TALES OF THE DREAMER WITCH

5 FANTASY STORIES

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Tales of the Dreamer Witch

5 fantasy stories

written by Tanya Ferris

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Published by Lulu.com

ISBN: 978-1-312-50863-7

Story 1: Theft of a Dream

Maybe you have heard my name.

It is Sandra Nox

But I am mostly known as The Dreamer Witch.

I once served prince Venor, first son and heir to the throne of the Palladian Empire that has its seat in the Constellation of Boötes.

After their catastrophic clearance through the abutting galaxies, the Palladian Fleet attacked my home planet in the solar system of Aldebaran.

I happened to be one of the few survivors taken prisoners of war and implanted to become perfect servants for the Empire.

However, I managed to escape two Palladian years ago, having fully developed psychic powers till then unsuspected; moreover, I allied Arion of Tifereth, the Empire's worst enemy.

Now I am wanted in 172 solar systems of the Palladian Dominion.

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I am flying high over endless green fields; I'm entering a narrow foggy path that gradually takes shape between two lines of leafy trees. I relish an exhilarating sense of freedom, but soon everything around me seems to be melting away. I'm trying to envisage it as clearly as I can, but the only thing I finally achieve, is form a colourless

relief picture sculpted on the astral substance, the ethereal matter all universes are made of. A new path is now being formed before me, hardly discernible between the white tree trunks that spout up towards the alabaster sky. However, I cannot complete my creation: Everything remains motionless, translucent white, incomplete; suddenly, at the end of the path there is a sphere of sparkling light that grows brighter and brighter, obliterating the trees, the path, me, the world...

Right at that moment I woke up from the nightmarish experience, which had just repeated itself for the third time since my arrival on planet Phaon. Apparently, the recurrent psychic experience was a message warning me about an imminent danger and this was understandable, since the planet is within the limits of the constellation of Boötes.

I could have never imagined coming so close to the seat of the empire, I have always considered it suicidal. On the other hand, the Palladian royalty was unlikely to suspect I would ever dare attempt anything within their dominion. Besides, the information I had gathered was too important to ignore: Here, on Phaon, which orbits quasi-forgotten around the dwarf-star Sigma, in the fringes of the Palladian Empire, there was hidden a relic of an ancient civilization long ago lost and forgotten. To the moment I had only a vague idea about what it was exactly; I only knew I wanted it for myself and my interstellar travels.

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My inquiries had finally led me to the mountainous city of Darrak where, behind the whitewashed walls, the tiled roofs, the unpaved alleys and the surrounding barren hills, a dreadful curse lurked behind every corner. That was a wide-spread superstition on Phaon, ever since a mysterious disease first appeared on the planet six months ago. The

most common symptoms were loss of weight, hemorrhage, madness, suicidal attempts -all resulting in an agonizing death.

People attributed the disease to a so-called Archangel Assar, who always lied in wait for his victims in the dark. There were many sects that worshiped the Archangel, considering him a godsent entity who had come down on Phaon in order to give the iniquitous a deserved punishment. On the other side, very few know that *Assar* is the secret ancestral name of the Palladian royalty. In all probability, the "curse" was another biological weapon of the Assars, secretly being tested on the primitive population of Phaon.

A couple of days had already passed in annoying tranquility. I wasn't particularly worried about contracting the disease, it was not contagious anyway; besides, Arion of Tifereth had reassured me that my *Alvesten bracelets* would protect me against it.

I stared out of the half open window, into the moonlit cobbled street below. At this late hour of the night it was completely empty. I had perfect confidence in Arion, I knew that at the time being there was nothing I could do but lie low and wait for further instructions, but now all I wished was that this tantalizing wait was over.

"Be careful what you wish, Sandra," I heard a man's voice whisper near me. "What you wish might come true!"

I gasped in astonishment and turned at once, simultaneously drawing my laser weapon, ready to defend myself.

"Arion!" I exclaimed in surprise and relief. "How did you get in?"

"Silly question," he replied calm.

He was wearing a tight blue uniform, his red hair shim-

mering in the moon light, his green eyes sparkling watchful. As he came closer, I noticed that he was holding something that looked like a bulky book, wrapped in a black cloth. He unwrapped it fast and threw it on my bed with a quick movement. I was taken aback as I read the shiny red letters inscribed on the black leather cover: *The Word of Alagor*. It is a rare book of ancient magic and forgotten sciences, destined to be in possession of enlightened mystics only.

"Where did you get this, Arion?"

"Don't ask! Just study it well, as fast as possible!"

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The biggest part of Phaon is covered by endless ochre deserts studded with petrified dunes, bleak villages and small primitive cities built in the sparse oases. Thousands of people are crowded there, living lives of misery and perpetual fear, their heads constantly bent before the powerful Palladian authority of alleged "divine" origin. Now, with the outbreak of the new disease, fear had turned to terror.

The arenas are the most popular form of entertainment in the cities of Phaon, where the masses have the opportunity to exhaust their oppressed aggression by watching star gladiators fighting each other to death or being torn apart by gigantic alien beasts. It all happens for the amusement of the uproared crowd and, eventually, for the glory of the winner in a supposed sacred tournament.

Three weeks after my arrival in the capital city of Thanda, I had already won a very good reputation as a gladiator. That new career of mine had already cost a dozen of slaughtered opponents, but it all served a good purpose... First, I had to disguise myself in a way that not even my own mother would ever recognize me; then, I introduced

myself as an experienced gladiator coming from "beyond the deserts". That explanation was not satisfactory enough for the Reverent Judges, who claimed there is nothing beyond the deserts. Yet, my identification papers looked perfectly genuine to them. Last but not least, gladiators are always welcome to the arenas of Phaon, especially once they have succeeded in a certain fight-test.

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So, there I was once again, wreathed in the dust of the arena, waiting for my rival to appear and the final duel to begin. I could hear the crowd buzz in excitement, countless inquisitive eyes fixed on me. I was wearing a violet tight-fitting uniform, embedded with variegated shining gems around the waist and my left hand was tightened to an invaluable Simisen sword. That time I had dyed my long hair lilac -which is considered the colour of wisdom in Phaon.

I could hardly contain my impatience when my opponent finally entered the arena. The spectators burst into cheers of exhilaration for he, the renowned Zygor Amherst, was not any gladiator; he happened to be the champion of Phaon for five consecutive years. And he was their strongest hope to see an arrogant warrior woman -that is me- defeated and dying on the sand of the arena.

Looking quite impressive and powerful in his close-fitting blue uniform made of some metalized material, Zygor approached slowly, armed with a steel dagger and a round shield. He had a set face with an air of determination, curly brown hair and sparkling emerald eyes. It *was* mesmerizing to look straight into his eyes; so had I heard many times but found it hard to believe, until now that I was facing him in the arena of Thanda.

A dagger can be a very dangerous weapon in skillful hands, and Zygor soon proved to be more than this: he was extremely agile and fought with a vehemence I could hardly repel. He was constantly on the attack, very confident of himself, forcing me to retreat most of the time. I could hear the crowd roar, impatiently awaiting my fall; especially the women were yelling continuously, in ecstatic mania. I knew I wouldn't be able to resist that kind of concentrated negativity much longer; for the time being, all I could do was recede all the way back, barely parrying a cascade of terrible blows, unable to fight back.

Very soon I ended up in a corner breathless. Zygor Amherst riveted his flaming eyes on me and suddenly the sword was too heavy for me; after a swift blow of his, it was no longer in my hand. I could only stare at the enemy stunned, as he was raising his shiny dagger to deliver the ultimate blow. For a moment of despair, I thought of resorting to some psychic technique that would neutralize him; of course, something like that would probably betray my true identity. So, I span round into a high kick instead, which unexpectedly disarmed Zygor's hand and sent the dagger fly away through the dusty air. Next moment I was rolling down on the sand towards my fallen sword; I grabbed it fast and stood up to my feet in a split second. The enemy stared at me in utter surprise, still unarmed. His selfconfidence had obviously waned, as he instantly glanced back in anguish -a fatal mistake for any gladiator- possibly looking for his dagger, which was nowhere to see.

There was a stony silence among the spectators now, while the red sun was setting behind the ancient pyramids that rose up to the violet sky beyond the upper tiers of the arena. All at once, I was abashed at the tension on Zygor's face, as he stood there fully alert, determined to fight with bare hands. My personal principles urged me to lay my

weapon down on the sand and continue with a fair fight. The crowd burst into wild excitement.

Charging with a loud martial cry, Amherst rushed at me in a frantic attempt to knock me down with his powerful fists. I managed to deflect a terrible punch with a quick blocking movement and then sent him fall back with a sharp sidekick. In no time he was up on his feet again, launching another assault. I ducked immediately and rolled on the ground away from his outraged blows, amidst whirls of gray sand. All at once, a strong kick made my head spin and I collapsed; the crowd roared in wild excitement. I hadn't lost my senses yet, but I no longer knew where I was or what I was doing; I was only vaguely aware of imminent danger. Instinct alone saved my life, as right at the correct moment I came to myself and swept the opponent down with a low kick. He certainly hadn't expected that, for he finally lost balance and fell on the sand. Right after, I pounced on him with a loud martial cry and brought the fight to an end with a sharp blow between his eyes. Zygor Amherst sank to the ground unconscious.

For a few moments I stayed there motionless, pondering on how lucky I was that time; not only had I survived a very dangerous opponent, but I had also avoided one more meaningless killing. The buzz of the displeased crowd irritated me, but I didn't really care. I considered this an ideal ending to my career as a gladiator, which also brought me one step closer to my original purpose.

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I could barely contain my suspense, as six silent acolytes were guiding me to the *Great Hall of Honour*. This is where the king of Phaon himself awards champion gladiators -a sanctum accessible only to those who deserve it. When we reached the black metal portal, here known as *The*

Last Gate, I was astounded to see that the clerics knew how to type the secret digital code which allowed entrance to the vast room. When the portal was open at last, I saw the king sunk in his carved ebony throne, obscured in his dark-coloured royal garments. The grimness on his face showed he did not like at all the fact that he had to reward a female gladiator; yet, he couldn't otherwise now.

As I stepped in, my heart leaped with wonder: The dark gray walls were hidden behind a complex of heterogeneous pieces of machinery; odd-shaped outgrowths; giant glassy spools matching each other in paradox manners; sharp-edged levers jutting out in hinted aggression; numerous hexagonal hive-like cavities beaming inside with a soft light; interspersed gemstones of various shapes and colours shed an uncanny soft light in the whole room; most of the pieces were covered with a protective network made of some membranous tissue. The ceiling consisted of big metal slabs, carved with relief representations of dreadful aliens. But what impressed me most, were the space navigation systems, the vast polyhedral screens, the odd-shaped furnishings, all symmetrically placed around the king's throne.

It was all true then, what I had read in the *Word of Alagor:* The Great Hall of Honour, its origin unknown to its present residents, was in fact the legendary starship Zephyrus: a work of extraordinary science and incredibly old age, a myth for many civilizations, resting there, on that insignificant planet, for millennia. Certainly, the primitive people of Phaon could have never imagined what it really was; to them, it had always been a god-sent temple of kings.

....

It proved to be rather difficult for me to overcome a certain nervousness that night, until I finally managed to calm down and go to sleep for *I had to dream*. Before long I

gained awareness of myself and the dream became lucid; I explored the astral fields for a few moments, then I forced myself to awake instantly, only to sink to the hypnagogic state again -this time envisaging the expressive face of the notorious outlaw Arion. The image of him grew clearer and clearer before me, his shiny red hair waved in the soft breeze, his slit green eyes sparkled in the light of dawn. The haze gradually melted away and I was *elsewhere* now, watching the infamous Lord Diodor, ruler of the Abyssal Realms, cautiously climbing on the purple cliffs that rise above the dark waters of the Nameless Lagoon. He looked impressive in his black uniform with the metal epaulets and the heavy firearm in his hands.

"All right, Arion, give me back my Jade Sceptre and I shall spare your life! Maybe!" he bellowed harshly.

"Why don't you come and get it?" echoed a daring voice behind a high rock.

"You will regret this Arion!" cried the enemy full of wrath, as he climbed higher on the steep rocks, scanning the coast with his narrow, cunning eyes. All of a sudden, a scarlet laser beam hissed down the mossy crags and hit the stone just an inch away from the Lord's head, leaving him breathless for an instant. Right then, I heard Lord Diodor command his mercenaries with a rough voice: "Get him now, dead of alive! Move, you morons!"

Hidden behind a shell-shaped rock, I watched Arion fighting six of them. I had no doubt he would prevail once again against the sluggish warriors of the Abyssal Realms, thanks to his determination and his excellent martial arts. I didn't have to wait long: Just a few seconds later, he had managed to kick them all off the crags. However, Lord Diodor -undoubtedly more efficient than his ruffians- kept on climbing up the cliffs, always full of anger, while Arion

had taken cover behind a massive arched rock. Then I realized he was completely unarmed. *He must have lost his laser weapon during the fight*, I thought, feeling a clasp on my heart.

As soon as the enemy came near enough, Arion pounced on him at once, defying the enemy's deadly firearm; he barely dodged a thick luminous beam that shattered the purple rock behind him into burning dust. Right after, a set of impressive kicks made Lord Diodor lose his balance, stumble back and fall off the cliffs. The heavy weapon slipped off his hands, and a terrible scream echoed all around. A soft thud was heard and Arion rushed down the precipice in search of the Lord's body; yet he found nothing. An ominous silence reigned all over the coast.

All of a sudden, a dark shadow sprang out of an oblong gap among the rocks and assaulted Arion like a crazed beast. It was Lord Diodor attacking barehanded; he managed to take his rival by surprise, throw him down by the edge of a flat rock and grab him by the throat, in a furious attempt to straggle him. After a few agonizing moments, Arion finally got rid of the deadly grip and pushed the enemy off with his strong legs. The Lord cried of pain as he crashed upon jagged crags; yet, next moment he was back on his feet again, ready to continue the duel. I watched the rest of the fight in anguish, until Arion got impatient and sent the Lord meet his men into the cold waters of the Nameless Lagoon, with a set of impressive high kicks. I left my hiding place and ran to him for a long kiss of love.

Time to return: I forced awakening at once, all my attention focused on Arion's enchanting face and the warmness of his hand in mine. Almost immediately, I woke up in my quarters in Phaon with a burning mind. The outlaw was with me now, his slender figure outlined in the

moonlight that came through the latticed window.

"Does Venor know anything about this?" he asked thoughtful.

"Venor? Of course not, how did this occur to you?"

"I don't know; but he's been after you for the last two years!"

"He's been after you, too. It was you who helped me escape from the Palladian Fleet, remember?"

"He had been after me long before that," he corrected me.

. . .

We wound our way through the endless dark corridors like flitting shadows, perceived by guards only when it was too late for them. We had just disposed of the last ones, when we finally stood in front of the Last Gate. My heart sank in uncertainty, as I typed the digital code memorized from the *Word of Alagor*, upon the odd flower-shaped keyboard embedded in the centre of the portal. When we entered the bridge of the legendary starship Zephyrus at last, for a few moments we stood still, hardly believing we had just achieved our purpose.

"Do you really know how to navigate this? I'm not so sure if it still functions, anyway" said Arion then in a broken voice, actually spoiling the magic of the moment.

"We shall see..." I replied, trying to sound as certain as possible.

I had studied a lot about the *Zephyrus* in the *Word of Alagor*, -though I often had the impression some parts were missing- so I thought I knew how to put an end to its agelong apparent death and pilot it back to the vast lacunae of outer space, where it once belonged.

With hesitant steps, we walked to the navigation panel

which was made of a light green iridescent material.

"Arion, give me the Jade Sceptre," I said softly.

He took the stolen item out of its sheath and handed it to me; all I had to do now, was place it in the respective cavity and wait for a few agonizing seconds. To my great excitement, it gradually turned transparent and luminous, shedding a soft white light all around. I sighed in relief, for the first step had been successful: It is the Jade Sceptre that provides the Zephyrus with neutrino-naser energy. After that, I felt a lot more confident: I lowered the correct levers, pressed dozens of keys, gave mental and manual orders to the Artificial Intelligence Unit and finally stayed still, full of suspense. Innumerable lights flashed one after another, the weirdshaped screens lit up; a vibrating whirr filled the air as incredible quantities of energy were streaming into the powerful engines, bringing the ancient starship back to life. Like a giant night butterfly, with its sinister wings glittering in the starlit sky, breath-taking and dreadful, the Zephyrus took off at last, after eons of idleness. It slowly started to ascend into the night sky of Phaon, reducing to burning dust a large part of the miserable city below, while the red star Zenobe was pulsating outside our window.

For an indefinable span of time, all sense of reality seemed lost for both of us and our everlasting passion, as we crossed vast intergalactic distances towards a final destination: a small, semi-material asteroid known as Tifereth, in the centre of the constellation of Argo -Arion's home and kingdom.

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What we should have foreseen but unconsciously chose not to: Someone had been after us during all that time, probably taking into account the information given to him on planet Phaon, as well as the data of another source I don't

want to talk about; the fact is that during the last two years it has been impossible for me to hide from him for long. As soon as the enemy's spacecraft suddenly appeared in our radars, we both froze in astonishment.

"I don't believe it! A Palladian spacecraft!" I cried perplexed.

"Venor's spacecraft!" gasped Arion.

At that moment, a terrible suspicion occurred to me.

"Where did you find the *Word of Alagor*, Arion?" I asked him in feigned calmness.

"I had to steal it from Venor; but I assure you, he doesn't know who took the book and I left no trace behind..."

"Does this look like he doesn't know?" I snapped out, as the enemy's spacecraft appeared in our screens and seemed to be approaching steadily.

"I had no choice; I almost bumped into him while he was taking it from the Ancestral Library of Phaon; unfortunately, he had been there before me, but I can assure you he got wind of the theft a long time after I was gone..."

"You should have told me that from the start!" I interrupted stern.

"Sandra! This is not the right tie to quarrel! We can talk about it later!" he retorted impertinently. I was mad at him but he had a point.

"You are right; we can talk about it later. After the prince has taken an unforgettable lesson!"

Confident of our military superiority, I set the Zephyrus on a war footing. However, the very next moment the enemy managed to anticipate my attack, but that was no reason to worry: just like I had expected, his reinforced lasers proved to be totally ineffective against the protective

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