



CARL COTA-ROBLES

INGRID

— A DRAGON DESTINY NOVELETTE —

RISING

Ingrid Rising

A Dragon Destiny Novelette

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INGRID RISING

A DRAGON DESTINY NOVELETTE

CARL COTA-ROBLES

INGRID THE WESECH DRAGON
(10 YEARS BEFORE THE EVENTS IN SAND
AND SMOKE)

SMOOTH STONE BRUSHED AGAINST HER BACKSIDE AS THE DRAGON Ingrid squeezed through a narrow tunnel. With every twist of her body, she mustered more energy for the day ahead. Darkness enveloped the tunnel, but it didn't touch her heart. She writhed around the stony bends, dragging herself along the passageway with claws and the power in her tail. It was warm down here, so very far from the snow-capped mountaintop. She smiled as she thought of the dragon children she would be seeing soon.

A roar echoed across the tunnel system, filled with distress and anger. Ingrid ignored it. She wiggled around a bend. The tunnel continued upward for what seemed like forever. The rock was grittier the higher she traveled. Behind her, the sound of scraping claws on stone accompanied more roars, and she heard thuds as the mountain shook.

Another fight between neighboring Wesech dragons was breaking out. At thirty-nine years of age, Ingrid had become very good at avoiding those fights.

Smoke greeted her at the entryway to the cavern. She stopped

for a moment, breathing in the aromatic scent. Her eyes drooped shut. A feeling of peace came over her.

For a dragon such as her, there was nothing quite like the fragrance of smoke. It was like a human stopping to smell the flowers. For a moment, she wondered if the Sun dragons enjoyed smoke as much as her kind did. There were two breeds of dragon in her world, the Wesechs and the Suns, but her kind, the Wesechs, rarely interacted with the Suns. She would probably never know what they enjoyed.

Ingrid leaned down, squeezing through the narrow opening in the rock. Bits of gravel bit into her body, but she pressed on, ignoring the poking and stabbing feeling. She popped out the other side. Unlike the tunnels, the cavern was illuminated by dim rays of sunlight. The light came from a wall with many holes punched into it. She peered about the space, taking in her barren and dirty classroom. The room was barely big enough to fit her and her students.

Ingrid scrambled down the rocky cliff that overlooked the classroom. She descended headfirst, claws biting into the stone like hooks. She jumped the last bit to the ground, using her small wings to slow the descent. She landed with a thud upon the empty, sandy floor.

The kids weren't here yet, but they would arrive soon. Thin sheets of stone lay in one corner, inscribed with stories and fables. A large sheepskin bag hung from a stalactite that bent in an odd shape. Dried grass was scattered around the rocky room, making for a softer, more comfortable surface to sit on. Ingrid considered her lesson plan for the day.

"Miss Ingrid!" came a child Wesech's squeal.

Ingrid looked up. A young dragon, no larger than a human, hopped from rock to rock, descending from the entryway. Her name was Brenda. With a plop, the dragon landed in a pile of dried

grass. She looked up at Ingrid, all smiles. Ingrid towered over her. She was at least four times taller than Brenda.

Ingrid looked up, and she spied two yellow dragon eyes peering through the opening in the cavern rock, where the tunnels were. That would be Brenda's mother. Ingrid lifted a paw. She waved. The yellow eyes disappeared.

"Good morning, Brenda," Ingrid said. "You're very early today."

"My mama has to work early," Brenda said.

"Ah, I see," Ingrid responded. She moved toward a patch of dried grass. She sat.

"Oh, look what I learned!" Brenda said suddenly.

She opened her mouth and stuck out her tongue. Straining her lips, she forced her tongue to curl inward, rolling it up like a human parchment.

Ingrid smiled wide. "Wow. That is a very neat trick," she said.

With her tongue still out, Brenda started talking. It came out sounding like gibberish.

Ingrid laughed. "I have to be honest with you Brenda. I can't understand you with your tongue sticking out like that."

Brenda put her tongue back in her mouth. "Can I play with a toy now?" she said.

"Yes, of course," Ingrid said. "Class doesn't start for another 30 minutes."

Ingrid watched as Brenda clambered up a wall and dumped the entire sheepskin bag of toys all over. They scattered, some rolling as far as the wall that let light into the cavern. Ingrid would have to clean up before the other kids arrived, otherwise they would do nothing but play.

Brenda snuggled a dragon doll. Ingrid smiled softly as she watched the little girl play. The doll was made from sheepskin, hay, and colored with natural dyes. Like with most of the toys that

were scattered throughout the classroom, Ingrid could remember exactly where she'd gotten it. An older dragon had donated it just last year. Ingrid's all-female dragon school survived off donations.

When it was close to starting time for school, Ingrid got up and helped Brenda put the toys away. She lifted the big bag up, and she slipped it over the stalactite just as the next few dragon kids began to arrive.

Like Brenda before them, they hopped down the stony cliff and flapped their puny wings to help control their falls. They landed in the hay. Being females, none of them would ever have wings that were capable of flight. Ingrid gazed from student to student, watching them as they stood up. Their stubby wings flapped uselessly. Only male Wesechs grew the kind of large, powerful wings that were necessary for flight. Females breathed hotter fire, though.

"Good morning, everyone," Ingrid said.

More light was filtering in through the holes in the cavern wall now. The day was well underway. She took attendance. There were nine students in total, but usually she had a class of 13. Where were the others?

"I need to pee!" one Wesech kid shouted.

"Alright," Ingrid said. "I just need you to wait one minute."

She glanced up at the cavern opening again, but no other Wesechs were descending. Ingrid sighed, feeling worried. It was just these nine for today, unless the others were delayed. It wasn't uncommon to have one or two students missing, but four was a lot. She wasn't able to shake the worries from her mind.

Ingrid stood up on her hind legs, and she unhooked the bag of toys. She dumped them to the floor.

"Playtime for five minutes," she announced. "Not you Freya."

Ingrid grabbed Freya by the scruff of the neck and she lumbered off. They slid into a narrow passageway.

Ingrid tried to reassure herself. The missing kids were probably fine. Maybe they were sick or had a family emergency.

The passageway led out to the side of a mountain. Blinding light enveloped them, and Ingrid had to shield her eyes to adjust. When she lowered her paw, she saw thick sand for as far as the eye could see. Looking up, she could make out the rising mountains all around her. They were near the bottom of a mountain. An easy couple of hops and they could reach the desert, but Wesechs never went down into the desert. Only humans bothered to live there.

Freya squatted on the side of the mountain and let loose. A steady stream of pee drizzled down the cliff. Ingrid gazed at the snow-capped mountaintops and the crests filled with lush, green grass above them. The sky was clear. The sun beat with such warmth that she had a desire to just lay and bathe in its rays.

When Freya was done, Ingrid reluctantly picked her up and they went back inside, to the much cooler caverns. Ingrid cleaned up the toys.

“Listen up. We’re going to work on our fire breathing again today,” Ingrid said.

She reached into her pouch for some coal. The Wesech Tribunal rarely provided enough for her classroom, so she had to supplement with what extra her husband could get her. It was one of the perks of being married to a coal collector.

Ingrid passed around pebble-sized chunks of coal to the students. She only had enough to give each kid one small piece. Ingrid’s husband had said it should be enough for two to three short bursts of fire, depending on the efficiency of the Wesech’s insides. The kids took the coal eagerly. Their faces were filled with nervousness and excitement.

Ingrid called the kids up one by one and had them practice by spewing flames at a corner cavern wall. The first kid burped, and instead of fire, hot smoke came out of their mouth. The second kid

did the same. It was usually the same story for these Wesech children. Breathing fire was rarely easy from the get go.

Then a little girl named Tyra approached. On the first try she released smoke, but on the second she expelled a compact burst of red fire in a perfect V-shape.

"Excellent job, Tyra!" Ingrid said. She clapped the young Wesech on the back with the flat of her paw. "You get a gold star today."

Tyra grinned. "I did it!" she said. "I breathed fire."

Afterward, Brenda sauntered up to the wall for her turn. She was always successful; she was way ahead of the others. On the first try she unleashed a hearty stream of red flames, and on the second those flames turned orange and yellow.

After practicing their fire-breathing, the kids took their lunch break, and then they had playtime. The playtime was meant to get them tired out, so that they would sleep during their afternoon nap, but they were still bouncing off the walls with energy afterward.

Ingrid read to them to get them to go to sleep.

Before she knew it, the end of the day was upon her. The parents came one by one. Ingrid felt immense satisfaction as she watched the kids go. Brenda had been the first to be dropped off, and she was the last to be picked up too.

"Your mama must be a busy dragon," Ingrid said when it was just the two of them.

"Yes, she is. She's meeting with the Tribunal," Brenda said.

"Oh," Ingrid said. "That is quite the honor."

Brenda rolled her eyes. "No it's not."

"Do you know who the Tribunal are?" Ingrid asked, feeling surprised at Brenda's point of view.

"My mama says they're all conceited," Brenda said.

Ingrid frowned. She had been raised to believe the opposite. "The Tribunal are in charge of taking care of our nation," she told

Brenda. "They are smarter than the rest of us. They create laws, they come up with solutions to our problems, and they keep everyone happy. Does that sound conceited to you?"

Brenda eyed Ingrid with confusion, as if considering the new information. "No," she finally said.

Ingrid nodded.

"Have you ever met the Tribunal?" Brenda asked.

"Only once," Ingrid said.

She remembered a conference that she'd attended, meant for teachers in the Morite mountains. The entire Tribunal had been there, sitting in a circle on the snow-capped mountaintops. She remembered shivering from the cold as she'd listened to Rolf, the largest Tribunal member, speak. He towered over the rest of them, and his voice was hypnotic.

She remembered the others. Hans, Jakob, and Olaf were the goofballs of the group. They had laughed and made playful jokes throughout the entire event. Another Wesech dragon, Salem, had struck Ingrid as conniving, and Bo, a rigid-looking Wesech with a thick build, had seemed militaristic.

The Tribunal leader, Ove, had spoken after Rolf. He towered over many other dragons, and he sported muscles as thick as Bo's, though he was not as large as Rolf. He had not struck Ingrid as particularly approachable. He kept to his own small group, chatting in a closed-off manner.

Ingrid had grown up being told that the Tribunal Wesechs were the most intelligent Wesechs in the mountains, and all of her experiences with them had given her no reason to doubt that intelligence. She recalled their introduction of a parents' day at school, for mothers and fathers to spend more time with their children and get to know the teacher. Ingrid would have never thought of such a thing.

"Mama's met the Tribunal dragons a bunch of times," Brenda said. "She says I'm smarter than them."

Ingrid smiled. "Then maybe you should join the Tribunal when you're older."

Brenda smiled back at her. "You too!" she shouted.

Ingrid laughed at Brenda's naivety. "Oh no, that's not a possibility. They're much too smart, smarter than I could ever be," she said.

"Oh," Brenda said, and she looked sad.

"But you can do it," Ingrid said, trying to sound reassuring. "Just keep working hard, like you're doing. Not many Wesechs can burn fire as well as you do at such an early age."

Brenda became distracted then, and she played with her toys for a little while. By the time her parents came to pick her up, it had grown dark.

Ingrid yawned, and then she cleaned up after Brenda and left the school.

She slithered back through the rocky tunnels, rounding the rough bends with ease on her way back home. Other Wesechs clambered through the cave system ahead of and behind her, the sound of their claws on stone accompanying hers. They scrambled along together, forming a swarming, scraping mass of exhausted dragons.

Ingrid thought of the Tribunal on her way home. Despite Brenda's arguments, she felt convinced that they were intelligent, just rulers. Though they often overlooked those at the bottom of the mountains, and sometimes their laws were not kind, it was all in the service of making the Wesech nation more prosperous. Ingrid was just too ordinary to understand all of the reasons behind their actions. One day, when Brenda was older, she would see how much of an honor it was to share space with them.

As she slithered into her home, Ingrid found her husband,

Magnus, hunched over, eating something voraciously. He slurped as he ate, making a great noisy sound that would drive many Wesechs mad, but Ingrid found it adorable.

She stomped over to him, and he looked up as she approached, sensing her presence.

Magnus had chocolate sauce all over his face. Ingrid giggled.

“What?”

“Chocolate sauce. Everywhere.”

She couldn't stop laughing.

“This is messy food,” Magnus said protectively. “Don't steal any.”

“I wouldn't dream of it,” Ingrid said.

A human pastry as large as a coyote lay in front of Magnus. Wesech dragons did not bake pastries.

“Where did you get a human pastry?” she asked.

“The collection,” Magnus said. “Nobody else wanted it.”

Ingrid licked some of the chocolate off his snout. It tasted sweet. He smiled at her touch.

“How kind,” Ingrid said. “That must be the first time the humans have ever given us a present.”

“Hah,” Magnus said. “I believe they wanted to compensate us, because they didn't deliver enough coal.”

“Your boss must've been angry.”

“By the Mother, yes,” Magnus said. “But he did not yell at or punish me, at least.”

Magnus leaned down, and he took another bite of the pastry.

Ingrid felt glad that he was enjoying himself. It wasn't every day that they received human food. Most Wesechs were content with a diet of goat and more goat.

Ingrid glided to the back of her home, where a minuscule roasting chamber sat. She and Magnus had a small home. Their heating chamber was no longer across than a human was high. It

was not large enough to fit a giant mountain goat whole, and they frequently had to claw the raw goat to pieces before they roasted it.

One of those pieces was still inside, roasting from when Ingrid had placed it in the chamber this morning. She took it out and munched on it. The savory taste quickly overwhelmed what sweetness was left on her lips from the chocolate.

"There were only nine kids at school today," Ingrid told her husband in between bites.

"What happened to the other four?" Magnus asked.

"I don't know. I hope their parents will reach out to me and explain it at some point."

Suddenly, there came a roar from the entrance to Ingrid's cavern. Something knocked on the stone.

She looked at Magnus, wondering who it could be, and he shrugged.

"I'll get it," she decided.

Ingrid slithered over to the stone. She moved it aside. A familiar looking Wesech stood in the entryway. The last time that Ingrid had seen her had been at national parents' day. She'd been visiting her daughter then. Her daughter, Clara, had been missing at school earlier.

"Why Gaia, this is unexpected," Ingrid said. "Is everything alright? I missed Clara at—"

"That's why I'm here," the Wesech mother said. "I need to talk to someone. I need help. Please."

Ingrid stepped aside. "Come in," she said.

Gaia entered.

Magnus approached. "Would you care for any chocolate pastry?" he asked the shaken up mother.

It was a nice gesture, and Ingrid felt a bit jealous because he had refused to share his pastry with her, but Gaia shook her head. She was too shaken up to eat. Ingrid felt worried.

Ingrid led her to a worn down sheepskin rug. Gaia sat, tears running down her face. Ingrid sat with her, waiting patiently for Gaia to open up. Magnus crawled out of the cavern, under the guise of going to take a pee, though Ingrid knew that he was actually just giving them some space.

“Something terrible has happened,” Gaia finally said. “Something really terrible. I’m not sure what to do.”

“What is it?”

“Can I trust you?” Gaia said.

“Yes, of course.”

“You can’t tell anyone what I am about to say.”

“I won’t,” Ingrid promised.

“Three thugs came by my cavern early this morning, as Clara was getting ready for school,” Gaia said. “They knocked on my stone, and when I rolled over the rock, they pinned me to a wall, and they...they took Clara. They said if I tried to get her back, they’d kill both me and her.”

“Oh by the Mother,” Ingrid said.

“I’ve been shaken up all day,” Gaia said. “I need someone to help me. To help Clara. I don’t know what to do.”

“Have you spoken with the Tribunal Voice about this?” Ingrid said.

Gaia looked horrified. She buried her snout in her belly. Ingrid frowned, knowing she’d said something wrong.

“That’s the thing,” Gaia said, her voice quivering. “The Tribunal isn’t going to help. Because...because...”

“What?” Ingrid said. “Why wouldn’t they help?”

“Two of the ones who took my little Clara I didn’t recognize,” Gaia said, shaking and crying. “But the third was the...the Tribunal Voice.”

Ingrid rose, her heart thudding in her chest. The Tribunal Voice was a Wesech who supported a region of Wesechs and acted as an

intermediary between those Wesechs and the Tribunal. Normally, he was the one that any dragon in the mountain could go to for help. If he'd abducted Clara, though...

"The Tribunal needs to know about this," Ingrid said. "Come on. We'll go directly to them."

"Wait," Gaia said. "There's something else. When the Voice came, he said that the order to take my daughter had come directly from Ove. He's the leader of the Tribunal!"

"Oh, by the Mother," Ingrid said.

She was overwhelmed. She paced the floor, trying to think of what to say next. She wanted to help, but if they couldn't go to the Tribunal with a matter like this, who could they go to?

Meanwhile, Clara's mother stared at Ingrid like she was Clara's only hope.

INGRID THE WESECH DRAGON

INGRID CLAMBERED THROUGH THE STONY TUNNELS WITH GAIA.

“Listen to me for a moment,” she said. “Just listen. There's no way that the whole Tribunal is behind this. Fine, maybe Ove is behind this. But not the rest of them. They take an oath to protect the dragons of these mountains. They *will* help.”

Gaia looked uncertain and scared.

The Tribunal wasn't evil. The more Ingrid considered that possibility, the more she was sure of their goodness. The Tribunal had existed for hundreds of years, caring for the dragons of the Morite Mountains without fail. Ingrid gritted her teeth, plowing through the rock with all her might. Gaia scraped through the tunnel behind her. This was a big misunderstanding. Ingrid was going to visit one of the Tribunal members and she'd set things straight. Gaia would see.

“I h-hope you're right,” Gaia said. “Otherwise...”

Ingrid squeezed around a bend in the tunnel. “Jakob will help us,” she said.

She grunted, remembering an old flame, one of her kinder old flames, named Lars. Lars was Jakob's cousin, and he'd been kind

enough to tell her where Jakob lived. Their conversation had gone smoother than Ingrid might have expected. She sighed. She had a long trail of crummy exes.

As she climbed, Ingrid ruminated on her young adult years. The male dragons had been lining up to woo her when she'd come of age. She was a natural beauty, with a big belly and colorful scales. At first, like any young Wesech female, she had been excited for the attention.

Experience had quickly changed her perspective.

"So let's discuss our relationship," Ingrid remembered telling one male, named Sven, who she had just slept with. Sven had rolled over, propping his large body up on one paw. He had shot her a devilish, proud glance. Ingrid had smiled back at him, thinking the world of him at that very moment.

They'd been tucked into a small cavern, barely big enough for the both of them. Ingrid's parents had been away, either hunting or on a date. The cavern had been soaked in thick smoke and many things had laid an arm's reach away, like grilled goat meat, big sheepskin blankets, and pieces of gold for admiring. Ingrid had spent hours preparing herself and the room for Sven. She had been so scared things wouldn't go well.

"Um," Sven had said in response to her inquiry. "Maybe later. I forgot I have things to do."

He'd stood up.

"But you said we would discuss our relationship," Ingrid had said. She distinctly remembered him telling her that before they'd slept together.

"Did I?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Well, I shouldn't have said that. I really must go."

He'd tried to squeeze past her. Ingrid had blocked his path.

"So what? You don't want a relationship?" she'd said.

“Well...” Sven had said. “No.”

Ingrid had been so hurt she'd complained until he told her more.

“The truth is that you're just no fun to be around,” Sven had said. “You're a beauty, but that's all there is to you.”

After a while, she'd realized Sven wasn't the only one who thought that way. She was nothing more than false gold to most dragons.

“What if you're wrong?” Gaia said, bringing her out of her daydream. “What if Jakob locks us up?”

Ingrid scraped her teeth against her tongue. She felt a pang of uncertainty. Gaia was right. This plan wasn't without its risks. But who else could they turn to for help with something like this?

It took several minutes of climbing and clambering for them to reach the top of the mountain. Eventually, Gaia and Ingrid leveled off, and they scraped through the stone along a narrow passageway that forked off from the main tunnel.

“I don't think I'm wrong,” Ingrid said. “Just trust me. The Tribunal is supposed to be there for us.”

“Okay,” Gaia said. “But I'm scared.”

Ingrid and Gaia shoved themselves once more through the rough rock. Pieces of stone bit into her backside. It was obvious that this tunnel was not as well traveled as some of the others. Soon, they came upon a big boulder. She slowed her pace, then raised a paw. Ingrid roared, then knocked. A moment later, the stone rolled away to reveal a young Wesech. He couldn't have been older than 20.

“Is Jakob home?” Ingrid asked.

“Father!” the young dragon called out. “Some females are here to see you.”

“Alright, I'm coming Gustav.”

Gaia carefully positioned herself behind Ingrid, hiding out of

sight. A moment later, Jakob arrived. He was quite a bit older than Ingrid, with worn down scales. He raised his head slowly to look at her, curiosity in his eyes.

When he did not invite them inside, Ingrid just launched into an explanation of the reason they had come. Jakob stared at them, first skeptical, then shocked, as she explained how Gaia's daughter had gone missing. That look of shock could not be faked. Jakob was not in on the kidnappings. When Ingrid was finished telling him the story, he frowned, then took a tense breath. He wiped his snout.

"I'm very sorry to hear of your daughter's disappearance," he said, craning his neck to look at Gaia. She shyly made eye contact with him.

"So do you know where Ove might be keeping her?" Gaia said.

Jakob shook his head. "No. But I will bring the matter up at the next Tribunal meeting. We'll investigate it."

"The next Tribunal meeting isn't for days," Ingrid said.

"Yes," Jakob said.

"We need to find Clara now," Ingrid said. "If we wait days, there's no telling what might happen to her."

"Then you should speak with your district Voice," Jakob said. "He's there to—"

"Our Voice is the one who kidnapped her!" Gaia screamed.

"In that case, report it to a neighboring district's Voice," Jakob said. "I'm truly sorry."

He turned the stone over, and Ingrid and Gaia were left with no choice but to leave.

Perhaps Gaia was right. Even though Jakob was clearly not involved in the kidnappings, he was unwilling to lift a single claw to help. Ingrid had always thought that the Tribunal was there to protect her and every Wesech around her, but now she felt disappointed, distraught, and worried because there was nothing that

they could do. She was skeptical, at best, that another Voice would help. They all took their orders from Ove. If he'd ordered one to abduct Clara, the others wouldn't be able to do anything about it. As she and Gaia tunneled back home, Ingrid was overcome by worry, feelings of inadequacy, and disgust at the dragons who were behind this.

"Forget about the Tribunal," Ingrid told Gaia. "We'll investigate this ourselves. Did the thugs who kidnapped Clara say anything about where they might have been headed? Anything you haven't told me yet?"

"I don't think so," Gaia said. "I wish I knew where she was. I can't stop worrying about her."

"We'll find her," Ingrid said. Her claws tightened around a pebble, turning it to dust. She hadn't meant to do that. "We need to speak to the Tribunal Voice."

"We?" Gaia said with fear in her voice.

"Me," Ingrid corrected herself. "I'll find out where Clara is, then come and find you."

"What are you going to do?" Gaia said.

Ingrid took a beat to think about how to answer that. A plan started to form in her mind. The more she thought about it, the more confident she felt. Even though the Tribunal was unwilling to help Gaia, Ingrid was perfectly capable of doing so.

"Don't worry about that," she told Gaia. "I promise you this: we will get Clara back."

Magnus reached out, laying a paw on Ingrid's shin. He shot her a look of concern. They were just outside their home. Ingrid's right side was to him, and she looked down the tunnel that stretched across the interior of the mountain that they lived within.

“Remember. Don't say anything that might get us in trouble,” he said.

Ingrid smiled, turning to him. “I'll do my best.”

He nodded, then moved his paw away from her. She led the way through the tunnel, and he followed.

As they reached the narrower part of the passageway, she chewed on their plans. Magnus had gotten her a meeting with the Tribunal Voice. His name was Harold. They would use the meeting as an opportunity to learn about what the Voice and Ove were doing with the Wesech kids. She wasn't to reveal that they knew that Clara had been kidnapped; if she did, that would probably put them in trouble.

Ingrid slowed as she neared the Voice's boulder, raising a tentative paw. Magnus clambered to a stop behind her. She knocked.

It took only a few heartbeats for the Tribunal Voice to roll the boulder aside.

“Good to see you, Harold,” Ingrid said, offering him a shy smile.

“Evening, Harold,” Magnus said.

The Voice moved aside, gesturing for them to enter.

As they entered the cavern, he closed the stone behind them. He quickly started talking politics with Magnus, and Ingrid became lost, feeling like a third wheel in their conversation. There was quite a bit of vocabulary that went into conversing about human-dragon trade relations.

While they talked, she shuffled around the room, eyeing her surroundings, hoping for something that might give her a clue about where Clara was being kept.

Harold's cavern was spacious. The Tribunal had blessed him with a roasting chamber that was large enough to fit a whole goat. There were three sheepskin rugs in his home, and the ceiling was

so high that she was able to lift herself up on her hind legs without hitting her head.

It turned out that Harold was roasting a goat for them all to eat. He lived alone, so the goat was cooking slowly.

"May I?" Ingrid asked Harold, eyeing the roasting chamber. A female's fire could roast meat much faster.

He smiled at her. "That would be lovely."

She burned coal, spewing bright blue fire. It hit the roasting chamber and the heat passed into the goat.

She caught a bit of Magnus' conversation with Harold.

"May I use your mountainside for a bit?" he said.

"Of course," Harold said. "Right through there."

"I'll be back soon."

Magnus stomped off.

Ingrid turned, regarding Harold. He made eye-contact with her.

"So Harold," Ingrid said carefully. "What sort of work does the Tribunal have you doing at the moment?"

Harold smiled. "Nothing that a schoolteacher need concern herself with, I assure you."

He trudged over to her, eyeing the roasting chamber with the goat behind her.

"I'm just curious," Ingrid said. "Come on. Please. Give me details."

Harold sighed. "Well, honestly, I've been doing a lot of dispute resolution," he said. "You know how our dragons can be."

Ingrid manufactured a laugh. "Yes," she said. "And what about children? Does the Tribunal have you working with them?"

Harold frowned. He looked guarded. "No," he said in a tone that made it sound like this matter was closed.

Ingrid was thoughtful. She wasn't sure how to approach this in a cautious way anymore. "That's not what I heard," she said.

Harold's eyes widened. "And what have you heard?" he said.

"That you've made several house calls."

"And?"

"That you've taken children from their parents."

Harold tensed. His eyes glazed over with aggression.

"Where are the kids, Harold?" Ingrid said. "Tell me."

He shook. "Drop this," he said. "This is your only warning."

"Or what?" Ingrid dared to ask.

Suddenly, he lunged at her. She ducked, then scurried to her right. He slammed into the roasting chamber, barely stopping before his head went inside it. The force of his body hitting the chamber knocked the goat right off the hook that held it.

As Harold started to turn around, Ingrid's heart raced. He had attacked her! On instinct, she whipped her front paws forward and grabbed him by the back of the head, pressing his head dangerously close to the hook that had previously held the goat. He stared at that hook, fear in his eyes. With one strong shove, she might impale him on it.

"L-Let me go," he said, his voice quivering.

"Where did you take the kids?" Ingrid hissed.

Harold sweated and coughed. Ingrid shook, feeling nervous.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

"Don't lie!" she said, then roared. She shook him. Harold looked scared out of his skull.

"Ove will kill me."

She hesitated. Then she pushed his head forward, toward the hook.

"No! Stop!"

She stopped with the point of the hook only a hair away from him.

"Tell me where the kids are right now," she said.

"The goat ranch," Harold said, sounding exasperated. "There's

a portion of it underneath a cliff. By this mountain. It has a fence. That's where we have them. Now let me go."

She thought about asking him to take her there, but there were too many things that might go wrong with that.

"Ingrid! What are you doing?" Magnus' voice came from across the room, behind them.

"He-he attacked me," Ingrid said.

Magnus' eyes went wide. She let go of Harold, then kicked him to the ground.

He coughed and wheezed, weak from the heat. She backed away from him.

She clambered out of the cavern. Her husband followed her, asking too many questions.

Armed with the information that Clara was on the goat farm somewhere, Ingrid answered what she needed to, left Magnus, and then went to find Gaia. She was relatively sure that Harold had not been lying. She had developed a good sense of how to tell dragon lies from dragon truths during her time as a teacher. The kids loved to tell her tall tales. Magnus would have come with her, but Ingrid insisted he stay behind. If things went badly, she didn't want him more involved in this plot than he already was.

Ingrid and Gaia wriggled up a tunnel that wound in a zigzag toward the edge of the mountain. It widened near the exit, but only dim moonlight illuminated the mouth of the tunnel. Ingrid burst out of the tunnel system onto dirt and sand. She stood up on the mountain, gazing out at her surroundings. By this point in the day, the mountainside was dark, but the fresh air was still nice. Ingrid savored the scents.

As she and Gaia walked, Ingrid could feel the weeds and the vines beneath her feet. Up here, unlike on the ground, there was more greenery. She soaked in the feel of nature around her. Despite

her arduous, overwhelming task, the cool air brought a small amount of peace.

"It doesn't look like too long of a hike," Gaia said.

The goat ranch was up a ways. Even in the dark, the fields that the goats grazed on were visible from here. What Gaia wasn't accounting for, though, was how large the ranch was. They had a flock capable of feeding the entire mountain range. But Harold had said that Clara was being kept by their mountain. That limited the area that they needed to search somewhat.

"That's right," she said. "But we need to walk fast. We have to get to Clara before Harold catches up to us."

"O-okay," Gaia said.

Ingrid looked back down the mountain. They were making good time. She couldn't even see the tunnel that they'd crawled out of anymore.

Soon, they reached the fields, and then they walked around the mountain cliff, searching for the place where Clara was being held. In the dark, they had to travel extra slowly to make sure they did not miss anything. The moon and the stars shone down on the mountains and the fields. The goats were nowhere to be found. It was just empty fields of grass mixed with stony mountains that rose and fell for as far as the eye could see.

"Mama!" came a dragon's sudden cry.

Ingrid looked, and she saw Clara just where Harold had said she'd be. She was in a fenced off area underneath one of the rocky cliffs. But it wasn't just Clara there.

Ingrid approached, and she counted the other Wesechs with Clara. There were more than fifty of them. They were stuffed so close together that they barely had room to breathe. The goats had more living space than these Wesech kids.

"Oh by the Mother!" Gaia cried out.

She ran over to her daughter and she put her paw through the bar. Clara took it.

“Mama, get me out of here.”

“We will,” Gaia promised. “We’re going to get you out. All of you.”

Then Ingrid spied the other three children who she’d been missing in class that day. They were near Clara, huddled together, looking scared.

Ingrid approached, and she raised her claws. She raked them against the fence, sawing it. Children’s claws were not strong enough to saw through wood.

Then she heard a whoosh of air. There came a thud as something, or someone, landed behind her. There was a crackling sound and Ingrid spun. She opened her mouth and she burned coal. Blue flames ignited, lighting up her surroundings, and then she let them burst forth. The Wesech across from her unleashed an orange and yellow fire blast, and their flares met in the air, sizzling and turning to smoke.

When the smoke cleared, Harold was visible, faintly illuminated in the moonlight. The Tribunal Voice roared.

“You thought you could just run here without me coming after you, huh?” he said. “I won’t let you touch Ove’s flock.”

“His flock?” Ingrid said. “These are children, not goats.”

“Hmph,” Harold said. “They’re Tribunal property. Now leave! That’s your only warning.”

Ingrid growled. “No,” she said. “You should be the one to leave. That’s *your* only warning.”

Harold’s eyes lit up with anger. He opened his mouth, flames crackling within it.

He let forth a burst of orange fire, and Ingrid countered it again with her blue flames. As the smoke filled the mountainside, Ingrid charged at the Tribunal Voice.

Males were stronger, but if she caught him by surprise, she could still beat him.

Ingrid pulled back her arm, and she punched Harold just as the smoke cleared. He fell backward off the cliff, and then she heard loud wing-beats. She peered down, and squinted, but she couldn't see him.

Then he roared.

Ingrid heard a flap of wings.

His roar came from below her, and as he became visible, soaring through the air toward her, Ingrid opened her mouth. She burned the entire remainder of her coal. Her mouth went alight in blue flames, and the blazing fire descended on him in a wide burst that he couldn't escape.

Harold howled as he went up in flames. He fell, a blazing ball of blue fire. He collided with the mountain below, sending up clouds of dust.

Ingrid stared at him for a while, wondering if he would get up. He didn't. She eventually backed away from the cliff. Her paws trembled as she stepped along the mountainside.

"I killed him," she said.

She had never killed a fellow dragon before.

Gaia had freed the kids. Ingrid approached them, feeling numb.

"I-Ingrid," Gaia said. "Clara told me something. You should hear it."

Ingrid looked at Clara. She was still thinking about Harold's body on the mountainside below. She had to force her words out. "I'm glad you're safe," she said.

"Ove has been eating us," Clara said, and suddenly all thoughts of Harold left Ingrid. Clara started to cry. "He was keeping us in that cage and I thought he was going to eat me. I was so scared. He took other kids earlier today. He burned them outside the cage and then he said he was going to feast on them."

"By the Mother," Ingrid said.

"Somebody needs to do something," Gaia said. She shook with fear. "What if he tries to take Clara again?"

"The Tribunal member we spoke to, Jakob, he will do something," Ingrid said.

"You really trust him?" Gaia said.

Ingrid hesitated. She didn't really know Jakob.

"We have to trust him," Ingrid said. "The Tribunal is set up with a system of checks and balances."

"You need to become a Tribunal member," Gaia said.

Ingrid was silenced by shock.

"I-I'm not worthy of that," she said.

"Please."

Ingrid shook her head. Gaia was crazy.

"I'm not smart enough or strong enough. Jakob will help. You have Clara back now, so just be patient and keep your head down."

"Please, Ingrid," Clara said with pleading eyes.

"We need you," Gaia said. "Challenge Ove. Take him down."

Ingrid felt inadequate. She considered the request, gazing around at the dragons on the mountainside.

"A Wesech needs at least 50 supporters to mount a challenge," she tried to argue.

"There's fifty-eight of us here," Gaia said.

The kid Wesechs nodded, all in support of her.

Ingrid sighed. She had never imagined herself becoming a Tribunal member. Never before had a female Wesech been on the Tribunal. But by the Mother, Gaia was right. Ove needed to be removed from his seat on the Tribunal. And could she really trust Jakob to do that? She barely knew the dragon.

"Alright," Ingrid said. "Ove does need to be removed from the Tribunal. I will challenge him."

INGRID THE WESECH DRAGON

AS SHE CLIMBED, INGRID FELT IRRITATED THAT SHE HAD TO BE THE one to push for the right thing. She was a schoolteacher, not a politician. All her life, she'd believed that if real trouble ever roared its head, the Tribunal would be there to protect her. And yet, in her children's hour of need, everything she'd ever believed in had been turned on its head. The government could not be counted on to protect the weakest among the dragons. It was up to each and every Wesech as an individual to protect those closest to them.

Ingrid clambered through the rugged rock, thrusting herself through a narrower part of the tunnel. The stone bit into a fold between her wing and her back. She twisted, and chunks of rock shattered to dust. Then she heaved herself higher.

With the children as her motivation, she spun through the dark tunnel, eyes on the abyss above, mind on the snowy mountaintop that was her final destination.

It had been a few days since she and Gaia had freed Clara and the other kids who Ove had abducted. They had gone to see each child's parents, but knowing they would not be safe until Ove was

deposed, the families had gone into hiding on the desert plains outside the base of the mountain.

Ingrid shuddered as she thought of the conditions there. The warm sun beat down most hours of the day, and the sands were everywhere. She had slept with the group out in the open, and she didn't want to do so again.

She rotated her head, gazing down upon her group of supporters. They clambered through the tunnel beneath her. Now that the families had joined their children, there were three times as many as there had been near the goat ranch. The mass of dragons were barely visible in the dark, narrow tunnel, but Ingrid could hear them moving. With every movement up through the rock, the echo of hundreds more claws on stone came from below her.

Soon, a small, bright light became visible above her, and she knew that they were reaching the top of the tunnel. As they scrambled toward the surface, she felt a cool breeze wash over her. Ingrid hoisted herself out of the mountain, pushing with her hind legs against a knob of rock. Her front paws touched cold snow, and she shivered as she pulled her entire body free.

Some Wesechs were accustomed to the cold heights of the mountaintop, but Ingrid was not. She tucked her wings in, gazing about, quivering in the cold. Snow dotted the landscape. Dull rocky terrain went on for as far as the eye could see. Clouds and fog shrouded the vicinity.

Ingrid watched as the children and their parents piled out after her. Off a ways, she could see that the Tribunal was in session. Ingrid had never seen a Tribunal session before, but now that she got a good look at it, they seemed more ordinary than she would have ever thought. Seven Wesechs sat around a black circle, on a portion of the mountain where the snow had been cleared away. The Wesechs sat with gold pyramids in the dirt before them, and each of them appeared relaxed and informal. As the dragons with

her splashed around in the snow, the Tribunal looked one-by-one in her direction.

Suddenly, Ove roared.

"You!" he said. "Who *are* all of you!"

"My name is Ingrid," Ingrid said.

Ove flapped his wings, soaring over from the Tribunal circle. He was much larger than Ingrid, with a bulky chest and thick wings. He landed in the snow with a splash. He looked at her, yellow eyes gleaming like the sun itself. There wasn't just authority to that look. He was powerful too.

"Ingrid. Return to the bottom of the mountains," he said. "Take your friends with you."

He looked over Ingrid's shoulder, at Clara, and his eyes widened.

"Wait a moment..." he said. "Are you who I think you are? Oh yes! I recognize you. I've been searching for you."

Ingrid growled, drawing Ove's attention back to her. "Stay away from her. Your days of eating kid dragons are finished."

"Who told you about that?" Ove said. "You're not supposed to know about that."

"Well, I do. And I won't let you harm any of the children here," Ingrid said. "I've come to tell you that your behavior is unacceptable, and it must stop."

"You can't tell me what to do," Ove said with a laugh.

There came a flutter of wings, and several of the other Tribunal members landed in the snow alongside Ove. He stood taller, as if emboldened by their presence.

"What is going on?" a Wesech who Ingrid recognized as Hans said.

"This female is causing a scene," said Ove. "She is from the bottom of the mountains. Get her out of here."

"Tell them what you've done," Ingrid said.

“What does she mean by that?” Jakob said.

“Nothing,” Ove said. “She has a wicked mouth.”

“It is not nothing,” Ingrid said. “They should know what you have been doing, Ove. You’ve been kidnapping Wesech children and eating them.”

A few of the Tribunal Wesechs’ eyes went wide.

“Is that true?” Hans said.

Ove rolled his eyes. “If it was true, would it really matter?” he said. “She’s trespassing. That’s the real crime.”

“So it is true,” Hans said.

Ove stomped down hard in the snow. “Our herd needed to be thinned!” he roared. “I only do things that are good for the Wesechs. Unlike her.”

He glared at her.

“So we are dealing with an overpopulation problem,” a Tribunal member hissed. Ingrid recognized him. It was Salem.

“That’s right,” Ove said. “But let’s keep the focus on her. She needs to leave.”

“You should have brought the overpopulation issue before the rest of us, so that we could have solved it together,” Hans said.

“Pah! What does it matter?”

“We could vote you out of the Tribunal for this,” Hans said.

“I do not think so. Such a decision requires a vote from six Tribunal members. Would you all unanimously turn your back on me?”

There was a brief silence. Slowly, Wesech Tribunal members raised their paws. Everyone except for Salem.

The slithery, conniving Tribunal member hissed. “I propose we give Ove a second chance,” he said.

“Salem, this is not a matter to be taken lightly,” Hans said.

“My vote is final.”

"Regardless, abducting and eating children will not continue to be acceptable," Jakob said.

"I agree," Hans said.

The others all nodded.

"Fine," Ove said. "I won't eat any more kiddies. Happy? Now will you leave, miss Ingrid?"

"No," Ingrid said loudly. "I won't."

Ove glared at her. She roared, as loud as she could, and he jumped in surprise.

Ingrid spat. She had been chewing on a scale for the last few minutes, and she spat it onto the snow in front of Ove now. He stared at it in shock.

"I challenge you," she said. "For your Tribunal seat."

"You can't—," he started to say.

"I have more than 50 supporters. If you refuse the challenge, I take your seat without a fight."

Then Ove shook his head and he chuckled.

"Fine," he said. "I have to finish my meeting, though. We'll fight tomorrow. Now get out of here. I don't want to have to kill you a day early. Or, on second thought, maybe I do."

Ingrid gazed about her classroom, overcome with emotion as she looked upon her students for what might be the last time. She breathed in through her nose, bottling up those emotions, using all of her strength to remain composed. The dragon children looked up at her; it was a rare moment of silence for them. Their curious faces were illuminated by criss-cross rays of light from the cavern wall. The room had been neatly arranged moments ago. Gaia stood next to her, but Ingrid had eyes only for the kids.

“Gaia will be taking over as teacher,” Ingrid said, finally breaking the silence.

She would need to be at the top of the mountain by midday for her fight with Ove, which meant that she only had a few minutes to explain what she was doing. She had already told Magnus last night. After the fight, if she won, she might visit the kids again. But if she lost, then she would die. Ove would not show her mercy. It would not be right to leave here without warning them of the stakes.

“But where are you going?” a nervous kid named Vivian asked.

“Well,” Ingrid said, sucking in a breath.

This was hard. She'd been teaching the children for the better part of a year now. How could she tell them that she was leaving them, and that she might never return?

“She's going to join the Tribunal,” Gaia said, and she smiled at Ingrid.

“Are you truly?” Brenda said. Her eyes lit up.

Ingrid nodded. “Yes. I hope so,” she said.

“I always knew that you would be on the Tribunal!” Brenda said.

“It's not that simple,” Ingrid said. “Listen closely. The Tribunal has always had just seven pyramids. In order to take a seat on the Tribunal, I have had to challenge an existing Tribunal member. I need to defeat them in single combat.”

“You can do it,” Brenda said. “You taught all of us to breathe fire. And you're a better fire-breather than anyone else.

“Which Tribunal member are you fighting?” Tyra asked.

“Ove,” Ingrid said.

“Ove's the second biggest one!” Freya squealed, sounding fearful.

Ingrid sighed. Now they would all be scared for her.

"Yes," she said. "And if I lose, he will kill me. So if I do not return..."

Tears began to run down her cheeks.

"You'll return," Brenda said. "We all believe in you. Don't we?"

"I certainly do!" Clara declared.

"I do too!" Vivian said.

"I need to pee!" Freya said.

"I'll take you," Gaia said, and she scooped up Freya.

"I want you all to know that it's been an honor teaching you," Ingrid said. "And I love you all. I'll always cherish the memories I have of this class. But now I have to go."

Ingrid stepped forward, past the kids, towards the exit. As she made her way out of the cavern, she leaned down, kissing each of the students on the top of their heads. Then she lumbered toward the rocky cliff, which led to the cavern entrance, and she began to climb.

Her claws dug into the rock with each step. She sniffled, restraining her tears. There wasn't much time left. She had to get to the top of the mountain, and fast.

When she reached the top of the cavern wall, near the crevice which led out of the school, she was tempted to look back down at the kids, but she didn't. She had said her goodbyes already. There was no more time to spare.

Ingrid left the cavern.

Now she was once again in the dark recesses of the mountains. She dragged herself through the rock, shimmying on her belly deeper into the mountain until she reached the main tunnel. Contorting herself so as to be oriented vertically, she pulled herself up, twisting like a corkscrew through the large passageway.

The smoke from many homes radiated through the tunnel, filling her lungs as she climbed. Dragons to either side of her

clawed at the rock, climbing up or down in tandem with her. Her heart pounded in her chest, and her nerves overwhelmed her with fear. Ove was one of the most powerful Wesechs in the entire Morite range. She steeled herself, determined to see the challenge through.

As she neared the top, she felt the familiar cold of the peak. She shimmied her way through the last of the prickly rock, tossing aside snow and ice in splatters as she heaved herself into the open air.

Ingrid took a deep breath, filling her lungs with fresh air. Then she shivered.

“So you actually showed up,” Ove said.

She looked up, gazing upon the Tribunal circle. It was so close that she could hear Ove without him needing to raise his voice. He stood in the center of the obsidian circle, with Rolf, Salem, and Bo on one side of him and Hans, Jakob, and Olaf on the other. The wind blew, rustling his humongous wings.

“Yes,” Ingrid said. “And unlike you, I care about the youth of these mountains..”

She approached, nervously swinging her tail across the snow. It cleared some of it away, forming a path, and soon that path connected with the snow-less Tribunal circle. She stepped into the center of the circle, across from Ove, not daring to take her eyes off of him. The other Tribunal members watched them with neutral expressions.

“Don't insult me!” Ove said. “You have no idea how hard I've worked as Tribunal leader.”

Ingrid narrowed her eyes. At one point in time, she would've been on his side, but now she could see that he only worked hard for himself.

“Hans,” Ove said. “You may count us down.”

Hans counted slowly, giving them both ample warning that the

challenge was about to begin. Ingrid backed away from Ove, struggling to focus. Ove just shot her a smug grin. She tensed, taking a defensive posture.

Then Hans finished the count, and he roared. Ove flapped his wings immediately.

Ingrid went up on her hind legs. She raised her front paws, but Ove didn't fly towards her. Instead, he rose up into the sky, soaring over her head with a rush of wind.

Ingrid had swallowed a lot of coal in the morning, in preparation for the match. She spun, keeping her eyes on him as he rose up into the sky, and then turned back around. She opened her mouth, trying to get a good shot at him. He was just a spec in the sky by now, and he was moving quickly from cloud to cloud, circling in the air around her.

Ingrid burned coal anyway. She let forth a blast of blue fire, but missed him completely.

Suddenly, he dove towards her, and she backtracked, startled.

He contorted his body, adjusting the angle of his approach so that he was coming at her from the side, rather than the front. She struggled to keep up with him. She craned her neck and burned more coal. He roared, and she trembled, suddenly losing her concentration.

A blast of heat hit her head on. Fire was forming in his mouth, and she barely had time to open her own mouth before a streak of yellow flames shot towards her. She quickly unleashed her own blue fire, intercepting Ove's blast just before it hit her. Then he pulled upward, soaring into the rising smoke from the collision between their fires.

Now, she could no longer see him. She backed up again, gazing from one end of the smoke cloud to the other, trying desperately to locate some sign of him. Her heart beat fast. She couldn't stay here. She was a sitting duck.

She raced across the mountain. A blast of yellow fire scorched the stone that she'd stood on. She kept running, looking over her shoulder every now and then. The smoke seemed to be dissipating, but she still couldn't see him.

Then she heard a whoosh and without looking over her shoulder, she knew he was approaching. She ducked, but he slammed into her backside before she could go down completely. He roared, and then he scratched her on the back of the head, tearing scales off.

She cried out. The cold air bit into her exposed flesh. The weight of his body pressed down on hers, and she was unable to move.

Then she thought of the kids, and she found new strength.

She swung her tail, slamming it into his side. He grunted. She swung it again, and he roared with a mixture of pain and anger.

His grip on her was loosened, and she oriented herself to face him. She opened her mouth. She burned coal, and then she released fire.

He leaned to his left, and she missed.

She shoved him away with her hind legs. He leaped off of her, yellow flames building in his mouth. She rose to her feet, adrenaline carrying her.

She burned coal again. He released a blast of fire. She released her own blast of fire. The two fires collided again, releasing smoke.

Then he flapped his wings, and flew high into the air again.

She had no chance of hitting him that far away. She kept her eyes on him, though, as he soared through the sky above. He arced through the air, adjusting his flight path so that he was aimed toward her again.

He opened his mouth on the way down, and he released yellow and orange flames. She easily released her own hot blue fire, and

once again the two colliding blasts created a dense cloud of smoke.

As he entered the smoke cloud again, she realized that he was trying the same trick a second time. She took two steps back, trembling as she considered making a run for it once more. Craning her neck, she made every attempt to see inside the smoke cloud. It was so dense that she couldn't even spot a hazy outline of his figure.

The smell of the smoke masked his scent too. Her mouth hung open, her eyes darting back and forth across the air in front of her. She felt afraid. Then a new idea came to her. She might not be able to see or smell him...but maybe she could hear him.

She closed her eyes. She tried to tune out all the background noise, focusing instead on just what was coming from the smoke cloud. The sounds of the other Tribunal members chatting, the sound of the rushing wind, even the sounds of her own feet shuffling in the snow, disappeared. Then, for a while, everything seemed quiet.

And then she heard a faint sound to her right. A barely audible flap of two powerful wings.

She spun to her right just as he came diving out of the smoke cloud. She released a blast of blue fire. Her aim was perfect, but he was too far away. He adjusted his trajectory, and the blast missed. He crashed to the ground.

She quickly ran towards him. He was getting up slowly, and his body looked bruised and battered from the fall. She leaped into the air, using her stubby wings to jump far and fast across the mountaintop. She opened her mouth again. She burned coal, and then she released a hot blast of fire.

Ove matched her fire with his own. Another cloud of dense smoke appeared, but this was one was on the ground, where she could use it to conceal herself.

She glided into the cloud, and she felt wind as his tail swept through the air where she'd been.

She came around behind him. She heard a violent flap of wings, but before he could take off, she swung her tail, slamming it into his massive body.

He howled. He tried to strike her with his claws, but she easily dodged his attack. She slammed her head into his chest. That knocked him to the ground.

Then she burned coal again.

Blue flames illuminated the whole smoke cloud. Ove's eyes were wide with fear. Ingrid unleashed the fire with her face right above his. He had no time to dodge and no time to counter with his own blast of fire.

She backed away as his body went up in flames. He rolled over through the snow and the rocks, trying to extinguish the fire. His scales turned charcoal black quickly, flaking at the edges.

After a few moments, he succeeded in extinguishing the fire, but his body was red and blistering. He coughed and wheezed, swaying from side to side, barely able to stand.

"It's over," Ingrid said. "You need medical attention. Yield."

"No," Ove growled.

She was surprised at his quick response.

Then he opened his mouth, glaring at her like he was ready to blast her with fire.

"Stupid female," he said.

Ingrid burned coal, preparing to counter his blast.

But instead of releasing fire, he began to howl in pain.

She watched with shock. His belly lit up red and orange, instead of his mouth. The part of him that was designed to carry fire from his belly to his mouth was clearly damaged. He roared with pain, shock spreading across his face. His whole body lit up went up in flames.

It took mere seconds for him to collapse again. He landed in a slushy pile of snow, but the fire didn't care. It raged, growing in intensity to feed off his whole body. After it was done, all that remained of the Tribunal leader was ashes.

Rolf stepped forward from the sidelines. He reached into Ove's ashes with a paw, and he grabbed something. He pulled it out, and he wiped it clean.

He was holding Ove's pyramid. It shone like gold in the sunlight.

Rolf approached Ingrid with a smile on his face.

"Congratulations," he said. "You are the newest member of our Tribunal."

He held out his paw, offering her the pyramid. Ingrid shivered. She wasn't sure if it was from the cold or from the battle. She took the pyramid. Her heart pounded faster.

Slowly, she tucked the pyramid into the pouch on her belly. And then, together with the other six members of the Wesech Tribunal, she took a seat—Ove's seat, now her seat—around the Tribunal circle.

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