

Vengeance of Dragons: Chapter 1

By Holly Lisle

*“Solander the Reborn will arrive
in the wind of the Dragons’ breath. Wanderers and Steaders
joined
will slay the Dragons.
Born of blood and terror,
The opal city Paranne will rise at last.”*

*from The Secret Texts, Vol. 2, Set 31
by Vincalis the Agitator*

The scream was Kait Galweigh’s first warning that something was wrong. The second, half an instant later, was the hard metallic stink of human blood mingled with the rank stench of predator.

“Run!” she heard Hasmal shout.

“The gap!”

“Slings!”

“Gods, I think he’s dead!”

She heard running, and shouts, and animal howls. The smells and sounds and the terror hit her like a blow to the skull; her body responded before her mind could. Her blood began to boil and her skin and muscles flowed like liquid, and the human part of her, which had been hunting for edible plants in the forest, shifted to embrace the monster that lived inside of her; she became the thing she both hated and needed. With the woman burned away, what remained was beast, furred, fanged, four-legged, hungry for the hunt. Karnee now, blood-

mad, she raced toward trouble.

She came over the ridge at a dead run, and skidded to a stop at the sight laid out before her. The attackers had her people backed into a narrow crevasse in the cliff that formed the north wall of their camp. Turben was down and bleeding heavily. The other three used the plentiful shale scree as their weapon; they were taking turns throwing volleys against the enemy with makeshift slings, timing their fire in such a way that a constant rain of the knifelike stone shards filled the air.

She couldn't see the attackers, but she knew where they were from the sound of them; they were using the ruin as their shield. They were better armed than the humans. She could hear the twang of bowstrings, the hiss of heavy arrows flying through the air, the rattle and clatter as the arrows rebounded off the cliff face and knocked loose more scree. Better armed and with their prey cornered, they couldn't help but win.

Unless she found a way to shift the odds in her favor.

She scrambled down the cliff, kicking loose scree as she did. But neither her friends nor her enemies would pay attention to her – four-legged, she moved differently than a human, and she sounded like she was moving away from the trouble.

Once into the valley and downwind of the attackers, she came in behind them, running through the underbrush with her belly to the ground, fast as she could without making noise. She was fast and quiet enough that they had no warning when she burst out of the brush to attack them.

She got her first clear look at them as she charged toward the nearest. They were taller than a tall man at the withers and gaunt as specters, and their gray fur hung from their frames in ragged, moss-festooned hanks. She guessed they massed twenty to twenty-five stone – more than four times the weight

and bulk of the average human. They ran on four legs but stood clumsily on two to fling rocks or shoot their arrows, and they called to each other in rough syllables that were not far removed from wordless grunts. Yet they did speak, and they did make weapons, and their faces, arranged in human fashion though larger and more heavily-boned than any human's could be, bespoke their Wizards' War origins. They were Scarred monsters whose ancestors a thousand years earlier had been men.

She was terrified. All her life, she'd heard horrible stories about Scarred monsters and what they were capable of – and she knew what she was capable of, which made her give them credence . . . but in the end those stories didn't matter. Her friends' needed her.

She lunged in, keeping low to the ground and aiming straight for the rear leg of the nearest attacker, and before any of the four beasts could react to her, she'd sunk her fangs into the tendons of the monster's right leg and ripped through them.

The monster screamed, and blood gushed in her mouth. She bounded away, spitting out fur and feeling the surge of the Karnee battle-lust boiling in her veins, fed by the raging river of her fear and her determination.

The beast she'd hamstringed was on three legs, turning to face her as quickly as he could. She could read murder in his face. One of his three friends had turned, too, and nocked an arrow. She spun, darted from the cleared circle, burst out at one of the two monsters still occupied in firing at the cornered humans. An arrow shot by the friend of the creature she'd injured grazed her back and fire screamed through her body, but she kept going. Behind her, the arrow rattled off a tree.

She launched herself upward at the soft underbelly of the creature before her, her claws unsheathed and hooking forward,

her teeth bared. She ripped into the unprotected skin and the slippery, stinking weight of gut rolled down at her. The beast shrieked, its voice far too high-pitched for its size, and flailed at her. Her momentum carried her out of its reach, but into the path of the other two monsters.

One released an arrow in her direction; the other reached for her with dirt-crusting claws as long as her hands. The reaching monster hampered the aim of the shooting one, and the shooting one screamed at the grabbing one and startled him, and so both missed. She scrambled away before they could organize their attack, and ran out into the rain of shale.

“Don’t hit me!” she yelled, and caught just a glimpse of the pale faces of her friends peering from the protection of the crevasse. “I’m going to lead them away from camp. Hasmal – set a . . . a spellfire.”

She heard them shout “Kait!” and someone yelled “Right!” and she hoped that had been from Hasmal, and that he had understood what she’d said. Her Shifted voice was deep and coarse, more the growling of an animal than the speech of a woman. Godsall, she hoped he could figure out what she planned, and that he would do what she wanted him to do.

The three monsters who could move came after her. The one she’d disemboweled was down – not dead yet, but down. But the two that were still healthy looked like they were moving at their top speed after her, and even the one she’d hurt was coming on three legs. They weren’t that fast, but their legs were long, so they covered a hellish amount of ground with every step. And she’d bet they could run forever before they tired. She was an endurance runner, too, but she didn’t want to have to depend on endurance. She wanted to get a lead on them, get to safety, and then wait out the hell that would blaze in her wake.

She charged straight for the stream that fed into the bay and

leaped over it. On the other side a game trail ran parallel to the water up to the last ridge before the bay. Kait followed it; the animals that browsed along it had cleared much of the underbrush from it, so for something her size, it made easy running. She didn't have to fight her way toward the bay; the beasts that pursued her, much larger than she, struggled with the branches and thickets that overhung the trail at their eye-level. She could hear them crashing after her, branches cracking and rattling. They were falling behind. They started howling, and she could hear the frustration in their calls.

She would make it. She was going to survive. She'd have time to get down to the beach, to swim into the bay –

Another monster appeared in front of her, running toward camp. Another part of their hunting band, coming to assist its packmates. She shrieked, caught off guard, but it wasn't surprised to see her. It narrowed its eyes and lunged.

She barely evaded it; she was small and fast, it was large and slower. But not slow enough. It jumped sideways to block her escape, yelling as it did. From behind her, one of the others shouted back.

They talked to each other. Too easy to think of them as animals, but they weren't. The ones behind her had told the one in front of her to watch out – that she was coming.

She shot straight up a solid tree, cat-like claws hooking into the bark. The monster stretched after her, grabbing her tail, and she felt a single instant of blinding pain along her spine. She dug harder with her hindquarters and pulled free. She ran along the upper branches for a ways, leaping from tree to tree, keeping out of reach, heading steadily toward the bay. She hated being off the ground. She was losing time, and careful as she was she still presented too much of a target.

She heard the flat twang of a bowstring, and an arrow buried itself in her flank. She screamed, feeling the hot gush of her

blood down her leg and the weight of the shaft throwing off her balance. The pain was another weight, sucking the fight from her. She stared down; one of them crouched below her, tracking her through the trees, waiting for another shot clear of the branches. She flung herself forward, and heard another of them crashing toward her from the side. The ones behind her were closing.

Hurry with the fire, Hasmal, she prayed. If he did, her friends would survive; they would find a way get the Mirror to the Reborn even if she died. They had to succeed at that – Solander the Reborn had told her he had to have it. The Mirror, which was rumored to resurrect the dead, would one day give her back her murdered Family, but even before it did that, it would serve Solander's purpose in creating his world of peace and love – the world in which her kind would be accepted, not hunted down, tortured and slaughtered.

She never thought she'd discover something worth dying for, but a world that would not murder little children for being born Scarred was such a thing. Her family's lives were such a thing. If her friends could live to get the Mirror to Solander

She yanked the arrow from her flank with teeth and claws, and, fighting the agony, went scrambling on three legs along the branch. The Karnee Shift began closing the wound, but ate up her energy to do it. Her body would devour itself to heal; if she lived through this, she would have a hellish price to pay.

Then she heard fire crackling behind her and caught the first whiff of smoke rolling toward her. The spellfire wouldn't be stopped by rain or by live, wet wood or by unfavorable wind. It would burn everything burnable in its path, carving a perfect circle of destruction through the forest, stopping only when the energy with which Hasmal had fueled it ran out. It would burn faster than any normal fire, reducing a full-grown tree to ashes in mere moments. If she didn't get out of

its way, it would burn her, too.

The stream ran below her, within reach. But the monsters held the game trails to either side of it. She couldn't run to the bay, and if she wanted to live, she had to get to the bay. She was out of time.

The monsters sniffed the air, smelling smoke – but they didn't know how fast the fire would come. She did. In desperation she threw herself into the center of the flooded, icy, boulder-studded stream. The water dragged at her legs as she scrabbled to touch bottom, and lifted her off her feet, and flung her forward.

She fought to keep her head up. The current was fast, brutally fast, the normally negotiable water made deadly by days of rain. It slammed her into boulders as it dragged her downstream, and tore at the arrow protruding from her flank, first shoving it deeper, then trying to rip it loose; with every bone-cracking collision she could only remind herself that worse was coming.

The current spun her backwards for an instant before sucking her completely under the water. In that instant, she saw the world behind her lit up like a blast-furnace, blue-white fire advancing in a wall faster than the fastest man could run.

She'd seen the monsters behind her outlined by the fire.

And then she was under the muddy water, caught in the fierce center of the current, dragged headfirst through blackness. She held her breath and kept her forelegs over her head, hoping to protect herself from rocks, but the current jerked her into one from the side, and when her head hit, the pain hammered her, and she inhaled water and choked as the current flung her upward again, playing with her. She spewed water into the air and pulled smoke-poisoned, fire-heated air into her wet lungs.

Then everything got worse. The stream became a waterfall that plunged down the side of a cliff and poured into the bay. The current flung her over the precipice amid a torrent of pounding water. The sensation of floating seemed to last both forever and no time at all, ending abruptly in horrific pain. Her body crashed against rocks and water slammed down onto her, and ribs and hips and legs all shattered and screamed agony at once.

She was with the pain, in the pain, made of pain for an instant that was an eternity, while her blood boiled and her skin burned and a fire erupted inside of her that was hotter than the spellfire that had destroyed the world around her.

Then . . .

Nothing.

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