

Book One of the Heroes of Legend

The Archer, the Princess and the Dragon King



The Archer

L. A. Hammer

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Prologue – Prophecies and Miracles

‘Let go!’ shouted the boy, ‘Let go of me!’ Dark of hair and eyes, the boy of only ten was a stubborn case. Eldarus had been a tutor for Matthew since he was barely able to crawl. Now he was also a substitute father to the lad. His father had been a great king, and ruler of a vast portion of the lands that were now torn by battle and bloodshed.

It was Matthew’s destiny to throw back the emperor’s forces and take back his kingdom.

‘You must learn to focus your kinning,’ Eldarus instructed. ‘Remember your breathing. Focus on the sound of the waves.’ He still clung to the tunic of cured leather the boy wore over spun wool of grey and green. The boy was like a wriggling worm in his grasp, but Eldarus did not let go despite the boy’s protest.

‘The water makes me ill, *im’pater.*’

‘Solidify your will, Matthew. Surrender to the calm of the ocean.’

‘The ocean is not calm,’ Matthew replied, flapping his arms like a squawking crow.

‘The time draws near for your eleventh name day, Matthew. Then you will become a man, and the kinning will call you into its embrace. If you are not prepared, it will burn you to a cinder.’ Eldarus’s tones were filled with fervour at the last.

‘I’m not ready, *im’pater.* I’ll never be ready in time.’

‘Matthew Eaglehawk, you are of the blood of kings. You were born ready.’

The boy pouted a moment then ceased his flailing. Taking a deep breath, Matthew sat and folded his arms on the deck of the small vessel. The boy was right; there was a terrible wind this evening. The lantern swinging on a nearby pole emitted a halo of gold; tracing lines upon Matthew’s fragile features. He began his meditation, and after a while of monitoring his altered demeanour, Eldarus returned below deck to fetch the precious cargo he had spent much of his lifetime searching for.

In the lantern light below deck, in his cramped quarters, he reached into the second drawer to pull forth a cloth wrapped parcel that was warmer than he remembered. *It’s working. It’s happening already.*

Returning above deck the moonlit ocean waves sprayed foam and salt upon his face. He spared a moment to check the helm where his captain worked the wheel, a glowing

apparition with a face of brown bone-skull and deep black eye sockets. Wraiths were more trustworthy at sea than any man, and old Captain Vortikhas had sailed the globe with Eldarus, and so far, Eldarus had never been let down.

Other wraiths patrolled the decks, on the bow, port and starboard sides, fixing the sails, hoisting ropes and keeping things in order, a trustworthy crew indeed. Wraiths needed to be kept under a certain degree of control, of course, though Eldarus was well skilled in all manner of witchcraft and sorcery.

Placing the dark cloth bundle in front of Matthew, Eldarus pulled the folds aside to reveal an egg big enough to have been birthed by an ostrich. The scaled black marble texture glistened in the moonlight, but the centre of the egg pulsed and flared, seemingly in time with young Matthew's breathing.

'Now reach for the kinning source,' Eldarus instructed, as a halo of burning white appeared around Matthew's head, also flaring in time with his breathing and the light of the egg.

Eldarus began his own incantation, first in a low rhythmic chant, then holding his gnarled wooden staff. A beacon of pure white blossomed from the staff's tip; glowing brighter than the moon. It was then that Eldarus heard the angels singing, first a low male chorus, followed by heavenly female singers.

The egg began to hum with vibrations, as small cracks formed across the shell. A small fragment broke loose; a tiny claw burst through. *It's working.*

The singers harmonized as Matthew remained very still, eyes closed with hands in prayer position, clasped with index fingers pressed together, pointing upwards.

The egg split down the middle as leathery wings fanned out from the broken shell, to reveal a tiny lizard shaped figure with a long neck and tail, onyx scaled, eyes of burning gold. The tiny dragon spread its jaws to emit a screech that cut through the voices, silencing all; the waves calmed, the light of Eldarus's staff grew dim. It *had* worked.

Through the kinning ceremony the boy had adopted a most powerful ally.

The light of the wraiths patrolling the decks appeared once more, having been drowned out for a time by the burning staff. Old Captain Vortikhas moaned like a zombie as Matthew stroked the scales of the dragon.

'Splendid, Matthew, well done.'

'What shall we name him?'

'There are many old dragon names that spring to mind,' Eldarus said in a heightened mood. 'But I will leave that up to you.'

Matthew screwed up his face a moment then stared at the enchanted creature again to say, 'I will name him Utredius.'

'Utred's Fire you name him? Now that is not a bad name.' It was then that the boy broke into a fit of tears, and Eldarus was as always at a loss for the right words to comfort him. Utred had been slain only three years to this day, and Matthew was still struggling to come to terms with his loss. In truth the relationship between the old Mage and the future king had been trying to say the least. It wasn't that Matthew was a bad student exactly, he was just, well, overly emotional.

'Do not shed more tears, dear boy. You have Utredius now.'

The dragon stood up on its back legs and spread its wings, and Matthew giggled as he tickled the creature's underbelly. Then it was more tears, lots of tears. It seemed when Matthew got in these moods there was no way to hold back the flood.

Eldarus decided he could use a strong whiskey, and some cheese and crusty bread.

'Vortikhas, keep an eye on the lad.'

There was no water for miles from this place, and the sun was a burning beacon making Cybele sweat from head to toe.

She wore only a pale cream skirt and vest, belted with fine leather and a silver phoenix buckle, the sigil of House Ra'nen, a House of ancient rulers. Though Cybele was only a princess, all of seventeen years and slender as a snake. *No wait, eighteen years old! Today is my birthday*, she remembered with surprise. *Not much of a birthday*, she thought to herself. *Stranded in the middle of the desert about to die of thirst!*

Her mission was simple. Find the Phoenix bird of the southern wastes and bond with it. The only thing at risk was the fate of the world. This had been part of Cybele's lessons ever since she could understand language.

She took a moment to sip from her water flask, as she raised a flat hand over her brows to gaze across the desert hills. The heat haze hovered across their tops like a golden mist.

She had wandered these lands for six days. She was down to a half empty flask.

‘Where are you?’ she screamed at the endless burning wastes. She walked on with blistered feet stinging in her leather boots. They were good boots, but her socks had worn thin and the rubbing never ceased.

Discouraged, hot and alone, she sat and began to meditate. Feeling the sun baking her slickened skin, beads of sweat fell down her back providing the slightest sense of coolness. There was no breeze, just heat dry enough to choke a camel.

She sat and prayed for some time to Aman’un; the goddess of rain. She prayed to Aman’un that her last flask would be filled before noon. But it did no good.

With eyes closed she heard a slight growl directly in front of her; opening one eye to see a male lion standing only inches from her face. Its nose was nearly touching hers.

She was startled, but not afraid. Lions were the most sacred of all animals to the Tegeans. They were also closer companions to Tegeans than dogs.

She reached out to scratch the big creature’s ear inside its shaggy orange mane. The lion sat with legs spread out before it, and she tickled it under its chin until it rolled onto its side and she began to tickle its belly. This was no wild lion. He belonged to someone. That made her cautious, as she gazed about with an alert posture.

‘He is named Ri’tu’kur,’ a voice called from behind her. She turned her head and then her body to face a man standing seven feet tall easily. His hair was curled into tight black locks; his black skin glistening like marble. He wore a red robe with a golden woven belt and carried a thin black walking stick.

‘Ri’tu’kur means proud one,’ the man continued. ‘I named him that because he was very stubborn even as a cub.’

‘I know what it means,’ Cybele said. ‘I’m not a child. I’m fluent in Old Tegean.’

‘Yes, I see you wear the belt of a princess. So, you must be fluent. Forgive my rudeness, princess.’

‘And what do they call you around here?’

‘My name is Samlet Adrobi,’ the man replied. ‘My friends call me Slow Sam.’

The man was slender and lean muscle. His muscles were defined like a racehorse.

‘By the way, you have any water?’

‘I could spare some, in return for your name?’

‘You should know just by looking at me. The ginger locks, the freckles. I’m the eldest daughter of King Oteptun Ra’nen.’

Realisation dawned upon Slow Sam, as he replied, ‘So if you are the eldest, you must be in search of the Red Phoenix, princess.’

‘Just call me Cybele, Slow Sam.’

‘Then we are close pals already.’

‘Now how about handing over some of that water? I told you my name.’

He handed her a large water skin to help fill her own flask.

‘It seems the rain goddess has answered my prayers after all.’

Feeling comfortable around the man, Cybele later stayed to make camp, and as dusk fell, the man began to cook a meal for them to share.

‘Do you know any magic?’ Cybele asked.

‘I know a little magic, though much was lost with my people. I wander these lands searching for ancient scrolls that might trigger the spark I seek to reignite the flames of the Akhori Magi of old.’

Sam had a small cookpot that he was more than capable of lugging around, though he had a large camel seated near the flames with saddlebags packed with paper scrolls; weapons and tools strapped to the animal.

‘What sort of magic do you know?’

‘I can find water. I can speak to animals in different tongues, but that is common magic. I can make fire out of thin air.’

‘Show me,’ Cybele said. ‘I have to see this.’

The man spun his palm and a flicker of amber flame danced along his fingertips for only a brief moment, but it was impressive all the same.

‘Can you teach me?’

‘I could try. Your mind must be clear of all distractions.’

Cybele followed his commands, and when he guided her thoughts to picture a glowing light within her chest, he told her to spin her wrist with palm and fingers rising upwards, but to keep her eyes closed. With her eyes shut, Cybele thought she saw a flicker of light that was more than just the campfire. When she opened her eyes, she saw Sam staring at her with a confused expression.

‘Well, did it work?’

‘Try again, with your eyes open.’

The first time she flicked her wrist nothing happened.

‘Try again. Focus your breathing.’

Cybele focused, and the second time she twisted her wrist slower, and before her eyes blossomed a crescent of crimson and golden flames that covered her entire palm and rose like

a sphere of light. The flame burned as a pure scarlet sphere hovering an inch above her open palm, as tendrils of golden flame licked up along her fingertips.

‘Draw deeper, do you see it?’

‘See what?’

‘The Red Phoenix, Cybele. You must bring it into being.’

It was then she understood, and at his words she began to see the flames taking a shape more like a red bird about the size of an eagle. First the wings appeared, golden and crimson feathers burning in the blue-black abyss, then the head and beak took form, and the bird flapped its wings to soar up into the starlit sky, circling round several times before it returned as a bird of living flesh to perch upon her outstretched arm.

‘It’s a miracle, Cybele. Never had I understood the legend until now. You have saved the world from the threat of eternal darkness.’

Tristan watched as the first pups were born, giggling as the mother grey wolf licked their coats clean. They were quite large, almost as big as one of Tristan’s smaller house dogs. There were four so far. He waited patiently to see if the last one was the most precious of wolves to be born in this Age.

‘Can I pat them, *mon’pater*?’ His father looked down with a wide grimace as he replied, ‘Be patient, Tristan. Wait for them to suckle and grow a little.’

The four pups were crawling their way towards Frostgale’s teats. In time they were all given the chance to drink, though the massive sabre-wolf was still in labour. She growled in low tones occasionally, whimpered, but was calm.

‘Will it be the Snow Wolf, *mon’pater*?’

‘If the prophecies are to be believed, the Snow Wolf will be born this night.

Frostgale’s mate was the king of all sabre-wolves, and so the prophecies state that he shall sire the Snow Wolf. You know the story, boy. Do I have to tell it again?’

‘I know it already,’ Tristan said with a sigh. ‘When the Red Phoenix returns to save us from eternal darkness, the Lord of Wolves will be born as her protector.’

‘Yes, and you shall be the steward of the Princess of Tegea. It is your duty to protect *her*.’

‘But I’m only a boy,’ Tristan replied. ‘How could I protect a princess?’

‘You will learn, Tristan. I will teach you the Old Ways, of the Archers of our ancient clans. Your arrow always finds home, does it not?’

‘I suppose. Oh, look Father, it is happening, the fifth pup.’

They gazed in anxious expectation, Tristan holding his breath until he saw the shiny white coat emerge and spill out over the crimson blanket.

‘It’s him, Father! The Snow Wolf has been Reborn!’

‘Blessed be the brethren of our kin,’ Rodin said, his thick dark eyebrows nearly lifting off his face. ‘Its eyes should be blue, or green,’ Rodin said, as Tristan too noticed that the white pup had bright red eyes, and this was something he had never heard of, in any part of the prophecies of the Snow Wolf. Then a grave concern overtook his father, as if in afterthought. ‘We must prepare, my son. There were parts of the prophecy that have not been spoken amongst children for many an Age. It is a Dark Prophecy, of the coming of the *Ana’nitia*.’

‘The Dark Brotherhood, *mon’pater*? You mean those are not just stories?’

‘Where did you hear that name, boy? That scoundrel Tallis been spinning his yarns again, has he? I’ll boil his boots for breakfast.’

Tallis was a Royal Stableboy at Rodin’s castle. A grown man of twenty-three, he would often tell Tristan stories of the Old Ways and its magic. Tallis’ father, Terrence Silver-Tongue, was the Court Bard, and he had shared many of the tales told at Royal Festivals.

‘Tallis said when the *Ana’nitia* return to our world, the living will walk as the dead, for the Brotherhood are cursed souls that feast on human blood.’

‘Damn that blabbermouth,’ Rodin used tones of a grumbling mountain bear. ‘Better yet I’ll have my ox drag him through a hundred miles of peat, after I boil his boots. He had no business frightening you with those tales, Tristan.’

‘I like his stories. I’m only a little frightened. I know you will always be there to protect me.’

‘I may not always be though, my dearly beloved boy. Dark times are upon us. We must send word to the Nine Lords of the Council. And the King must hear of this.’

‘Our King, Father?’

‘Our King must know of it. Burn my bones! All the Kings must be told. The prophecies stipulate that the Lord of the Brotherhood will cast the lands into darkness and chaos. Kin shall betray kin. The seas will burn, and the skies will fall. Valleys will become oceans, mountains will crumble. The moon shall be as blood when the Lord of the Jinn announces his Return. The first sign will be the birth of the red-eyed Snow Wolf.’

‘I’m frightened now, Father. What are those words you are speaking?’

‘They are the Dark Prophecies, Tristan. They are old as the First Men, and they tell of the End of Days.’

‘Is there nothing we can do to stop it from ending?’

‘I will have to see about that.’ His father looked utterly bewildered. His gaze returned to the white pup being licked by Frostgale. ‘See that the pup gets room to feed. He’ll need his strength in the coming months. What name do you chose for the Lord of Wolves?’

Tristan sat staring at the Snow Wolf for some time. He had named the first four Avalanche, Stormblizzard, Gale and Winter. When he spoke, he felt that all his hopes were being forced into this tiny furry pup. ‘I name him Neverend.’

His father appeared to be choking back tears as he grumbled again, wiped his brow, and then smiled as he gazed down at Tristan, reaching out a giant’s palm to gently tussle his straight black hair. ‘You are a good son, Tristan. Resilient and you have a resourceful mind. I hope you are right. I hope it does never end.’

Chapter 1

The Shadow Awakens

Arathudria slept for eons, since time everlasting, and beyond time. *What is sleep? What was time?* Arathudria’s mind was scathed with holes, his memory in pieces. *What is mind? What is memory?* It had been so long since he had seen the light of day. An endless night everlasting he had slept. Forgetting what form, he once took, what hue of flesh, tint of fur, shade of eye. Memory, yes, slowly Arathudria regained and reorganized memories.

Arathudria was once King of the Blessed Ones, who ravaged the face of the Earth, biting, feeding; tasting fresh blood. It had been so long! The taste of blood was a longing in his bones that had been forsaken for time immemorial. *How long has it been? Does day still turn into night? Does the moon still rise for his people to flourish under its deathly pale shimmer? How long? Are any of my people left?*

Arathudria yawned, his jaw crackling like thick broken twigs as he inhaled air, into his lungs, for the first time since . . . forever! Light entered his eyes, horrid, ghastly, sunlight! But the light could not touch him here. *I am safe, in this . . . stone, sulphur, lime, yes: this cave. I am safe as long as the sunlight does not reach me.* He had to wake, and quickly.

Other bones snapped and contorted, creaking limbs, attached to leathery membranes. *Wings, yes bat wings. I was born of the bat.*

The urge to taste blood was excruciating. He could not live without it, not fully live and move in this world as he once did. *Blood! I must have blood!*

A shrieking peasant beast crawled within reach of one of his clawed fists. Arathudria struck hard and fast, clutching the creature that screamed and writhed. He bit down on the furred rodent to suck life bringing viscous joy from its veins and flesh.

It was as if he had reached for lightning and touched the Creator. Rejuvenation flowed from his lips and fangs, deep into the pit of rancid and decaying flesh that had lain rotting for millennia. The life bringing juice dribbled into his pores, his arteries, pumping blood to his forsaken heart.

Glimmer!

‘What fine day it is brother,’ Camellios shouted while riding by on his prancing grey foal. ‘The sun is burning brightly, ever so bright! Is it not wonderful to breathe the spring air and ride through the fields of many colours?’

Arathudria nearly lost balance on his mount, his prized racing stallion, Ketfolix. *What madness is this? This never was? This could not be? Is it me? Arathudria?*

‘Why does my Lord look so forlorn?’ Camellios asked, reining in the foal, his little brother glanced upwards with great concern. Though there was that childish grin he wore whenever he was playful. ‘Is it your head or your stomach, my Lord?’ And then he grinned even wider as he flourished a free hand in a deep bow from the saddle, ‘What ails ye’, my Count?’

Arathudria gazed towards the glowing beacon in the sky. The sunlight did not bother him. It was not that. It was the fact that the sun was not bothering him that had him so perplexed. *My brother: Camellios?*

Camellios suddenly looked quite troubled and put fingers to lips to whistle, and the thunder of hooves sounded to the west. Arathudria looked there to see a vanguard of riders approaching, amongst them was a beautiful woman with raven locks, eyes like jet stones and impressive bosom. *My wife: Annabetha, my darling, long lost, wife?*

‘Hi Ho, what troubles you, my Count?’ Annabetha asked when at his side. She rode a sleek pale mare with silver bells entwined within the ashen mane. ‘You look as if the Dark Lord stepped in and stole your soul.’

Glimmer!

Arathudria’s mouth was dry, yet he tasted fresh blood. He gorged on the filthy rat for all the life he could gain from it. Another crossed his path, perhaps drawn to the carnage, or some trick of his powers returning. He snatched the beast and squeezed its flesh till bright red juice drizzled onto his forked tongue. A wellspring of health coursed through his veins, life! He was alive again! Blood! More blood! More *bloody* blood!

Glimmer!

Count Arathudria Dra’Kulus read the letter of his wife’s suicide note. Tears stained the fine paper, blotting the fresh ink: he had never shed so many tears. In his heart a terrible ache had awoken, blinding agony that swept him on a path of boiling passionate rage! He swore vengeance on those that had kept him from her side, those who had sent false word that Arathudria had died in battle. And so, his beloved wife had taken her own life, as: in the words of her letter, ‘there could be no life without my One Love’.

Arathudria howled like a wolf baying at the moon. He screamed like a madman whose mind is torn asunder. Storming through the castle, he killed men, women and children at will, by instinct, he was bred for murder, though never before this day would he say he had taken a life without justice being served. *I care not for justice this day!*

His sword was a venomous viper, claymore glowing crimson in the lantern lights that showed piles of dead or wounded. None were to be spared: he picked them off like flies, stabbing the fallen here, blade through an eye socket or throat as he searched for fresh victims.

But this was not the extent of his thirst for anarchy, as he progressed towards the Holy Grounds, where he would make his Covenant against God. There he would renounce all ties to the Church and sell his soul to the Maker of Darkness. Only then would he have the strength needed to avenge the loss of his Annabetha.

Glimmer!

Arathudria roared with vehemence, his cry was that of a raging red dragon: the crystal palace shuddered. Bats swarmed above: screeching in a flurrying dance on the air. He stood and picked them off, one by one, savouring the fresh, warm, thick and delicious taste of bat blood turning stone back into bone, decay into fresh flesh, he sank his fangs deep as they screeched in agony and triumphant worship.

Chapter 2

Spring Thaw

The morning sky was scarlet and golden, warm, but with fat heavy droplets of rain falling across the calm seas. Matthew was up on deck practising his kinning source when the boat skewed through the harbour, towards the longest of the three stone piers. Uthumbria was not one of the great cities, but the seaport was expansive, to say the least. Eldarus watched the boy with a father's fondness as he sat, eyes closed, deep in meditation. The small onyx scaled beast scratched at the wooden decking with its razor claws, wings spreading as if to take flight, though Utredius had barely flown more than a few seconds in the few days since his birth.

The men on the docks were busily unloading freight or sea-catch, but the Docks Master waved a fist like a cudgel at the boat's arrival to the port, eyeing the crew warily with his one grey eye, the other masked with a patch marked with a red dagger. Farimus was once the most feared Pirate Trader on the Kintorin Seas, though he had lost a wager with King Uthron, many years gone by, and had to give up his daring lifestyle to earn an honest wage.

'Good morning to you, Old Sailor,' Eldarus called with a sharp grin.

'Good morn' to ye', Sorcerer,' the man grumbled, 'I'd have ordered to sink this damn vessel from a mile off, if I had no' seen you on deck beforehand. Last time I saw a ship sailed by spectres, it was a grim scene that followed, that do be sure.'

The wraiths were barely visible in the morning's glow, pale lines tracing the human forms of a number of male figures, including Captain Vortikhas at the wheel. 'My men are well trained, I assure you, Farimus. What news in the capital?'

'It do' be dark days, my old Wizard pal, dark times indeed.' The grim tone and demeanour of the man told him he was almost trembling with fear.

'Well, speak man!'

'Word is the King has been alerted to a possible . . . Return.' Farimus had looked left and right before speaking; and cast his eye at the lad on deck before speaking the last.

‘You speak of a Return to Dark Days?’ Eldarus asked, half in shock.

‘You do catch on quick, old man. I do’ no’ want to speak their name here, or ever, it do be said to be a curse to even utter their name. But the Winter Wolf do’ be Reborn, and his eyes do’ be said to glow like hot blood.’

‘What’s he talking about, *im’pater*?’ Matthew asked, moving up beside him on the deck. ‘The White Wolf, with red eyes?’

‘We will talk of this later, old friend,’ Eldarus said with a troubled gaze directed at the Dock Master. Farimus’s eyeball glared perplexed at the tiny dragon standing perched on Matthew’s dark cloaked shoulder. ‘So, the dragon do’ be Reborn too. So, it do’ be happening, all in line with Prophecy.’

‘What does he mean, Eldarus?’ Matthew asked with a pout, dark eyes staring up at him with slight irritation tinged with anxiety.

‘We will talk of it later, boy! Get up onto that dock and help an old man across.’ The boy did as he was asked, though before he could lend Eldarus a hand he found the steady grip of the thick muscled Pirate grasping his arm.

‘My bones nearly split with thirst,’ Eldarus complained with a light chuckle. ‘And there is barely a cord of muscle left on them.’

‘You do’ look young as the day we first met,’ Farimus replied when Eldarus planted both feet on the dock.

‘Cast off, Vortikhas!’ Eldarus shouted to the ship’s captain. The burning lacework apparition lifted a dark captain’s hat from his bone white skull—hollow caves for eye sockets—to wave farewell, as the vessel sailed back out to sea.

‘Where do’ they go when they go?’ Farimus asked as he watched the ship’s departure.

‘Oh, here, and there,’ was the only reply Eldarus could accurately give.

Matthew played with Utredius, the little creature fanning its wings and screeching at high pitch each time Matthew threw the dragon a scrap of meat, before gobbling down the morsel that had been seared in the pan. But Matthew was really listening to the conversation between Eldarus and the old Pirate Trader, Farimus.

They were trying to keep their voices low, but Utredius fed Matthew a strain of the kinning source, enough for Matthew to focus his hearing on the voices at the far end of the

hall. The two men sat beside the brick hearth where a warm fire burned on fat logs, golden curls rising through the darkened chimney. Farimus' home was formed of bricks of many shades of red and yellow, with lanterns lighting the walls and a small chandelier. The candles had melted down two thirds while the men sat together.

A large green parrot with a red-yellow beak also perched on a grandfather clock, the bird making soft ticking sounds in rhythm with the timepiece. Calafan was its name, and it kept a beady eye fixed cautiously upon Utredius the entire time.

Sharing a flagon of fine apple brandy, the pair had the look of being under the spell of drink, though Matthew knew this was a trick of Eldarus's, to appear more affected than he truly was, to glean what information he could from a wagging tongue.

'I do know no more than this, old pal,' Farimus insisted, 'word came with the first ships before morning. The signs do tell the tale, though, no?'

'So, it seems,' Eldarus replied. 'What do the kings intend to do about it?'

'That be your place to give council, I do have no business talking to kings.'

'Quite right: and I shall have to speak with all of them, very soon.'

After a pause, while Eldarus tapped his crystal tumbler with a fat golden ring, Farimus spoke up again to say, 'I did hear one other rumour this evening,' to which Matthew focused his hearing even closer. 'I did hear that the Princess of Tegea did also summon the Red Phoenix not two days past.'

'That is perhaps more relief than cause for alarm,' Eldarus replied. 'Without the phoenix bird, we would be swamped in a winter without end. Facing that, at the same time as a return of the *Ana'nitia*, could be the worst possible outcome I could foresee.'

'So, we do be saved then?'

'It is too early to tell. I will journey to Tegea after speaking with the kings of this realm, to see what more I can learn. The real question is whether the Vampire King has truly arisen, and when, and where. Our only hope is to strike hard and fast, to eliminate our enemy once and for all, before his infection spreads.'

'My people were raised on the tales of the Old Ways, and we do fear the chance of such days visiting us once more. I do have many friends on the sea, if you need ships, you come to me first.'

'We will have need of many ships, first to bring soldiers, but perhaps also to evacuate cities and holds. The bite of the *Ana'nitia* is swift: the plague is said to spread like no other disease we've ever known.'

Matthew realised his teeth were starting to chatter. He was trembling all over. Still he was shocked when Eldarus gazed his way, staring into his eyes as the old Wizard growled, 'You eavesdrop, boy?' He did not look pleased about it.

'Only a little,' Matthew managed between shivering jaws.

'Well, you might as well hear the rest of it.' Eldarus wore that kind fatherly gaze he spared for times like these. 'Get over here, boy, and bring that wretched beast with you.'

Matthew pushed himself up onto legs that were quite numb from sitting crossed so long. He stamped his boots on the slate tiles to get some feeling back, then walked zigzagged toward the two men at the fireplace. Utredius screeched and followed, flapping his wings to lift a little off the ground every few steps. Matthew turned back to watch and giggled. 'Come on, Utredius! We're gonna hear a great story!' The pair sat between the two men's chairs, and the warmth of the flames brought some strength back to his core. He still shivered as he rubbed palms together briskly then held them up before the fire.

'Yes, get warm boy.' Farimus barked like an old wolf. 'There do be a terrible chill on the air this evening.'

'Yes, and I only kept the boy away from the flames so we could have our little talk.' Eldarus rubbed Matthew's right shoulder as he spoke. 'I forget that the little ones can freeze in these temperatures.' He slapped his back gently as Matthew coughed.

'I was just a bit frightened, *im'pater*. I heard you speak of the Vampire King.'

'Vampire King!' Calafan repeated, earning him a growl from Farimus. The bird bobbed its head nervously: wings fluttering.

'I do have a fine coat for you, boy,' Farimus said in a soft rumble, after the two men exchanged glances. 'It will warm your bones if nothing else will.'

'Do not be frightened, Matthew, my boy,' Eldarus sighed when Farimus stood and paced through a darkened archway. 'I will protect you as long as I am able.'

'How long will that be?' Matthew asked with a pout. The old man cackled at that, stroking his long white beard before replying, 'Well, as long as needs be. How's that, lad?'

Matthew knew Eldarus was very old, older than any other mortal man alive, much older in fact. The Elves lived forever, or so he'd heard, but Matthew had heard Eldarus talk of knowing the Elven King when the king himself, was just a lad. And the Elven King was *very* old!

'Will you protect everyone, *im'pater*?'

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