



Cattra's Legacy

By Anna Mackenzie

Chapter 1 – Pelon's gift

The villagers came to witness the burial, but only out of custom and curiosity, drifting away as soon as the first clod of earth fell. Ganny lingered longest, touching Risha's arm before she left. Risha didn't notice. It wasn't until old Kelor smacked the flat of his shovel once, twice, against the newly mounded earth that she shivered, abruptly feeling the cold that had burrowed beneath her heavy, home-spun clothes.

She moved then, her limbs sluggish. No one called to offer comfort as she walked through the village, the windows of the cottages gazing on her blank and mean-eyed. At the last holding she turned in, the iron latch of the gate stiff beneath her hand. The cottage, built from the stone of the mountains that shadowed it, seemed hollow without Pelon. His chair, crudely carved and cushioned with goat hide, stood turned to the hearth, but the fire before it had died. Pulling the mourning shawl from her head, Risha deftly twisted her hair into a plait. There were still goats to be milked.

Emett caught her as she turned onto the path up the mountain.

"Mam sent me to tell you she milked your goats with ours." He shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, as if he had stones in his boots. "She said it'd be dark otherwise."

It was true. The shadows stretched long and narrow from their feet, and crouched inky-dark in the folds of the mountain. Risha reached for the pail he held out, liquid sloshing within. "Thank her for me. It was thoughtful." As the woman had always been. It was from Ganny that Risha had learned the skills she needed to manage her father's holding, though her kindness had never proved sufficient to unlock Pelon's heart.

"I'm sorry about Pelon. Will you keep on at the cottage? It'll be hard on your own." Emmett's words poured like spilled milk.

Risha swallowed, throat tight. Emmett had been her only playmate in childhood, until the taunts of the other children had set them apart. "I haven't thought about it."

His mouth opened then closed. He was a few years older, no longer a boy yet not quite a man. Settling for an abrupt nod he turned and strode away. Risha followed slowly, the two pails and her milking stool awkward to carry.

Later, with the fire sulking in the grate, its peaty fug stinging her eyes, she let herself wonder about an answer. Even when each breath had become a struggle, his skin dull as clay, Pelon had offered no advice. A wild sob rose within her. That her father had been taciturn and difficult had not changed the love she'd felt for him. Curling tight around her loneliness, she let her grief loose.

The first pale light of morning had begun to filter through the narrow window when Risha woke, her eyes gritty and swollen. She splashed water on her face, dispersing the haunting remnants of dreams – almost. Refusing to hear the whispers, she shrugged into her padded jacket. Despite summer's imminent arrival it was still cold in the mountains.

The peaks were gold-tipped when she stepped outside, the sky above washed in pink. Spring was Risha's favourite season. She loved the harsh, singular beauty of the mountains as they discarded their shawls of snow; red and ochre creeping up the newly bared rock as though a bunch of sharp-hipped old women were slowly pulling on fresh skirts.

When she reached the lowest meadow Bell trotted to meet her, butting her head against the girl's thigh. Risha scratched behind her ears. The old nanny had been a long-ago gift from Ganny, and from the outset Risha had loved her with all the

passion of a lonely child. Settling her stool on the uneven ground she bent to her task, the stream of warm milk ringing in the pail.

Honey was still penned in the birthing shed. "Any day now," Risha told her, running her hand over the goat's distended belly, "and maybe twins." The nanny rubbed her head against the girl's palm in reply.

From the open doorway, Risha watched the village begin to stir. Torfell had been her home for as long as she could remember – which had never been enough to impede the other children's spite. Not that she believed the claims they made. On the path she met three sleepy-eyed girls coming up. The younger two looked aside but Carly stared at her boldly. The girl was two years older than Risha, but it was not only that which set them apart. Beside Carly's pale perfection Risha's sun-burnished skin appeared tarnished, her auburn hair drab, while her slender frame could compare only unfavourably to Carly's buxom figure. Risha closed her ears to the snide comments that pursued her down the mountain.

The fragile peace of the early morning stolen, she banged the pail of milk against the step so that a bird exploring the kitchen garden startled into the air and was gone.

Leave.

It was more a feeling than a word. Risha splashed water on her face. She didn't doubt it came from Nonno – but Nonno had been silent for years and she had no call, now, to be speaking up again.

"Go away," Risha snapped, her voice hollow in the empty cottage.

Three days after her father's death, Risha received a visit from Bram. She'd never known the headman to call at the cottage other than when he needed Pelon's help with the dubious accounting of the tithemen. Her skin prickled as he stepped inside, his pale eyes scouring the room. Risha motioned him to a seat and set a bowl of tea before him.

"Your father's death grieves me, Risha, as it grieves the village," Bram said formally, his hands spread flat upon the table.

Risha accepted the token with a nod.

"Pelon made no provision for such an eventuality. Were you aware of the terms of lease of the holding?"

Risha stiffened. "My father bought this cottage."

Bram shook his head, his expression pained, eyes calculating. "No, Risha, your father leased the holding for his lifetime. Now that he is dead, it reverts to the village."

"I . . . what are the terms? I can match them."

Bram's broad smile looked foreign in his face. "A girl, scarcely more than a child, with a holding to herself? Be reasonable, Risha. It would be too much for you alone."

"I can manage the holding. I have done for years." Though it was true, she felt disloyal for saying it. She squeezed her palms together in her lap, forcing aside a memory of her father at the kitchen table, quill scratching across parchment, ignoring the holding, his daughter, even his own health. "You know I can manage the holding, Bram," she repeated, hearing and hating the plea in her voice.

"I must think of the village."

Her chin came up. "So you would have me lose my home as well as my father?"

Colour rose in Bram's cheeks. "You have lived all your life on our goodwill. When Pelon brought you here we struck a bargain. His death brings the end of it." His eyes strayed around the room. "The holding will go to Tok."

"Tok has a holding! What need has he of another, save to satisfy his greed?"

Bram rose to his feet, his tea untouched on the table. "Tok has sons. And you have the manners of an out-comer."

What she'd said was true but she'd been unwise to say it. Tok was Bram's brother-in-law. "I'm sorry," she muttered. "It's a shock, that's all." An idea struck her. "I can help you as my father did: he taught me to read and calculate. I can deal with the tithemen."

He hesitated only briefly. “They’d not respect the words of a girl, a mere child. I came to give you warning, not to bargain. You have three weeks.”

When the door closed behind him Risha sank into her father’s chair, a worm of fear wriggling in her belly. Her choices were limited, as Bram surely knew. She was too young to marry, even had she the inclination, and the village offered scant opportunities for employment. Anger bloomed in her that her father had died so easily, slipping away without a single word of advice. Unless . . .

Fetching the key that Pelon had worn on a thong around his neck, Risha unlocked the carved chest that sat against one wall. Stale, papery air rushed up at her as she lifted the lid. Inside lay a thick sheaf of parchment, loosely tied between covers of stiff, untooled leather. Risha lifted the folio, in her mind seeing Pelon’s thin fingers holding it, rather than her own. He had never discussed with her the work that had so absorbed him. A Brief Historical of Elgard. She stared at the handwriting, as familiar as her own. At the bottom of the sheet, in writing so small it was barely legible, Pelon had inked an inscription: For her child. Risha flicked to the end, but the work was unfinished.

A memory spooled through her mind: her father shivering and wracked by coughs, hunched over the work when he belonged nowhere but in bed. She had no doubt that his obsession had contributed to his illness.

Scholars.

Risha felt Nonno’s disdain clearly, like a stain in her head. “Leave me alone.”

The manuscript spilled from its covers as she slapped it onto the floor. The friend who had kept her company in her earliest childhood, rocking her hurts and soothing her loneliness, had in the end brought her only grief. It might not have been so if she’d kept Nonno to herself, but she’d been a child; she’d seen no reason not to speak of her to Ganny. Pelon’s anger had been frightening. Worse, he’d made her swear that she would never again play the thought-picture game she had reluctantly described.

‘Never, Risha. You must swear it on your life. And tell no one. No one, you understand me?’

In the face of his vehemence she capitulated, though banishing Nonno had left her with an aching sense of loss. And now, as if Nonno could read the release of that restriction, she was back.

Risha cleared her throat. “You’re not real.” The lack of an answer should have confirmed her statement, but did not. She could feel the waiting, like a sigh.

She straightened the folio’s pages with fingers that trembled. ‘The creation of a lonely mind,’ Pelon had said. Perhaps it was true; perhaps that was why Nonno was back.

Closing her mind tight Risha returned to the chest, sorting methodically through its remaining contents. Beneath a stack of unused parchment and her father’s box of scribing materials she found a cloak of midnight blue, a pair of soft leather boots – too soft for the harsh stones of the mountain – and a baby’s shawl, delicate as cobweb. Fine as they were, the clothes told her only that they hadn’t come to the mountains destitute and she’d known that already, though her father’s supply of coin had long since run out. There was no lease or sale agreement, no token for his daughter, nor any clue as to what she might best do with Pelon gone. The scribing box held only ink, quills and a tiny knife. She sat back on her heels, her hand falling on the unused parchment.

Barc. Barc had carried the fat packages of parchment to Torfell. He would know who had sent them – and how Pelon had paid. Risha felt a tiny flickering of hope. Barc would have answers, and with spring giving way to summer, it would not be long until the traders again crossed the mountain pass.

Risha reached for the last remaining item in the chest, a slender volume, its title indented in the supple leather cover: Illuminations on Pratinus. The gossamer fine pages had yellowed and the ink of the inscription was brown and faded. Risha tilted it towards the light. For the eagle mind of Pelonius, from his friend Meredus of Elion. Pelonius. Pelon? A folded sheet of parchment slipped from between the book’s pages, the uppermost corner bearing the stain of some long-forgotten meal. Risha opened it. Each straggling line of letters, scattered in errant fashion across the grubby sheet, dug like a blade into her heart.

Pelon had taught her to write using a stick of charcoal on board. She still remembered her delight as she came to understand how the letters drew together into sounds and words; her excitement when he first allowed her a precious sheet of parchment, arranging the quill in her hand and guiding her wrist. This sheet of parchment. Tears welled in her eyes.

Standing so quickly that blood roared in her head, Risha whirled away from her grief. Bram's ignored tea taunted her from the table. She snatched it up and flung its contents out the door. Sunlight sparkled through the arc of golden liquid. Risha blinked. The images that came to her rushed up out of darkness: sun on water and red-burnished hair and a tower that seemed to reflect back the light. The crack and toss of cloth caught in the wind: banners and something larger, taut and pale, that flickered above her.

"Risha?"

Resting a hand on the solid stone of the cottage wall Risha tugged herself back to the present.

Ganny stood at the gate, her no-nonsense face creased with concern. "Are you well, girl?"

Risha nodded, wiping her damp palms on her skirt.

Ganny surveyed her a moment longer then clucked her tongue. "You don't look it. Easy to see you've not been eating."

"I'm fine. Truly."

The woman's brows lifted.

"It's kind of you to ask," Risha added.

"You need to get out of the house. Come and help me gather fruit. I thought I'd make a batch of sour plum relish."

Risha's skin lifted into goosebumps as the shards of . . . was it memory that jangled within her? Abruptly she nodded. "I'll fetch a basket."

Ganny smiled, her plain face taking on a faint hint of prettiness.

Risha returned the tea bowl to the table, glanced sidelong at the scattered contents of the chest, and firmly closed the door. As for Pelon: he might not have left her anything useful, but he had at least loved her enough to keep her childish scribbles.

Ganny's brows drew into a frown as Risha told her of Bram's visit. "He's ever been good at getting more for his own."

"Ganny, did my father tell you anything about his past?"

"Not me. He spoke to Bram, maybe." The woman's knife bit into the small green plum in her hand. Flicking out the stone she dropped the halves into a pan and picked up another. "You can move in with us," she said gruffly. "Bram has no right to turn you from your home."

"I—" Risha's gaze strayed around the cottage, even smaller than her own. "I'm not ready to make any decisions," she said.

"You need some time, of course you do. Pelon was always so—" She stopped as the door swung open. Emmett's face, as he crossed the threshold, held neither surprise nor welcome. "How did you fare?" Ganny asked, with a smile for her son.

Emmett hung his empty snares behind the door. "The game's scarcer than it should be." Pouring water from the kettle he splashed his face and hands.

"It's still early in the season," Ganny suggested. Emmett dried his face on a ragged towel that hung above the sink. "Risha had a visit from Bram," the woman added.

Emmett met Risha's eyes then looked away.

He knew. A spurt of anger brought her straighter in her chair.

He made an appeasing gesture with his hand. "They were speaking of it in the village last night." The silence became

strained. "I always thought the holding was yours," he added finally.

"So did I." Risha halved and pitted the last of the fruit and stood to leave, her chair scraping loud against the flagstones.

"Stay and eat with us," Ganny offered.

Risha shook her head. "I have things to do."

"Well, you're welcome here," Ganny said stoutly. "Always have been, always will."

Emett said nothing, his eyes shying from Risha's glance.

"How's Carly?" she asked him, with only a little spite. The attention Emmett had paid Tok's daughter through the slow months of winter had been lost on no one, though the young woman had given little indication that she returned his interest.

Emett flushed. "I've not seen her."

The girl would be a troublesome catch. Risha felt a twinge of pity. "Is she kind to you, Emmett?"

Ganny snorted. "There's precious little kindness in that one. She takes after her father."

Emett pulled out a chair with a thump.

Ganny ignored him. "Come tomorrow, Risha, and we'll work out what to do."

Risha's eyes strayed to Emmett's mulish expression.

"And take this; it's little enough." Ganny tucked half a loaf into her basket. "You're too thin," she said in a familiar complaint. "You must make yourself eat whether you feel like it or not."

Risha's throat felt thick. If only Pelon had seen past the woman's plain face to her kindness – but he had always preferred his own company. She missed him, suddenly, with an ache that sliced through her bones, and hurried away before she betrayed the depth of her grief.

Her own cottage felt empty after the warmth of Ganny's kitchen. Nudging the fire into life she filled her kettle and forced herself to chew a wedge of bread and cheese. Ganny had been right: she hadn't eaten properly since before Pelon died.

The thought of him turned her to face the contents of the chest, spread across the floor. Lifting the cloak she shook it out. There was something caught within its folds. She fumbled for the opening of the pocket, feeling the weight of the fabric and its warmth – it was large enough to have been her father's but, even re-cut to fit, it was unlikely to be of much use in the mountains. If she stayed. The idea crept insidiously into her head, the way lichen creeps over rocks.

Risha's fingers closed around something small and firm. It was a doll, such as a mother might make for her child. No chord chimed in her memory. She held it to her nose but there was only a sour mustiness. One side was coming unstitched . . . there was something inside. Probing with her finger she hooked out an oval brooch. It was gold and the stones set into its face shone like sunlight on water. The image was of a ship, the jewels quartering her flag.

Something moved in Risha's mind that she couldn't quite grasp. It was years since she'd wondered about her mother. When she was younger she'd held to a comforting image, solid as Ganny and soothing as Nonno. But this . . . she didn't know what to make of it. Pelon had never once spoken of their past and it was too late now to ask. Turning the brooch in her fingers she searched her memories, but nothing came. It looked valuable, and she wondered why Pelon hadn't sold it.

With a sigh, Risha slipped it back inside the doll and re-stitched the torn seam. After a moment's hesitation she returned it to the chest and locked the lid. Not for a moment did she believe the precaution necessary, but Pelon had. As the light began to fade, Risha picked up her father's manuscript and set herself to find out why.

Next morning Risha woke late. She'd read half the night, but for all the words her father had spilled across paper, none shed any light on her dilemma. A seam tore as she tugged her dress over her head; as she reached for needle and thread

she stubbed her toe on the hearth. By the time she left the house her mood was sour as three-day-old milk. She was nearly at the goat shed when a sharp complaint reached her ears.

“ . . . not the way it looks to me! She’s always in and out your door.”

“It’s not me she comes to see.”

Risha slowed, colour creeping up her neck.

“Nor you that sends her away! You can’t expect me to take you seriously when that out-comer is hanging round you every minute of the day.”

“Carly,” Emmet’s voice was pleading. “You can’t believe I care for her. I’d be as happy as you to see her gone. It’s just . . .”

Risha wheeled away. Carly had never made a secret of her hostility but Emmet’s words stung like salt in a scratch. Rolling her hurt into a dense, dark ball, she flung it at Nonno. Let the woman help with that!

No sooner was it done than she felt ashamed of her action. Pelon had been right: Nonno was a child’s game. The enveloping warmth she recalled when she’d turned tearfully inward had been nothing more than her own need answering itself. And now, she was too old to believe it.

Vision fogged by tears, Risha stamped across the meadow, stopping only when one boot sank into mud. Risha scowled at the dew-pond. An insect skimmed across its surface tugging an arrow of ripples in its wake. She barely saw it. Instead, an image poured through her head, of a river with a patchwork of emerald fields running back from its banks and a road running straight as a falcon’s flight to a high wall of stone. Behind it buildings rose, their orange-roofed towers catching the sun’s light and reflecting it back, dappled, as if it was shimmering on water.

Risha broke out of her trance, her skin clammy with sweat. If that had been Nonno’s answer, it helped not at all – or perhaps it did. Perhaps it was enough to be reminded that there was a world beyond Torfell and that, somehow, she must find the place her father had once occupied within it.

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