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DRAGONS OF STARLIGHT

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BRYAN DAVIS



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Blood match. The words echoed in Jason's mind as he stood at his corner of the tourney ring and gripped the hilt of his sword. Like a beating drum, the announcer must have repeated that phrase a hundred times, as if the potential for bloodletting might whip the crowd into a frenzy.

Jason scanned the two-hundred-plus onlookers. Seated in the surrounding grassy amphitheater during the warmth of midday, they offered no cheers, no applause, just a low buzz signaling a rising anticipation. Jason Masters, a peasant boy, had advanced to the finals and faced the obvious favorite, Randall Prescott, son of the governor of all Mesolantrum. And with the final round came new weapons and new rules, designed to pose a fresh challenge to a young warrior's expertise and courage.

Drawing his sword closer, Jason looked at its tip. The referee had fitted a blocking circle within a half inch of

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the end, ensuring that his jabs would not inflict a mortal wound. Of course, a blow to the face could rip out an eye, but such an attack would immediately disqualify the offender. No one wanted that to happen, no matter how much he disliked his opponent.

Randall paced at the opposite corner, looking smug as he slid his big feet across the grassy floor. Being the son of the governor, he had been provided with the best equipment and was trained by some of the finest swordsmen in Prescott's domain.

Yet not *the* finest. Jason looked up at the royal box where Governor Prescott sat. His bodyguard stood next to him, always watchful, always ready to defend the governor against attack—*the* best swordsman in the land, Jason's brother Adrian Masters. From his soldier's uniform to his polished leather boots, dark gray trousers, and flowing, long-sleeved forest green shirt, he looked very sharp, especially with the sword and belt attached to his hip. Training with him had provided Jason with all he needed to succeed this far in the tournament, but would it be enough to defeat Randall?

A young woman sat on Prescott's other side—Marcelle. She was still wearing her gray tourney britches and white shirt, both stained with sweat, and had her auburn hair tied back, supporting a laurel leaf crown. She played the part of the new adult champion quite well.

Jason tensed. "Played the part" was right. She shouldn't be the champion. If only Adrian would be as concerned about truth as he was about chivalry—

"Now hear the rules!" the referee bellowed. A tall man with a black beard and a swarthy complexion, the tourney's

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lead referee, stood at the center of the ring and looked at Jason and Randall in turn. His deep voice continued. "Honor and integrity will be your guide, as always, but in this match, the contest will end the moment one of you draws blood, and that contestant will be declared the winner. Be warned, however, that any blood drawn above the shoulders will disqualify the assailant.

"The judges will tally points, as usual, but the points will not matter in the outcome unless no one draws blood before four minutes expire. In the absence of blood, the point totals will be used to determine the winner, as in all your previous matches."

As the referee droned on about the usual rules of engagement, Jason searched the peasant section. His father and mother sat together, his father alternately cracking his knuckles and pushing back his thinning gray hair, and his mother biting the nails at the ends of her roughened fingers. Meredith, the carpenter's wife and Mother's best friend in the peasant commune, sat nearby, leaving one empty seat in between.

Jason let out a sigh. That seat was for Meredith's daughter, Elyssa, who had once been his best friend. Their friendship had waned as he began attending warriors' school and she started working at the governor's palace. It was a shame—she was really a good friend. If she were still alive, she would be cheering him on.

The referee nodded at each contestant. "The final rule is simple. All manner of cunning is allowed, but you may never leave the ring." He then backed out of the way and shouted, "Let the battle begin!"

Randall charged toward the center with his sword out in front, obviously looking for a quick strike. Jason ran to

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meet him and blocked his thrust. The two blades rang out and then screamed as metal slid against metal.

Jason pushed with his legs. Randall was stronger, heavier. Staying locked for very long would be a big mistake.

With a burst of strength, he shoved Randall back, but before he could jump safely away, Randall swiped his blade across Jason's sleeve. The material tore, and the point nicked his skin.

The crowd roared, the nobles with cheers of approval and the peasants with moans of lament.

While Randall pedaled back, pumping a fist, Jason stared at the wound. The referee ran over and grasped Jason's arm. Both studied the superficial scratch, Jason breathing heavily as he silently begged, *Don't bleed. Please don't bleed.*

He twisted his neck and found Adrian. The governor was standing and applauding furiously, while Adrian stood stoically at his side. Adrian laid a hand on his heart and mouthed, "Listen to your heart." He then moved his hand and pointed at his head, this time mouthing, "But use your brain."

Jason nodded. They had long ago mastered lip reading, finding it helpful for communicating during the Counselor's long sermons at Cathedral.

After a few seconds, the referee raised a hand and shouted, "There is no blood! Let the match continue!"

Randall stood near his corner and waved his sword. "Your turn, Masters." His voice carried a mocking tone. "Make your move."

Padding slowly toward his opponent, Jason watched his eyes. *Listen to your heart*, he repeated in his mind.

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Listen to your heart. His heart said that it was about time a peasant put one of these high-minded aristocrats in his place, but his brain said that matching muscle with Randall would be a fool's game. Like it or not, Randall was bigger and stronger. Exploiting Randall's biggest weaknesses—lack of speed and cunning—would be his only hope. And it had already been two minutes. If four minutes expired, the judges, all from the noble classes, would award Randall the win no matter how well either contestant performed.

Jason drew within a sword's lunge and stopped. Using the tip of his sword, he scratched several letters in the dirt. He then nodded at Randall and spoke in a matter-of-fact voice. "I made my move."

"What?" Randall tilted his head. "What did you do?"

"I wrote it here." Jason pointed at the marks. "Can't you read?"

Setting a hand on his hip, Randall chuckled. "Do you really think I'm going to fall for that old trick? I'm not as stupid as—" Jason lunged, jabbed Randall in the thigh, and leaped back. Blood immediately oozed from the wound and soaked his pant leg.

As the crowd roared again, Randall glared at Jason. His face flushed almost as red as his blood. The referee grasped Jason's wrist and lifted his arm in the air. "The winner and champion of the youth division!"

Jason gave Randall the traditional contestant's bow and spoke in a smooth tone. "The writing says, 'Never drop your guard.'"

Like an explosion, Randall burst from his corner and charged with a pronounced limp, shouting, "You little conniver!"

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The referee pushed Jason out of the way and caught Randall in his arms. “Control yourself, Randall. Do not play the fool in front of your father and the entire domain. The rules allowed for the cunning Jason employed, so you will have to accept the outcome with dignity.”

Still flushed, Randall drooped his shoulders and backed away.

“Your swords, please,” the referee said, holding out his hands.

Jason laid his hilt in the referee’s palm, and Randall did the same. Randall offered a quick bow and strode from the ring. Barely limping now, he stalked through a gap in the amphitheater’s circle, allowing him to quickly duck out of sight.

“Jason Masters!”

Jason turned toward the voice. Governor Prescott stood in the ring, holding a crown of green laurel leaves, Adrian and Marcelle at his side. Wearing a grim expression, Prescott extended the crown with both hands. “Bow, please.”

Keeping his eyes on Adrian, Jason bent at the waist. With his lips thin and tight and his cheeks flushed, Adrian looked embarrassed. Had Marcelle said something that wounded his pride?

When he straightened, Jason mouthed the words, “What’s wrong?”

“Ask me later,” came the silent reply.

“And now . . .” Prescott spread out his arms, laying one on Jason’s shoulder and one on Marcelle’s. “Let us honor the warrior champions in the adult and youth divisions!”

The peasants stood and cheered, while the aristocrats sat and applauded politely. Jason guessed they were not

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excited about Marcelle's victory. Even though she was the daughter of a nobleman, she had never been popular with the elite. Her outspoken ways saw to that.

She took Jason's hand and shook it warmly. "Congratulations, Jason." She glanced back and forth between him and Adrian. "It was a pleasure to watch a son of Edison Masters do battle in the final round. I'm glad to see that you're courageous enough to face an opponent who might be able to defeat you." With a final smile directed at Adrian, Marcelle walked out of the ring and into the crowd descending the amphitheater steps.

Adrian set a hand on Jason's back, his fingers flexing. No doubt he was angry. "You'd better go home as soon as you can, Jason. I'm sure Mother and Father will want to congratulate you."

Jason turned just in time to see his parents leaving. Of course, there was no law against peasants coming into the ring, but approaching while the governor stood there would be frowned upon.

While Governor Prescott spoke to an elderly noble, Jason leaned close to Adrian and whispered, "Will you be home for a while, or are you going out on one of those dragon-hunting missions again?"

"Shhh!" Adrian nudged Jason with his elbow. "I'll meet you at home this evening. We have a lot to talk about."

"Okay. I'll see you then." As Jason walked between two sections of grass-covered seating areas, he took the crown of laurels from his head and looked at it. Somehow it didn't feel quite right, like something was missing. Sure, it was great being recognized as the best young swordsman in Mesolantrum, but having matching crowns with Adrian would have been a lot better. If only he hadn't withdrawn!

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As Jason passed a massive oak, two male peasants huddling under the boughs suddenly stopped their whispered conversation. Jason nodded, recognizing them as two of Adrian's friends from another commune. They nodded in return. Something made of parchment protruded from the front pocket of the closer man.

Quickly turning his head, Jason strode on. Most of Adrian's friends were believers in the Lost Ones and the dragon world, and the hidden parchment likely meant that a new issue of the *Underground Gateway* was circulating. That would explain the whispers. Since the newsletter had been forbidden by the governor, the believers never openly talked about it. Important or not, the paper wasn't safe to carry around.

"Safe," Jason muttered to himself. With the exception of the tournament, all of life had been too safe. Work, study, eat, sleep, and then do it all over again the next day. What a boring existence! But slaying dragons? Rescuing slaves? Now that would break up the monotony.

He glanced again at the men. Both had turned their backs to him. Were they reading the newsletter? If they had a copy, might Adrian have one?

Jason let a smile grow on his face. Even if the stories were nothing more than fairy tales, just reading them would take him on an adventure, something that would make his sword training feel worthwhile. So far his life had been nothing but lessons, training, tournaments, and, of course, his tasks in the commune. Since the governor allowed one guardian warrior in each commune, being chosen to train for that duty was supposed to be a great honor, but what had all the hours prepared him for? To

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chase away an occasional wolf ... or something more exciting?

Jason picked up his pace and hurried toward home. The answers couldn't come soon enough.



Koren blinked open her eyes. As she lay on her thin mat, her tired muscles complained about the previous day's labors, hauling felled trees so the men could build new rafts for the stone movers. Such labor was usually reserved for the young men, but they had been called to the number two mining pit to help the older men open an especially productive vein, so the stronger girls had been summoned for raft duty.

In the glow of a single candle burning in one corner of their cramped room, she looked at Natalla and Petra, her fellow orphans, still sleeping on their mats between her and Madam Orley. They, too, were exhausted. Madam, of course, was too old to help with the trees, but she had completed the girls' labors while they were gone. At her age, that was quite a task.

Clenching a fist, Koren sat up. What those slave-driving monsters wouldn't do to get their precious pheterone! Even whipping young girls to get the last measure of strength from their worn-out bodies!

She cradled her chin in her hands and sighed. None of that mattered. Slave drivers or not, they were in charge, and she and the other humans had no choice but to obey them. Dawn would arrive in less than an hour, and chores wouldn't wait. Arxad was more patient than her previous masters, but his expectation that slaves should obey

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promptly was the same. He would want his breakfast on time.

Koren crawled over to Natalla's mat and shook her. "Wake up. It's time to get to work. Arxad will want fresh meat this morning."

"Mmmm?" Natalla rolled to her stomach and hid her face. "Tell him to go out and kill a squirrel."

"Madam purchased two stags from the merchant last night." She shook Natalla again. "We have to butcher them before reading time."

Natalla's pillow muffled her voice. "Read now. Butcher later. I'm listening."

Rolling her eyes, Koren reached under her own pillow, withdrew a small book, and laid it open in her palms. She flipped to page forty-one and, keeping her voice low, read her two paragraphs out loud, glancing at Natalla every few seconds to make sure she was listening. When Koren reached the end, she repeated the final sentence, "You will recognize love when you see someone sacrificing himself for the sake of a pauper."

Koren shook Natalla yet again. "Were you listening?"

Natalla sat up, grinning. "You will recognize love when you see someone sacrificing himself for the sake of a pauper."

"You clown." Koren shoved Natalla's foot with her own. "But do you know what it means?"

"I think so." Natalla's brow bent. "Are we paupers?"

"Of course not." Koren picked up a hairbrush from a nearby desk and pointed it at Natalla. "Except for the promoted slaves, we have one of the best Assignments possible."

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“Then who is a pauper?”

As she brushed her hair, now down to the middle of her back, the way Arxad liked it, Koren let her mind wander from home to home, thinking about all the possible Assignments on Starlight. Finally, her thoughts drifted outside to the walled-in fields of dry grass and pebbly soil where the unfortunate children toiled while waiting for the Traders or the Separators to decide their fate. With a sigh, she said, “The cattle children are paupers.”

“So we’re supposed to sacrifice for them?”

Koren tapped on the page with her brush. “That’s what it says.”

“But how? How can a village slave help someone in the camp?”

Koren closed the book and caressed the old leather cover. “I’m not sure, but someday I’m going to find a way to help them. Someone has to.”

“You’ll get in trouble.”

Koren grinned. “Only if I’m caught.”

“I think I have it memorized,” Natalla said, reaching for the book. “Stephan is next. He’ll memorize his part quickly. You can count on that.”

Koren laid the book in Natalla’s hands with a mingled sense of relief and loss. The book of the Code was a precious thing, and while in her possession it was her responsibility. If her master found it, every human on Starlight would lament its destruction. And keeping it out of Arxad’s sight for much longer wouldn’t be easy.

As her fingers slid away from the treasured book, Koren made a face. “Tell your brother that if the bees are hostile, I might need some help today.”

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“Don’t get stung!” Natalla swatted at imaginary bees flying around her head.

“I won’t.” Koren stood and hoisted Natalla to her feet. “Come on. I have an idea.”

“An idea? What?”

“The beehives are near the cattle camp. Maybe I can sneak a meal inside, at least a hunk of bread.”

“But there are dozens of children,” Natalla said, “and you might get trapped in there.”

“I know, but if we’re going to sacrifice for the paupers, we need to start somewhere, and helping them one at a time might be the only way.”

TWO

Jason stared at the message flashing on the side of the silvery tube. *Deposit genetic material for access.*

Now this was different. Why would Adrian have a Courier's message cylinder concealed under their bedroom floor? Marcelle wouldn't be communicating with him, not after Adrian's latest refusal to battle her in a tournament. And she certainly wouldn't encrypt it with a genetic identification filter. She wasn't one to worry about who heard what she had to say.

Kneeling as he held the tube, Jason looked at the hole in the floor he'd made while looking for the newsletter. Adrian often kept a copy hidden under the wooden panels, but a Courier's tube was used only for official communications from Governor Prescott or his staff. Surely Prescott would have nothing to do with the covert operations of the Gateway.

Jason rose and looked out the door. The hall was empty. Now, with harvesting and school hours finished

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for the day, Adrian would return from the castle soon. He wouldn't mind that his brother had been snooping around for the latest newsletter. After all, Adrian had long wanted Jason to accept the teachings of the Gateway and join their ranks, but maybe this tube was meant to be secret. Yet why would that be? Since Adrian was the governor's ceremonial bodyguard, he wouldn't have to hide official communications at home. And who could have sent it?

Shaking his head, Jason laid the tube back in the hole. There was no doubt about it; Adrian's secretive ways had shifted from abnormal to bizarre.

Jason scanned the room, letting his gaze drift from the arched entry to the two thin sleeping pads on the wooden floor. Without pillows or blankets, the beds, if anyone would call them that, had only wadded blue sheets on top, not much protection from the cooler nights that season three had recently ushered in.

As if on cue, a breeze blew in from an open window, brisk, damp, and smelling of wood smoke. Jason stepped over the beds and stuck his head through the window. Outside, a thin mist veiled the governor's castle and the forested hill it sat atop. Somehow the white curtain made the castle seem distant, as if it would take more than the usual hour to make the journey on the forest path and up the grassy slope.

At the foot of the hill, the fog completely shrouded Jason's two-story school. It had been clear earlier in the day. Perhaps the quick change portended a late-night storm. The smoke in the air proved that many were preparing for a cold, wet night.

A loud *thwack* caught his attention. To the right, his father swung an axe and split a short log down the middle,