

ZONDERVAN

Warrior

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ursed by blindness, Zena shuffled on her knees—reaching, groping—a beggar stretching out empty hands into the hated void. Oh, yes, it was blindness, but not the indiscriminate shackling of innocent eyes by a careless creator. Hers was a wretched, calculated blindness inflicted long ago by the accursed Starlighter, the selfsame Cassabrie who had delayed the arrival of the prophesied hatchling ... until now.

The black egg lay near. Its presence—close, warm, alive—beckoned. The prince within the stony shell called with an inaudible voice, a plea that rode the winds of sensation, a yearning for intimacy. She would provide sympathy, as always. Souls trapped in darkness often cry out for the solace of another lonely prisoner, each one hoping for the day of liberation. Perhaps her role as comforter would reap rewards even beyond the benefits she sought.

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Her fingertips brushed a dimpled surface. Chill bumps raced across her skin as she purred, “There you are, my darling!”

She reached for the velvet case in the pocket of her silky gown, withdrew the Starlighter’s finger, and set the tip on the shell. Ah! The connection brought a new icy chill. Such joy! It was just a finger, to be sure, but it meant so much more. That vile girl had paid for her deed, and she had paid dearly. The great Starlighter had lost her precious perfection and now lent her missing digit to a dragon who was prophesied to be born handicapped. What a delicious irony that her finger provided the means to instruct the unborn prince about the history of Starlight and inform him of his glorious future.

The chill continued, in spite of the heat in the Basilica’s cavernous incubator room. Five paces away, a circle of fiery fountains soared up from the floor and splashed against the marble ceiling high above—a protective fence of flames that whipped the air into a hot, whooshing swirl.

As Zena held the finger in place, the cold sensation eased, replaced by a surge of warmth that sizzled into her body, the sign of connection with the dragon youngling inside. Her blindness faded, and the black shell came into view, reflecting her ivory skin, slender face and hands, and long black dress. Propped on a nest of soft pillows, the egg shifted, giving evidence of the life within.

“My prince,” she whispered, “can you hear me?”

The finger quivered for a moment, then became still. As she waited for a response, the shadow of a dragon enveloped her in winged darkness. Zena resisted the urge to tense her muscles. Magnar’s visits had become

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more frequent, and his silent approaches had too often given him the advantage of catching her off guard. The noise from the flames masked the sound of his wings, and his ability to pass through the fountains unharmed had proven him to be the most powerful dragon in the world. His cooperation remained essential.

Keeping her focus on the egg, Zena spoke with a steady voice. "I will have news in a moment."

Magnar thumped his tail on the floor, impatient, as usual. Zena let her lips stretch into a satisfied smirk. Or perhaps he was uneasy about the finger she had cut from the Starlighter's hand so many years ago. For all the bravado he displayed as king of the Southland dragons, he did not cope well with trivial reminders of the death sentences he had ordered.

When the quivering resumed, a low voice rode the Starlighter's bone-thin finger and penetrated Zena's mind. *I hear you. Is everything prepared?*

"All is ready," she said out loud. "Magnar is here to witness your emergence, and once he verifies that you are, indeed, the prophesied king, he will abdicate as planned."

Magnar's skepticism is excusable. Very few kings are willing to relinquish power to a promise.

Zena lifted the finger and set it back in its case, gazing at the wrinkled skin's almost imperceptible glow. Another precious moment of clarity had been spent. How many more remained before the finger's power died away and permanent blindness set in? Fewer than before; that was the only certainty.

She blinked, still able to see clearly. This brief view of the visual world would soon fade, but likely not before the

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historic birth of the next dragon king. Seeing him emerge had dominated every dream, and now all her years of service would finally bear fruit. The triumph of his kingdom would bring her restored vision. The prince had promised it, and she would do everything in her power to see his rule expand throughout all of Starlight.

The black egg tilted to one side and leaned for a moment before rocking upright on its nest. A slight crackling sound reached her ears, barely audible amidst the rush of flames.

“The time has come.” Still on her knees, Zena closed the case’s lid and slid it into her pocket. She then opened a panel in the floor and turned off the fountains. As the flames shrank away and the breezy rush settled, she caressed the egg’s shell, pausing on a tiny crack near the top. “The king will hatch soon—perhaps minutes.”

With a beat of his wings, Magnar scooted closer, extended his long neck, and sniffed. “The crack is deep enough to allow his scent to escape. It will not be long now.”

“Have you decided whether or not to tell his mother?”

“She must not know until I give the order. Her exile is deserved and will remain intact. If this prince is indeed the prophesied one, it will not be beneficial to have another powerful dragon as his ally.”

“If that is your wish.” Zena wrapped her arms around the egg, making her loose sleeves ride up past her elbows. Intertwining her fingers on the opposite side, she laid her cheek on its surface, letting her hair drape its reflective shell. As she bathed in its purple aura, she sighed. “For centuries we have waited. The day has finally arrived.”

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“You never lost faith,” Magnar said, “though many others have.”

“True. I am not shy about my own loyalty. I deserve accolades.” Reaching out a hand, Zena stroked Magnar’s claw. Years ago, he would have recoiled at her forward manner, but now he didn’t even flinch. His scales felt warm, reflecting their fiery appearance. With her vision still somewhat intact, his elegant draconic form stayed in view. His long, sleek neck curled like an adder ready to strike, and his ears, short and pointed, rotated as if searching for a lost sound. His backbone spines bent slightly toward his lengthy tail, giving the appearance of swift movement, as if blown back by the wind.

“What do you think?” she asked. “Will his handicap be obvious? Perhaps something so crippling that other dragons will be loath to accept him as their new king?”

“If the prophecy is true, he will be able to quell any uprising of potential usurpers among us.” As he drew his claw away from her hand, his scaly brow dipped low. “Or human invaders.”

Zena looked into Magnar’s eyes—scarlet, pulsing, furious. His anger over the release of Jason and the new Starlighter still scalded his temper, and his desire to pursue the escaped humans consumed him. He was a beast lunging against the bars in a cage of his own making. “Have you tested the barrier recently?” she asked.

“Less than an hour ago. As long as the Starlighter remains to the north, she is out of reach.”

“When the prince emerges,” Zena said as she lifted her cheek from the egg, “he will provide guidance concerning the Starlighter. Since Koren threatened to kill the

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youngling, perhaps he has given up on luring her into servitude. If the prince orders her execution, then it might be safe for you to travel beyond the great wall and bring her to justice.”

“A guess is all you have.” Twin plumes of dark smoke rose from Magnar’s nostrils, and his voice deepened. “If you are wrong, and the Starlighter ruins our plans, my wrath will be speedy and furious, beginning with a certain priestly dragon and ending with a hatchling prince and his blind guardian.”

Zena raised a rigid finger. “Stay your fury for another few hours. If your faith remains steadfast, you will be given what you have coveted for so long.”

“Again, a guess on your part. Every moment we wait separates us further from the Starlighter and her companion. If she arrives safely in the Northlands and finds the star, all could be lost.”

“She is ignorant. Without the prince, she can neither harm Exodus nor resurrect it.”

“The star reveals its own secrets. She might be ignorant, but she is not a fool. It will not take her long to piece the puzzle together.”

“Fear not. We still have time.” Zena petted the top of the egg. “Do not be shy, my love. The shell has cracked. You need only to break through. Then you will be able to assume a throne of power from which you will rule this world.”

After a few seconds of silence, the egg vibrated in time with a pecking sound. The crack lengthened, then widened. A sharp black claw protruded near the top of the egg, almost invisible against the shell’s surface. It disap-

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peared for a moment before breaking through again at a lower point. Soon, a jagged-edged fragment dropped to the pillows, and the two halves of the egg fell away from the center, revealing a black conglomeration of scales and twisted body parts.

The bundle swelled. Ever so slowly, a pair of wings unfurled, and a head emerged from a coil of neck and limbs. A pair of scaly eyelids blinked, briefly veiling two blue eyes, clouded and without defined pupils. They glowed as if embedded with a phosphorescent dye. As the newborn dragon scanned the room, the glow passed across Zena, then returned to hover over her. Again he spoke to her mind. *Greetings, my friend.*

Smiling broadly, Zena extended her hands. “Shall I carry you, my noble king?”

Not yet. I must test my abilities, including my voice and motor skills.

With every phrase, the youngling’s mouth had remained still, yet his words came through clearly, even without the Starlighter’s finger. Apparently the shell had hindered his telepathy powers, and now he could communicate freely with her, a benefit of their spiritual attachment.

When the young dragon stretched out, Zena looked him over. He appeared to be of normal size for a newborn, perhaps five feet long from the tip of his tail to the top of his head. His wings were well-formed, as were his forelegs and hind quarters; no sign of handicap in his body structure at all. He differed from other younglings only in color, jet black instead of reddish brown, with blue eyes instead of yellowish orange.

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“I am ...” The newborn’s voice squeaked as he spoke in the dragon language. He coughed twice and spat out a wad of thick liquid before trying again. “I am Taushin.”

“A lovely name.” Zena clapped her hands. “You are draconic perfection.”

“He has an impressive form,” Magnar said. “Classic dragon beauty in every way. Yet it is his handicap that will prove his kingly right, and I see no obvious deformity.”

Taushin swung his neck. His light beams drifted across the bigger dragon and toward his face, halting at his eyes. For a moment he appeared to be deep in thought, then his ears perked up. “I have found a new sense of perception and am now comprehending my surroundings through Magnar. Why do I not have this ability myself?”

“How strange.” Zena looked into Taushin’s glazed eyes. Even though her own vision had already dimmed, the truth was evident. “You are blind.”

“Blind?” Taushin repeated. “You have mentioned this label in describing yourself.”

“Sometimes I can see shapes and shadows,” Zena said, “and sometimes I am totally without vision, but I have overcome my lack of eyesight. My other senses are more acute.”

Blinking, Magnar turned away from the probing glow. “So that is his handicap—blindness. Truly this is severe enough to fulfill the prophecy.”

Taushin’s expression turned sour. “Zena, you feared a bodily deformity of limbs or wings, but I suspect that this is worse. Still, I would not be blind if I had a different companion, one who could see. I could look through her eyes.”

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“I can only beg your tolerance,” Zena said. “I promise upon my life to serve you with every skill and talent I possess. If not for that Starlighter . . .” She tightened her jaw. Her eyesight had been stolen long ago by Cassabrie, but Cassabrie had paid the price with great suffering and death. There was no use airing once again a story that never failed to make her boil.

“Yes, you told me about Cassabrie.” Taushin lowered his eye glow to the floor. “You have also mentioned Koren. She is a Starlighter as well. She could serve as my eyes.”

Zena stroked his neck, pressing her fingers in as deeply as his armor would allow. “Serve as your eyes? But, my liege, only hours ago she threatened to kill you.”

“An empty threat, I assure you. When I call for her, she will return.”

“She is dangerous,” Magnar said. “She has the power to hypnotize any dragon who watches her stories come to life.”

“So I have been told.” Taushin blinked again, momentarily shutting off the blue rays. “Perhaps a dragon who cannot watch her stories will be immune.”

“I see your point. An intriguing advantage.” Magnar averted his gaze and appeared to be looking at the hole in the ceiling, an exit for flying dragons. “If you are the prophesied king, then you have been born with a message for me. When you deliver that, and I deem it to be adequate, I will be satisfied and abdicate my throne.”

“As if you could stop me from taking it.” Taushin smiled, exposing two razor-sharp fangs. As his lips relaxed, hiding the fangs, his voice altered to a deep register, mysterious in tone and bearing a hypnotic cadence. “Fear not, Magnar.

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As your father promised, the key to the portal will come to you, carried by a girl from Darksphere. Yet, beware. Although she appears to be nothing more than a ragged refugee, she possesses great gifts akin to those of a Starlighter. You must not underestimate her.” After a short pause, he added, “Zerrod has spoken.”

“Zerrod?” Magnar’s ears perked up. “How could you know my father’s name?”

“Perhaps now you are convinced that I am, indeed, the new king.” Taushin’s eyes shone bluer and brighter than ever. “Before you leave, I must ask you to do something for me.”

Magnar bowed his head. “As always, I am at your service.”

“Call for a gathering of dragons and humans alike.” Taushin sat up high on his haunches with a wing bent across his chest. “I will present myself to them this very evening at the Zodiac. Dragons and humans alike will welcome the dawning of a new day, an era that has no need for slaves.”

“Perhaps. At least until they learn what those words mean.” Magnar looked up at the hole again. “Our search for the dragon assassins should be complete by then, so everyone will be available.” After bowing again, he flew upward in a tight spiral and through the opening.

As soon as Magnar disappeared, Zena stroked Taushin again. Nearly blind once more, she sighed. “Are you certain of your decision to call Koren? Are my services insufficient?”

He arched his back, apparently enjoying the strenuous massage. “You are a benefit beyond all estimation, but you cannot give me sight.”

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She thrust her hand into her pocket and withdrew the velvet box. Both hands trembling, she snapped it open and grasped the Starlighter's finger. Her eyesight immediately began to clear, as always. "Look through me now," she said, unable to keep her voice from shaking. "You will see. I can serve you as well as Koren can."

Taushin looked into her eyes for a moment, then turned aside. "Yours is an aided vision that will eventually fail. Why should I rely on the recipient of light when I can have the source?"

She brushed away a tear. "I . . . I understand. You must have the best servant possible. Yet, if I may be so bold, there is no substitute for loyalty. She of the green eyes and red hair will not soon be persuaded to worship you as I do. Cassabrie could not be tamed, so I expect the same from Koren. And Cassabrie may yet create a stir. I have not told you this, but her spirit lives on. I saw it myself."

Taushin's ears flattened, and a reddish hue tinted his eyes' glow. "I assume you have not yet found the body from which you cut that finger."

"Not yet." She caressed one of his wings. The leathery texture felt good against her skin. "I have not been able to prove my theory, but I strongly suspect that Arxad knows where it is. If you question him, he might—"

"There is no need to question Arxad. From what you tell me, he would never reveal secrets that will bring harm to his precious humans. I will locate Cassabrie's body myself. Even now I feel its presence. It is close, perhaps even within these walls. If we are able to obtain it, we will have the ultimate bait to lure the spirit of Cassabrie into our grasp. With her and Koren working together, nothing

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can stop us from resurrecting the Northlands star or from dominating every inhabited world.”

“Two Starlighters?” Zena said. “How can we restrain such power? How will you coerce them to do your will?”

“Koren is easy prey. I have read her mind, and I know her weakness, a soft spot we will have no trouble exploiting. Cassabrie, however, will not be so easily persuaded.”

Zena held the finger in front of her eyes. “Trust me. Cassabrie longs for restoration. Even if we never find her body, we can lead her to believe that we have it. With this bait, perhaps we can control her as well.”

Taushin’s blue rays penetrated Zena’s eyes and reflected back at the finger. “As you said, there is no substitute for loyalty. Who else could conjure such a deceptive scheme?”

Zena smiled, her lips trembling. “And our schemes have only just begun.”



Balancing on vine-tied logs, Jason pushed a steering pole into shallow water and guided his raft toward a moonlit bank on the right. Koren slept curled on her side, in spite of the northbound river’s quickening current. A few hours earlier, they had anchored their rickety craft using a vine and stone and then dozed atop the river, hoping the water offered protection from any wild beasts that might be roaming the shores. Although those hours passed without incident, Jason had awakened many times, pain from the head wound Magnar had inflicted throbbing in time with his heartbeats, and his hypersensitive ears alerting him to every strange noise. After the fifth time a loud owl-like hoot sent his hand

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flying to the hilt of his sword, he decided to get up and try to make some progress in spite of his weariness.

He touched the wound with a finger. The bleeding had stopped, but the pain raged on. Like a seasoned warrior, he would have to ignore it and press forward.

Koren, on the other hand, seemed undisturbed. With her head resting on her hands and her Starlighter cloak covering her body from neck to ankles, she appeared to be as comfortable as if she were lying on a feather-stuffed mattress and satin sheets. Even when an occasional splash misted her hair, she merely fidgeted. This Starlighter, as she called herself, had clearly exhausted every ounce of energy.

When the front end of the logs bumped against the shore, Jason gave the pole a final shove, pushing them higher on the sandy bank and making the raft tilt toward the river. Even then, Koren didn't budge.

He knelt close and listened, trying to tune out the sounds of running water behind him, a talent he had learned from his brother Adrian. As Koren drew breaths in a steady rhythm, her eyelids twitched, making tiny droplets glisten on her delicate lashes. The bright moon, Trisarian, had passed its zenith but floated high enough to illuminate her features—a small nose on a face as smooth as silk, hair so fiery red it seemed that the mist should sizzle on contact, and thin lips posed in a slight pucker, somewhat dry and peeling from her slave labors in the heat of the day.

He set his hand inches above her hair. It seemed a shame to wake her, especially after witnessing the deeds that had spent her energy. Her amazing storytelling gifts

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allowed her to create ghostly characters who acted out a tale that recalled the capture of humans from Jason's home planet, Major Four.

In the story, the humans' brave leader, Uriel Blackstone, resisted enslavement, escaped, and returned home through a portal deep within a mine where slaves drilled for pheterone, a gas that dragons require for survival. Back on his home planet, Uriel tried to mount a rescue, but no one believed him. In fact, the authorities accused him of killing the Lost Ones, as Uriel called them, and they confined him to an insane asylum where he spent the rest of his life.

Because of Koren's storytelling, Magnar, the dragon who had captured the Lost Ones, became hypnotized, which allowed Jason to purloin a key that unlocked Koren's chains. After some shrewd negotiating, Arxad flew them to this river, and, after providing counsel to travel to the Northlands where a helper awaited, he returned to the dragon village, leaving them on their own.

Jason moved his hand away from Koren's head. It would be better to let her recharge her dragon-charming gift. If not for her ability, they would both likely be dead. They could wait a little while longer, at least until—

Koren sucked in a breath and shot to a sitting position. Holding her hands against her heaving chest, she stared with wide eyes. "I can ... I can feel him ... like a fire burning inside."

"Him?" Jason met her gaze. "Who?"

After taking a deeper breath, she swallowed. "The prince. The dragon in the egg. I hear his voice. I feel his presence."

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Using a cup he had fashioned from leaves, he dipped out a little water from the river and handed it to her. “How do you know it’s the prince?”

After taking a drink, she slid her hand into his and clutched it tightly. Her green eyes looked like copper fire in the moonlight. “While I was chained next to the black egg, he spoke to my mind, almost like he was inside me. It’s the same now.”

“What’s he saying?”

Koren withdrew her hand and looked southward toward the village, separated from them by countless miles and the great wall that, with aid from a mountain range to the south, hemmed in the dragons’ realm. Her tone altered to a stretched-out, ghostly cadence. “Come back to me, Starlighter. I am Taushin, the newborn prince and soon-to-be king. Together, you and I can break the tyranny and help your people find liberty.”

“Taushin?”

She nodded. “I’ve never heard that name before.”

He jabbed the pole into the ground. “No matter what he says, he’s a dragon, so he’s not on our side.”

She shifted her gaze to her lap where she threaded the leaf cup through her fingers. “I know, Jason. I know.”

He bent lower to catch a glimpse of her face, now pensive and confused. “You don’t *want* to go back, do you?”

“Of course not. It’s just that ...” She let out a deep sigh and looked up at the moon. “If he really does want to help us, we’ll never find out.”

Jason stood upright and reached for her. “Better to stay the course for the Northlands and find the person Arxad mentioned.”

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When she grasped his hand, he pulled her up and helped her step to solid ground. She nudged the raft with the toes of a bare foot. “Why did you bring us to shore?”

“Arxad mentioned a waterfall. I think I hear it, and the water’s getting rougher.” He picked up a pumpkin-sized cloth bundle, food Arxad had supplied, and walked out onto a dry grassy field. He stopped and scanned the moonlit expanse, a fairly flat terrain. “We’ll have to go on foot.”

Koren joined him, yawning and stretching. “Did you get any sleep?”

“Some. A hooting bird kept waking me up.” While attaching the food bundle to his belt, he looked back at the river. “But I had a strange feeling that something else lurked out there, something that watched us, waiting for us to come to shore. So I decided to forget about sleeping and ride the river until that feeling went away.”

She slid her fingers around his arm. “Then we’ll have to find a safe place to sleep, maybe in some bushes.”

“Not yet. We’ll sleep during the day. March while it’s night. We don’t want a dragon patrol to spot us.”

Koren looked up at the moon. “Trisarian is so bright, if the dragons sent a patrol, even at night they would probably see—” Her head tilted to the side. “How strange!”

“What?” Jason followed her line of sight. A cloud bank drifted close to the moon, the leading edge reaching toward it with gray fingers. “The clouds are strange?”

She wrinkled her brow. “It rarely rains in the lowlands, so clouds are usually confined to the mountains. I have seen them veil Trisarian before, but not until later in the cool season.”

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“Then we’re in luck. The darker the better.” Turning slowly, Jason scanned the area again. Soon, the landscape would be shrouded, so he had to take in as much visual information as possible. Now his confident remark about darkness seemed premature. The feeling that something lurked returned, pricking his senses. It was out there somewhere. Would darkness embolden the creature? Give it an opportunity to attack?

As a breeze kicked up, Jason inhaled the air, moister than before and carrying a variety of odors—grass, mold, and . . . and something else, something wild and bestial. Closing his eyes, he allowed his sense of smell to hone in on the wild odor’s source—to the east, out in the field, maybe a stone’s throw away. If only he had his father’s amazing sense of smell. He and Adrian had inherited a portion of it, but no one could identify a scent as well as Edison Masters could.

Jason opened his eyes and looked in the odor’s direction. Now darkening with each passing second, the field resembled a dim ocean, with the tops of the grass stalks undulating in the wind. Dozens of small trees dotted the landscape, and many of them swayed as well. Any one of the stationary shadows could be the stalker. Perhaps a carnivorous beast lay low in the grass, relishing the opportunity to taste human flesh.

Jason grasped the hilt of his sword with one hand and reached for Koren with the other. “Let’s go,” he whispered. “We’ll get as far as we can while it’s still light enough to see.”

With the river on his left and the field on his right, Jason hurried toward the north. His sword whipped his leg, and the food bundle bounced, forcing him to travel

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slowly. After a minute or so, he released Koren's hand, hoping to secure his baggage and quicken his pace, but she soon began to fall back, limping.

He halted at a copse of bushy trees and waited for her to catch up. Although she was only a few steps behind, if not for her white dress and flowing cloak she would have been invisible in the failing moonlight.

The river's roar increased, signaling their nearness to the waterfall and forcing him to speak above a whisper. "Are you hurt?"

She lifted a leg and showed him her bare foot. "There are sharp stones in the grass. I think it's bleeding."

"That's not good." He knelt and held her foot, small and narrow, with rough calluses on the sole. Blood oozed near her heel from a thumbnail-length cut, but its depth was impossible to determine. "I'd let you wear my shoes," he said, "but they're way too big. Maybe I could wrap it with something."

"That would be helpful."

"Let's duck under the trees." He led her into the copse, nothing more than a tight semicircle of tall shrubs.

She sat on a patch of grass, her leg extended. "What do we have to wrap it with?"

Jason scanned the field beyond the shrubs. If a predator crept out there, it could approach without being seen. "We have this." He unfastened the food bundle from his belt and sat next to her. As he spread the cloth out on the grass, he kept glancing at the field. Maybe if they ate their fill and left some for the creature, it would be satisfied. Then again, it might follow them in search of more. Perhaps it could track the scent of Koren's blood.

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“Let’s go ahead and eat,” he said, trying to keep his voice confident. “We need the energy, and I can use the cloth to wrap your foot.”

“I suppose you’re right.” She winced, as if her own words scraped her senses.

“What’s wrong?”

“Taushin. His call is more urgent. He says I’m in mortal danger. If I come back to the great boundary wall, a wolf pack will guide me safely to him. Then I can choose an attendant and give her an easy life. I will live as a princess in the Basilica without any labors.”

Jason kept his focus on the cloth as he spread out an assortment of fruits, raw vegetables, and dried meats. “Did he mention me?”

Koren shook her head. “I don’t know why. Zena knows you’re with me, so he probably knows, too.”

“He plans to cook me at the stake. That’s why. He doesn’t want you to know.”

She laid her hands over her ears. “He’s getting so loud I can barely hear you.”

“Can you use your gift to drown him out? Maybe tell a story?”

“That might work.”

“Go ahead and eat first.” Jason drew out his sword and laid it next to the food. “Choose what you want, and when you finish, I’ll bind your wound while you tell a story—that is, if you can wait that long to squelch the prince.”

“I think I can,” she said as she lowered her hands. “It’s already a little better.”

While they ate, Jason glanced between Koren and the field beyond the shrubs. With clouds fully enveloping the

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moon, and trees blocking its muted light, her green eyes seemed to be the only visible objects, like little emeralds floating in the dark air.

Jason concentrated on their surroundings, again tuning out the river's noise. Outside their refuge, the grass rustled in the breeze, and every creaking sound and popping noise gave Jason a start. It seemed that the stalker lay just beyond the copse, watching with hungry eyes.

Jason picked up his sword and the cloth, leaving a few meat strips on the ground. "Let's go to the river and wash the cut before I wrap it."

"Good idea." She rose and brushed off her dress.

"Is Tau-what's-his-name still talking?"

"Taushin. Yes, the same message over and over."

"Have you tried talking back to him?"

She shook her head. "I'm not sure if I can, and I don't want to give him the satisfaction. Maybe he doesn't know he's been able to reach me."

"True. But if you decide to answer, tell him I said to go back into his shell and shut up. It'll take a lot more than a scaly parrot to get you away from me."

Koren covered a smile with her fingers. "I'll think about it."

Following the sound of falling water, they passed through the tree boundary and walked to the river. As they stood at the edge, Jason surveyed the scene, barely visible in the veiled moonlight. The river rushed past their feet and, about ten paces downstream, tumbled over a cliff and fell into depths unknown. Beyond the falls and to the left, the spilled water flowed westward. To the right,

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the grassy field extended eastward and northward, acting as a precipice for the gorge.

Koren sat at the river's edge and hiked up her dress, revealing short trousers underneath. "I can wash it myself."

"No. Let me." Jason set a knee on the sand and a boot in the shallows. He moistened a corner of the cloth and swabbed the sole of her foot. As he continued dipping and washing, she winced with every touch. "Is Prince Persistent still bothering you?" he asked.

She cocked her head. "That's strange. I don't hear him anymore."

"Good. Maybe not answering was the right decision." He wrapped the cloth around her foot and tied it at her ankle. "Let's see how it feels."

Holding her hand as well as his sword, he helped her limp toward the trees. "What's the verdict?" he asked.

"I can walk but probably not very fast."

When they arrived at the center of the copse, Jason stooped and felt for the meat. It was gone. He sniffed the air. The wild scent had returned, stronger than ever.

"Koren," he whispered, still crouching. "Don't ask why. Just climb up on my back. Do it now."

"Okay." Her hands gripped his shoulders, and her trousers brushed his sides. Soon, she had mounted and settled on his back.

"Are you ready?"

"I think so."

Jason slowly straightened, holding her wrist with his free hand. "Just hang on." Leading with his sword, he burst from the trees and ran into the field, heading northward

warrior

and keeping the river and waterfall to his left. As long grass whipped his legs, he listened for a pursuer, but the river drowned out all other sounds.

He couldn't look back. Every step held a potential trap—a hole, a gully, or even a plunge into the river's gorge. With only a few feet illuminated in front of him, even one second of carelessness could cost them their lives, or at least a painful tumble.

"Jason!" Koren yelled. "Something's following us!"

With his own heavy footfalls shaking his voice, he shouted, "What does it look like?"

"A man!"

"A man?" Jason slowed to a halt and turned to face the pursuer. As he stared at a dark form creeping toward them, he readied his sword, whispering, "Get down."

Koren slid off his back and stood at his side. "He's slowing."

"Who are you?" Jason shouted.

The form stopped. As Trisarian peeked through a gap in the clouds, the human frame clarified. He stood with a hand on his hip and something long and pointed in his other hand. "I had planned to ask you the same thing." The man's voice was gravelly, yet dignified in tone.

Jason inhaled through his nose. Yes, the stranger carried the bestial odor. "If you are a friend who will help us," Jason said, "we will introduce ourselves. If you are here to harm us, I will introduce you to the point of a sword."

The man let out a genial laugh. "Since you left food on the ground, I assumed it was for me and that you considered me a friend. Perhaps it was an ill-advised assumption, but my stomach said otherwise. I have not had meat

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in a long time. In fact, I had been thinking about trying to catch a fish in the shallows. The roots, berries, and field potatoes in this land are not very filling.”

As the man drew closer, the moon shone on his face, dirty and covered with a thick, choppy white beard. He halted within striking distance and dropped a sharpened stick. “You talk as a free man would. Where are you from?”

Jason sheathed his sword. “I am Jason Masters. I have come from Major Four—”

Koren jerked on his sleeve and hissed, “Don’t tell him everything! We don’t know him yet.”

“It’s all right,” Jason said. “He’s human, not a dragon.”

Her voice dropped to a whisper. “You can’t trust every human, especially one who isn’t a slave.”

“If he was an ally of the dragons,” Jason replied, also in a whisper, “he probably wouldn’t look like a homeless beggar.”

Koren’s skeptical expression softened. “Do what you think is right.”

“As I said,” Jason continued, turning back to the man, “I have come from Major Four, the world of humans, in order to rescue the slaves and take them home.” He nodded at Koren. “And this is Koren, one of the slaves.”

The man pointed in the direction they had been running. “If you think home is that way, you had better think again. You will find only snow, ice, and a castle filled with ghosts.”

“Ghosts?” Jason half closed an eye. “As in disembodied spirits?”

“Exactly, young man. I have seen them myself.”

warrior

Koren stepped forward and offered a half curtsy.

“Pardon me, sir. Jason told you our names. Will you tell us yours?”

“I apologize for my rudeness, Miss.” The man gave her a formal bow. “I am Uriel Blackstone.”