yona knew it was Mardia, Beva’s mother. Phoran knew it too.

“Go to her, Yona. She will need you. I will cuddle with the others.” Phoran always made things sound so simple, trying hard to be cheerful. He had done so all the way through the many weeks they had spent walking north. When the slavers were out of hearing, of course.

Yona carefully made her way across the room between the restless or sleeping bodies till she found the young girl, weeping over her mother. The small face of the ten-year-old looked up, and she buried herself into Yona’s chest; the thin, weak body shaking with agony and grief. Yona held the girl for a moment more, then released her and signalled two others to help move Mardia’s body to where the others were by the wall. It wasn’t difficult. They had all lost so much weight that even though none felt strong, the bodies were easy to lift.

“What time is it?” asked Phoran when Yona returned, Beva huddling against her.

“I don’t know, my love. Near dawn perhaps. It is some hours since they came with the water.” She settled down and Phoran snuggled into her with Beva. Phoran had been the strong one, but he had tried to stop the slavers beating the women once too often, and they had whipped him with sticks into unconsciousness. Then they had denied him food for a week and whipped him again. Now he was one of the weakest of them, but he was staying alive, somehow.

A cough from the other side of the door attracted Yona’s attention. It was hard to know the time in this cold world, closed off from the light. But in the week they had been held here, there had been no movement at night, so she supposed it was approaching dawn. She could hear distant clattering. They knew the kitchens were a little way down from their room since they had been brought into the building that way. She remembered the brief, healing warmth of the kitchen when they had entered from the freezing gorge, only to lose it again when they were pushed on up the corridor and into this icy prison. More crashing and clattering and some shouting; she couldn’t make out the words.

“What is happening?” asked Phoran, opening an eye.

“I don’t know. Nothing to do with us, I think.”

“Hmm.” He cuddled closer still and wrapped his arm around Beva, who was shivering. There was yet more and louder crashing and shouting, and Phoran snapped his eyes back open. “Something is going on,” he said, a little of his strength returning.

“Sit up, Beva,” said Yona to the girl. Yona stood and leant against the door, listening carefully. She could hear more shouts and cursing, the words clearer now, and then the crash of a door and footsteps running up the corridor. And then ... laughter? They all heard it and Yona turned and shrugged at Phoran.

“I love that Mab-Tok!” someone shouted out. Yona flinched back from the door. It had come from right outside and was full of glee. Phoran had stood up, helped by Beva, and he came over to the door.

“What is going on?”

“I don’t know,” said Yona. “Not the guards, I don’t think.” She put her ear to the door again. She could hear quiet talking and then a huge crash. Then more shouting.

“Behind that door!” This time, it was a young woman’s voice. Yona stepped back, taking Phoran and Beva with her. Something banged against the door, hard.

“Back!” shouted Phoran as they all struggled to their feet. Whoever it was smashed against the door again.

“Are they coming for us?” asked Beva, her voice trembling with panic. Phoran and Yona held her tightly, their own fear stark on their faces. The door crashed open, and in the dim corridor stood a tall young man.

“You are free,” he shouted. “Get out of here!”

Yona didn’t hesitate. To stay was to die, she was certain. Grabbing Phoran and Beva, she ran from the room and headed down to the kitchens, the others behind them. The young man shouted something, but she couldn’t hear what he said. She had to get out of this building more than anything in the world. Yona charged into the kitchen and kept going, dragging the limping, gasping Phoran behind her, the small Beva desperately trying to help him. Then they were outside in the narrow gorge. In the weak, dawn light, was a scene of chaos and madness. Ahead of them, two huge beasts were wailing and crying. One, clad in studded leather, thrashed around angrily, while the other was cowering and whimpering, pushed against the cliff wall. Guards shouted and fired their bows, and above were dragons, dropping rocks down into the gorge. Yona skidded to a halt and the slaves crowded in behind her.



More dragons leapt from the cliff above and dropped rocks on the angry, leather-clad beast, pushing him back while the other monster walked slowly down the gorge.

“What do we do?” Yona asked Phoran, looking around her. She knew they had to head down the canyon, but the way was blocked by the massive beast. It was a calliston, she thought, but far bigger than in the stories she had heard as a child.

“I don’t know!” replied Phoran as a big tan and cream dragon landed with a thump in front of them, its great wings out wide. Yona jumped back in surprise, and Phoran wrapped his arms around her.

“Run to the beast,” the dragon yelled at them. “Get onto its back.” The slaves stared, wide-eyed with fear. “Now!” shouted the dragon, and jumped back into the air.

“Come on!” yelled Yona at the other slaves. To go back inside was impossible, and there was something about the beautiful dragon she felt they must trust. She ran down the steps and along the gorge towards the slowly lumbering animal, the others following anxiously. Across its back was a vast leather blanket made from many oothen hides stitched together, and knotted straps hung down the beast’s flanks which the slaves used to climb up onto the hides. The calliston walked ponderously on four thick legs, its two smaller arms beneath its massive head clutched together in fear.

“Climb up!” shouted Phoran, using his little strength to lift Beva, pushing her up the side of the animal. Others followed, pushing the two other children up ahead of them and climbing up. Phoran grabbed a strap and tried to pull himself up, but his legs gave way and he fell to the ground.

“Get up!” Yona yelled at him, pulling at his arm.

Back up the gorge, the fighting continued. She could see spears and arrows flying backwards and forwards, and hear the angry screams of the other calliston. Phoran struggled to his feet, and Yona, with the help of another man, pushed him up the side of the beast, the two of them scrambling after him. She looked around, panicking. Everyone had made it, somehow, cramped together on the callistons back. Suddenly, the beast rumbled beneath them and broke into a fast trot, huffing and puffing its way down the twisting gorge.

“Do you think he knows where he’s going?” yelled Phoran. He was collapsed down on the hide and was being held tightly by Beva and another woman to stop him sliding off.

“I don’t care!” Yona shouted at him. The beast ran faster and faster down the gorge, twisting and turning, crashing into the rock walls in panic, and suddenly they emerged onto the endless, stony scrub of Great Plains. They were free. Yona burst out laughing, hanging on desperately. “I really don’t care!”

The wind picked up as the large calliston trotted south with the freed slaves hanging onto its back, fearing where the animal was going, but fearing more being left behind on the barren plain.

“It is a dummerhole!” called out Beak, a wanderer who had been captured in the west.

“A what?” Yona shouted back. She had worked her way carefully towards the head of the calliston, looking for reins or anything that would control the animal. She had already tried shouting at it but to no avail.

“A dummerhole,” said Beak, moving up next to her. “It’s a calliston that has been captured young. They drill into its head and scald its brain with a fiery sword, making it dumb. They grow very big.”

“Do you know how to control it?”

“No, sorry. I’ve only heard of them; never seen one. Do you think we should get off?”

“I don’t know. It is running very fast!” Yona peaked down at the ground from the broad shoulders. The powerful calliston was trotting at the speed of a cantering horse, but it was a much smoother ride; it’s four, clawed feet padding like a large cat, not thundering like a cow or an oother. She shivered and looked behind them towards the towering wall of the North Hoar Ridge where dark clouds were being whipped into dramatic forms by the wind. “There’s a storm building.”

“Storms here are bad news,” said Beak, looking north. “They can go on for days and the wind and sand can cut your skin.” He looked back at the slaves, huddled on the oother hide. “We are not dressed for it.”

“Then we hang on,” decided Yona. “We are heading south away from captivity, so we hang on.”

Yona did not mean to take charge, not really, but for some reason, she had stayed stronger than the others, apart from Beak. The small, tough-looking man with dark, weathered skin, seemed hardly affected by their ordeal though his eyes were haunted. Mostly he had kept apart from the others in the room. He smiled once at Yona and made himself as comfortable as he could.

“I might not know much about callistons and dummerholes,” he said, shrugging. “But nothing runs forever.”

As the evening drew in, the storm caught up with them, and the humans lay flat on the calliston’s back, shielding their eyes. Yona was sitting high on the great neck, peering through the gloom and the dust. Beneath her, she felt the calliston rumble. It made a pathetic whimpering sound, surprisingly high-pitched for such a great beast. Without thinking, Yona stroked the thick neck. The skin was not rough, but smooth and covered with short, fine hair.

“Hush,” she said when the calliston complained again. Ahead she could see a small copse of stunted trees, the first she had seen on this barren plain. The calliston turned towards them and slowed. Yona could feel the tiredness in the huge body beneath her like she could with horses. When the animal reached the trees, it slowed to a halt and collapsed, shielding itself from the wind.

“Off!” Beak commanded the others, and they slid from the hide. He jumped down and helped the weakest of them to the ground. Yona slid down and walked around to the front of the calliston. It had laid its huge, dragon-like head down on the stony ground and was panting with exhaustion, curling its smaller front arms under its neck. Yona put her hand on the side of its massive face.

“Thank you,” she said. The calliston breathed out and shut its eyes.

“I don’t think it can understand you,” said Beak.

“Can callistons talk? Like in the stories?”

“Yes, callistons can. Not dummerholes, though.” He looked around and shivered. “I don’t think we dare stay here long, but the river is close and we all need water.”

“We need food too,” said Yona, sitting down by the big head. “So does our friend here, I would think.”

“Maybe it’s like a dragon,” said Beak. “Some say they are related. Dragons can go several days without eating.”

“I had never seen a dragon before,” said Yona. “There were none in the south where we lived. Will you try to get home?” She knew nothing about the small man other than he said he had been wandering.

“I have no home. Nor do most of these here, I reckon. You and your man are different. The girl is homeless and parentless now.”

Yona nodded. They hadn't seen the capture of the others, but she knew that three women and three children, including Beva, had come from a tiny hamlet the slavers had burnt down. They had only taken the women and the girls and killed the rest. She suspected that story was true for nearly all of them. If you have nowhere to return to, you are less likely to escape, perhaps. She huddled down on the ground, shivering as the wind whipped around them.

“Wake up,” said Phoran, shaking Yona. “The storm is getting worse!”

Yona shook herself awake. It was still dark, but there was light in the far east. The wind was battering and howling through the thin trees, and the calliston raised its head and groaned. Yona touched it on the cheek and it blinked at her.

“You are making a friend, I think,” said Beak.

“She does that with horses too.” Phoran smiled.

Yona looked up at him. “You seem a little better.”

“Just a little. The river is over there. I had a long drink. You should too. Take Beva; she's scared.”

“Okay.”

Yona struggled upright, found the young girl, and took her to the river, the two of them drinking greedily with their hands from the rushing cold waters that flowed down from the ridge. Behind them, she heard a loud grumble, like a deep yawn, and the calliston heaved itself heavily to its feet.

“Is he going?” asked Beva.

“Come on, quickly!” They hurried over to the calliston. Beak and Phoran were already hurrying the other slaves onto its back. Yona pushed Beva up and was about to climb up herself when she heard the calliston rumble again. She turned and realised it was looking round at her. “Oh, this might be risky,” she told herself, walking up to its head and touching it again on the cheek. She started walking on ahead to the south, along the banks of the river Cor-En, bracing herself against the wind. Behind her, the beast grumbled a little, then slowly followed her.

“What are you doing?” called down Phoran from the calliston's neck.

“We need him to go south. I don't know how else to tell him.”

“Him?”

“Oh!” Yona laughed. “I don't know!” She looked back at the calliston, following behind her. “I think so, though.” She smiled at the huge beast and broke into a trot, encouraging the animal to follow her. The calliston lengthened its stride, easily keeping up with her short human legs. The wind blew harder and Yona put her hands over her eyes. In a beat, the calliston moved alongside her, shielding her a little, and rumbled at her.

“You are right; I am slowing you down.” She smiled once, then grabbed a strap and pulled herself onto its back. Immediately the calliston broke into a trot, its great head kept low, and ran unerringly south. Perhaps her encouragement was unneeded after all, Yona thought.

The storm followed them most of the day as the calliston kept to his southerly course, his head low and his eyes half closed. At midday, they discovered another of their number dead, this time from hunger, and they held the emaciated man on the hides rather than let him fall. By late in the afternoon, they were leaving the storm behind. They had been travelling along the banks of the river Cor-En, and the desolate plane changed slowly to grassland with the occasional small

grouping of trees leaning over the rushing, milky-blue water. Beak made his way to Yona where she was sitting on the calliston's neck.

"Look behind," he said to her. Yona turned and looked north. Stretched across the plain was a wall of dust reaching to the sky, dark, foreboding, and impenetrable.

"Did we come through that?" asked Yona.

"Only the leading edge and that was bad enough. We will not be chased now. I reckon those slavers are trapped in their gorge."

"Do you know much about these lands?"

"A little. I have travelled to Tellmond for work before. They have mines up there, mostly dug by slaves. I didn't stay long." Beak shrugged as if it was unimportant, but Yona suspected it was anything but. "If you can work out how to stop our friend while it is still daylight, we can light fires and cut some spears from the trees somehow. Some can forage, and some can fish."

"I will try," answered the young woman.

She leant forward along the calliston's neck and pulled at one of the beast's large, soft ears. The calliston's head was huge, but it didn't have the dramatic horns of the dragons, and she could reach the ears easily. The calliston huffed and she pulled again. She had no idea whether it would work, but perhaps if it was annoying, it would stop. The beast twitched its head in irritation and Yona, feeling guilty, stroked the smooth neck. The calliston rumbled and turned its head slightly to look back at her. The large eyes were light brown and golden, and he blinked softly and slowed down. Yona waited till he was slow enough, then slid off his back and trotted along by his head, putting her hand on his cheek. "We'll stop here, friend," she said, slowing her own pace. The calliston, sensing her change in speed, slowed and stopped, and then, with a sigh, lay down.

"Clever!" remarked Phoran, sliding down stiffly.

"I need a hug, Phoran," complained Yona and he wrapped her in his arms.

"I'm not sure I am much good for hugs at the moment. I need to eat. We all do." Beva wandered over to him and pushed her way under his arm.

"So does she," said Yona, touching the girl's face lightly. "I will help Beak. He is going to try to light fires and perhaps fish. I'll check to see how everyone is doing." Behind her the Calliston suddenly grumbled and stood up, the humans scattering quickly.

"What is he doing?" asked Beva nervously.

"I'm not sure," Phoran said to the girl who was squeezing him in fear. He winced in pain.

"A little care with me, Beva," he said softly. "I'm a bit broken."

"Sorry," she said.

The Calliston sniffed the dusty air, then turned and walked to the river, plunging its head into the water. Yona chuckled.

"He has run so far, and he didn't drink last night. Oh, Phoran, I wish knew more about callistons. He is saving our lives and I am doing nothing for him in return."

"Keep him moving us south, and that will help him too, my love."

"I know. I think he knows that too. Go and sit down, both of you. I will help Beak."

Yona, Beak, and five others who were the strongest, split themselves into teams. Three went fishing with sharpened sticks, two collected fallen wood for fires, and two foraged. They had no tools, so they snapped thin sticks to make fishing spears and could only burn what they could find, and eat what they could dig up with bare hands. It took them three hours, but each of the humans fell asleep with a few mouthfuls of food in their stomachs. It was not enough, but it would have to do. They laid the poor man who had died during the day to rest behind a tree.

They had no tools to dig a grave and not enough strength to pick up the large stones on the river bank to cover his body. No one knew his name, but a few wept for him anyway.

“If I remember rightly, the river turns east at some point,” said Beak to Phoran and Yona just after dawn, marking out a sketch on the ground.

“Do you know where we are?” asked Yona.

“I think so,” said the dark-skinned man. “We crossed a trail a little way back yesterday. There’re a couple of roads through here that head towards Ponack in the Sand Hills.”

“I don’t know Ponack,” said Phoran.

“Desert people. Good people. But we should keep heading south.” Beak put a mark on his sketch. “If that trail was here, then later today we will cross another trail heading east. There are hills near there and we might need to move away from the river.”

“If we have a choice,” said Yona, laughing.

“Our friend certainly seems to know where he is going,” commented Beak, thoughtfully.

“What do you mean?” asked Phoran. “I thought you said he is no more intelligent than a horse.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Yona, looking over to where the calliston was walking through the grass, pulling leaves from sturdy bushes with his hands and eating them. “Something in his eyes is very different from our horses, and I sometimes think he can understand me a little. Where do you think he came from?”

“I don’t know,” replied Beak. “I was taught some about callistons when I was young, but I have no idea where they live.”

“Some of the others are worried,” said Phoran. “We desperately need more food. A couple said we should be resting and foraging. We can do nothing while on the calliston’s back.”

“They have a point,” replied Yona. “But there is nothing much here.”

“It will be greener near those hills, and then we will cross into Epinod,” said Beak. “One more day and we will think again.”

Behind them in the distance, the storm was still raging. But though it was very windy as they headed south, the sun warmed them, and as they approached the hills the Calliston suddenly slowed.

“What is it?” Yona asked the great beast, leaning forward on his neck. He rumbled deeply and stopped, and she jumped down. “What have you seen?” The calliston had moved away from the river to avoid a thick woodland, and they had crossed the second of Beak’s trails. Yona shielded her eyes from the sun, trying to see what the large eyes had spotted.

“Deer!” Phoran hissed down from his vantage on the beast’s back. “On the edge of the woods to the right.”

“I can see them. Why has he stopped?”

“Why wouldn’t he? Callistons aren’t vegetarians,” said Beak, jumping down.

“Do they hunt?”

“Farm, hunt, cook. Him? I don’t know.”

“Let’s get everyone down,” said Phoran. “I can see a stream over there and we’re not drinking enough.”

Yona and Beva helped Phoran lower himself from the hides, and the others headed to the stream and the shade of the trees. The calliston walked slowly towards the deer. Yona trotted up

to the beast's head and was surprised when he put his hand on her shoulder and pushed her gently aside.

"Let him go," whispered Beak. Yona nodded and watched the beast make his way towards the deer. He was walking incredibly slowly, almost meandering, and occasionally stopped and picked something from the odd bush.

"Clever," said Phoran. "It is like the sharks we see off the coast. Sometimes they swim gently and slowly among other fish and then suddenly attack. I bet that's what he's doing." The calliston was now walking through the small herd of deer, towering over them. They were obviously wary of the huge visitor, but most continued to eat, their ears twitching nervously. Then the calliston moved. The freed slaves had only thought of him as a cumbersome beast over the last few days, using him simply as if he were a ridiculously big horse. But callistons are not like horses or cattle, they are more like dragons or bears. They are supple, strong, and, as two deer found out, incredibly fast. In a flash, the calliston lunged out at the two deer who were standing to the side of him, grabbing one with a large hand and the other with his mouth, then pinned them to the ground.

"Come on!" shouted Yona, running to help the calliston who was struggling to keep hold of both animals. Beak shot after her followed by another woman, and the two women pounced on the deer, holding them tightly while Beak grabbed up a rock and used it to beat them unconscious.

"Two?" the small man asked. "Why two?"

Yona stood and walked to the calliston who had stepped back a short way, and she put her hand on his face. The big animal blinked and rumbled quietly. "It's for us," said Yona. "He has caught one for us."

It was hard work. With only unhelpfully smooth, rounded stones and split branches, bleeding and cleaning the deer had not been simple. But they had managed eventually, and had roasted the smaller one in pieces over a fire while the calliston had taken the other away a short distance to eat on his own. For the first time in weeks, the remaining twenty-two humans had almost full bellies, as did the calliston, and they sat around by the small stream talking while the beast dozed peacefully nearby. Beva, the young girl, had been nervous of the massive animal, as they all had, but with encouragement from Yona, had put her hand on his warm, smooth face and he had rumbled in pleasure. Now she was sitting down next to him, leaning against his head, sleeping.

"Whatever we do next, Phoran, she will have to come with us."

"We wanted a family," he murmured as Yona leant against him.

"I am sorry, Phoran. I don't know why I can't get pregnant."

"It might be me," he said. "Definitely me at the moment! Sitting here cuddling is about my limit."

"You always find something to make me smile," said Yona, reaching up and stroking his face. She had checked him over earlier, as she had checked the rest of them, and though some of his bruises were beginning to fade, some of them were still vivid, and a couple of the scars on his back from being whipped had started to bleed again.

"What are we doing next?" Daintine, an older woman, sat down next to them. "Do we know where we're going?"

"Not really, other than south," said Yona, looking over to the calliston. "But I think he does." She frowned slightly. "And I think the dragons did, too."

"In what way?" asked Phoran.

Yona sat up. “Think about it. All that fighting, and that other beast screaming, and yet this big fellow was walking down the gorge only slowly. If I had been him, I’d have been running! Then we all climbed up on his back and as soon as the last of us were up, he started trotting, like someone had commanded him.”

“But how could they command him?” asked Daintine. “Beak says the animal has a damaged mind.”

“I don’t know, Daintine, but they say callistons and dragons are related. Perhaps he understood something they shouted.” Yona shivered and looked north. “That storm is moving this way again. I think we should try to make more headway before dark.”

“Some will object, but you are right,” said the older woman. “That deer was welcome, but we are all frightened, Yona. Why are you so strong?”

Yona looked into the woman’s eyes and shook her head. “Oh, Daintine, I am not!” She wiped away a sudden, unwelcome errant tear and went to wake the calliston.

“She is strong, Daintine, whatever she says,” said Phoran. “Always has been. But she is frightened too.”

“When we get to Epinod, I think a couple are heading west, but the rest of us have nowhere to go. You have, don’t you.”

“Yes, we do. It’s a long way, but our village is in the far south. We were some leagues from there when we were caught.” Phoran looked over to where Beva and Yona were laughing at a huge yawn from the waking calliston. “But I am not sure it’s quite that simple,” he added quietly.

“I can’t get him to stop!” shouted Yona at Beak in panic. “He’s speeding up!” The calliston had been heading south-east all afternoon without stopping. Now they had reached the growing river Cor-En and the big animal was charging towards the bank.

“The river is deeper here!” shouted Beak, joining Yona on the neck. “I hope he can swim.”

“I can’t!” said Beva, hanging on to the hide, her knuckles white. “I’m going to drown!”

“Hold on, girl,” said Phoran, grimacing with pain as he wrapped his arms around the small girl.

Yona peered ahead. The sunlight had been failing rapidly, but she had let the calliston continue rather than stopping early. The winds had reached them in the afternoon and they had been caught in a massive thunderstorm; the more leagues south they covered today, the better. “Getting closer! Everyone hang on tight!”

Beneath her, the calliston rumbled and let out a roar, and he pushed his head forward. When they reached the stony bank, he almost jumped into the water, a huge wave pushing ahead of him, and he drove his way across. The river was much wider and faster here, having been joined by another behind the hills, and the big beast had to fight his way across. The humans hung on desperately, waves of cold water washing over the hide. Beva coughed and spluttered when she swallowed water accidentally, and Phoran sat her up, banging her on the back with one arm while he hung on with the other.

“Nearly there!” shouted Beak.

“Look out!” warned Yona as the calliston hit a channel and plunged deeper into the water, crying and bellowing in panic. Beak grabbed the man behind him who was sliding off the hide.

“Help me!” he yelled at Yona. Yona caught hold of the man’s arm, but her hands were cold, and she felt him slipping from her grasp.

“Beva, hold onto the hide!” shouted Phoran, and leant over to help Yona and Beak. The man was panicking and fighting them to stay on.

“Hold still,” Beak shouted at him, but it was too late. The man kicked and struggled in desperation, making it impossible for them to hold on to him, and then he fell backwards into the fast-moving river and washed away from them, sinking beneath the water. Phoran grabbed Yona before she fell in after the man, and pulled her back onto the hide. With a roar and pathetic cry, the calliston found his feet, and hauled himself up the bank, panting and gasping.

Yona stared at the river. Another one. There had been thirty of them when they had reached the gorge and six of them had died in that freezing room. Now they had lost two more on the journey. She slid from the hides and went around to the calliston’s face. He looked as frightened as they, and as the others climbed down from his back, he lay down and curled his head around, tucking his large hands under his chin.

“What happened?” Beak asked her. “Why did he do that?” The man was angry.

“Look at him, Beak!” snapped Yona. “He is scared. Whatever it is that is driving him south, he had to cross the river and it frightened him.” She put her hand on the beast’s face. She could feel him shaking. “There are trees over there. We need fires,” she said. Beak nodded and went to help the others. Yona sat on the ground by the large head. The calliston’s eyes were open wide and he shivered and grumbled.

“Is he alright?” asked Beva in a small voice, sitting down and snuggling against Yona.

“The river frightened him.”

“Can’t he swim?”

Yona looked down at the small girl, thinking about how the massive, powerful animal had struggled against the current, crying and roaring as he had crossed. “You are a clever one,” she said to the girl. “No, I don’t think he can.”

Beva leant against the beast who shuddered and whimpered, almost nuzzling her. “I can’t swim either and I am frightened as well,” the girl told him.

Yona looked at them. The small, thin, tired girl, only ten years old, and the giant calliston, big enough to carry all of them crammed together on his muscled back. Suddenly, they really didn’t look very different at all. Softly, Yona started to sing to both of them, the unrequited mother inside feeling their fear.

*Dark though the night,  
You hold me so tight,  
Beneath the light of moons,  
Until the light of day.*

*Oh, tender love,  
Flying high above,  
Sing now of romance true,  
As with you I now lay.*

*Sleep here with me,  
Beneath the oaken tree,  
And we will dream of sun,  
As we travel on our way.*



The calliston and the child had fallen asleep.

“And that is why I love you so much,” whispered Phoran in Yona’s ear, kneeling behind her. Then he held her close while she buried her head in his hair and cried. His turn to be strong.

The morning saw a large fire, a very pleased Beak, and a man called Hekon brandishing rabbits.

“We found an abandoned farm just in the woods there,” said Hekon as they handed the rabbits to Daintine to gut. To her delight and surprise, he gave her a small knife. “Seems like they left a few tools. Very rusty, but it polished up on a rock and I am not complaining.

“We also found one old axe head and a broken shovel,” added Beak. “And there is some canvas back there. It’s a bit mouldy, but it should clean up.”

“I will come and help,” said Yona, getting up from where she had been cleaning the wounds on Phoran’s back with some herbs and water. “Anything like pottery there?”

“Some broken bits, but we haven’t looked through everything,” said Hekon. “I think it’s been abandoned some years because the roof is half fallen in.”

“Well, I suggest we stay here the day then,” said the young woman. “I know Noenna and two others want to head west into Epinod, but I suspect a day’s rest for them first would be sensible before they set off on foot.”

“Are we still heading south?” asked Beak. “Not that I am complaining.”

“I suspect so,” replied Yona. “I think our big friend has decided to go where it’s warmer, but I am not sure where that is. Whatever, he is certainly desperate enough to run south and cross a dangerous river.”

The old, ruined house looked to Yona to be perhaps a woodsman’s cottage rather than a farm, but she thought Hekon had been right and it had been abandoned for many years. It took them an hour to rescue what they could, and they dragged it all back to the others wrapped in the tatty canvases they had found. With a lot of cursing and struggling, they managed to get the canvases into the edge of the river and scrubbed them clean of moss and mould with stones, before hanging them from branches to dry.

“Have you somewhere to go?” Yona asked Noenna as the woman used a tatty end of one of the canvases to make a small bag.

“I have family in Essenor, I hope,” she said with a tired sigh. “Or I used to many years ago. I want to try.”

“You could still come with us.”

“Do you know where you are going?” asked Noenna, raising an eyebrow.

Yona laughed. “No, possibly not, but every league we get farther from the North, I feel better, and that is enough for now.”

Noenna gave the young woman a hug. “You are very special, Yona. You and Beak and your man Phoran have kept us all going, even before we reached that terrible room. People will remember that you know. I will. Will you return to your village?”

“I’m not sure. Neither Phoran nor I have family. We are fisherfolk and we have both lost people to the sea. If our big friend goes that far south, then yes, perhaps. If not, then I don’t know. It’s a very long way.”

“Why do you feel so close to this beast? I know he has saved us, but so would have horses.”

“Perhaps.” Yona looked over at the calliston who was drinking from the river while Beva sat on his neck, laughing at something. “There was once an intelligent person in there. He would

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