

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Blood of Dragons

Written by Robin Hobb

Published by Voyager

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

ROBIN HOBB

Blood of Dragons



HARPER
Voyager

HarperCollinsPublishers
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperVoyager
An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers 2013

1

Copyright © Robin Hobb 2013

Robin Hobb asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978 0 00 744413 7

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

Set in Sabon LT Std by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.



MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC® C007454

FSC™ is a non-profit international organisation established to promote
the responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the
FSC label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come
from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and
ecological needs of present and future generations,
and other controlled sources.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

PROLOGUE

Changes

Tintaglia awoke feeling chilled and old. She had made a good kill and eaten heavily, but had not rested well. The festering wound under her left wing made it hard to find a comfortable position. If she stretched out, the hot swollen place pulled, and if she curled up, she felt the jabbing of the buried arrow. The pain spread out in her wing now when she opened it, as if some thistly plant were sending out runners inside her, prickling her with thorns as it grew. The weather had become colder as she flew toward the Rain Wilds. There were no deserts, no warm sands in this region of the world. Heat seemed to well up from the earth's heart in the Chalcedean deserts, making it nearly as warm as the southern lands were at this time of year. But now she had left the dry lands and warm sands behind, and winter's stranglehold on spring had claimed its due. The cold stiffened the flesh around her wound, making each morning a torment.

IceFyre had not come with her. She had expected the old black dragon to accompany her, although she could not recall why. Dragons preferred to be solitary rather than social. To eat well, each needed a large hunting territory. It had only

Blood of Dragons

been when she had left his side and he had not followed that the humiliating realization had drenched her: she had been following him, all that time. She could not recall that he had ever requested her to stay; neither had he asked her to leave.

He had all he needed from her. In the early excitement of discovering one another, they had mated. When she grew to full maturity, she would visit the nesting island, and there lay the eggs that he had already fertilized. But once he had impregnated her, there was no reason for him to stay with her. When her eggs hatched into serpents that would slither into the sea and renew the endless cycle of dragon-egg-serpent-cocoon-dragon, the memories of his lineage would continue. Eventually, there would be other dragons for him to encounter, when he chose to seek their company. She felt puzzled that she had lingered with him as long as she had. Having hatched so alone and isolated, had she learned undragonlike behaviour from humans?

She uncoiled slowly and then even more gingerly, spread her wings to the overcast day. She stretched, already missing the warmth of the sands, and tried not to wonder if the journey back to Trehaug were beyond her strength. Had she waited too long, hoping she would heal on her own?

It hurt to crane her neck to inspect the wound. It smelled foul and when she moved, pus oozed from it. She hissed in anger that such a thing had befallen her, and then used the strength of that anger to tighten the muscles there. The movement forced more liquid from the wound. It hurt and stank terribly, but when she had finished, her skin felt less tight. She could fly. Not without pain, and not swiftly, but she could fly. Tonight she would take more care in selecting her resting place. Taking flight from the riverbank where she presently found herself was going to be difficult.

She wanted to fly directly to Trehaug in the hope of locating

Malta and Reyn quickly and having one of her Elderling servants remove the arrowhead from her flesh. A direct route would have been best, but the thick forests of the region made that impossible. For a dragon to land in such a thickly treed area was difficult at the best of times; with a bad wing, she would certainly go crashing down through the canopy. So she had followed first the coast and then the Rain Wild River. The marshy banks and mud bars offered easy hunting as river mammals emerged on the shores to root and roll and as the forest creatures sought water. If she were fortunate, as she had been last night, she could combine a stoop on a large meal with a safe landing on a marshy riverfront strip.

If she were unfortunate, she could always land in the river shallows and crawl out onto whatever bank the river offered. That, she feared, might be her best option this evening. And while she did not doubt that she could survive such an unpleasantly cold and wet landing, she dreaded the thought of attempting to take flight from such a place. As she had to do now.

Wings half-extended, she walked down to the water's edge and drank, wrinkling her nostrils at the bitter taste of the water. Once she had sated her thirst, she opened her wings and sprang into the sky.

With a wild flapping of her wings, she crashed back to earth again. It was not a long fall, but it jarred her, breaking her pain into sharp-edged fragments that stabbed every interior space of her body. The shock jabbed the air from her lungs and crushed a hoarse squawk of pain from her throat. She hit the ground badly, her wings still half-open. Her tender side struck the earth. Stunned, she sprawled, waiting for the agony to pass. It did not, but gradually it faded to a bearable level.

Tintaglia lowered her head to her chest, gathered her legs

Blood of Dragons

under her and slowly folded her wings. She badly wanted to rest. But if she did she would awaken hungrier and stiffer than she was now and with the daylight fading. No. She had to fly and now. The longer she waited, the more her physical abilities would wane. She needed to fly while she still could.

She steeled herself to the pain, not allowing her body to compensate for it in any way. She simply had to endure it and fly as if it did not hurt. She burned that thought into her brain and then without pausing, opened her wings, crouched and launched herself upward.

Every beat of her wings was like being stabbed with a fiery spear. She roared, giving voice to her fury at the pain, but did not vary the rhythm of her wing beats. Rising slowly into the air, she flew over the shallows of the river until finally she lifted clear of the trees that shaded the river's face. The wan sunlight touched her and the wilder winds of the open air buffeted her. The breezes were heavy with the threat of chilling rain to come. Well, let it come, then. Tintaglia was flying home.

*Day the 15th of the Fish Moon
Year the 7th of the Independent Alliance of Traders
From Reyall, Acting Keeper of the Birds, Bingtown
To Ereġ Dunwarrow
Enclosed in a standard message cylinder.*

My dear uncle,

My delayed response to your offer is due to my utter surprise at receiving it. Over and over, I have read it, wondering if I am ready and more: if I am worthy of what you propose. To vouch for my promotion not only to a Master within the Guild but also to select me to take over your personal birds and cote . . . what can I say to such an honour? I know what these pigeons mean to you, and I have faithfully studied your breeding journals and your documentation of how you have improved the birds for both speed and vitality. I have been in awe of your knowledge. And now you propose to put your birds and your careful breeding plan into my hands?

I shudder to think you will take this amiss, but I must ask you, are you certain you wish to do this?

If, after consideration, you still wish to offer me this extraordinary opportunity, then yes, I will accept it and endeavour for all the rest of my life to prove worthy of it! But be assured, if you have reconsidered, there will be no ill will between us. To know that you even considered me worthy of such an honour and responsibility makes me resolved to strive to be the keeper that you believe I can be.

*With humble thanks, your nephew,
Reyall*

And please assure my Aunt Detozi of my good wishes and utter delight in her good fortune in wedding you!

CHAPTER ONE

Ending a Life

She opened her eyes to a morning she didn't want. With great reluctance, she lifted her head and looked around the single room. The cabin was cold. The fire had been out for hours, and the cold and damp of the unseasonably cool spring had crept relentlessly in while she huddled under her worn blankets, waiting for her life to go away. It hadn't. Life had lingered to ambush her again with cold and damp, disappointment and loneliness. She clutched her thin covers to her chest as her eyes wandered to the stacked and sorted papers and parchments that had occupied her for the last week. There it was. Alise Finbok's life's work, all in one stack. Translations of ancient papers, speculations of her own, careful copies of old documents rendered in black ink with her best guesses at the missing words inked in red. Deprived of any significant purpose in her own life, she had retreated to ancient days and taken pride in her scholarly knowledge of them. She knew how Elderlings had once lived and interacted with dragons. She knew the names of Elderlings and dragons of old, she knew their habits; she knew so much about a past that no longer had any relevance.

Elderlings and dragons had returned to the world. She had witnessed that miracle. And they would reclaim the ancient city of Kelsingra and take up their lives there. All the secrets she had tried to tease out of old scrolls and mouldering tapestries meant nothing now. Once the new Elderlings gained their city, they would only need to touch the memory-stone there to discover all their history for themselves. All the secrets she had dreamed of discovering, all the puzzles she had longed to solve were finished now, and not by her. She was irrelevant.

She surprised herself when she flung the blankets suddenly to one side and stood up. Cold wrapped her instantaneously. She stepped to her clothing trunks, the grand travelling trunks that she had packed so hopefully in the days before she left Bingtown. They had been stuffed when she began her journey, full of sensible clothes fit for a lady adventurer. Stoutly woven cotton blouses with a minimum of lace, split skirts for hiking, hats with veils to ward off insects and sun, sturdy leather boots . . . little but memories remained of them now. The hardships of travel had softened the fabrics. Her boots were scuffed and leaked, the ties now a series of knots. Laundering clothes in the acidic waters of the river had been her only choice, but seams had weakened and hems had frayed. She drew on a set of her worn clothes with no thought as to what they would look like. No one was going to look at her anyway. She was finished forever with worrying about what she looked like or what people thought of her.

An Elderling gown, Leftrin's gift to her, hung on a hook. Of all the clothing she owned, this alone retained its bright colours and supple softness. She longed for its warmth but could not bring herself to put it on. Rapskal had said it and said it clearly. She was not an Elderling. She had no right to the city of Kelsingra, no right to anything pertaining to Elderlings.

Blood of Dragons

Bitterness, hurt, and resignation to the reality Rapskal had voiced formed a tight, hard knot in her throat. She stared at the Elderling gown until the brilliant colours shimmered from her unshed tears. Her sorrow only deepened at the thought of the man who had given it to her. Her liveship captain. Leftrin. Despite the differences in their stations in life, they had fallen in love with one another during the arduous journey up the river. For the first time in her life, a man had admired her mind, respected her work and desired her body. He had kindled a like passion in her and awakened her to all that could exist between a man and a woman. He had created desires in her such as she had never known before.

And then he had left her, here. Alone in a primitive cabin . . .

Stop it. Stop whining. She stared at the Elderling gown and forced herself to remember the wonderful moment when Leftrin had offered it to her, a priceless artefact, a family possession; he had shared it with her, with never a qualm. And she had worn it as armour against cold and wind and even loneliness. Worn it without a thought about its historical significance. How had she ever dared to rebuke the keepers for wanting something as warm and impervious as the ‘priceless artefact’ she had enjoyed so often? And Leftrin? Was she faulting him for her loneliness? *Hypocrite!* she rebuked herself.

Leftrin had had no choice but to return to Cassarick to fetch supplies for them. He had not abandoned her; she had chosen to stay here, because she had believed that recording all that she saw in the untouched Elderling city was more important than being beside him. That choice had been hers. Leftrin had respected it. And now she was faulting him for that? He loved her. Shouldn’t that be enough for her?

For a moment, she teetered on accepting that. A man who loved her: what more did a woman need from life? Then she

gritted her teeth as if she were going to tear a bandage from a partially healed wound.

No. It wasn't enough. Not for her.

It was time to put an end to all pretences. Time to be done with that life. Time to stop telling herself that if and when Leftrin returned and said he loved her, all would be well. What of her could he love? When all was stripped away, what part of her was real and worthy of his love? What sort of person would cling to the hope that someone else would return to give meaning to her life? What sort of quivering parasite needed someone else to validate her existence?

Scrolls and sketches, paper and vellum in tidy stacks rested where she had left them. All her research and writing waited by the fireplace. The impulse to burn it all was gone. That had been last night's pit of despair, a tarry darkness so deep that she had not even had the energy to feed the papers to the flames.

Cold daylight revealed that as a foolish vanity, the childish tantrum of 'Look what you made me do!' What had Rapskal and the other keepers done to her? Nothing except make her look at the truth of her life. Setting fire to her work would not have proved anything except that she wished to make them feel bad. Her mouth trembled for a moment and then set in a very strange smile. Ah, that temptation lingered; make them all hurt as she did! But they wouldn't. They wouldn't understand what she had destroyed. Besides, it was not worth the effort to go knock on a door and borrow coals from one of the keepers. No. Leave them there. Let them find this monument to what she had been, a woman made of paper and ink and pretence.

Bundled in her old clothes, she pushed open the door of the cottage and stepped out into a wet, chill day. The wind slapped her face. Her disgust and hatred for all she had been

Blood of Dragons

rose like a tide in her. The meadow vista before her ended in the river, cold, grey and relentless. She had been caught in it once and nearly drowned. She let the thought form in her mind. It would be quick. Cold and unpleasant but quick. She spoke aloud the words that had rattled through her dreams all night. 'Time to end this life.' She lifted her face. The wind was pushing heavy clouds across a distant blue sky.

You would kill yourself? Over that? Because Rapskal told you what you already knew? Sintara's touch on her mind was coldly amused. The dragon's consideration was distant and impartial. *I recall that my ancestors witnessed humans doing this, deliberately choosing to terminate a lifespan that is already so brief as to be insignificant. Like gnats flying into flames. They flung themselves into rivers, or hanged themselves from bridges. So. The river? Is that how you will do this?*

Sintara had not touched minds with her for weeks. For her to return now and to be so coldly curious fired anger in Alise. She scanned the sky. There. A tiny wink of sapphire against the distant clouds.

She spoke aloud, giving vent to her outrage, as in a single heartbeat despair became defiance. 'End *this* life, I said. Not end MY life.' She watched the dragon tip her wings and slide down the sky toward the hills. Change took root in her, grew. 'Kill myself? In despair over all the days I've wasted, all the ways I've deceived myself? What would that do except prove that in the end I still could not escape my own foolishness? No. I'm not ending my life, dragon. I'm taking it. I'm making it mine.'

For a long moment she felt nothing from Sintara. Probably the dragon had spotted some prey and lost all interest in the gnat-lived woman who could not even kill a rabbit for her. Then, without warning, the dragon's thoughts boomed through her mind again.

The shape of your thoughts has changed. I think you are finally becoming yourself.

As she stared, the dragon suddenly clapped her wings tight to her body and dived on her prey. The abrupt absence of the dragon's touch on her mind was like a gust of wind boxing her ears. She was left stunned and alone.

Becoming herself? The shape of her thoughts had changed? She decided abruptly that it was just Sintara trying to manipulate her again with her riddling, puzzling way of talk. Well, that was something else she had finished with! Never again would she willingly plunge herself into a dragon's glamour. Time to be done with that, time to be done with all of it. She turned on her heel and went back into the little cabin. It was also time to be done with childish demonstrations of hurt feelings. Moving with a purposeful ferocity that she had thought vanished with her youth, she tidied her papers into her trunk and shut the lid on them relentlessly. There. She looked around the rest of the cabin and shook her head. Pathetic that she had huddled so long in this small space and done nothing to make it more liveable. Was she waiting for Leftrin to come back and bring the comforts of his ship's cabin with him? Pitiful. She would not spend another hour sequestered here.

She layered herself into every worn garment she owned. Outside again, she lifted her eyes to the forested hills behind the patchwork village. This was the world she lived in now and perhaps always would. Time to master it. Ignoring the sleety rain, she headed uphill and followed a trail the keepers had trodden, winding past a few of the other rehabilitated cottages before reaching the eaves of the dormant forest. Her resolution grew as she left the settlement behind. She could change. She wasn't chained to her past. She could become someone who wasn't merely a product of what others had done to her. It wasn't too late.

Blood of Dragons

When trails intersected, she chose to go up and to her right, reasoning that on her return, trails that went down and to her left would take her home. Ignoring the pull in her calves and buttocks and back, she punished muscles that had idled for weeks. The work of walking warmed her and she actually loosened her cloak and scarf. She looked about the forest as she had once studied Kelsingra, mentally logging the plants she knew and the ones she did not. A bare-thorned bramble patch might be thimble berries, a good thing to remember come summer.

She came to a small stream and knelt by it to drink from cupped hands before crossing it and moving on. In a sheltered hollow, she found a small patch of wintergreen bushes, their scarlet berries still clinging. She felt as if she had discovered a cache of jewels. Making a bag of her scarf, she gathered as many as she could find. The sharp flavour of the berries would be a welcome addition to her menu, as well as efficacious against sore throats and coughs. The evergreen leaves she stripped, too, relishing their scent and already imagining the tea she would brew from them. She was surprised none of the keepers had found them and brought them back, and then realized how foreign these bushes would be to the canopy-bred hunters.

Tying the scarf closed, she looped it through her belt before moving on. She left the deciduous trees behind and moved into evergreens. Their needled branches touched fingertips over her head, dimming the day's light and hushing the wind. The deep bed of fragrant needles and the quiet of the woods after the constant wind made her feel as if she had cupped her hands over her ears. It was a relief.

She moved on through the forest. Hunger found her. She put a few of the wintergreen berries in her mouth and crushed them in her teeth, flooding her senses with the sharp taste and scent. Hunger passed.

Alise came to a small clearing where a storm-blasted giant had fallen and taken a rank of its fellow trees down with it. A vine similar to ivy had cloaked the fallen tree. She studied it for a time, then seized one of the tough stems and pulled it free, though it did not come willingly. She stripped the leaves off it and tested her strength against it. Unable to break it with her bare hands, she nodded to herself. She could come back with a knife, cut lengths of the stuff, take it back to her cabin and weave with it. Baskets. Fish nets? Perhaps. She looked at it more closely. The leaf buds on it were starting to swell. Maybe winter was starting to loosen its grip on the land. Overhead, a distant hawk gave cry. She looked up through the gap in the forest roof. Only with that glimpse of sky did she realize how much of the day had passed. It was time she turned back. She had meant to gather green alder twigs for smoking fish and had not, but she would not be empty-handed. The wintergreen berries would be welcomed by all.

The downhill hike quickly woke pangs in different muscles of her legs. She gritted her teeth against them and went on.

Serves me right for spending so much time sitting inside, she told herself grimly.

It was in that stratum of forest where evergreens gave way to deciduous trees that she caught an odd scent. The wind blew more freely here and she halted where she stood, trying to puzzle it out. It smelled rank and yet strangely familiar. It was only when the creature stepped into view on the path in front of her that her mind made the connection. *Cat*, she thought to herself.

He was not immediately aware of her. His head was low, and he sniffed at the ground with his mouth open. Long yellow fangs extended past his lower jaw. His coat was an uneven black, darker dapples against blackness. His ears were

Blood of Dragons

tufted and the muscles under his smooth fur bunched and slid as he moved.

She was caught in disbelief, filled with wonder at the sight of an animal that no one had seen in ages. And then, almost immediately, her translation of an Elderling word popped into her mind. ‘Pard,’ she breathed aloud. ‘A black pard.’

At her whisper, he lifted his head and looked directly at her with yellow eyes. Fear flooded her. Her own scent on the trail. That was what he sniffed at.

Her heart leapt and then began hammering. The animal stared at her, perhaps as startled to see a human as she was to see a pard. Surely their kind had not met for generations. He opened his mouth, taking in her scent.

She wanted to shriek but did not. She flung her panicky thought wide. *Sintara! Sintara, a great cat stalks me, a pard! Help me!*

I cannot help you. Solve it yourself.

The dragon’s thought was not uninterested, merely factual. Alise could feel, in that moment of connection, that the dragon had fed heavily and was sinking into a satiated stupor. Even if she had wished to rouse herself, by the time she took flight and crossed the river and located Alise . . .

Useless thought. Focus on now.

The cat was watching her and its wariness had become interest. The longer Alise stood there, frozen like a rabbit, the more his boldness would grow. Do something.

‘Not prey!’ she shouted at the animal. She seized the lapels of her cloak and tore it open wide, holding it out to make herself twice her natural size. ‘Not prey!’ she shouted at it again, deepening her voice. She flapped the sides of her cloak at the animal and forced her shaking body to jolt a step closer to it. If she ran, it would have her; if she stood still, it would have her. The thought galvanized her, and with a wordless

roar of angry despair, she charged at the beast, flapping the sides of her cloak as she ran.

It crouched and she knew then it would kill her. Her deep roar became a shriek of fury, and the cat suddenly snarled back. Alise ran out of breath. For a moment, silence held between the crouched cat and the flapping woman. Then the animal wheeled and raced off into the forest. It had left the path clear, and Alise did not pause but continued her fear-charged dash. She ran in bounds, ran as she had never known that anyone could run. The forest became a blur around her. Low branches ripped at her hair and clothing but she did not slow down. She gasped in cold air that burned her throat and dried her mouth and still she ran. She fled until darkness threatened the edges of her vision, and then she stumbled on, catching at tree trunks as she passed them to keep herself upright and moving. When finally her terror could no longer sustain her, she sank down, her back to a tree, and looked back the way she had come.

Nothing moved in the forest, and when she forced her mouth to close and held her shuddering breath, she heard nothing save the pounding of her own heart. She felt as if hours passed before her breath moved easily in her dry mouth and her heart slowed to where she could hear the normal sounds of the forest. She listened, straining her ears, but heard only the wind in the bared branches. Clutching at the tree trunk, she dragged herself to her feet, wondering if her trembling legs could still hold her.

Then, as she started down the path toward home, a ridiculous grin blossomed on her face. She had done it. She had faced down a pard, and saved herself, and was coming home triumphant, with wintergreen leaves for tea and berries, too. 'Not prey,' she whispered hoarsely to herself and her grin grew wider.

Blood of Dragons

She resettled her clothing as she strode, and pushed her wild hair out of her face. The rain was finding her now. Time to get home before she was completely soaked. She still had things to do tonight. Firewood and kindling to gather, coals to borrow to rekindle her fire, and water to haul for cooking. And she should tell Carson about the pard so he could caution the others. Then she could make her tea.

A well-earned cup of wintergreen tea. Part of having her own life, now.

*Day the 20th of the Fish Moon
Year the 7th of the Independent Alliance of Traders
From the 'Bird Keepers' Guild, Bingtown
To All Guild Members
To be posted prominently in all halls*

It is essential that all members of the Guild remember that our profession is a time-honoured trade with rules, professional standards and secrets of bird handling, training and breeding that are confined to Guild members. Guild birds remain the property of the Guild, and the offspring of Guild birds remain the property of the Guild. Our reputation and the custom we have built up depend on our birds being the swiftest, the best trained and the healthiest. Our clients use Guild birds and bird keepers because they know they can rely on us and our birds for message transport that is quick and confidential.

Of late, there has been a spate of complaints and queries about possible tampering with messages. At the same time, we have noticed more citizens turning to private flocks for the transport of messages. To make matters worse, the recent plague of red lice led to many of our customers being frustrated at the lack of available Guild birds to bear their messages.

We must all remember that not only our reputations but our livelihoods are at stake. Our honour demands that members report any suspicions of message tampering.

Likewise, any members stealing eggs or fledglings for personal use or profit must be reported.

It is only by all of us adhering to our guild rules that we can maintain the quality of service that our patrons expect. Maintaining our standards will assure that we all prosper together.