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Dragon Bound: Number 1 in series



Par Thea Harrison

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurHalf-human and half-wyr, Pia Giovanni spent her life keeping a low profile among the wyrkind and avoiding the continuing conflict between them and their Dark Fae enemies. But after being blackmailed into stealing a coin from the hoard of a dragon, Pia finds herself targeted by one of the most powerful - and passionate - of the Elder Races.As the most feared and respected of the wyrkind, Dragos Cuelebre cannot believe someone had the audacity to steal from him, much less succeed. And when he catches the thief, Dragos spares her life, claiming her as his own to further explore the desire they've ignited in one another.ExtraitPia was blackmailed into committing a crime more suicidal than she could possibly have imagined, and she had no one to blame but herself.Knowing that didnt make it easier. She couldnt

believe she had been so lacking in good judgment, taste or sensibility. Honestly what had she done? She had taken one look at a pretty face and forgotten everything her mom had taught her about survival. It sucked so bad she might as well put a gun to her head and pull the trigger. Except she didn't own a gun because she didn't like them. Besides, pulling the trigger on a gun was pretty final. She had issues with commitment and she was so freaking dead anyway, so why bother. A taxi horn blared. In New York the sound was so common everyone ignored it, but this time it made her jump. She threw a glance over one hunched shoulder. Her life was in ruins. She would be on the run for the rest of her life, all fifteen minutes or so of it, thanks to her own foolish behavior and her shithead ex who had screwed her, then screwed her over so royally she couldn't get over the knife-like sensation in the pit of her stomach. She stumbled into a narrow trash-strewn street by a Korean restaurant. She uncapped a liter-sized water bottle and chugged half it down, one hand splayed on the cement wall while she watched the sidewalk traffic. Steam from the restaurant kitchen enveloped her in the rich red-pepper and soy scents of gochujang and ganjang sauces, overlaying the garbage rot of a nearby dumpster and the acrid exhaust from the traffic. The people in the street looked much as they always did, driven by internal forces as they charged along the sidewalk and shouted on cell phones. A few mumbled to themselves as they dug through trash cans and looked at the world with lost wary eyes. Everything looked normal. So far so good? After a long nightmarish week, she had just committed the crime. She had stolen from one of the most dangerous creatures on Earth, a creature so frightening that just imagining him was more scariness than she ever wanted to meet in real life. Now she was almost done. A couple more stops to make, one more meeting with the shithead, and then she could scream for oh say a couple of days or so while she figured out where she would run to hide. Holding on to that thought she strode down the street until she came to the Magic District. Located east of the Garment District and north of Koreatown, the New York Magic District was sometimes called the Cauldron. It was comprised of several city blocks that seethed with light and dark energies. The Cauldron flaunted caveat emptor like a prizefighter's satin cloak. The area was stacked several stories high with kiosks and shops offering Tarot readings, psychic consultations, fetishes and spells, retail and wholesale sellers, imports, those who dealt with fake merchandise and those who sold magic items that were deadly real. Even from the distance of a city block, the area assaulted her senses. She came to a shop located at the border of the district. The storefront was painted sage-green on outside, with the molding at the plate-glass windows and door painted pale yellow. She took a backwards step to look up. The name DIVINUS was spelled in plain brushed-metal lettering over the front window. Years ago her mother had on occasion bought spells from the witch who owned this shop. Her boss Quentin had also mentioned the witch had one of the strongest magical talents he had ever met in a human. She looked in the storefront. Her blurred reflection looked back her, a tired young woman, built rather long and coltish, with tense features and a pale tangled ponytail. She looked past herself into the shadowed interior. In contrast to the noisy none-too-clean surroundings of the city street, the inside of the shop appeared cool and serene. The building seemed to glow with warmth. She recognized protection spells in place. In a display case near the door harmonic energies sparked from an alluring arrangement of crystals, amethyst, peridot, rose quartz, blue topaz and celestite. The crystals took the slanting sunshine and threw brilliant rainbow shards of light onto the ceiling. Her gaze found the single occupant inside, a tall queen-like woman, perhaps Hispanic, with a gaze that connected to hers with a snap of Power. That was when the shouting started. You don't have to go in there! a man yelled. Then a woman shrieked, Stop before it's too late! Pia started and looked behind her. A group of twenty people stood across the street. They held various signs. One poster said, Magic = Highway to Hell. Another said, God Will Save Us. A third declared, Elder races An Elitist Hoax. Her sense of unreality deepened, brought on by stress, lack of sleep and a constant sense of fear. They were yelling at her. Some of humankind persisted in a belligerent disbelief of the Elder races, despite the fact that many generations ago folktales had given way to proof as the scientific method had been developed. The Elder races and humankind had lived together openly since the Elizabethan Age. These humans with their revisionist history made about as much sense as those who declared the Jews hadn't been persecuted in World War II. Besides being out of touch with reality, they were picketing a human witch to protest the Elder races? She shook her head. A cool tinkle brought her attention back to the shop. The woman with Power in her gaze held the door open. City ordinances can work both ways, she told Pia, her voice filled with scorn. Magic shops may have to stay within a certain district, but protesters have to stay fifty feet away from the shops. They can't come across the street, they can't enter the Magic District, and they can't do anything but yell at potential customers and try to scare them off from a distance. Would you like to come in? One immaculate eyebrow raised in imperious challenge, as if suggesting that to step into the woman's shop took a real act of bravery. Pia blinked

at her, expression blank. After everything she had been through, the other womans challenge was beyond insignificant, it was meaningless. She walked in without a twitch. The door tinkled into place behind her. The woman paused for a heartbeat, as if Pia had surprised her. Then she stepped in front of Pia with a smooth smile. Im Adela, the owner of Divinus. What can I do for you, my dear? The shopkeepers face turned puzzled and searching as she looked Pia over. She murmured, almost to herself, What is it Theres something about you. Crap, she hadnt thought of that. This witch might remember her mom. Yeah, I look like Greta Garbo, Pia interrupted, her expression stony. Moving on now. The other womans gaze snapped up to hers. Pias face and body language transmitted a Closed sign, and the witchs demeanor changed back into the professional saleswoman. My apologies, she said in her chocolate milk voice. She gestured. I have herbal cosmetics, beauty remedies, tinctures over in that corner, crystals charged with healing spells Pia looked around without taking it all in although she noticed a spicy smell. It smelled so wonderful she breathed it in deep without thinking. Despite herself the tense muscles in her neck and shoulders eased. The scent contained a low-level spell, clearly intended to relax nervous customers. While the spell caused no actual harm and did nothing to dull her senses, its manipulative nature repelled her. How many people relaxed and spent more money because of it? Her hands clenched as she shoved the magic away. The spell clung to her skin a moment before it dissipated. The sensation reminded her of cobwebs trailing across her skin. She fought the urge to brush off her arms and legs. Annoyed, she turned and met the shopkeepers eyes. You come recommended by reputable sources, she said in a clipped tone. I need to buy a binding spell. Adelas bland demeanor fell away. I see, she said, matching Pias crispness. Her eyebrows raised in another faint challenge. If youve heard of me then you know Im not cheap. Youre not cheap because youre supposed to be one of the best witches in the city, said Pia as she strode to a nearby glass counter. She shrugged the backpack off her aching shoulder and rested it on the counter, pulling the tangle of her ponytail out from under one strap. She stuffed her water bottle inside and zipped it back up. Gracias, said the witch, her voice bland. She glanced down at the crystals in the case. They were so bright and lovely, filled with magic and light and color. What would it be like to hold one, to feel the cool heavy weight of it sitting in her palm as it sang to her of starlight and deep mountain spaces? How would it feel to own one? The connection snapped as she turned. She looked her own challenge at the other woman. I can also feel the spells you have both on and in the shop, including the attraction spells on these crystals as well as the one thats supposed to make your customers relax. I can tell your work is competent enough. I need an oath binding spell, and I need to walk out of the shop with it today. That is not as easy as it might sound, said the witch. Long eyelids dropped, shuttering her expression. This is not a fast food drive-thru. The binding doesnt have to be fancy, said Pia. Look, we both know youre going to charge more because I need it right away. I still have a lot to do, so can we just please skip this next part where we dance around each other and negotiate? Because, no offense, its been a long bad day. Im tired and not in the mood. The witchs mouth curled. Certainly, she said. Although with a binding, theres only so much I can do on the spot, and theres some things I wont do at all. If you need something tailored for a specific purpose it will take some time. If youre looking for a dark binding youre in the wrong place. I dont do dark magic. She shook her head, relieved at the womans business-like attitude. Nothing too dark, I think, she said in a rusty voice. Something with serious consequences though. Its got to mean business. The witchs dark eyes shone with a sardonic sparkle. You mean a kind of, I swear I will do such-and-such or my ass will catch fire until the end of time type of thing? Pia nodded, her mouth twisting. Yeah. That kind of thing. If someone swears an oath of his own free will, the binding falls into the realm of contractual obligation and justice. I can do that. And have, as a matter of fact, the other woman said. She moved toward the back of her shop. Follow me. Pias abused conscience twitched. Unlike the polarized white and black magics, Gray magic was supposed to be neutral but the witchs kind of ethical parsing never did sit well with her. Like the relaxation spell in the shop, it felt manipulative, devoid of any real moral substance. A great deal of harm could be done under the guise of neutrality. Which was pretty damn self-righteous of her, wasnt it, coming fresh as she did from the scene of her crime and desperate to get her hands on that binding spell. The urge to run pumped adrenaline into her veins. Self preservation kept her anchored in place. Disgusted with herself, she shook her head and followed the witch. Here goes nothing. She really hoped that wasnt true. They concluded business in under an hour. At the witchs invitation she slipped out the back to avoid more heckling from the protestors. Her backpack had been lightened by a considerable amount of cash, but Pia figured in a life-or-death situation it was money well spent. Just one thing, said the witch. She leaned her curvaceous body in a languid pose against the back doorpost of her shop. Pia paused and looked back at the other woman. The witch held her gaze. If youre personally involved with the man that is intended for, Im

here to tell you honey. He isn't worth it. A harsh laugh escaped her. She hefted the backpack higher onto one shoulder. If only my problems were that simple. Something moved under the surface of the other woman's lovely dark eyes. The shift of thought looked calculating but that could have been a trick of the late afternoon light. In the next moment her beautiful face wore an indifferent mask, as if she had already moved on to other things. Luck, then, chica, the witch said. You need to buy something else, come back any time. She swallowed and said past a dry throat. Thanks. The witch shut her door and Pia loomed to the end of the block then moved into the sidewalk traffic. Pia hadn't shared her name. After the first rebuff, the witch knew not to ask and she hadn't offered. She wondered if she had Trouble tattooed on her forehead. Or maybe it was in her sweat. Desperation had a certain smell to it. Her fingers brushed the front pocket of her jeans where she'd slipped the oath binding, wrapped in a plain white handkerchief. A strong glow emanated through the distressed denim and made her hand tingle. Maybe after she met with the shithead and concluded their transaction, she could take her first deep breath in days. She supposed she should be grateful the witch hadn't been more of a shark. Then Pia heard the most terrible sound of her life. It started low like a vibration, but one so deep in power it shook her bones. She slowed to a stop along with the other pedestrians. People shaded their eyes and looked around as the vibration grew into a roar that swept through the streets and rattled the buildings. The roar was a hundred freight trains, tornadoes, Mt. Olympus exploding in a rain of fire and flood. Pia fell to her knees and threw her arms over her head. Others screamed and did the same. Still others looked around wild-eyed, trying to spot the disaster. Some ran panicked down the street. The nearby intersections were dotted with car accidents as frightened drivers lost control and slammed into each other. Then the roar died away. Buildings settled. The cloudless sky was serene but New York City most certainly was not. Alrighty. She pushed upright on unsteady legs and mopped her sweat-dampened face, oblivious to the chaos churning around her. She knew what/who had made that unholy sound and why. The knowledge made her guts go watery. If she were in a race for her life, that roar was the starter pistol. If God were the referee, He had just shouted Go. * * * He had been born along with the solar system. Give or take. He remembered a transcendent light and an immense wind. Modern science called it a solar wind. He recalled a sensation of endless flight, an eternal basking in light and magic so piercing and young and pure it rang like the trumpeting of thousands of angels. His massive bones and flesh must have been formed along with the planets. He became bound to Earth. He knew hunger and learned to hunt and eat. Hunger taught him concepts such as before and after, and danger, and pain and pleasure. He began to have opinions. He liked the gush of blood as he gorged on flesh. He liked drowsing on a baked rock in the sun. He adored launching into the air, taking wing and riding thermals high above the ground, so like that first endless-seeming ecstasy of flight. After hunger he discovered curiosity. New species burgeoned. There were the wyrkind, Elves, both light and dark Fae, tall bright-eyed beings and squat mushroom-colored creatures, winged nightmares, and shy things that pattered in foliage and hid whenever he appeared. What came to be known as the Elder races tended to cluster in or around magic-filled dimensional pockets of Other land, where time and space had buckled when the earth was formed and the sun shone with a different light. Magic had a flavor like blood only it was golden and warm like sunlight. It was good to gulp down with red flesh. He learned language by listening in secret to the Elder races. He practiced on his own when he took flight, mulling over each word and its meaning. The Elder races had several words for him. Wyrms, they called him. Monster. Evil. The Great Beast. Dragua. Thus he was named. He didn't notice at first when the first modern Homo sapiens began to proliferate in Africa. Of all species, he wouldn't have guessed they would flourish. They were weak, had short life spans, no natural armor and were easy to kill. He kept an eye on them and learned their languages. Just as other wyrkind did, he developed the skill of shapeshifting so he could walk amongst them. They dug up the things of the Earth he liked, gold and silver, sparkling crystals and precious gems, which they shaped into creations of beauty. Acquisitive by nature, he collected what caught his eye. This new species spread across the world, so he created secret lairs in underground caverns where he gathered his possessions. His hoard included works of the Elves, the Fae and wyrkind, as well as human creations such as gold and silver and copper plates, goblets, religious artifacts, and coinage of all sorts. Money, now there was a concept that intrigued him, attached as it was to so many other interesting concepts like trade, politics, war and greed. There were also cascades of loose crystals and precious gems, and crafted jewelry of all sorts. His hoard grew to include writings from all Elder races and from humankind, as books were an invention he (only sometimes) thought was more precious than any other treasure. Among his interest in history, mathematics, philosophy, astronomy, alchemy, and magic, he became intrigued with modern science. He traveled to England to have a conversation on the origin of species with a famous

scientist in the nineteenth century. They had gotten drunk together the Englishman with rather more desperation than he had talked through the witching hours until the night mist had been burned to vapor by the sun. He remembered telling the drunken clever scientist that he and humankind civilization had a lot in common. The difference was his experience was couched in a single entity, one set of memories. In a way that meant he embodied all stages of evolution at once beast and predator, magician and aristocrat, violence and intellectualism. He was not so sure he had acquired humanlike emotions. He had certainly not acquired their morality. Perhaps his greatest achievement was law. Humans in different cultures also had many words for him. Ryu, they called him. Wyvern. Naga. To the Aztecs he was the winged serpent Quetzalcoatl whom they called God. Dragos. When he discovered the theft, Dragos Cuelebre exploded into the sky with long thrusts from a wingspan approaching that of an eight-seater Cessna jet. Modern life had gotten complicated. His usual habit was to focus Power on averting aircraft when he flew or, simpler yet, just file a flight plan with air traffic control. With his outrageous wealth and position as one of the eldest and most powerful of the wyrkind, life scrambled to arrange itself to his liking. He wasn't so polite this time. This was more a get-the-fuck-out-of-my-way kind of flight. He was blinded with rage, violent with incredulity. Lava flowed through ancient veins and his lungs worked like bellows. As he approached the zenith of his climb, his long head snapped back and forth and he roared again. The sound ripped the air as his razor claws mauled an imaginary foe. All of his claws except for those on one front foot where he held a tiny scrap of something fragile and, to be frank, inconceivable. This tiny scrap was as ludicrous and as nonsensical to him as a hot fudge sundae topping an ostrich's head. The cherry on the hot fudge sundae was the elusive whiff of scent that clung to the scrap. It teased his senses into frenzy as it reminded him of something so long ago that he couldn't quite remember what it was. His mind went white-hot and slipped from its mooring in time. Existing in his wrath he flew until he came to himself and began to think again. Then Rune said in his head, My Lord? Are you well? Dragos cocked his head, for the first time coming aware that his First flew behind him at a discreet distance. It was a measure of his rage that he hadn't noticed. Any other time Dragos was aware of everything that happened within his vicinity. Dragos noted that Rune's telepathic voice was as calm and neutral as the other male's physical voice would have been had he spoken the words aloud. There were many reasons why Dragos had made Rune his First in his Court. Those reasons were why Rune had thrived in his service for so long. The other male was seasoned, mature, and dominant enough to hold authority in a sometimes unruly wyrkind society. He was intelligent with a capacity for cunning and violence that came close to Dragos' own. Most of all, Rune had a gift for diplomacy that Dragos had never achieved. That talent made the younger male useful when treating with the other Elder Courts. It also helped him to navigate rocky weather when Dragos was in a rage. Dragos' jaw clenched and he ground massive teeth shaped for maximum carnage. After a moment, he answered, I am well. How may I be of service? his First asked. His mind threatened to seize again in sheer incredulity of what he had found. He snarled, There has been a theft. A pause. Rune asked, My Lord? For once his First's legendary coolness had been shaken. It gave him a grim sense of satisfaction. A thief, Rune. He bit at each word. A thief has broken into my hoard and taken something of mine. Rune took several moments to absorb his words. Dragos let him have the time. The crime was impossible. It had never happened, not in all the millennia of his existence. Yet it had happened now. First someone had somehow found his hoard which was an incredible feat in itself. An elaborate fake setup complete with state-of-the-art security was located below the basement levels of Cuelebre Tower, but no one knew the location of Dragos' actual hoard except himself. His actual hoard was protected by powerful cloaking and aversion spells older than the pharaoh tombs of Egypt and as subtle as tasteless poison on the tongue. But after locating his secret lair, the thief had managed to slip past all of Dragos' physical and magical locks, like a knife slicing through butter. Even worse, the thief managed to slip out again the same way. The only warning Dragos had received was a nagging unease that had plagued him all afternoon. His unease had increased to the point where he couldn't settle until he went to check on his property. He had known his lair had been infiltrated as soon as he had set foot near the hidden entrance to the underground cavern. Still he couldn't believe it, even after he had torn inside to discover the indisputable evidence of the theft, along with something else that trumped all other inconceivability. He looked down at his clenched right foot. He wheeled in an abrupt motion to set a return path to the city. Rune followed and settled smoothly into place behind him, his rear right wingman. You are to locate this thief. Do everything possible, Dragos said. Everything, you understand. Use all magical and non-magical means. Nothing else exists for you. No other tasks, no other diversions. Pass all of your current duties on to Aryal or Grym. I understand, my Lord, Rune said, keeping his mental voice quiet. Dragos sensed other conversations in the air, although no one dared

direct contact with him. He suspected his First had begun giving orders to transfer duties to the others. He said, Be very clear about something, Rune. I do not want this thief harmed or killed by anyone but myself. You are not to allow it. Be sure of the people you use on this hunt. I will. It will be on your head if something goes wrong, Dragos told him. He couldn't have articulated even to himself why he pressed the matter with this creature who for centuries had been as steady and reliable as a metronome. His claws clenched on his implausible scrap of evidence. Understood? Understood, my Lord, Rune replied, calm as ever. Good enough, he growled. Dragos noticed they had returned over the city. The sky around them was clear of all air traffic. He soared in a wide circle to settle on the spacious landing pad atop Cuelebre Tower. As soon as he settled he shifted into his human shape, a massive six-foot-eight dark-haired male with dark bronze skin and gold raptors eyes. Dragos turned to watch Rune land. The gryphons majestic wings shone in the fading afternoon sun until the other male also shifted into his human form, a tawny haired male almost as massive as Dragos himself. Rune lowered his head to Dragos in a brief bow of respect before loping to the roof doors. After the other male had left, Dragos unclenched his right fist in which he held a crumbled scrap of paper. Why had he not told Rune about it? Why was he not even now calling the gryphon back to tell him? He didn't know. He just obeyed the impulse to secrecy. Dragos held the paper to his nose and inhaled. A scent still clung to the paper which had absorbed oil from the thief's hand. It was a feminine scent that smelled like wild sunshine and it was familiar in a way that pulled at all of Dragos deepest instincts. He stood immobile, eyes closed as he concentrated on inhaling that wild feminine sunshine in deep breaths. There was something about it, something from a long time ago. If only he could remember. He had lived for so long, his memory was a vast and convoluted tangle. It could take him weeks to locate the memory. He strained harder for that elusive time with a younger sun, a deep green forest, and a celestial scent that drove him crashing through the underbrush. The fragile memory thread broke. A low growl of frustration rumbled through his chest. He opened his eyes and willed himself not to shred the paper he held with such tense care. It occurred to Dragos that Rune had forgotten to ask what the thief had stolen. His underground lair was enormous by necessity, with cavern upon cavern filled with a hoard the likes of which the world had never seen. The treasure of empires filled the caves. Astonishing works of beauty graced rough cavern walls. Items of magic, miniature portraits, tinkling crystal earrings that threw rainbows in the lamplight. Art masterpieces packed to protect them from the environment. Rubies and emeralds and diamonds the size of goose eggs, and loops upon loops of pearls. Egyptian scarabs, cartouches, and pendants. Greek gold, Syrian statues, Persian gems, Chinese jade, Spanish treasure from sunken ships. He even kept a modern coin collection he had started several years ago and added to in a haphazard way whenever he remembered. On the ostrich's head was a hot fudge sundae. His obsessive attention to detail, an immaculate memory of each and every piece in that gigantic treasure, a trail of scent like wild sunshine, and instinct had all led Dragos to the right place. He discovered the thief had taken a U.S. minted 1962 copper penny from a jar of coins he had not yet bothered to put into a coin collecting book. . . and on the hot fudge sundae atop that ostrich's head perched a cherry. The thief had left something for him in place of what she had taken. She had perched it with care on top of the coin jar. It was a message written on a scrap of paper in a spidery, unsteady hand. The message was wrapped around an offering. Im sorry, the message said. The theft was a violation of privacy. It was an unbelievable act of impudence and disrespect. Not only that, it was baffling. He was murderous, incandescent with fury. He was older than sin and could not remember when he had last been in such a rage. He looked at the paper again. Im sorry I had to take your penny. Heres another to replace it. Yep, thats what it said. One corner of his mouth twitched. He gave himself a deep shock when he burst into an explosive guffaw. Presentation de l'diteur Half-human and half-wyr, Pia Giovanni spent her life keeping a low profile among the wyrkind and avoiding the continuing conflict between them and their Dark Fae enemies. But after being blackmailed into stealing a coin from the hoard of a dragon, Pia finds herself targeted by one of the most powerful - and passionate - of the Elder Races. 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