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“It was right where you told me it would be, Starsha.” He turned to her with an earnest look on his face much too solemn for a seven-year-old. “You could have gone with us. Why didn’t you tell Master Dorian yourself?”

“Oh, Pinay, I couldn’t tell him. He’s the clan leader.” She looked around to be certain they were alone. “If Master Dorian found out I’m a dreamer, he would turn me over to Garthazor, and he would likely kill me. No one must know, Pinay.”

He cocked his head. “Mother was a dreamer.”

Starsha’s breath caught. “Yes, she was, and she died because they found out.”

Page 17

Kymel rode through a downpour. He hated rain, especially here, where it struck the massive stone walls of Garthazor’s bastion and ran down in crimson rivulets.

“Fortress of Blood” the clansmen called it. A fitting name.

It was a hard name like Kymel’s training. Years of physical and mental discipline. Drills that challenged him to the core to change him from the lost and lonely boy he once was to the warrior he had become.

He approached the iron gate and reined back on his horse. He required no gatekeeper, for he was Lord Kymel and this was home. He shivered, remembering the warmth of his early childhood in the Russet Clan. So different from this place.

Kymel quickly suppressed those memories, for he had an important duty to perform and no room for tenderness or affection. The time of the Moon in the Day Sky drew near. He steeled himself for the battle to come.

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The dragon dame, Tryphosa, returned to her cavern still clutching her new hatchling and trembling with shock and anguish. She grieved for the long-anticipated cherished moments now wrenched from her heart forever. The young human female had cheated her out of the bonding and the first song.

Tryphosa set her will to raise her offspring the best that she was able, but with the imprint lost, she would never feel the natural maternal connection to her daughter. Nothing would ever fill that void.

*“How could you, Starsha—after all I did for you?”*

Page 23

“If we can’t have our good-luck rock, you can take our bad luck.” Vikayla shook her hands at Starsha. Single file the others passed her, each of them mimicking Vikayla.

Their juvenile behavior annoyed Starsha, but she chose to ignore it. Bad luck indeed, she thought. She grasped her basket and rose to leave, but the handle broke just at that moment and dumped her laundry in the stream. Sheets and tick coverings bobbed along as she lunged repeatedly to recover them. She chased after the linens to the tune of their taunting laughter.

And that’s when she knew, absolutely, that she did not belong here.

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Something was wrong, horribly wrong. The dragon dame felt the presence of an intruder the moment she entered. She raced to her nest at the back of the cavern. There stood the human, Garthazor, robed in black and purple with a red pelt over his shoulder. . .

Terror and rage swelled up inside Tryphosa and burst from her in a jet of fire that enveloped the intruder. . .

“*Murderer,*” Tryphosa screamed as she drew back her arm, exposing saber-sharp talons. Her blow carried the full weight of her massive body. Upon contact, a sound like the shattering of glass splintered the air. Her body flew backward and crashed into the cave wall.

Page 28

Because Starsha felt the isolation so keenly, she treasured the time she spent with Pinay building up the fires at daybreak. One morning he asked her, “What do you remember about Mama?”

Her perspective suddenly changed. Though he was accepted by the Ebony Clan, he didn’t have the same precious memories that sustained her.

What could she say about their mother that would let him catch a glimpse of who she was? “Here, let me show you a game we used to play.”

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“Please let me go,” she begged.

Master Dorian glared at her. “You know where he is? Then tell us.”

“I . . . I . . .”

Desperately, she searched for something to say. No dream had come to her—no vision of his whereabouts—nothing. Even if it had, she could not admit it now. Cold fear gripped her. Female dreamers were hunted and killed. She would be of no use to Pinay dead. “I don’t know,” she whispered.

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“Get out of here,” Vikayla shouted as she flung a stone. “You’ll not have the food of the Ebony herd.”

“Or the water,” shouted another girl.

Starsha’s eye went to the object of their attack. On the far side of the stream, she saw a spotted llamacorn. Her heart went out to the poor creature, but she could ill afford to let herself be seen.

The spotted animal backed away. Starsha noticed her cria. The baby llamacorn tottered after its mother. Evidently, the girls hadn’t seen it, for they turned their backs and returned to the village.

Starsha walked around the head of the spring and entered the forest. She traveled for quite a distance until she knew the villagers could not hear her, then she trilled the llamacorn call that Nana had taught her so many years ago. Soon the spotted creature appeared.

Page 44

Starsha’s cry shattered the stillness of the night as she jolted awake. She knew now where to find her brother. Neither the darkness of the cloudy night nor the creatures of the forest had the power to detain her. Every step was lighted perfectly with the memory of her dream, and the fire of determination within her drove her onward.

Page 50

The moon cast ghostly shadows across Starsha’s path as she pushed through the underbrush and thickly grown trees. . .

Strange how dark and foreboding the forest seemed now when just a short time ago everything had been so sure. Stepping into a clearing, Starsha felt exposed and vulnerable. Stark moonlight intruded on the secrecy she desired. As she rushed to the

other side of the clearing, a shadow overtook her. She looked up in panic for the shadow maker. . .

Page

“I caught him sneaking away.” Kymel held up the knife and shook his fist. “Who let him get his hands on this?”

One of the guards growled a denial in his native tongue.

The second guard drew his sword. “Garthazor sent us after a female dreamer, not this pup. I should have slit his throat when I had the chance. He’s worth nothing.”

Page 56

*“Starsha may have to die—for our own protection. I cannot make that judgment now. First, I will go to the High Clan. Our guests turned out to be working for Garthazor.”*

*“What?” his wife shrieked, “I thought you knew them.”*

*“I thought I did, too, but they led us into a trap.”*

Page 63

Tryphosa crawled along the ground, loathing the humiliation of the posture. Humans walk on the ground, she thought bitterly, but dragons belong to the sky. Time bound her with heavy chains, for each step took an eternity. The thought of the male egg, hidden in a cave now vulnerable to Garthazor’s treachery, pierced her with anguish. I must find Nevela and return to my nest now.

She pumped her wings to rise above the world of men. Searing pain forbade her ascent. All around her, cliffs mocked her lowly position. She roared an angry reply to their arrogance.

Page 65

The dragon dame's words knifed into Starsha. Instead of healing, she had found cursing. Instead of a powerful ally, she had made an enemy. Now as the blue dragon turned her back, Starsha knew that Pinay's only hope rested with her. She could not fail him. She would not fail him.

Page 70

Her next step stirred a repugnant odor of burned hair. Starsha looked down and saw the remains of women's tresses strewn about. Her stomach lurched for she read in the debris the signs of Garthazor's treachery.

Page 72

Tryphosa felt a prickling of her skin and then an oppressive heaviness. Immobilized, she fell to the cave floor.

Garthazor laughed. The sound of it sickened her. "Associating with humans is your undoing, Tryphosa. . ."

Page 77

Nevela had gone again, but there was nothing Tryphosa could do about it. Perhaps she had returned to Starsha. Though it tore at her heart, the dragon dame knew she must let the hatchling go. To release a young one was unheard of among her kind. Nothing short of death would make it happen—but she lived a death beneath this net, and it severed her ties with her child.

Page 78

"You've got to eat. Open your eyes. That's it." Starsha tipped the bucket so that the little dragon could get to the milk.

Nevela put her snout down in the white liquid. Her face twisted into a pucker.

“It’s not sour,” Starsha protested, but Nevela snorted, pulled her head back, and sneezed. Milk sprayed all over Starsha.

Page 82

Thunder exploded, sending its shock wave through the night and jarring Starsha awake. The ground beneath her trembled at its monstrous command. Lightning claws ruptured the black heavens, stabbing out in vengeance.

Starsha leaped from her bed, threw open the door, and plunged into the storm. Rain beat upon her furiously as though she were running beneath a massive waterfall.

Page 89

The clang of metal jarred Starsha awake. She lay on cold stone. Pain gripped her heart, but it was the soreness of past trauma rather than the sharp pain she had experienced at Garthazor’s attack.

Frigid air intruded on her scalp. She reached up to brush it away and felt smooth, unprotected skin. Her shaved head touched her trembling fingers as though it were reaching out to make sense of the nakedness. Starsha felt violated.

Page 96

“No one else had hair as long as Ambria’s. It was a beautiful gold color, and it brushed the floor when she combed it out. She wore it down her back, loosely wrapped in woven ties. I knew that Garthazor would not accept the amulet as proof of her death, so I kept it, and I shaved her head and took her hair to him instead.”

Starsha exploded, “You shaved her head? You marked her as a *slave*?”

“She was *dead*. And what do you think he would have done to *you* if I had taken your mother to him?”

Page 100

“Garthazor intended to kill you. If Pinay saw that, he wouldn’t cooperate.

Garthazor needs Pinay.”

“He *needs* him?”

“Yes. To get the egg. Garthazor can’t see it as long as it is in the nest.”

Starsha doubted the truthfulness of his statement. “If he can’t see it, how did he manage to get the female egg?”

A low chuckle escaped Kymel. “He threw a rock.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“It is, isn’t it. But it’s true. I saw it with my own eyes.” Kymel chuckled again. “He took me along to look for it, but I couldn’t see it either—the nest or the eggs. Garthazor got so mad that he started throwing rocks. One of them must have knocked the female egg out of the nest. Suddenly there it was on the floor of the cave. He didn’t want that one, but he had me pick it up and bring it along.”

Page 105

Tryphosa heard Nevela’s plaintive warbling. The sound of it tore at her heart. Although she had forsaken her daughter, the decision had been made in the desperation of her soul and out of her utterly powerless condition. To now hear her cry drove Tryphosa to madness.

She could not stop the hungry whimpering, could not offer sustenance, could not even drive the pitiful orphan away. Nevela circled above and then lighted on top of the horrendous net. Tryphosa felt the weight of her as though the cave had collapsed and buried her beneath the mountain.

Page 141

*“It’s one thing for her to face you, but quite another to face Garthazor alone.”*



*“She has an ally—Kymel. He has magical abilities. His influence is greater than we anticipated.”*

*“But he is subject to human weakness, as you told Starsha yourself. He is just now beginning to learn his capabilities. He is untried. He lacks understanding. He could bring us to ruin with the dream spell he has been sending her.”*

*“She will see through it. She will stand in the Valley of Thunder.”*

*“She doesn’t know who she is. She is running away at this very moment. I must assemble our forces. We will face Garthazor ourselves in the Valley of Thunder. We must not rely on the frailty of humans. We must purge our world of this depravity.”*

*“Antiquity, killing is not the answer. We have a better plan, one that supports the prophecy.”*

*“But our plan depends on Starsha being in the Valley of Thunder when the moon is in the day sky. If she fails us, we must be prepared to fight.”*