

The Dragon Prince and the Blazing Healer

By David Schuchardt

"I can't believe you are even considering leaving this island without Maggie!" In any other setting Philip would have been more interested in how the light of the setting sun shone upon the green fields leading up to the Northern Irish cliffs and how it shimmered in the waves beyond their shadows. The mysteries of the shadowed beach would've also sparked his curiosity, what legends or wonders might be hidden amongst the wave worn boulders. Unfortunately, he had a very angry Silver Dragon (in Celeste) to deal with not, to mention Blaze the great Dragon he was bonded to as a rider was taking the side of his mate.

"She does have a point, there are very few situations where I would even contemplate leaving my mate behind; this is not one of them." Philip looked at the large fire red and gold Dragon. Narrowing his eyes not because of the way the sun shimmered so bright off both dragons to the point where it was nearly blinding, but rather out of annoyance.

"You aren't helping" Philip said through the mental bond that he shared with Blaze then turning his gaze upon Celeste "this is not uncommon amongst humans, even when we form deep attachment to each other. We will often go our separate ways if circumstance dictates or we may simply grow apart."

"That is to use your human phrasing hogwash, not only are you assuming that such things are unheard of amongst draconic kind (which they are not) it has no bearing on the situation. You and Maggie share a bond just as I and Blaze do!" The Silver Dragon punctuated her words with a short burst of fire that lashed out mere feet from where Philip sat.

Philip was fairly sure that he was in no danger from the flames which is why he hadn't even raised his shield let alone flinched; true there were very few things in the world that would

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pierce his shielding gift, that being said the fire from the Silver Moon Dragon was quite likely one of them. As it was, he felt the rings on the left side of the chain mail shirt he wore briefly grew warmer. Since the chain mail was enchanted to protect against heat that was impressive; though for an instant he thought something on him was on fire when he saw vapor rising in the air but when he did not smell the distinct odor of burning wool or leather, he realized it was just a mist that formed after the intense heat.

"Celeste!" Blaze's thoughts lashing out angrily at the unwarranted behavior of his mate "though he might be acting like an idiot, please do not burn my rider." His head rising from the ground where he lay resting in the sunlight his eyes fixing on Celeste's as a wave of images passed between the two dragons that Philip was only vaguely aware.

As the two dragons argued Philip's thoughts wandered to the vividly memory of the first time he and Maggie had met. In a frenzied battle he, Blaze, Celeste, and their other companions against several hundred corrupted fair folk, dark goblins, and one very powerful Dark Hymn (h-U-mn) sorcerer. They arrived just in time to disrupt the ritual that would have turned Hazel into a demonic possessed dragon. The demon spirit would have trapped her soul as well as that of her rider and another victim with the power of a healer. The creature would have used this perversion of the rider's bond as a source of its strength in combination with the stolen powers of the healer so that it would never be injured. Fortunately they had arrived just in time to rescue not only Talesy and her Dragon Hazel but also Maggie. At the time a naïve young member of Doctors without Borders who had been caught in southern Africa when Xander invaded the world.

Though a healer by nature the young redhead had plenty of her ancestors fighting temper and as soon as she had been freed from her bonds had set upon the forces of darkness nearly as

ferociously as Celeste. In fact in that instant when the two had met on the battlefield a riders bond formed between them. A moment later Maggie and Phillips eyes met, he was sure beyond any doubt that a bond far deeper and stronger had been forged between them in that instant. The certainty had only grown stronger as they traveled across the entire length of the African continent, dealt with the rogue Leviathan that had been terrorizing the Mediterranean, witnessed a repeat of the great ambush in Louisburg Forrest (site of three Roman legions destruction), not to mention the adventure in London. The trouble was Maggie wasn't either aware of its existence or how deep it tied them together.

" I think your anger is misplaced Celeste" Philip said once he saw the two dragons had ceased their fierce exchange. It was only when Celeste slowly turned her head to face him again did he realize that he should just stay quiet. However, the die was already cast. "The bond between rider and Dragon is almost as strong as the one you described and yet you left her behind in her village."

"The difference" Celeste said in tones of ice that Philip knew from experience meant barely controlled rage when it came to dragons "is I'm not planning on flying another inch further without my rider, but you are actually contemplating continuing on to find a new bearer for that ridiculous white rod you found."

"That rod as you put it is in my charge until I find one worthy of wielding it, and you know full well I can't give up that task." Philip felt his iron control over his emotions slipping knowing some of them were leaking into the bond he shared with Blaze and to Celeste through the bond she shared with Blaze. Since control hadn't been working Philip began to speak with reckless abandon. "Do you honestly think I wanted to leave her there? I told her about my misgivings of the village that something didn't feel right, she didn't believe me. I told her that I

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wanted her to continue traveling with us, but she said now that she was home she was not going anywhere. She insisted that we were welcome to stay in the village. I told her how I felt; she told me she didn't feel the same way." Philip took a breath all his emotions had broken completely free of whatever control he had over them and he was sure that the heartache he felt was plain to see on his face even to draconic eyes. The understanding and reassurance he felt through the bond with Blaze and through it from Celeste as well, was proof that they now understood every moment he spent now separated from Maggie was sheer torture, worse than when his heart had been broken in his youth by one he loved and didn't love him back, worse than when the first great love of his life was taken from him by a traders blade, that was how he felt now.

"I am sorry Philip" Celeste thought to him, as her own healing gifts came to the fore trying to ease the pain he felt. "I've never heard of anyone denouncing the bond or even be unaware of its existence. I thought she was aware of it as well."

"She probably is aware of it though only in the periphery of her mind, perhaps only her subconscious." Blaze said, a philosophical tone to his words as images of others here seen sharing the bond flashed through his mind both human and others. "While it is true that no race is ever denied the riders bond once it has been forged, the bond amongst humans appears to be less common than other races and as a result is often not recognized for months or years. In fact I think I've seen a couple of instances where it has been denied outright though it was only in the short term when circumstance did not permit its acknowledgment." As he thought these words both Blaze and Celeste moved their heads closer to Philip until each one rested on both of his sides. As the reassuring warmth of their presence both physically and mentally washed over him Philip felt better though the pain remained as sharp as the moment when he walked away from Maggie not wishing to say goodbye. "I understand now why you have been repeating that phrase,

the Lord makes all things work for the good of those who love and follow him." Philip felt Celeste understanding that even though it hurt him deeply he knew it was part of a greater plan that he was only a small part of, trying to fathom it would drive even a dragon mad. The best they could do was to face the challenges placed before them and try to choose the right path. After several moments of companionable silence Blaze spoke "The situation you now find yourself is very similar to what I said before, there are few instances when I would even consider attempting to force Celeste do something she did not wish to do. It is the same for you when it comes to Maggie even if the actions she's taking wounds you so dee..."

"Philip, Celeste Help M..." The mental screen cut off abruptly stopping any words Blaze was going to think. Philip recognized that voice and the pain, anguish, and fear contained within it sent him into a blinding rage. In the split second it took for the rage to fade enough for his thoughts to return he found himself in the saddle as Blaze launched himself off the cliff using every bit of skill, strength, and gift he possessed to swiftly gain altitude; as Celeste flew towards the southern horizon straight for Maggie's village swifter than an arrow loosed from a bow. One thought was in all in their minds; who ever had hurt Maggie was going to regret it.

Brandon, Granite, Talasy, and Hazel were resting a short distance from where Philip argued with the two dragons. All of them had felt a growing tension between Celeste, Blaze, and Phillip through the entire day. So when Celeste had circled down to the seashore Brandon suggested finding a good campsite and the other three quickly volunteered to assist him. They had found a ruined castle with some outbuildings that while burned were still relatively intact. There was no indication of the castles name on any of the buildings or on the castle itself, the only sign was for the road "Dunles". They were just getting ready to start a cooking fire when they heard the telepathic scream, Brandon couldn't make out any words but the emotions were

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clear enough. He ran to the castle and up the first set of stairs he found until he reached the top of a tower. As he stepped out on the top of the tower he saw the two dragons, as shadows charging across the setting sun racing to the south.

"Philip" Brandon shouted telepathically and when no answer came he repeated it several times increasing the strength of the shout each time. Finally as the dragons grew fainter in the distance he finally heard an answer from Philip.

"Something has happened to Maggie." The brief flash of emotion that came with the psychic reply was enough to worry Brandon. He knew from long experience that when Philip was not calm and some emotion (in this case rage) was leaking through the telepathic communications; he would be unwavering in reaching his goal exactly like most dragons would be in a similar situation. It also meant that he would be extremely reckless. Turning he swiftly ran back down the tower taking the steps three at a time, as he came hurtling out the entrance he shouted "something's happened to Maggie! Philip, Blaze, and Celeste are flying back to rescue her."

Talasy dropped the arm load she was carrying and swiftly ran to Hazel where she with the fluid and graceful motion of elves leapt into the saddle. "Is there any chance we will catch up to them before they reach the village" she asked as Brandon reached Granite and quickly leapt from the ground to his foreleg and then into the saddle. At the same time she pulled her bow from the holster that held it stranded in the same motion.

"At the speed they are flying at, unlikely" came the deep rumbling reply of Granite as Brandon finished securing himself to the saddle.

"We still have to try" said Hazel in the whispering melody that was her psychic voice "in their state of mind there is no telling what trouble they'll charge blindly into."

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"It's nothing we haven't done for them before and they for us" Brandon said as he straightened in the saddle "now to the sky." The two dragons flung themselves into the air swiftly gaining altitude and turning until the sun was on their right, flying to the South with all the strength they could muster. Their rapid departure had only taken the span of a few minutes as the sun began to dip below the western horizon and yet by the time Granite and Hazel gained the altitude at which most dragons could fly with the least resistance at maximum speed; Celeste and Blaze were mere specs in the distance.

As the fog of unconsciousness slipped away, Maggie slowly became aware of her surroundings; she heard shouts and cries, the smell of smoke, then felt that she was bound to something! Her eyes flew open; she was in the village square right in front of the church on top of a pile of wood tied to a stake. The last thing she remembered before been knocked unconscious was tending to the garden at her sister's house when several of the people of the village came storming up to the cottage in a mob calling her a witch and seized her. She'd been so startled by their actions that by the time she realized the danger all she could do before one of the villagers hit her over the head was call out for Philip and Celeste.

One of the village elders stepped forward and began reading from an official document " Maggie McFarlane, you've been accused and found guilty of the charge of witchcraft, of consorting with the devil and using forbidden powers. Evidence to these charges is the fact that you have a familiars bond with one of the Devil's creatures a Dragon, and the use of foul sorcery to keep your brother-in-law from passing into his internal rest. Said charges having been witnessed by myself and Gregor McFarlane as well as being verified by Bishop Bellows" as he said their names the County Bishop and Maggie's older brother Gregor came forward and stood on both sides of the elder.

Maggie was stunned, she and Philip had explained that there was nothing demonic about Dragon's or the bond they shared with them. No matter how one interpreted the Bible it was clear that the dragons were not demonic entities and what was more they believed in and honored God as well, even though they called him by a different name. Also any of the practices that could be called witchcraft found in the Bible she could not practice even if she wanted to, her gifts were not in those areas. As with all Christian believers who had been granted the gifts she had prayed and thought long and hard for answers about her newfound abilities; and like most of them she come to the realization that they were gifts. She had not bargained for them she had not given anything up to acquire power, the gifts had been freely given to her as another might have been endowed with the ability to work metal or weave an inspiring tale of words. The only thing that was expected of her was that she would use them well and in a manner that glorified the Creator.

As for her brother-in-law, her sister's husband had been in a poison induced coma that had not been treated properly. It had puzzled her because the proper medicine to counter the toxin should be easily available to the village even in its current state, however with her gifts she is able to remove the poison from his veins and gradually increase his strength to the point where he was out of danger and should in several more days or week to wake from the coma. As the preposterous charges continued Maggie desperately searched the faces of the crowd for an signs that this was an elaborate and unamusing joke or that someone would intervene on her behalf. In some, such as her sister and mother she could see horror as they huddled behind the elder. Her younger brother and sister also stood with them fear upon on their faces even though they clearly did not fully comprehend what was going on. All of them were unable to do anything to stop what happening as one elders lieutenants stood guard over them. However, the rest of the faces were masks of hatred and fear. Maggie didn't want to believe what was happening; how could

people she had grown up with, known for most of their lives even tended to as a medical student; were now treating her as if she was the source for all the evils that had befallen them since Xander's invasion.

Finally Maggie brought her eyes back to the elder as he finished reading out the list of charges and looked up at Maggie "do you have anything to confess before the sentence is carried out?"

Maggie raised her head defiantly, she would not cry or beg For mercy as she met the hateful gaze of the elder and spoke "Philip was right; he sensed the moment he set foot in this village that it was not the place I had told him of. The village I knew in my youth would not have given into fear and hatred. They would not have burned one of their own daughters or others of their own people simply because they did not share their views or refuse to attack anyone on-site who wasn't obviously a human." Maggie looked into each face of the villagers gathered there meeting their hate filled eyes with the fiery spirit of her own. She had not wanted to believe what her own eyes and senses told her. That everything could be explained away by other possibilities, but there had been obvious signs that dwarves and elves at least lived in the village not many, just a enough to help defend the village. Also several key figures in the village who would've been voices of reason that would never willingly leave this place were not there anymore (such as her mentor Dr. Melissa McGuire), and most damning of all a sooty circle in the exact spot she was now bound.

She had not wanted to believe it but the looks of shock, shame, and pride in the crowd told her all she needed. "I should've trusted Philip, I should have trusted my own instincts instead of blindly believing that the people I remembered were the same. Instead I find a place that blames anyone who is different, who had no part in the actions that befell the world for all

the evils that have passed. A place that should have been led by wisdom and reason, instead of falling back into old traditions of fear, jealousy, and ignorance that were outlawed centuries ago" she fixed her eyes on the village elder speaking directly to him "your fear, no your hatred blinds you so much that you condemn your own daughter to death."

Enraged by her words Maggie's father seized the nearest torch and marched up to the stacked wood "Maggie McFarlane you have been found guilty of witchcraft and heresy, and are hereby sentenced to death and will be burned at the stake." With that he cast the torch onto the wood, as Maggie's mother, sister, and younger siblings began screaming for him not to, however their voices were drowned out by the rest of the village's shouts of approval.

The flames raced across the diesel soaked wood towards Maggie and would reach her within a few seconds; she braced herself for what she knew would be an agonizing death one thought filling her mind, "I wish I could've seen him one last time." The smoke filled her nostrils as she felt the heat begin to burn her skin as she closed her eyes.

"Hold fast dear one" a voice rang out in Maggie's head, one she had not thought to here again, Celeste. Her eyes flew open as the Silver Dragon came streaking out of the sky her wings creating a gust of wind so strong that it smothered the fire. Letting loose a terrifying, earth shattering roar she landed and wound her body about the stake were Maggie was bound using her own body to smother what was left of the flames as well as prevent anyone from reaching Maggie. As the terrified villagers began screaming, shouting, and seizing weapons another roar louder and fiercer shook the sky. Brilliant flames illuminated everything in the square for a moment as Blaze circled the village. All eyes were on him as he dipped for a moment gliding barely above the roofs of the nearest houses and so did not notice the figure that leapt from his back until he landed in the square with such force that a small crater was created.

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As the dust cleared the villagers saw standing there before them his face filled with rage, Philip the Dragon Prince of An-t-air, illuminated in the piercing white light of his half drawn sword. As the the villagers beheld his visage as terrifying as an enraged Dragon they could not fathom the struggle going on with in his mind, for the blade of Ubilaz Wurdiz (Evil's Fate) only glows in the presence of evil and would only strike at such a time. In this manner the sword could not be used to harm the innocent or the just. If Philip fully drew the blade he would strike down many of the people who lived in the village for the horrors they had inflicted, but he also knew many of them had only done so out of fear that had been manipulated by a few. The agony they would put themselves through once they realized the full horror of their actions would be more fitting than the swift justice of the blade. After several moments he drove the sword back into its sheath with a decisive strike.

"What more evidence do you need" shouted the Bishop "her dark champion and their demonic familiars have returned to..." His words were cut off as with blinding speed Philip moved, first striking him in the gut then as the Bishop double over seizing him by the throat lifting him off the ground.

"You insane fools" shouted his voice full of anger and contempt "I will not bother to repeat the words of truth my beloved has spoken to you this night. Instead of thinking for yourselves, you instead let this frightened and jealous man leaned you to this dark moment. You all should know better and know the difference between the actions you took and the actions our Lord in heaven would have wanted you to take!" With that said Philip threw the Bishop to the ground ripping the priestly frock from his neck! Throwing it on the ground he turned to Maggie's father "you, were jealous of the power and prestige that other more worthy souls were given over you; So much so that you orchestrated all of this treachery to do away with your rivals all to feel

the power again, as you did before all of this started. You sicken me and yet at the same time I pity you, once you were a good man I could tell that by the way the villagers look to you for guidance but more still by the love and admiration your daughter held for you." With that Phillip turned and ran to Maggie.

For a moment Maggie's father was frozen in fear or anger it was difficult to say, but then he moved and from under his cloak drew an old flintlock pistol. Cocking it, he took aim at Phillip's back. Slowly he began to squeeze the trigger, and then he collapsed crying out in pain the pistol falling forgotten from his hand as he clutched the arrow that had pierced through his right knee. A moment later Granite landed in the square right behind Phillip who was now climbing the wood pile Celeste shifting her position allowing him to reach Maggie.

"I don't want to see any of you try and do something like that" Brandon said his American accent made more pronounce with anger gesturing with a crossbow in one hand and a blunderbuss in the other. Granite growled menacingly at the crowd showing no sign of fatigue after the swift race he had flown to reach the village in time. "Those of you on the other side of this misbegotten village's square had better do as I say our else Talesy will put an arrow through you just as she did your leader though I can't guarantee shall be so kind with her aim next time." As he spoke Blaze landed on that side of the square a further discouragement to any rash behavior, while at the same time Hazel began circling the village as he had.

"You came back" Maggie said tears welling up in her eyes a thousand emotions whirling through her mind "even after what I said and did."

"Always" was all he said as he cut the ropes holding Maggie to the stake. As she staggered forward Phillip caught her and their eyes met; for an instant it was as if Maggie sat in the center of a storm of thoughts, images, and emotions that were not her own. It was exactly the

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same as when they first met and yet stronger, deeper, and with greater understanding. She now recognized what it was that had happened and with a great surge of joy she reached out with her mind touching Phillips, recognizing him the same feelings for her that she felt for him.

Confusing yet indomitable in its truth, the moment was fleeting yet it left an enduring legacy upon them not unlike what a rider and dragon share, but far deeper and intimate.

As the intensity of the emotions faded Philip and Maggie were shaken from their revelry by shouts and the sudden arrival at their side of Maggie's mother, sisters, and younger brother. As the two women tearfully embraced Maggie, she and Phillip saw the events that had just unfolded, he through his bond with Maggie even as she witnessed them through the eyes of Celeste. Maggie's mother had broken away from the guard and started running to her daughter. She was quickly followed by the rest of her family even as her eldest son and the guard moved to stop them. Their attempt was brought to an abrupt halt by the sudden arrival out of the shadows of Maggie's brother-in-law. He struck the guard in the head and as he fell took the sword at the man's waist which he in one swift motion lay across the throat of Gregor stopping him in his tracks.

"I believe you were told not to move" the young man said as he gently pressed the razor-sharp edge of steel against his once best friend's throat. "As soon as I was unconscious you, your father, and Bellows acted exactly as I feared you would" he said as his right-hand leveled the flintlock pistol that Maggie's father had dropped at the defrocked clergyman as he slowly crawled away from where he had landed in the square. "Bellows you stay right where you are" he said calmly but there was a core of iron at the heart of those words, the bishop stopped moving save for a puddle that suddenly appears on the cobblestones beneath him.

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"All of you are fools to follow these frightened and jealous men. You should have been more like those brave men and women who you butchered in this very square, instead you given into your fear just as these fools you followed. If you had taken the time as I did to actually talk with the elves and dwarves and all the others who helped defend this place, then you would've realized their beliefs and ours weren't so different; no more so than a Catholic is to Protestant. If you had only taken the time to read the Bible properly then you would've seen what the true signs of witchcraft and demonism are." The young man spoke these words harshly so that the bite of them was like a lash on the villagers.

Philip heard the entire speech taking no pleasure in the knowledge that he was correct about what happened in this village. Instead wrapping his arms comfortingly around Maggie as her sister's and mother's nods of confirmation revealed her own worst fears to be true.

"Now that everything has been taken care of I really think it is a good idea for us to be going" said Blaze with a hint of urgency directly into Phillip's mind "eventually the shock is going to wear off these people."

"Agreed" said Philip "they're going to give into their anger before their shame I think" he added directly to Blaze. Then using his gift of telepathy he spoke to all four dragons, the two other riders, also to Maggie, her mother, sisters, youngest brother, and brother-in-law; "listen up, we are leaving. Celeste I will take Maggie with me and her youngest sibling on Blaze. I need you to take her mother and sisters, Brandon, Granite can take her brother-in-law?" Philip felt some trepidation; he was not sure if Celeste was going to allow anyone but her to carry Maggie at this particular moment but on the other hand neither was he going to let her go. Beyond that however was the undeniable fact that of all the dragons she had the fewest burdens to carry at the moment and could handle the most passengers.

"No problem" was the almost instantaneous and simultaneous reply from Brandon and Granite, from where they still stood guard on one side of the square menacing the crowd. A humorous smile crossed Phillips's face for a moment, of all of his, Blaze's, and Celeste's companions on this journey these two had been with them the longest and where becoming old hands at this kind of situation. He was also aware of a muttering at the edge of his mind which he realized was a heated mental argument between Maggie and Celeste over how he had arranged their escape. It became apparent that Maggie had agreed with his decision when Celeste harrumphed, but uncurled herself from around the stake and lifted her left foreleg to serve as a step for Maggie's mother and siblings to get into the saddle. He was aware of discomfort and confusion from all of Maggie's family save her brother-in-law (who appeared to have had some experience with telepathy) however they quickly moved towards their assigned mounts.

"Once you get to the saddle each of you should find several ropes tied to it, tie it around your waist and hold on tight." Philip scooped Maggie up in his arms and out loud told her younger brother to follow him as he made his way quickly to Blaze. He quickly but gently placed Maggie on the saddle then turning scooped the young boy up off the ground and placed him in front of his sister where after she finished tying herself to the saddle did the same for him. Phillips swung himself up behind the two of them automatically grabbing and securing one of the climber carabineers attached to a rope on the saddle to the corresponding loop on his riding harness.

"Hey kid we are leaving" Brandon shouted. Philip looked over and saw that Maggie's brother-in-law had not moved; any amusement at the idea of Brandon was the same age quickly disappeared as Philip reached out with his empathic gift and felt the titanic emotional battle that raged in the young man's mind. His anger and hatred over what the people who he trusted and

loved as brothers had done; versus the knowledge that if he acted on his anger he would be no better than them and would have understood the teachings of the Lord no better himself. After a moment the latter won out and Maggie let out a breath she hadn't realized she been holding as she shook free from the vision she had seen and felt through Phillip.

"That is going to take some getting used to" she thought to Philip conveying along with it her sense of wonder and annoyance.

"Give it time beloved, remember the same thing happened when you first bonded with Celeste and it took you a few weeks to communicate with her only when you wanted to" he thought with feelings of reassurance, confidence, and humor. A moment later Maggie's brother-in-law was tied onto the saddle behind Brandon, as soon as he had a tight grip on the saddle Celeste flung herself into the air quickly followed by the simultaneous takeoff of Blaze and Granite.

A wind as strong as a hurricane filled the square as the three dragons pumped their wings furiously swiftly gaining altitude eager to be gone from the tragedy of human ignorance that was the village beneath them. After several moments they reached the same altitude at which Hazel circled and all four dragons turned to the northern sky and with swift wing beats left the village far behind them. As they flew Maggie turned to face Philip making a conscious effort not to think the words she was about to say. She looked into Phillip eyes and said three words he had been deep longing to hear from her since the time they first met "I Love You." Only after those were out did Maggie allow all her feelings to flow through their bond to Philip and once again felt his in return as he lowered his mouth to her.

"ew, they are kissing" said Maggie's little brother which was followed by draconic, Elvish, and human laughter ringing out across the northern Irish sky.