

The Rod of Blackthorn



R.G. Blyth

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Prologue

Exotara and Bodia remained split for thousands of years following a nuclear explosion. Emerging from the dark period, the people of the land from the former planet Earth started to repeat the mistakes that destroyed the original civilisation.

Anarchy and democracy started to erode the civilised structure with the sole purpose of conquering and acquiring power. On Bodia, Thornix, Oryndor's half-brother, seized the land called Vandrelis, which Oryndor had ruled ruthlessly for thirty-five years.



Princess Kalithra was left with just Quinrex, the Cadejo, and two of the six warriors that had set out with her on her journey to escape the merciless Thornix, who had taken possession of their family stronghold after killing both her father and brother in battle.

Kalithra was taller than most girls, her age almost indeterminate, for ageing happened much more slowly in Vandrelis, the land where she was raised. On Lower Earth (otherwise known as Exotara), she would be twice her age as on Vandrelis one year represented two years on Lower Earth.

Reaching the Mountains of Itulin was going to be a tedious but necessary task for the princess, who needed to find a fabled crystal, without which her people would not be able to travel from Vandrelis to Exotara to escape the invading forces.

Known as the Crystal of Berestara, the stone would change the composition of air between the different worlds, allowing people to breathe when they reached the unfamiliar atmosphere of Lower Earth. Additionally, the crystal would prevent Kalithra from ageing before her time. This quest had been bestowed upon the princess by the all-knowing Augur, and her mother, Queen Sylvaris, who had already taught her that such tasks usually came with a catch. In this case, the crystal was guarded day and night by a huge and ruthless dragon called Glydclaw, who was the keeper of the Cave of Berestara. When asked how they would best the mighty beast, the Augur had been vague.



Having already crossed the lowlands, with their network of rivers running from the Mountains of Itulin, the small band made their way across flat fields that were still in harvest, with villagers gathering their crops before the season changed. The landscape gave way to spiny hedgerows, which appeared dense, dark, and treacherous. Mahorock Forest lay ahead, as they reached the boundary between the land and the mountains where the Cave of Berestara lay.

Kalithra's leather breaches protected her knees as she knelt, her hand placed across the ground to detect tremors. The Giants of Horlas often troubled Bodeons, the people of Vandrelis, who were caught out in the open, and so it was wise to detect their footfalls before they appeared in the flesh. What the giants lacked in their ability to see, they more than made up for in their keen sense of smell.

'Can you detect anything, Quinrex?'

Quinrex sniffed the air for hostile scents. His form was that of a Cadejo, although he possessed the ability to metamorphose. In addition to his primary form of a canine, he could swim underwater, fly in the air, climb, or dig underground, as he would take on the forms of a dolphin, an eagle, an ape, or a mole. Quinrex was Princess Kalithra's protector, and the Cadejo was worth a hundred Bodeon warriors.

During the journey, as each of her warriors had succumbed to some hostile event or another, Kalithra had often found herself wondering about Captain Verisona. Was he trustworthy, even

though he was of the Blue Amulet Household Guard—an elite force loyal to the Crown of Taegora?

‘Kalithra, those spines are poisonous. One touch will bring instant death.’ Quinrex spoke in the same language as the Bodeon princess, for the shape-shifting creature also possessed the ability to speak.

‘How in Headdon will we pass through and reach the dragon’s lair, my princess?’ The voice of the captain whined, irritating Kalithra.

‘I’ve heard such tales of these poisonous spines Captain Verisona; whether true or not, we will best avoid the forest. Quinrex will take to the skies and seek out the cave from above.’

The Cave of Berestara lay beyond the dense reaches of the thick tree trunks stretching over one hundred feet in front of them, with the crusted white peaks of the Mountains of Itulin projecting like teeth toward the sky in the distance. The ice of winter dwelt permanently on those peaks—the focus of Kalithra’s brave but foolhardy quest.

The captain of the Blue Amulet Household Guard looked at the uninviting forest stretching for miles, and his voice was laced with doubt and fear. ‘If the thorns don’t tear us to pieces, Princess, then the stranglers that abound the trees will capture us. It is said that once entangled in the reaper’s branches, you are squeezed until dead and then consumed, leaving but a shell behind.’

Kalithra knew her trusted Sword of Witherbrand, might be sharper than anything forged on Vandrelis, but the energy and effort it would take to hack through the forest would cost them dearly. The deadly acacia thorns were only the first of many layers of defence that the forest held in store for unsuspecting intruders.

‘Every hour or day we waste puts the lives of the people of Vandrelis at risk, and the imposter King Thornix becomes more powerful as he gathers allies to his cause since overthrowing my father’s kingdom.’

Kalithra reached for her sword, feeling its power. The cost of acquiring the mighty weapon had been even greater than taking the Bow of Mournfleet, which she insisted remain in Captain Verisona’s charge. The bow was made from the wood of shrine ash and glacier buckthorn, imbuing it with magical properties that allowed it to reach great distances, finding its target every time.

On the right side of Kalithra’s leather belt hung the caduceus, Blackthorn in a thin sheath. The nymphs of Anigrades had used Blackthorn for healing. It was the Augur who had given the caduceus to Kalithra; from whence it had come, she would not say. Cast with magic and made from shrine ash and crushed strands of hair from the first King of the Giants of Horlas, it had been blended with pyrophoric chemicals and bathed in the sulphuric waters of the River Angrios, known for its magical properties. Blackthorn possessed the power to heal any wound, provided the heart was still beating.



Bending down to speak to the Cadejo, Kalithra threw her arms around the white furry animal, his blue eyes sparkled intelligently at the eighteen year old woman. ‘Quinrex, I’m sorry to place such a burden on you, but if anyone can retrieve this crystal, it is you. Change into the form of Skyhawk and take to the sky as we are slow on two legs.’

A shimmering light appeared around the Cadejo, his fur standing stiffly as the avian form of a Harpy Eagle replaced the canine in front of their eyes.

Quinrex’s wing span as Skyhawk was impressive at over six feet across, with talons capable of grasping prey and sharper than a grizzly bear’s claws. Skyhawk could use mobility, speed, and stealth to circumnavigate the forest with all its hidden risks. As its mighty wings pushed down, the raptor rose from the ground majestically. The metamorphosis was always a sight to behold, and the two warriors stood mouths aghast at the transformation. There was a slight problem, however, that Skyhawk had to overcome. As a Cadejo, Quinrex was male, while in his avian form he changed gender, so he had to avoid the advances of male eagles, for mating would diminish his powers until he retained one of his alternative forms. Few Harpy Eagles existed in Vandrelis, and male mates were always on the hunt for a female.

Using her powerful muscles, she soon rose beyond the canopy of the forest trees, with Kalithra, Captain Verisona, and Vendrake appearing as insects far below.

Quinrex found the body of her eagle pleasing, flying free in the sky, and her power gave her confidence in this form, for there were few predators that would trouble a Harpy Eagle.

Below Skyhawk, Howler Monkeys dived, jumping between the branches of the trees as she passed overhead. In eagle form, Quinrex suddenly realised she had not eaten a decent meal in twelve hours. Dropping down towards the canopy, Skyhawk’s sharp eyes picked up the form of a female Howler. But whilst she was preparing to take her prey, a noise from the mountain alerted her, forcing a change in course. Breaking from her descent, she resumed her climb towards the mountain peaks. Monkeys screeched and bolted, jumping into deeper protection as Skyhawk’s wings beat strongly, enabling her to change direction and rise towards the direction of the sound.

As she drew closer to the dark maul of the mountain, her eagle eyes could make out the enormous outline of Glydclaw as he moved onto a ledge at the cave’s entrance. The temperature had fallen drastically, but Skyhawk’s heavy plumage made light work of it. Peeling off to the side so as not to be seen, the eagle circled, scouting the scene to see if the entrance could be penetrated.

Meanwhile, the large spinous dragon looked around, its tail sweeping back and forth awkwardly, as it attempted to balance, its heavily armoured head moving around suspiciously.

Glydclaw’s black scales were like plates of impenetrable armour, his long body shimmering, displaying his iridescent crimson wings. His droopy eyes formed bladelike bony plates sprouting from his forehead, his spines emerging as jagged barbs stretching from his crown to his tail.

In addition to its thick, scaly skin, the creature had other weapons of protection, and while Quinrex knew that the Sword of Witherbrand could cut most materials, death would be swift from a single swipe of the dragon’s claws or tail. Once in his mouth, a victim would be crushed

and ripped apart in seconds, as his vicious, knife-like teeth aligned. The Bow of Mournfleet could locate the dragon's heart, but only an arrow tipped with a barb and forged from the same metal as the Sword of Witherbrand could penetrate its protective scales.

Kalithra had told Quinrex that she did not wish to kill the dragon, because, as with all other creatures, the balance of nature was fragile. She only wanted to borrow the crystal, but a conversation with Glydclaw, even if he could understand what she was saying, was unlikely to bode well. Travelling on the giant eagle would have been ideal, but Quinrex was unable to carry a Bodian on his back in eagle form, meaning that he was now the princess' final hope for success.

Perching above to observe Glydclaw, Skyhawk waited until the beast withdrew into his cave. Patience was a virtue the eagle had in abundance, contrary to when Quinrex was in canine form. Blessed with this ability, she waited until she heard the sound of snoring—for Glydclaw snored like the Giants of Horas themselves.

The eagle was fast, but it was her size dropping from the sky that provided her true speed. When she flew level, she was relatively slow, compared to the smaller peregrine falcon who could greatly outperform her. If only she had been one of those avian creatures now, she could be in and out of the cave before the first sands of an hour glass could fall.

Spreading her wings, she swooped downwards before rising to the level of the cave's mouth, from where she could see Glydclaw curled up inside as she made her first pass.

Where is the crystal? she wondered, deciding it would be best to land on the ledge of the cave. Stretching her talons, she came to a halt on a shelf by the outcrop from the cave's entrance, out of sight of Glydclaw. Then, creeping forwards, she turned her neck, and in the illumination of the dragon's flickering fire, she caught a glimpse of the crystal, sat on a ledge behind the dragon's sleeping form. Knowing her wings were more expansive than most raptors, she had two choices: fly in horizontally and snatch the crystal in a daring sweep, or quietly walk into the cave. But the second option would not work, as her first steps would alert the dragon to her presence.

A dragon's primary defence was its ability to breath fire, and this danger was not lost on the eagle as she perched, contemplating her next move.

The fire in the cave heated the stones flecked with iron, and Glydclaw would swallow them whole, breaking them down inside his stomach, and discharging the residue in the form of faeces. The iron could then be regurgitated, passing through a sac that produced hydrogen sulphide as it transited the creature's complex gut system. When the mixture would hit the air, the pyrophoric composition would ignite and expel a colourless gas that lit up. The process depended on having enough pyrite stones and mixing enough of the constituents for Glydclaw's needs. This could sometimes frustrate the dragon as the process could delay the production of fire on demand.

Glydclaw saw the shadow of the eagle but did not move. Instead, he lifted an eyelid ever so slightly, his eyeball revolving in a three-sixty-degree turning arc, spotting the Harpy Eagle on her perch. However, just as the dragon activated his pyrogenic system, the eagle disappeared, causing him to raise his head. Quinrex had returned to his Cadejo form and bounded at speed towards the back of the cave, snatching the crystal in his mouth and retreating behind the huge beast, ready to make a dash for the entrance. The crystal was smaller than he had expected, making it easier for him to carry.

As Quinrex moved, the dragon shifted his body in the cramped cave with its limited headroom. Noise from its insides sounded, as if a mechanical contraption had been set in motion, like the many water-wheel driven corn mills found throughout Vandrelis.

Quinrex compressed his body, bolting past the mighty dragon as it moved its tail around to block his escape. The swinging tail caught the side of the cave, and some of the rocks broke

and crumbled in chunks like coal hewn from a mine, allowing the Cadejo to avoid contact and certain death. Bounding for the entrance was going to be tricky, being able to quickly change back into eagle form now a matter of life and death. After eating, a Cadejo could change form almost instantly, but Quinrex was still hungry and knew he should have taken the Howler when he had the chance.

Without many other options at his disposal, Quinrex decided to let fate decide, *by the blessing of Erinmore*, he thought; it was now or never.

The dragon burped several times, and the air filled with the smell of eggs gone bad. If Quinrex was aware of what the dragon was doing, let alone the smell that permeated the cave, which consisted of pure poisonous hydrogen sulphide gas, he didn't show it as he focused his intent on the opening. Pushing his body forward as hard as he could, at the same time, he activated the change back to eagle form; willing himself to turn from fur to feathers as fast as possible.

Unfortunately, the change came even slower than usual, as he now plummeted from the ledge into empty space towards his impending doom. Trying his best to stay calm, he bit down on the crystal to stop it from falling.

The first flame emanating from the dragon above was short in burst and glided over Quinrex's plummeting canine form, the lack of flight saving him from the first burst, which would have ignited his fur and caused enormous damage.

Quinrex continued falling at speed and felt himself beginning to spin. The disorientation was profound and he lost track of his bearings, not being able to see Glydclaw slide out of the cave and spread his massive iridescent crimson wings.

As Quinrex spread his legs as best he could, the eagle form started to transmogrify. Feathers changed from fur, and his wings began to stabilise his descent—his canine eyesight being replaced by the eagle's telescopic focus. The dragon was gaining, forming a narrow dart-like shape to avoid air resistance, as Quinrex transformed into Skyhawk and raced forward, reaching terminal velocity. Although Quinrex was unaware of Glydclaw's flight dynamics, the dragon could travel little faster than the eagle; not least, because his weight was many times greater.

A point arrived when, even as the dragon spread his massive wing span, he knew he would be unable to reach the eagle, who could change direction rapidly. However, the fire in the mighty beast's belly was now fully fuelled and primed.

Quinrex turned across the forest canopy where he had spotted the Howler earlier, and the dragon followed, creating a shadow of fear that scattered the animals who lived in the treetops.



Kalithra, Captain Verisona, and the warrior Vendrake heard the deafening noise before they could perceive the deadly pursuit happening high above them. They had set up a temporary camp on the edge of Mahorock Forest awaiting Quinrex's return. As they looked into the sky, they couldn't quite make out the form of their companion as an eagle, however the massive form of Glydclaw was unmistakable. Verisona pulled up a collapsible telescope and saw the eagle fleeing the dragon.

'Princess, Quinrex is being pursued by Glydclaw. I can see a flame!'

'I don't think we need a telescope to know that the dragon breathes fire, Captain. By the hand of Headdon, Quinrex is in trouble.'

The three stared in horror as flames shot across the cloudless cerulean sky. Quinrex was running a dangerous gauntlet, as his eagle form swiftly descended across the tops of the trees, flying low. Whether better judgment prevailed or not, the eagle had decided to enter a gap in the forest to hide. Meanwhile, Glydclaw viewed it as an opportunity to incinerate the whole area. With vengeance foremost in the beast's mind, he didn't have time to realise that this might not be the wisest option, for the stolen crystal could become lost forever within the charred remains of the forest. As suddenly as a plume of flame erupted from Glydclaw's gizzard, he reconsidered.

Meanwhile, Quinrex hit the ground as the first flash of fire scorched the surrounding trees, all manner of creatures screeching as the fire engulfed them. Quickly changing back into his canine form allowed Quinrex to mount an escape, albeit slowly, as the fire had badly damaged his legs.

Heart-rending sounds stretched across the forest as his howls of pain joined those of the other creatures who had been caught in the inferno. The pale yellow crystal fell from Quinrex's mouth, such was his agony that gripping it was no longer possible.

Unknown to Quinrex, Glydclaw had stopped his flamethrowing retaliation and crashed into the trees in his frantic efforts to scout for the eagle. The Cadejo somehow managed to pick up the stone again and crawl away, his progress slow and painful. Thoughts of morphing into his ape apparition were dismissed as he knew this was impossible, his energy already sapped. All he could do was hope to remain out of sight of the beast that stalked him.

Kalithra's hands went to her face, her expression one of alarm. 'Did you see where he landed?'

The captain shook his head, but Vendrake replied, 'Princess, the eagle landed but a hundred yards from the edge, I'm sure I could work my way in through the thorns.'

'If we only we had the Arrows of Cythern, we could take that beast down.'

The captain's last comment was received with disdain, which showed in Kalithra's voice. 'We do not have any such arrows, so it's no good wishful thinking.'

Kalithra often wondered if Verisona had what it took to lead; he seemed young for a captain, while Vendrake was more experienced in the ways of battle. Kalithra tended to show a shrewd judge of character.

'I am going to have to go in and get Quinrex out. Firstly, we need to find the crystal, assuming Quinrex lifted it, and secondly, he's too important to leave behind.'

‘But, my lady, it’s too dangerous. If the thorns spike you, we may lose you, which is far worse than losing him.’

Kalithra had her mother’s steely resistance to stupid man-talk and ignored the comment, which Verisona clearly disliked. If Vendrake was troubled by the idea, he didn’t show it as he offered to take the princess’ place.

‘No, Vendrake, we do this together. I’ll lead with Witherbrand, and the captain can back me up with the bow. We may need to spread out to find Quinrex quickly.’

Quinrex could smell Glydclaw’s pungent breath as his body stomped, echoing through the ground with each heavy step. The dragon was none too particular about the noise and disturbance his dense, heavily armoured body made as he sought out his prey. The white coat of Quinrex might have given him away, but the charcoal colour produced by the heat and residue of burning matter had made it dark and dirty, camouflaging his fur. The crystal was in the Cadejo’s mouth, but he slipped into unconsciousness, death close by.

Glydclaw finally gave up his search and lifted into the air, disgusted and angry as he encircled the forest, ever hopeful he would catch sight of Skyhawk and retrieve the crystal.

There was a sudden rustling noise as someone crashed through the undergrowth. Quinrex lifted his head one last time and decided his time had come; thinking that the dragon had returned to finish him off.

Kalithra kneeled so she could examine her trusty companion. Seeing his damaged body, she thought him dead.

The captain’s voice grated on her nerves, ‘Your Highness, we ought to go. There’s no hope for the animal.’

Vendrake kept a neutral face, giving nothing away as he watched the officer reach down and lift up the crystal that had been at the heart of their dangerous quest. The stone had slipped out of the Cadejo’s mouth as he drifted into a coma. Even more surprising, Verisona then placed the stone in his leather pouch, believing no one had seen it.

The Cadejo’s chest barely rose, indicating to Kalithra that there was still a chance, as she reached for her Blackthorn sheath. This would be her first occasion to use the powerful healing talisman, as she recalled the Augur’s teachings.

Again, Verisona’s voice grated, ‘What are you doing, Princess?’

Ignoring the officer’s whining, she followed the Augur’s instruction, placing the caduceus across the injury. The Cadejo’s charred skin had brutally peeled back and was oozing clear fluid, and as the short Rod of Blackthorn came within inches of it, the talisman illuminated, becoming transparent and warm to the touch. Slowly, the badly damaged tissue responded, the fluid loss gradually ceasing. New skin then formed, and Quinrex’s fur grew back white and lush.

If this was not impressive enough, the internal damage was also repaired, as Quinrex’s eyes opened, the darkening sign of death in his blue eyes brightened and his tongue seemed to suck in new life as he gasped for air. Kalithra threw her arms around the Cadejo emotionally, saying, ‘I’m so glad you made it back to me, Quinrex.’

Having known the Cadejo since she was small, Quinrex had always looked out for her without complaint. After a while, Quinrex stirred, and finding his strength renewed, he stood up and looked around.

‘Where’s the crystal? I had it with me,’ he questioned.

Kalithra stood from her crouched position, replying, ‘Are you sure you didn’t lose the stone Quinrex? You had much to contend with. We saw you dive into the trees with the flames all around you.’

‘Upon the life of Erinmore, I did not let it out of my grip.’

‘Then it must be somewhere. Turning to the elite warriors, she barked urgently, ‘You two, scour the ground. The stone must be somewhere near if Quinrex says he did not lose it.’

Verisona set out to follow the princess’ command, while Vendrake was intrigued, his loyalty unexpectedly placed in jeopardy. Did he keep his captain’s secret, for the man must have had reason to hide the crystal? Or should he inform Princess Kalithra that it was hidden in the leather pouch of a man sworn to protect the Crown House of Taegora at any cost?

THE END FOR NOW... BUT READ MORE AT THE END.

The Author

Having spent his career in medicine and health, author Robert C Blyth retired to write full-time and mixes professional writing with fiction. His first novel involved nine short stories called Fatal Contracts, published first in 2021 under the name David R Tollafield and then as a second edition in 2024 under his pseudonym RC Blyth to avoid authorship confusion. His website is RCBlyth.com, and you can follow him on Twitter-X [@blyth_rc](https://twitter.com/blyth_rc)





The backstory to The Rod of Blackthorn—an opportunity to comment?

As Christmas approached, I decided to sit down and write a short story for my wife, Jill, to whom this is dedicated. Fantasy has only been a passing interest, but not for my wife, who loves stories about demons and dragons. This stirred my interest in Greek Mythology.

With only three weeks to that hallowed event and a break in writing from my other material, Blackthorn emerged. As I scratched the story out, having to dig into a plot I had not thought yet fleshed out, the Rod of Blackthorn fitted as I had crafted a wand-like Harry Potter stick in my mini workshop. I should add we had been to the Leavesden H.P. studios only a few weeks before, and her original purchase had been damaged. Having made a wooden box, I then thought I would make it less a wand and more a caduceus, the rod of healing associated with the medical symbol of Aesculus, known as the caduceus—*An ancient Greek or Roman herald's wand, typically one with two serpents twined around it, carried by the messenger god Hermes or Mercury. The rod of Asclepius is a staff entwined with a snake similar to the caduceus and remains a symbol of medicine today, while Asclepius was a Greek mythical healer.*

The job was rewarding, and my research into mythical beings revealed a bigger picture. Should my readers want more?

Here's your chance to tell me what interests you, and perhaps I'll complete the story. So, if you have enjoyed this, please do let me know. I will then sit down and write about the events that preceded Kalithra's quest and, of course, provide information about Lower Earth. Come to think of it, *what is Lower Earth, and is there an Upper Earth?* Indeed, there is so much more to tell.

This book is also available as a Kindle eBook on Amazon for immediate download.

Write to rcblythauthor@gmail.com. I love to hear from readers and hear their thoughts.



Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my copy editor, Stuart Budgen, for his kind assistance and encouragement. Distance offers no opposition to the aid he is prepared to provide.

Other Books by the Author

Fatal Contracts



Nine short stories, each with a mysterious and sometimes fatal twist based around the lack of awareness of signing contracts—a visit to a museum, a double cross for a hitman, a medical disaster, a Russian spy and more...

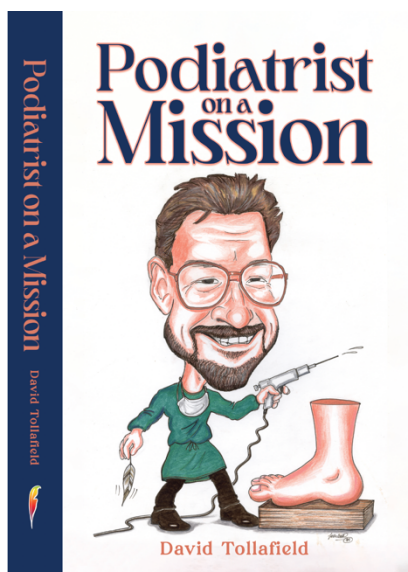
From real-life events to fantasy, Blyth researches the material that becomes the story.

Taylor Downing— popular British historian, author, and television documentary producer, writes—

It's almost impossible to see the twists coming and the author delights in revealing to the reader the most unlikely outcomes, whether it's after a visit to the London Dungeon, or in following the work of an unlikely assassin, or in transgender issues. Sudden death is never far from the pages.

Fatal Contracts is an excellent read. It's not long and always feels sharp and focused. The author has done a splendid job in exciting, amusing and terrifying his readers. Highly recommended.

Podiatrist on A Mission



Autobiographic novel

What do you do when your dreams fall apart? Faced with an unplanned gap year after a setback in his veterinary pursuits, David finds himself at the forefront of an emerging surgical field, one that challenges the conventions of the medical world. Amidst growing opposition and scepticism, many ask: Shouldn't medical doctors operate alone?

This is the tale of the birth of the field of podiatry and one man's unwavering determination. David's journey captures the spirit of the era and the challenges of pioneering change against all odds.

Blyth writes under his professional name—David R. Tollafield.

Coming in 2025

The Guardian Angel—a novella from the pen of R.C. Blyth, set in Brooklyn, New York.

Dylan Murphy bites off more than he bargains for when he carries out a practical joke on a member of a dangerous New York family, causing a chain reaction. When a contract is put out on his life, he is protected by an unknown source, but how long will his luck hold?

What is R.C.Blyth working on at present?

The Honourable Sicilian

Time never stands still for any author, but research is a passion, and Blyth travels to Sicily to pick up a story of a young shepherd who finds his father murdered by a ruthless landowner.

Love and passion embrace the story of young Tullio Chlemmo as he tries to balance life with a new family and his deep ethics about what is right. His journey becomes complicated when some wish him harm.