

# Three Toads and a Dragon

Louisa Swann

“Go away!” A fly dodged Lani’s hand and swooped to the other side of her face. She wiped her sweaty forehead on the back of her sleeve, ignored the irritation building in her stomach, and moved on, but the fly followed her.

“Drat!” Energy tingled in the earth beneath her feet – the kind of tingle that signaled trouble. Trouble in the form of monsters and strange happenings.

Trouble that called itself magic.

Lani gritted her teeth and focused on the glow of turning-to-winter aspens scattered amid a background of evergreens as she struggled to empty her mind. The fly swooped by her nose, and a shock of magic stung her skin. Instead of a fly, she found herself staring at a fat lizard suspended in the air by an impossibly small pair of wings. She wrinkled her nose, but before she could try to undo the errant magic, the creature squeaked and flopped away.

Lani groaned and started down the path. At least she hadn’t conjured up something really awful, like a goblin or a troll or a . . . a dragon! She scuffed her boots – short, frustrated movements that sent small squirts of dust scooting into the air.

Pine boughs dipped and swayed in the early evening breeze, a gift from the nearby mountain peaks. Lani lifted her tunic and let the swirling air cool her belly. She sighed – there would be no such relief for the moisture trickling between her breasts unless she undid the cloth binding them. An attractive notion, but the men she cooked for believed her a child. Best keep it that way. She plucked a blackberry from the basket on her hip and plopped it between her lips. The sweet juice exploded through her mouth as she scurried towards camp. These were not the kind of men one wanted to keep waiting for their evening meal.

At least these men hadn’t turned her out. Not yet, anyway. She’d been with them for almost a week and had managed to keep her magic a secret. It wasn’t so hard – highwaymen didn’t care about much of anything except improving their bags of wealth. Put a good meal in their bellies, some wine in their cups, and they didn’t ask many questions.

A squirrel chattered at her.

“I know, I know.” She grimaced and waved at the critic overhead. “Grandmother wouldn’t

approve.” But Grandmother hadn’t kept her promise to train Lani, either. There was plenty of time, Grandmother said. Enjoy your freedom while you can. So her magic ran wild and free, manifesting in strange, unpredictable ways. Ways that frightened the villagers and forced her into isolation.

Two days before Lani’s fourteenth birthday Grandmother died. All Lani had left was a letter of introduction from Grandmother to some long, lost aunt who lived halfway between Pur Point and Stefenston, a month’s journey by horse under the best of conditions. It had been four months and she was little better than halfway there.

The trees thinned as she scurried into camp, dodged between a pair of shabby tents, and skidded to a stop before the cook fire. She shoved the scarf off her head, rubbed the stinging sweat from her eyes, and stared.

Gerod stood at the clearing’s edge with a stranger. Not a normal, good-day-how-are-you-doing stranger, but a man as tall as a lance is long, his shoulders spread wide beneath a threadbare cloak. Gerod was no small man; Lani had seen him overturn a farm wagon only last week, just because the farmer had lost a wheel and the wagon was in Gerod’s way. This stranger towered over Gerod, gazing down at him the way a lord might stare down a rebellious peasant. A smile spread across Gerod’s face. “Welcome, my friend. What brings you to our little camp?” The hair on Lani’s arms rose. Gerod was never this pleasant.

“Who is that?” she whispered to the boy squatting by the fire. She gave him an inquisitive glance and settled her basket on the ground. She looked around at the other men: Padric and Storan sat close by Gerod, their faces strained. Petre ducked into a tent; Tors wasn’t around.

Algor shook his head as he added sticks to the crackling blaze. “Don’t know,” he replied and shoved a slab of meat at Lani. “You’re late.” He got up and wandered over to sit by Padric.

Lani shrugged. Algor always acted tough, but he was still just a boy. She slipped a knife from her boot sheath and hacked at the venison, surreptitiously peeking at the newcomer while she worked.

The stranger looked around. He didn’t appear impressed with their tattered caravan as he cast his cloak off one shoulder and placed a fist atop the scabbard at his hip. A hauberk covered him from chest to thigh, its surface black with tarnish. “This is my demesne. You and your kind are not welcome here.”

A knot of apprehension rose in Lani’s throat as she tossed a meat chunk into the pot hung

over the fire. Was the newcomer a lord, then? A man of position? She glanced again at the filthy hauberk and grimaced. No lord would allow himself to fall into such disrepair. More likely the man was a displaced knight, an arrogant fool with nothing better to do than cause trouble.

The stranger glanced in Lani's direction as if sensing her stare. Her skin prickled with little jolts of energy. Magical energy. Only this energy wasn't sharp with the newness of green, growing things. This energy hummed with age, like mellowed wine. There was something else odd about his magic, though . . .

For the span of a heartbeat the stranger's image seemed to shift, overlaid by a monstrous shadow that reached into the trees. Lani's breath came hard and fast as if she'd been running for miles. *What is happening?*

And then the double image was gone. She glanced at the other men, expecting to see some kind of response – alarm, anger, fear. But no one had moved, nothing had changed. Gerod stood relaxed, his hip cocked to one side in that haughty attitude she so despised, an attitude she didn't trust. The bushes moved behind the stranger and Tors leapt into the clearing, the glint of a knife in his hand.

Lani stood, hand pressed to her mouth as the stranger spun, sword in hand. He lunged forward and when he pulled back, Tors crumpled to the ground. Padric and Storan leapt to their feet and moved forward, swords drawn. Gerod raised his sword overhead, both hands on the hilt. The stranger let loose a bellow and thrust forward. Gerod moved sideways, his blow deflected. Padric and Storan closed on the stranger's side, slashing and thrusting. Gerod's second strike sank deep into the flesh of the big man's neck and shoulder.

There was no flash of magical lightening or burst of mystical fire. The stranger sagged to the ground and lay motionless; his life's blood spread a red carpet across the dirt carrying with it whatever magic he'd once known.

"What did you do that for?" Lani demanded, stunned by the violence.

Gerod looked at her for a long moment. His eyes narrowed, and a chill skittered across Lani's skin. He casually pulled his blade from the fallen man's flesh, bent low, and sliced free a pouch from the stranger's side.

"See to him," Gerod ordered, waving a hand at Tors' crumpled body. Petre and Algor sheathed their swords and moved to carry out his orders.

“Padric. You and Storan take care of her.” Gerod pointed at Lani, then picked up the stranger’s sword and stepped into his tent.

Lani’s stomach clenched into a tight knot. Padric moved forward as Storan turned towards her, an ugly grin on his scarred face. She ducked out of the clearing, the burly man’s curses filling the air behind her. The sound of his thrashing through the brush lent lightness to her feet as she raced down the trail. He was close, too close. Lani fell to the ground and scrambled beneath the brush, ignoring the tearing branches. She crawled until she could no longer move and then lay still, trembling like a cornered rabbit. The scent of crushed leaves and scraped dirt teased her nose. The voices and the footsteps drew closer. She dug her fingers into the soil, joined her roiling magic with that of the earth stinging her palms. Panic rose in her throat – if she couldn’t control the power, the bushes might turn into a pit of writhing snakes!

Quickly, Lani shoved thoughts of snakes out of her mind and visualized tiny green shoots reaching out of the ground. The shoots twined around each other, bark thickening as they wove themselves into a protective wall. Power prickled across her skin, flowed into the soil. She closed her eyes and concentrated; ignored the sweat tickling her ribs. Finally she collapsed against the earth, heart hammering in her chest. She swallowed hard against the dryness in her throat and covered her mouth to keep from crying out as someone crashed through the bushes nearby. Once, twice. She lost count of the number of times. But no one discovered her hiding place. Her magic had worked.

Darkness closed in and the woods grew silent. Lani swiped a tear from her cheek. She was on her own again – back to dodging village authorities as she struggled to find enough food to keep her going from day to day. Not a new story, but one that had grown old and wearisome.

Since she’d taken to the road, she’d learned how to sneak into people’s houses and out again without being caught. She took only what she needed, but she couldn’t ignore the shadow of guilt that dogged her heels. She’d actually fit in with Gerod’s band of thieves.

Lani shifted, trying to find a comfortable hollow in the dirt. She couldn’t give up now. Every day on the road brought her that much closer to her unknown aunt. If she was ever to have a chance at a normal life, she had to learn to control her wild magic.

Tickles rambled over her skin – the quiet energy of a slumbering earth touched with the essence of ancient power she’d sensed from the stranger. A sigh of air, like the almost-silence of something stirring in the night sky touched her cheek as she drifted into a restless sleep.