

Nuella's Dragon

(This is the Piemur prequel).

Piemur is a small lad born into the MinerCraft at Crom. He is the last of nine children and learns to shift for himself at an early age. His mother died in childbirth and his father has little time left after work to love his latest child. Much of his early rearing comes from his oldest sister who looked after the littlest three. She is "Sis" - the eldest of two girls in the family. The other sister marries early. "Sis" stays on with the family out of a sense of duty to the littlest three but as they get older, she finds her attentions attracted by a handsome farmer and marries him and moves far away.

His father, four of his brothers, and the miners' watch-wher are killed in a mining accident, leaving Piemur and the other two children on their own. The family is broken up, as is the way in the small mining community, among other families.

Piemur, who had loved to listen to "Sis" sing, is lucky to be taken in by the local Harper. The Harper is an aging bachelor and not good with kids but Piemur wins his heart with his warmth and kindly ways. Piemur's love of music is heightened as he starts singing along with the Harper as the old man putters about the place. The Harper is delighted to discover that the boy has a beautiful voice and the two grow to love their duets - as do all the miners when it comes evening time.

His life changes one day when a parcel is delivered to the small community. The parcel comes to the Harper for Piemur's care. It is then that Piemur discovers that his family had always been selected to manage the miners' watch-wher. The parcel is an egg, well-wrapped to keep it warm. Piemur is expected to know how to care for the egg and the resulting watch-wher - knowledge that his father had passed to the older boys and not, before his death, to Piemur.

With this new burden thrust upon him, Piemur's life becomes difficult. The old Harper tries to help, searching through old records but finds, to his dismay, that there is very little knowledge of watch-whers in the Harper records [much of it was lost by lazy apprentices who didn't want to copy such boring stuff at Harper Hall, and foolish Masters who set more store in copying songs and lyrics over boring animal things].

Fire-lizards are, of course, a thing only of myth [at this time], so Piemur decides that his best source of knowledge is the lore of dragons. He and the Harper do their best to learn about dragons from the Harper songs but there is little mention of early care.

The watch-wher hatches and Piemur despairs that he might lose the beast altogether but finally manages to discover - mostly through trial and error the ways of raising a rowdy watch-wher. It is here that Piemur discovers that while he can't talk with his friend, he can sense emotions [think fire-lizard, think treecat, especially Nimitz]. And, as he tries to name

his friend, he finally realizes that the watch-wher wants to be called Piesk (which is what watch-whers do in crowded conditions where they have one master - they "sk" the master's name).

As the watch-wher gets older, the miners demand that it and its keeper resume the traditional duties [sniffing for gas, crossing chasms, mapping new territory]. Reluctantly, Piemur finds himself spending long days (and nights) in the mines. Piemur hates the dark, enclosing spaces but loves his watch-wher friend. Watch-whers are treated by some as mere working beasts - to be put down when needs require, whip, beaten and abused. Others reckon watch-whers as near dragons and hold them in awe. As a youngster charged with the watch-whers keep, Piemur must battle against both prejudices within the minds of his elders.

Worse, Piemur realizes (and is told) that the work of the watch-wher and its master are done at night with the second shift while the other miners are sleeping. That means that he cannot sing at night with the Harper.

The Harper dies one night while Piemur is down in the mines with his watch-wher.

As Piemur copes with his grief, attends to the Harper's affects, and clears out the Harper's quarters for the new Harper (and tries to find new quarters himself), he discovers that one person had been at the Harper's side when he died. A young girl, Nuella.

Nuella is blind, has been from birth. The Harper, having discovered how much he loved children from his exposure with Piemur, cultivates the girl whose future is clouded. Nuella has no voice but her cheerful attitude, her ready acceptance of her situation, and her caring find a home in the Harper's heart.

Nuella has not been allowed in the mines because of her condition although she knows her way around the rest of the compound perfectly. "I can always tell where I am," she tells to Piemur early on. Nuella is not at all afraid of Piesk, as so many of the miner children are. She finds her lovely.

"She's like a little dragon," she says, running her hands lightly over the watch-wher's nuzzle.

"Dragons are bigger, and prettier," Piemur says.

"I've never felt one," Nuella answers. "Besides, she feels strong. Firm. I can feel the heat of her like a warm fire and the strength like a rock."

It is clear that Piesk is very happy with their new acquaintance.

When her own father is killed in a cave-in, Nuella begs Piemur to lead her down into the mines so she can 'feel' the spot and make her farewells. Touched, an orphan from cave-in himself, Piemur breaks all the rules and agrees.

The go down late at night, after the night watch has finished, just the three of them. Nuella, certain that this will be her only chance in the mines, connives to get Piemur (who is totally flustered at being out-charmed, out-wheedled, and out-witted) to show her all the levels and all the mine before they reach the site of her father's death. Which is just as well, as the site of the cave-in is a very dangerous place and supposed to be off-limits to all.

A cave-in seals them off just as they are about to leave. In the tense moments that follow, it is Nuella who calms Piesk, and Nuella who finds in her sightlessness that she can 'see' better than Piemur who has always been used to light.

And it is Nuella, working with Piesk, finding a 'feel' for warmth through Piesk (actually, linking in on Piesk's infra-red sight) who discovers a new opening in a side tunnel, an opening that leads them back to the main mines and freedom.

The miners, who had been desperately trying to free the two trapped children, are overjoyed at their escape. In the course of recounting their adventure, Nuella blithely asserts that she knew where they were and how to get back because she could see it all in her mind. She adds that the reasons there have been so many cave-ins in that area is because there are too many shafts drilled too close by, leaving too little support.

The head miner, skeptical at first, slowly becomes convinced as she describes the honeycomb layout of that section of the mine, and all the mine. It becomes clear to him that Nuella has the rare ability to maintain a full three-dimensional view of the mine - a benefit of her blindness.

"Eyes closed, she can see all the same," he reckons.

The new Harper, who has been ensconced for several sevendays and has started to get a feel for the lay of the land, is as astounded as the rest of the settlement by the dramatic events. In them, he sees a chance for Piemur, identified by the old Harper as a rare vocal talent to the Harper Hall and already accepted as an apprentice.

Piemur, unaware of this, becomes disturbingly aware that the warm feel of his watch-where friend has subtly altered. The watch-where remains close by Nuella, hovering always within easy reach.

Instead of reacting selfishly, Piemur, who has learned to cheerfully accept change, makes a very grown up decision. Aware of the stigma attached to Nuella's blindness and the effect it will have on her future in the mining community, Piemur selflessly nurtures the relationship between her and the watch-where.

But no one knows if a watch-where has ever transferred its allegiance (OK, I know - and the answer is yes, of course). The new Harper is willing to aid in the attempt and the head miner - who has taken Nuella as a fosterling - is reluctantly hopeful; not just because he has become attached to Nuella,

nor just because he would like to see her find a respected place in the community, but also because of her great mental mapping ability.

The last hurdle comes when the watch-wher is called upon to run a line across a chasm. Piemur gives the task to Nuella who balks. She is convinced that the other side of the chasm is fractured and will collapse. When she is finally proved right (someone throws a heavy rock across), and she and the watch-wher find a safe anchor spot, all the miners are convinced of her great worth in the mines.

Piemur realizes that now is the best time to finish making changes.

"Nuella," he says, "ask the watch-wher her name."

"I don't know how," she says.

"Just try," he says.

Nuella lays her hand on the watch-wher and frowns in concentration. The frown is slowly replaced by a widening look of incredible joy. She hugs the watch-wher and then, unerringly, throws herself at Piemur and hugs him.

"How did you know?" she asks breathlessly.

"I think she's your dragon now," he says. Nuella nods, tears of joy and sorrow streaming down her face.

"But what will you do?"

The new Harper approaches at this point and hands Piemur the letter. Piemur reads it in growing amazement and joy.

"I think I'll sing," he says. "I've always been good at it."