

# The Lavender Paladin

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Nia was too big to cling to her mother's skirts, but she couldn't help lurking in her shadow. She wasn't sure what to make of the travelers Mama had invited to spend the night.

Kwambo, the big one in lavender armor, stood guard by the window. She'd seen knights before, just never this close. Were they all so serious? His armor smelled funny. Like dirt and oil and rust.

The man sitting on the floor, Astonaris, was different. She'd never seen skin as light as polished olive wood. Nor hair so straight and silken. Her fingers itched to touch it, to feel if his rich brown locks were as soft as they looked. But his eyes were scary. They were white all over.

That hadn't stopped her younger brother. Abwembe sat in Astonaris's lap, listening to his story.

"...Every time Lion roared, Hare's fur stood on end and he leapt with fright, and... well, what do *you* think happened?" The strange man pulled the tops of his ears down.

"His ears stretched!" said Abwembe, giggling. He was only five, and could be forgiven for laughing. The man *did* look silly.

"So they did. Longer and longer. At last Lion, unable to contain his laughter, lifted his paws, letting his prey bound away. And that's why Hare's ears are so long and fuzzy, and why he listens so carefully now before venturing from his hidey-hole."

Lavender armor clinked and scraped as Kwambo leaned over to peer through the window. His hand drifted to the hilt of his sword. He seemed... nervous. What could make a knight nervous?

Mama finished chopping eggplant and scraped it into a pot with onions and peas, added a ladle-full of water and a pinch of salt, and gave it a stir. Picking up a charred stick, she poked the embers in the hearth.

The embers chirped.

Yelping, Mama dropped her stick. Amidst the ashes, a dragon uncoiled, chittering at being woken.

Nia grinned. It was hard to take such a tiny creature's outrage seriously. Where had Astonaris gotten her? She'd thought dragons were make-believe, and maybe this one could be mistaken for a slender lizard, but her neck was too long, and her head wasn't right at all. And lizards didn't sleep in fires.

Mama pressed a hand between her breasts, embarrassed. "Oh, dear. I'm sorry. I forgot she was there."

"Not the first time it's happened," said Astonaris. "Calm down, Pyrkaia."

The dragon's scales were ashen with flecks of red. In amongst the flames she might as well have been just another ember.

"How is it that she don't burn up?" asked Nia.

"Doesn't," corrected her mother.

Nia rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean."

"It's because she's a dragon," Astonaris explained. "Pyrkaia needs the heat like you and I need to make water."

"Pee, you mean?"

"That's right. She'll get sick if she..." Mischief flickered across his face. "If she *don't*."

Unwilling to correct a guest, Mama settled for a long-suffering sigh, though her mouth twitched at the corners.

He outstretched his hand. "Come on out, Pyrkaia. You've baked enough, and our host needs to cook dinner."

Pyrkaia shook herself, sending a spray of sparks up the chimney. Astonaris clucked at her, and she bounded over to perch on his arm.

"Would you like to pet her?"

"Can I?" said Nia.

"Sure. She won't bite."

Warily, Nia reached out. Her hand hovered just short of contact, until Pyrkaia raised up on her hind legs, bumping Nia's palm with the top of her head. The dragon's scales were pleasantly warm. And softer than Nia had expected, like supple leather.

She found Astonaris's cloudy orbs fixed upon her, as though he were watching. "Are you really blind?"

"Nia!" exclaimed Mama.

Uh oh. She was in for a scolding. Why, though? It was just a question. But before Mama could go on, Astonaris spoke.

"Yes, Nia, I am."

"How? What happened?"

"Child..." warned Mama.

Astonaris merely laughed. "That is a story for after dinner, I think. Let me rest my voice a bit. Kwambo, how about some music?"

The knight cast one more glance outside, then nodded. "Of course, deus."

Tugging off his gauntlets, he rummaged in his pack and drew out a reed whistle. The tiny instrument looked ridiculous in his big black hands, but when he set the flute to his lips and blew, his thick digits flitted through a lively melody.

"Now if only we had some accompaniment..." mused Astonaris.

Nia brightened. "I'll get my mbira!"

She ran to fetch her instrument from its hiding place on the top shelf, where it was out of her brother's reach. Little more than a box with metal keys that twanged when plucked, the mbira blended well with the flute's bright and cheery whistle.

She grinned at Kwambo as they made music together. Astonaris clapped the beat, and her brother pranced and wiggled in what could almost be called dancing.

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Kwambo watched Nia's bashfulness thaw as they played. Music dismantled the walls between strangers in ways nothing else could. When he offered to teach her a song on the flute, the way her eyes lit up warmed his heart. She had a good ear and quick fingers, and could already stutter through the melody by the time dinner was ready.

He stowed his flute as the widow spooned up vegetable stew and a generous helping of mash. Glancing from him to Astonaris, she hesitated, unsure whom to serve first. Kwambo tilted his head toward his god.

"Here you are, bwana," she said, kneeling. "I do hope it is acceptable. No doubt you are used to finer."

"Nonsense. It smells delicious." Aston breathed deeply, savoring the aroma. He groped around the edge of the plate for a utensil that was not there.

Kwambo could have kicked himself. Aston had never eaten with his fingers in the way of country folk, nor did he know the proper etiquette—eat with the right hand and wipe with the left, and never the two shall meet. Doing it neatly was a feat even for the sighted. Doing it blind? Kwambo would need to do it for him. Not that he minded.

"Deus," Kwambo said, kneeling beside his god. "Let me."

Taking a little mash in the first three fingers of his right hand, he made an indentation with his thumb and scooped up a bite of stew. Aston's lips closed over Kwambo's fingers as he licked them clean, his tongue lingering longer than was strictly necessary.

How could something so soft be so firm, so strong?

Suddenly Kwambo found it difficult to breathe. He snatched back his hand.

An arch smile flitted across Aston's face. Kwambo glowered; Astonaris couldn't see it, but if he knew him well enough to smirk then he would damn well feel it.

The widow pretended not to notice, but he caught Nia watching curiously. Kwambo was grateful his dark skin hid his blushing.

When he had finished feeding Astonaris, he dug into his own meal. Peas and onions and mash were simple fare, but satisfying. It was Aston who left him wishing for more.

"So why are your eyes white?"

"Nia, let the poor man be."

"What? He said he'd tell us after dinner."

Aston chuckled. "So I did, child. So I did. And a wonderful dinner it was, might I add."

The widow subsided at the compliment.

He began, "I was born with eyes like an eagle. Sharp and keen enough to spot a mouse from a mile away. But I spent all my time staring at the clouds, amazed at how white and fluffy they looked. One day it occurred to me that a bird might carry me high enough to touch them. And so I asked Heron. What do you think he said?"

"Yes?" ventured Nia.

"No! Little boys don't belong in the sky, he said, or they'd have been born with feathers. But once I got hold of an idea, I couldn't let go. I just couldn't! So I asked Hawk. What do you think *he* said?"

"No!" chimed both children.

While Astonaris spun his tale, Kwambo slipped outside to cut a reed from the riverbank. He settled in by the fire and whittled until night fell. Soon Abwembe drifted to sleep sprawled across his lap.

The widow laid blankets by the hearth for her family, insisting that her guests take the only bed in the house. Closing the door, Kwambo was unbuckling his armor when he saw movement through the open window. Heart flogging his chest, he turned for a closer look. Had they been found already?

"Breathe easy," said Astonaris. "Pursuit is a day behind us."

He no longer questioned how Aston knew what he knew. Though his instincts demanded otherwise, Kwambo forced himself to release his sword hilt. Outside, the shadow continued down the road, nothing but a traveler passing by.

"You see?"

"I'm sorry, deus. We are still too close to Pango—" he broke off, and sighed. "Dytika, I mean." No matter what conquering gods named the city, a lifetime calling it Pango'ngombe was not erased overnight.

"It is not too late," Aston said softly. "Not for you. You could still return home."

"Pango'ngombe is no more. Past time I accept it." His voice rough, he added, "So long as we are together, it will be enough."

"Then trust me."

So Kwambo did. And any disturbances that night were of their own making.

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The next morning, after a breakfast of flatbread and chai—that Nia had brewed all by herself—Kwambo and Astonaris made ready to go. She followed Mama outside to bid them farewell.

The blind man patted his pockets and came up empty. "I fear I have little to offer by way of a hostess gift."

"Oh, that isn't necessary," Mama said. "I only did what anyone would."

"What anyone *should*," said Kwambo, shouldering his pack. "Not what anyone else *did*."

Mama draped her arm around Nia's shoulder. "Your stories are gift enough."

"Then perhaps I can offer you something of a similar vein." Astonaris opened the door on his dragon's wicker cage. "Let me speak your fortune."

"Another story?" Nia asked.

"Of a sort. You see, dragons are more than just pets. Their venom grants my bloodline power beyond mortal ken. To some is given prodigious strength and skin like iron, to others is given the ability to create ice from thin air. For me, Pyrkaia gives the gift of foresight."

He coaxed the dragon out and cradled her against his chest. Then he offered her his wrist. She burrowed sleepily into the crook of his arm. He tsked, flipping her over and tickling her belly until she nipped his finger.

Nia started. He'd said venom, but she hadn't expected *this*. Snakes had venom. Scorpions, too. She didn't go around having them bite her. Yet he didn't seem bothered.

Returning Pyrkaia to her cage, Astonaris handed her to Kwambo, then extended his arm toward Mama. "Come, take my hand. The contact helps me focus."

The moment Mama's fingers brushed his, he gasped, and his eyes rolled back. Snatching her hand away, she shoved Nia behind her.

Ancestors, what was happening?

Astonaris's indrawn breath seemed to go on forever, a ghastly moan of horror. Kwambo rushed to his side.

"Aston." He clasped the blind man by the shoulders. "What is going on? Aston, talk to me."

The gasp became thin and strained. Astonaris threw back his head and began to tremble.

"No, no," Kwambo said, frantic. He yanked off one gauntlet, slapped him.

Astonaris went limp. Kwambo clutched him to his chest.

"Aston. Aston, can you hear me? Say something!"

Nia cowered behind her mother. She remembered petting Pyrkaia last night, and felt queasy. What if the dragon had bitten her?

Astonaris's eyes fluttered open. He groaned.

"It's all right. I've got you." Kwambo caressed his face as though he could wipe away the angry red finger marks blossoming there.

Astonaris relaxed, his clouded eyes drifting closed again. "Mmmph."

"You scared me. I've never seen the foretelling take you so strongly."

Breathing deep, Astonaris composed himself and shook Kwambo off, settling his weight onto his own two feet to address Nia and her mother.

"My apologies if I frightened you. That was not my intent." He put on a smile, but his pale flesh made it almost as scary as whatever had just happened. "My

good woman, your house will thrive. You shall be blessed with a great many beautiful grandchildren.

"And you, Nia, there are... big things in store for you. Listen to your heart and watch over your brother."

The blind man sagged, leaning heavily on his cane.

There was a moment's silence, then Nia remembered herself and forced her fingers to let go of Mama's skirts. Big things? Listen to her heart? She fought disappointment. He was as vague as the beggar who pretended to read knucklebones.

Then Kwambo rummaged in his pack and took out a length of reed. "For you, Nia. I cannot prophesy, but one of these is easy enough to carve."

And disappointment fled. A flute. He'd made her a flute! She could scarcely play it through all the grinning.

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They walked in silence. Well, almost. Kwambo's lavender armor rattled with each step. But not a word was spoken. Rather than hold Kwambo's elbow, as Aston was wont to do, he walked apart, tapping the dirt road with his cane.

Kwambo bided his time. The air grew heavy with words unspoken.

"Deus, what happened back there?"

"Hmm?" The tapping cane paused, then resumed. "Nothing."

Why was Aston lying? The fortunes he told were never vague or uncertain. Do this, don't do that, and when so-and-so says this it means that. What was he so afraid to admit?

"You made it up, didn't you? Their foretelling."

"No."

The word hung there, incomplete by itself. Tap, tap, went the cane. When Kwambo could stand it no more, he took Aston by the shoulders. The god's eyes were damp with unshed tears.

"What aren't you telling me?"

Aston made a noise in the back of his throat. A whine. "They're going to die. Nia and her mother. Murdered in cold blood."

"What?"

"The boy too, perhaps," he went on, as if Kwambo hadn't spoken, "though not if he heeds his sister."

Ancestors. Killing a harmless woman was bad enough. But the children? And why were he and Aston walking away when they should be rushing back?

"Can't we help them?"

"Perhaps."

"Then what are we waiting for?" He pulled at Aston's arm.

The god dug in his heels. "I cannot lose you."

"What are you talking about? I'm right here."

"Protecting me."

"Always."

Astonaris made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob. "My brave, selfless paladin. There are things even you cannot defeat."

"Then we'll beat them together, you and I."

"If only it were so simple."

"We can't just stand by and let them die!"

"You don't understand. Are you willing to trade your life for theirs?"

"If need be."

"And are you willing to trade mine?"

Kwambo flinched. He had sworn to protect his god with his life. That was a paladin's duty, though for him, the depth of his devotion went beyond mere oath-keeping.

But was this how they repaid the widow's generosity? He remembered Nia, her little hands moving beneath his as he showed her the fingerings to the song. Abwembe, nodding off in Kwambo's lap during a bedtime story.

"Does it truly come to that?" he asked hoarsely. "You or them? Is there no other way?"

"The ways are myriad. But if we turn back, Saegon *will* find us."

"But survival... Is it possible?"

Aston brushed at the air, as though he were parting a curtain. Then he sighed. "The paths that end in death carve the deepest rut, but there is one fate where none of us dies. One among thousands. And even if we can balance on that razor's edge, we will not emerge unscathed."

The blind god reached out in mute appeal. Kwambo gave his hand a gentle squeeze.

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Nia heard a shrill squawk. She straightened, the row she'd been hoeing forgotten. Her eyes narrowed. Her brother wouldn't dare...

There it came again, a squeaky whistle. Abwembe was trying to play her flute.

"Hey!" She dropped the hoe and bounded toward the sound. "That's mine!"

She rounded the corner. Her brother's eyes widened, and he ran, her flute clutched in his grimy hands.

Growling, she gave chase. He made it halfway around the house before she caught him. Tickling his ribs reduced him to a giggling, helpless mess, and she snatched the flute from his limp fingers.

She inspected the instrument for damage. There were no cracks she could see. Just little brother spit all over the mouthpiece.

Abwembe wriggled loose, and he took off.

"Yeah, that's right. Run and hide," she called after him. "If you broke it, I'll give you a thrashing no matter what Mama says."

She cleaned it with her shirt before putting the flute to her lips. He'd better hope it still played.

The note was bright and true. She sighed with relief. Abwembe had been puffing on it too hard, was all. But to make sure, she began playing the song Kwambo had taught her.

*Tweet da dee, da dee de—*

The note went shrill, and Nia winced. She checked her fingering.

First finger covered that hole. Second finger covered this one. Third finger, up. The fingers on her other hand went here, here, and...

Ah. There it was. The third finger on her left hand, the heart finger, had drifted out of place.

She adjusted her grip, and set the flute against her lips. Gently blew.

*Deeeee!*

There. All better. She began again.

*Tweet da dee, da dee dee dee. Tweet da dee, da dee diya doo.  
Tweet da dee, da dee dee dee. Tweet da diya dee, diya da doo.*

"That's a song I've heard before."

Nia whirled and came face to face with a boot, propped in a stirrup. She'd been so lost in the music, with making her fingers move just so, that she hadn't noticed the horse riding up behind her. The boot's leather was well polished, with shiny brass fittings and tinier stitching than she'd ever seen. She followed the white-clad, slightly dusty leg all the way to the man perched in the saddle.

He had the same olive-wood skin as Astonaris, though his clothes were fancier. His tunic was dyed blue as a clear sky, with golden embroidery. An ice-blue dragon perched on his shoulder.

"Your flute," he said. "Show it to me."

She glanced at the length of carven reed in her hand. Suddenly it seemed very plain and boring.

Swinging his leg over the saddle, he dropped down to the ground. "Come now, don't be shy."

His fingers beckoned, impatient, demanding. He sounded angry. Had she done something wrong? She held it up so he could see. Instead of simply looking, he plucked it out of her grasp.

*That's mine.* The words died on her lips. Her shoulders slumped.

The horseman wasn't alone. Other men rode with him, eight of them, foreign soldiers in shiny bronze breastplates and helms with feathered crests.

"Let me guess." Scowling, the man brandished her flute. "The same man who taught you the song also carved this?"

She nodded glumly. She'd definitely done something wrong. What, though? It was just a flute.

"And was there a godling with him?"

Godling? She didn't know what that meant.

He caught her blank look, and explained impatiently, "A man with skin like mine. And a dragon, though his is a different hue."

She studied her bare toes and shrugged.

He chucked her chin, making her look up. His touch was cold as winter, and his eyes, a brilliant amber.

"Answer me, girl."

She looked at her flute, just out of reach. If she told, she'd get it back, right?

"Yes," she whispered.



"What was that? Speak up."

Something like frost spiderwebbed down the reed. Except it couldn't be frost. Not at midmorning in summertime.

She swallowed. "Yes."

"Good."

Absently, his fist clenched, and she heard her flute crack. She watched in horror as the reed splintered, pieces crumbling to the ground.

"Good," he said again, slowly, in a way that did not sound good at all.

Her vision blurred as she stared at the fragments in the grass. The flute was broken. Dead. With it died the song in her soul.

A slap across her cheek shocked her back to the present.

"Answer me, girl!"

"W-what?" Gingerly, she touched her stinging skin.

"Is he here?"

Why had he crushed her flute? It wasn't fair! She had been good. She'd answered his question. Anger washed away her fear, her pain, leaving only a bitter knot of mulishness.

"Is he still here?" he demanded again.

She glared at him. He was a bully. Growling, he drew back to strike her once more.

The door to her house slammed open, and her mother shouted, "Wait!"

Several of the man's guards dismounted, intercepting Mama before she reached them. She fell to her knees.

"Please, bwana, leave her be. I apologize for whatever she did. Tell me and let me make it right."

"Where is Astonaris?"

"Aston... Why?"

He captured Nia's wrist in his icy grip. "Hold her still," he commanded, and one of his soldiers took her by the shoulders.

"Wait!" blurted Mam. "Please, I'll tell you, just don't hurt her."

He ignored her. Forcing Nia's fist open, he grabbed the littlest finger on her left hand. She gasped as cold invaded her flesh. Her pinkie hurt—burned, almost—but that soon passed, and then she couldn't feel anything. All the while, her mother kept protesting, begging.

When he let go, Mama gasped. Nia's finger was frosted white. Nothing happened when she tried to bend it.

From his belt he drew a dagger. Was he going to cut her? Why? Mama was cooperating. Instead he reversed the dagger, holding it gingerly by the blade. Then he struck her pinkie with the pommel.

Her finger shattered.

Strangely, it didn't hurt.

Nia stared at the stump where her finger had been. Her flesh was jagged, like broken ice. Why didn't it hurt? She'd cut her toe on a sharp rock the other day. That hurt. This should have hurt, too. All she felt was cold. Cold all over.

The bully wagged his dagger at her mother. "When I ask a question, I expect an answer."

Mama flung herself on the ground before him, worshiping his boots. "Yes, of course, bwana. Anything you want."

"Is my cousin here?"

"No, he left this morning. He and—"

"Do you know where they were headed?"

Mama gulped. "N-no."

Numbly, Nia watched the man wrap his hand around her heart finger.

"Please!" cried her mama. "They didn't say where they were going, but I know which way they left!"

He hesitated, but did not yet release her finger. "Show me."

"That way."

The man stared long and hard. "I don't believe you."

Again, that flash of burning cold. Mama's wailing. A rap of the pommel. The tinkle of falling shards.

This was a nightmare. Had to be. That was the reason it didn't hurt. She was going to wake up at any moment.

"Which way?" He grasped Nia's middle finger.

"That way, I swear!"

"I am right here, Saegon."

The man ducked like Astonaris's words themselves could have knocked him over the head. Like he was a boy caught red-handed, cringing from a spanking.

Picturing Saegon as a child made Nia giggle. The guard holding her clapped his hand over her mouth. Saegon glared. He was too old, too stern, to have ever been as young as Abwembe.

"Let them go, Saegon." Astonaris tapped the dirt with his cane as he made his way toward them. In his other hand he carried Pyrkaia in her wicker cage. "They have nothing to do with us. I offer you my life for theirs."

Alert and wary, the soldiers closed ranks around Saegon. What were they afraid of? Astonaris was blind and harmless.

"Where is your paladin?"

Oh, right. Kwambo.

"I slipped away unnoticed," Astonaris said. "Kwambo would have never let me surrender without a fight."

Saegon gestured to his men. "Take him."

The soldiers lurched into motion, but Astonaris lifted a finger, and everyone froze. "My life for theirs. Promise me."

"Fine. Whatever. Now take him! He's blind, you imbeciles." Yet Nia could hear the unease in his own voice.

Smiling faintly, Astonaris stooped to place the dragon's cage on the ground. He stepped away.

The soldiers tackled him, tying his wrists, then his ankles. Not once did he resist. Bound, he was dragged forward and thrown to the ground. Pyrkaia was deposited, far more carefully, beside him.

Only with his enemy helpless before him did Saegon relax. "Trading your life for a commoner? What happened to you, cousin? You've gone soft. Weak."

"Is the mother bear weak? Or the sparrow, who lures the fox away from its nest?"

Saegon's eyes narrowed, but rather than argue he kicked Astonaris in the ribs. "Two men, eyes on, at all times. Let's see you escape from me now."

"Deus?" said the soldier holding Mama. "What about them?"

"My life," Astonaris wheezed. "My life for theirs. You promised."

"I have not forgotten. I will not lay a hand on them." But silently he drew his finger across his throat.

Nia felt, more than heard, the regretful sigh from the soldier holding her.

When Mama opened her mouth, the soldier elbowed her in the gut. Astonaris must have heard her grunt, but he let himself be led away without a word of protest.

Saegon vaulted into the saddle. "Catch up to us on the road."

The stumps of Nia's fingers were beginning to sting. Distantly, she noticed she was shivering. Tears burned hot troughs down her cheeks.

"It'll be quick," murmured her captor. "I can give you that much."

Her brother was peeking between the logs of the woodpile. He looked so small, so afraid. He stood up. He was going to run to Mama, she just knew it.

*Abwembe, don't.* With her eyes she begged him to stay put, stay silent. For once he listened.

The soldier holding Mama drew his sword.

"Don't watch," said Nia's captor, but she couldn't tear herself away.

He covered her eyes. An afterimage of that bright, glittering sword was burned into the backs of her eyelids.

She heard a scuffle. Footsteps. Her captor gasped, and his grip tightened. There was a high-pitched scream, cut short. Then a thud and a splatter, the same sound as when she'd dropped an overripe melon, and it had burst and sprayed its guts all over her toes. The erratic rhythm of heels drumming in the dirt. Gurgling breath.

She wanted to see, and she didn't. She hated the man holding her upright; she burrowed into his chest for comfort. She was cold and numb all over, except for her missing fingers. They burned like live coals.

A blade touched her throat. She whimpered. Sudden warmth trickled down her legs, but she couldn't muster the will to be embarrassed.

"Let her go."

Kwambo?

You were too late, she wanted to say, but it was too much work to move her tongue. Astonaris was already gone. Mama was already gone.

"You know I can't do that," said her captor.

"Kill her, and it will be the last thing you do."

"I'm dead if I don't. My god has ordered her death."

"Do you really want to meet your ancestors with a little girl's blood on your hands?"

"I..."

"Please," said her mother's voice. "Don't hurt my daughter. I beg you."

Nia gasped. If Mama lived, then who...? She clawed at the hand covering her face. She wanted to see!

They struggled, and something whistled past her ear. She felt a tug at her hair. The man's grip slackened, and she stumbled free.

The body of the soldier who she thought had killed Mama lay in a pool of blood. His gaze was blank and scary.

She heard a wet slap. Her own captor had clapped a hand to his neck. Bright red blood leaked between his fingers. All five fingers.

He fell to his knees. Blinked.

Then Mama was there. Picking her up. Cradling her. Murmuring comfort.

Nia fiercely hugged her mother. "I thought you were dead!"

"Hush, child. You're safe now."

Safe? She didn't care about safe. She was too numb.

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Surrounded by thudding horse hooves and jangling tack, Astonaris blundered along on his leash. His toes found every bump and uneven cobble.

"What is keeping those two?" mused Saegon. "They should have caught up by now."

Astonaris could have told him. He didn't. He was the blind one, but it amused him to listen to the sighted stumbling blindly into the future.

"What are you smiling at?" asked Saegon.

"Was I smiling?" He might have been. It was easy to forget to guard his expression.

"What is it you know?"

"That I am thirsty. And I need to urinate. Odd, that. You'd think if a body needs to make water it wouldn't also want a drink."

Saegon allowed a halt. He did not permit Aston's hands to be untied, however, nor did he allow any privacy. Astonaris endured having his trousers yanked down to his ankles as though he were a toddling boy being taught how to pee.

As he was led back, Pyrkaia chirped—the cue from his foretelling. He lurched sideways.

The vision had shown him what happened next: The horse sidestepping. Its rider kicking at Astonaris, dislodging Pyrkaia's cage. Himself staggering, off balance.

Wicker crunched beneath his heel. This was the tricky part. Treading hard enough to ruin the cage without stepping on Pyrkaia. He overbalanced and landed on his ass.

The cavalcade erupted into curses and yelling. Astonaris felt little claws climbing his shirt.

"Sorry," he whispered.

His dragon perched on his shoulder and scolded him. Loudly. Right in his ear.

It took the paladins quite a while to coax Pyrkaia into the cage with Saegon's dragon. There was much hissing. Despite being hatchmates, they got along as well as two strange cats.

"Put the dragons with me," Saegon instructed. "And keep a close eye on him. He's up to something."

"Me?" said Astonaris innocently.

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Nia's wounded hand throbbed with each hoofbeat. Thump, stab; thump, stab. The pain made her dizzy, nauseous. Squeezing her eyes shut helped a little. Not enough. She wanted the numbness back.

All that kept her going was the fact that Saegon must be stopped. Or he would return and finish what he'd started.

After forever and ever, the throbbing lessened. She realized the hoofbeats had ended. She risked opening her eyes.

"We're here," Kwambo said.

Here was the middle of the forest, beneath a zingana tree's broad limbs.

Kwambo dismounted—clank, clank—and reached up to help her down. "We have a few minutes yet. Let's see how your hand is doing, shall we?"

When her feet hit the ground, her knees buckled, and she would have fallen but for Kwambo's strong arms. Slowly the world stopped tilting and spinning and twirling all about.

He led her to one of the tall, exposed roots so she could sit. Stripping off his gauntlets, he knelt in the soft earth and began unwrapping her bandage. She clamped her jaw to keep from crying out. Gentle as he was, it still hurt. A hiss escaped her when he pried the bloody cloth from her stumps.

The sight made her shiver. Bone, blood, and... Shouldn't there have been more blood?

"You don't have to go through with this, Nia."

After a moment's confusion, she realized he wasn't referring to rewrapping the wound. "Doesn't that mean Astonaris would die?"

"Let me worry about Aston."

Which wasn't the same thing as saying he would live. As though not admitting it made it untrue. Adults were silly like that. "I'm going to help. I just wish I weren't so . . ."

"Scared?" Kwambo finished for her.

She gave him a guilty nod.

"I know. I'm sorry. But scared is good. Scared keeps you careful, and careful keeps you alive."

"You aren't scared."

"What are you talking about? I'm terrified!"

"You are?" She scrunched up her nose.

"I'm scared I'll hesitate when I need to be swift, or act rashly when I should be thinking. I'm scared I won't be strong enough, fast enough, skilled enough." He looked smaller and smaller with each confession. "And I'm scared I'm going to get you hurt somehow. Hurt more, I mean. You deserve better. But I... I can't do it alone." By the end there were tears in his eyes. Then he straightened. "What matters is that we don't let our fears stop us."

She felt, if not braver, at least a little less alone.

The thud of hooves announced that it was time. She began to climb. Her bare feet found easy purchase on the zingana tree's rough bark. Her hand throbbed. She kept from whimpering, but only barely.

"Remember," Kwambo called up to her, "Saegon must not make it to his dragon."

Or they all died. He'd told her that without dragon venom, Saegon's frost extended no further than his touch. With it, he could turn anything he saw into ice.

When she reached the first limb, she broke off a forked twig. Her fingers shook as she tied it to one end of the string. She crawled out along a branch hanging over the road, and waited.

Within minutes Saegon and his men rode into view. Astonaris, hands bound, walked alongside one of the horses. There was a rope around his neck.

Kwambo strode into the middle of the road. Saegon reined in his mount, and his six remaining soldiers fell into formation around him. Astonaris glanced up and winked—straight at her.

She gulped and focused on the task at hand. Saegon's horse wasn't quite beneath her. She needed to crawl further out. Trying not to think about how slender the branch was, nor how unsteady her balance, she put the looped cord between her teeth and crept along the sagging branch.

Her skirt caught on the bark. Her struggling rustled the leaves. She froze.

"Release Astonaris," Kwambo said loudly to drown out her noise, "and you may leave with your life."

"May?" Saegon laughed. "I am a god. You can't stop me."

Carefully she unhooked her clothes and inched out, disturbing the tree limb as little as possible. The further she went, the further the branch dipped. Her heart hammered in her chest. She was completely in the open. If anyone were to glance up...

*Don't let your fear stop you.*

Taking the string from between her teeth, she secured one end around her finger. Loop by loop, she lowered it. The twiggy hook swayed as it descended.

"Two of your men have already fallen to me," boasted Kwambo.

"So that is what kept them. Well, we can't have you indigenes slaughtering paladins. Sets a bad example."

She finished unwinding the cord. The hook twirled in the air behind Saegon, above the dragons' cage.

The string was too short.

Only one thing for it. She crooked her legs over the branch, wincing at the noise of the crumbling bark. Kwambo clanged his sword against his shield to cover for her. Dangling upside down, she fished for the cage. The twig tapped the wires but did not catch. At least she was low enough. She tried again.

The hook snagged in Saegon's shirt. Nia's mouth went dry. She twitched the string from side to side, trying to dislodge it before Saegon noticed.

He noticed.

Saegon twisted in the saddle. His head tilted, following the string, and his amber gaze locked with hers. "You!"

She squeaked. She was trapped, stuck in a tree with nowhere to go. And all she could think about was how icy his grip on her fingers had felt.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was the squeak Astonaris had been waiting for. Poor girl. But there was no time for pity.

"Be brave, Nia!" he called.

He groped until he found Saegon's boot, and heaved.

\* \* \* \* \*

For an instant, the god teetered in the saddle below her, amber eyes comically wide. If Nia hadn't been so scared, she might have laughed. Then Saegon toppled.

The hook spun free.

*Be brave.*

She forced herself to move. Her trembling hands made the hook shiver and bob wildly in the air.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Saegon fell, Kwambo threw himself into motion. Surprise was his only advantage.

He slid past a hasty parry, nicking the man's blade arm. Just a scratch, but he'd won first blood.

That was all he won. The other paladins were good. Three stayed to protect Saegon. The remaining two vaulted off their horses and closed in on his flanks.

Kwambo pressed them as recklessly as he dared. If anyone remembered that he was a paladin too, all they had to do was put a blade to Aston's throat and the fight was over.

\* \* \* \* \*

Her makeshift hook rattled in the cage's wires. She gave the string a tug. To her relief, the cage lifted into the air.

But a soldier stood in his stirrups, reaching for it. She reeled faster. *Hurry, hurry, hurry!*

His fingers missed by a hair.

"Ha!" she crowed.

The soldier gathered himself and leapt from the saddle.

She yanked the cage higher. His fingers batted it, setting it swinging. Was that a cracking sound? She should have chosen a sturdier stick for the hook.

Inside the cage the dragons were spitting and biting at each other. Why couldn't they just hold still? Why couldn't she stop shaking?

Hand over hand, she reeled the dragons in. *Please don't break. Please don't break.*

She wrapped her fingers around the handle, and grinned in triumph.

Saegon climbed to his feet. He pointed at the man who had leapt after the cage. "You! Get my dragon back!"

The soldier ran to the tree, but his boots scrabbled uselessly against the zingana's bark. She couldn't help it; she giggled. Trees were meant to be climbed barefoot, not in boots.

"Hurry, you fool!" snarled Saegon.

Growling, the soldier discarded his shield and helm to lighten his load, and tried again. This time he wrapped his legs around the tree. He reached up, took hold, and pulled himself higher, inchworming his way up the trunk.

Her triumph faded. She had to go higher. To branches too slender to hold a full-grown, armor-wearing man. And she still hung upside down. She tried pulling

herself up, but her good hand held the cage and her wounded hand kept slipping, hurting.

The soldier had nearly reached the tree limb.

She grabbed the branch and, grunting, straining, pulled herself upward. Desperation lent her strength.

At last she made it. But it was too late. The soldier was already there, crawling out after her.

"I've got you now, girl." His smile was a frightening thing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Outnumbered three to one, Kwambo was forced on the defensive. Surviving against superior numbers depended more on footwork than swordplay. He kept moving, circling, keeping them off-balance and in each other's way.

Against most, he'd have made an opening by now. His longsword gave him greater reach, his armor protected him better, and he'd nicked one already, yet he couldn't win through.

Something had to change.

He danced away from a flanking attempt, then reversed directions. His armor should keep him safe. A blow glanced off his pauldron, another against his backplate. He parried the last, and his riposte nicked the man's knuckles.

Second blood. He watched their confidence falter. Even three to one, he could—

A clout from behind knocked him to his knees. His helmet rang like a gong. Or was that his ears? He blinked back stars.

A sword flashed overhead. He had to get his shield up. Sluggishly, his arm obeyed. The impact bashed the top of his shield against his visor.

Was he seeing double? No, a fourth paladin had joined the fray.

Kwambo tried clambering to his feet, but he was hammered down again and again. He sheltered behind his shield.

This couldn't be happening. Aston needed him. He had to... Had to get up. Had to fight.

A mighty blow cracked his shield in half. A second and a third turned it to splinters. A sword arced down and, shieldless, he raised his arm.

The blade struck his hand with enough force to shear through the armor. Pain erupted in his fingers. The sword rose for the finishing strike, but Kwambo couldn't tear his eyes away from his bloody gauntlet, now two fingers short.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cornered, Nia retreated further down the branch. The soldier crawled after her. The limb sagged lower, creaking beneath their combined weight. Lower still.

A flash of worry crossed the man's face. He let go long enough to beckon. "Give me the cage, girl."

She glanced down. The ground was so far away.

*Don't let fear stop you.*

Swallowing, she shook her head.

The soldier inched closer. She cowered back.

With a great, cracking roar, the branch broke. She, the dragons, and the soldier all tumbled toward the ground.



\* \* \* \* \*

Paladins spent years honing their instincts to defend first their god, second themselves. When the branch snapped, Kwambo's opponents' focus divided. Not long. A quick glance was all.

Kwambo moved without thought. He had prepared for this. He'd already marked the gaps in their armor, already noted who was the most dangerous. His body knew what to do, even when his mind was full of fog and pain.

With a roar, he came to his feet. He batted aside his victim's sword. A flick of his blade, and the man was clutching his throat.

Kwambo pivoted to the next. He slammed his elbow into the paladin's helm. The man's arms windmilled, opening his guard. Kwambo thrust low, severing the artery inside the man's thigh.

He felt heavy, plodding, as if he were wading through water, but he forced himself on. Once he stopped he wouldn't be able to start again.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sound of splintering wood seemed to go on forever. The whistle of falling leaves, the screams, the rattle of breaking twigs, the thuds of two bodies—one small, one grown—coming to an abrupt stop.

Astonaris held his breath. This was the moment of truth. All these subtle nudges to fate—weakening Nia's grip, what he'd told Kwambo and what he'd withheld, how sharply he'd thrown Saegon from the saddle, accounting for the breaking point of the tree limb, and on and on. All were to orchestrate this moment. One wrong note and the entire symphony fell into discord.

And Saegon, the soloist, had a penchant for improvisation.

Astonaris listened intently, impatiently, but the rustle of settling leaves and the clamor of battle drowned out his confirmation. Was Nia getting to her feet or had the landing snapped her neck? Was that groan from the fallen paladin or Saegon? Times like these, he really wished he could see.

The dragons' cage fetched up against his leg. That was his cue. He would have to trust that events were unfolding as he had hoped.

Astonaris knelt and righted the cage. Within, the dragons yowled their anger at the injustice of it all. He felt for the latch. With his wrists bound together, it took him a while.

Throwing open the door, he groped as the foretelling had shown; his fingers closed around a slender, scaly neck. The dragon hissed and scratched at his hands. He wished he were more certain she was not Pyrkaia.

"Cease!" Astonaris shouted. "Or I'll wring her neck!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Nia slowly picked herself up. Her back hurt, her hand hurt, her head hurt. She hurt all over, really.

On the ground beside her, the soldier roused. Pains forgotten, Nia backpedaled. But he wasn't after her. He was disentangling himself from the limp form he'd landed on: Saegon.

Nearby, Kwambo and two soldiers stood poised, neither taking their eyes off the other. Astonaris gave the ice-blue dragon a little shake, and it gave up the fight and hung there, panting.

"Put down your swords," said Astonaris.

She was almost surprised when Saegon's men did as they were told.

"Come Kwambo, cut me loose. We're leaving. Oh, and I'll be taking Saegon's mare."

A soldier made as if to argue, but a moan from Saegon interrupted him.

"When your god awakens," Astonaris said, "tell him to give up this hunt."

"And if he won't?"

"Then the next time will be his last." He paused to help Nia into the saddle. "The same goes for this girl and her family. Should any harm befall them, Saegon will suffer the same fate."

"What about his dragon?" asked another.

Astonaris bent and let her go, and the ice-blue creature disappeared into the underbrush. "If you don't waste your time chasing after us, you'll find her on a rock by the stream."

"What stream?"

"How should I know? It'll be the first one you find."

\* \* \* \* \*

The widow was waiting for them. A tautness in Kwambo's chest eased as Nia slid out of the saddle and threw herself into her mother's arms. Safely returned, as promised. Abwembe tumbled shrieking out of the house and piled on.

Astonaris said, "Saegon will not bother you again."

"Thank you," said the widow, hugging her family close. "Thank you."

"From now on your life's challenges are your own. The more I meddle, the more tangled the mess, so I'll leave you to discover it for yourself. The butterfly should not be torn from the cocoon before its time."

Kwambo unwrapped the bandage over the stumps of his fingers. The clotting held—it seemed he had finally staunched the bleeding.

There was a certain justice that his wound should mirror Nia's. He suspected Aston had arranged it that way to assuage Kwambo's conscience. It wasn't his sword hand. He could still strap on a shield, could still protect his god. The pain would fade.

He felt a tug at his elbow and turned to find Nia. "Why hello, brave one."

Smiling shyly, she held out her mbira. "For you."

"But it's yours."

"I want you to have it. Since you can't play your flute anymore."

He could hardly bear to accept. That instrument was all she had. But a child's gift should be cherished, never spurned.

The little wooden box fit easily into his hands. A few missing fingers wouldn't matter, as the mbira was played with thumbs. He gave the keys an experimental pluck. The twangy music brought tears to his eyes.

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