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DragonFox

by Tom Zumwalt

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Chapter Eleven

Morning.

Gone again, Fox thought, as he remembered that his mother went to a warrior council meeting. This time, she had said, about “an important matter” that needed her attention.

With his mother gone, he had an opportunity to look for something from his dream. In the dream his father told Fox about an object hidden somewhere within their house. Fox knew not what it was, only that his dream father wanted him to find it, that it would aid Fox somehow.

“Nes, I’m more convinced than ever that Father is alive.” Fox crept into his mother’s room. It had always been off-limits to Fox, and he would not normally consider entering her room. But the dream had been so vivid. So insistent. In it, his father, wearing the tunic he always wore when he was ironweaving, had approached Fox, smiling, holding a strange metallic object before him. Then Fox awoke.

Wary, Fox noticed everything was perfectly in its place, from her warrior’s gear to what few items she had kept as a reminder of his father. The light was dim, as the one lone window was shuttered. Nes circled his feet anxiously as if to tell him he shouldn’t be in here.

Unsure where to start, Fox searched, but turned up nothing. *Not here*, he thought. Then some force guided him outside to his father’s ironweaving work area.

As he entered the workshop, Fox realized he had not been in here since the Burning Night. *This feels odd*, he

thought, *coming in here without Father*. The dream, however, gave him permission.

There was the forge and all his father's tools, perfectly in place on one wall. Scrap metals of various shapes and sizes lay untouched in a corner. And over there, in the far corner. What was that? A small, ornately-woven metal box, gleaming. Fox walked over, gazed at it, then released the small clasp. Opening the lid, he saw his father's FarGlass. Fox picked it up and was met with a wave of memories about his father, times when he had shown Fox how to use the FarGlass to make objects appear closer than they were.

Fox wondered why his father had kept it out here instead of his parents' bedroom. Fox knew his mother did not believe in technology, preferring the old ways, so perhaps that was why. He tucked the FarGlass in his pouch—the pouch that contained odd bits and scraps that Fox thought useful.

Just then, his concentration was broken by chanting outside. Mawn and his toadies.

No, Fox thought. *Not now. I don't have time for this.*

Banging on his father's workshop, their voices were louder now.

"Foxie? Are you in there, White Socks?"

Something flipped in Fox's stomach as anger spread through him like a glowing ember. *No, you fools*, he thought. *I have something important to do*. When they beat on his father's workshop, it felt like they were beating on Father. His father, who had given so much. They must stop.

"No! Stop it!" he shouted. The tiny ember rapidly burst into flame. Fox could not allow them to do this. He stepped outside, holding a pair of his father's pliers.

One of Mawn's little party, normally silent, threw in comments of his own. "There's little Foxie White Socks. So, here's the great Dragon Fighter, huh?"

The other lackey could not be left out. "He'll never be a Dragon Fighter. He's a coward. Just like his father!"

And from Mawn. "Look, he's holding one of his coward father's tools. What are you going to do with that, coward? I think we should take it away from you."

Fox burned like a furnace. He looked down slowly at his father's pliers, then at Mawn. He dropped the pliers. "I don't need these to take care of you."

Fox knelt on all fours and a strange energy flowed into him from Gaia. Glaring at Mawn, he said, "This is all I need."

Fierce power surged through Fox as his body and the ground about him shone deep red, then orange, yellow, and finally brilliant white. He became as of stone. Nestor stared at Mawn and the other two and emitted a low, throaty, rumbling growl. The hair on Nestor's back bristled.

Mawn and the other two quickly backed up, no more taunts from them. Then they could retreat no further. Panic welled up in their bellies and their throats as they found their feet firmly planted in the ground. They looked down, horrified. The earth had moved all about them and entrapped their feet. Fierce panic gripped them.

Fox gazed at Mawn. "I want all of you to leave my garden. You are never to insult my father again. Ever. Understood?"

Fear choked out Mawn's words. All he and the other two could do was nod.

"Good." Fox released his connection with Gaia and stood. The earth freed their feet and they wasted no time escaping.

Fox blinked, then looked down at Nes. He couldn't help chuckling. "Well, boy, I don't think Mawn and his friends will bother us anymore. How was I able to do that, though? Quagn never taught me any Gaia spells."

Fox shrugged, "Ah, well, I'll ask Quagn next time I see him. For now, Nes, we have gardening to finish."

Chapter One Hundred-Ten

An ordinary day. The air was clear.

Silent. Unseen, they numbered in the thousands, but no leaf fluttered. No clouds disturbed. The outer sentries saw nothing. Heard nothing. Felt nothing.

Later, however, the wind prickled one's skin. Livestock became unsettled, and dogs and cats hid. No birds flew.

Jagna and Farrin, helping their mother gather sticks for kindling, looked far on the horizon.

Jagna saw it first.

"Mother, look at that funny dark cloud above the mountain."

"What, dear?" Bird looked up from where she knelt, gathering larger sticks. She squinted to get a better view. *There is a strangeness to that cloud, she thought. It shifts and moves unlike any I've seen before.*

She stood, letting the wood fall to the ground from her apron.

Great Gaia! she thought.

The cloud was no cloud. Bird didn't know what it was, but she knew that it was not good.

Barradin, her husband, stopped on his way back to their home, after having worked in the fields.

"What is it, Bird? What troubles you?"

She pointed.

Barradin turned to look and shivered. The cloud had grown. It pulsed and undulated, flickering as it rapidly grew.

"The prophecy is true," he said.

"Yes," said Bird. "The sky is black with dragons."

"Get the children inside, Bird. There is not much time."

"Yes, Barradin. Good speed, husband."

"Good speed, wife. If I see you no more in this life, I will see you in the next."

Barradin kissed his wife, and ran, hard and fast, shovel still in his hand, for the nearest alarm bell.

Bird gathered Jagna and Farrin together. "Children, remember the times we practiced what to do when the dragons returned?"

"Yes, Mother," said Jagna, maintaining his composure as best he could so as not to upset his little sister.

Farrin asked, tearfully, "Mother, where is Father going?"

"He's going to help the rest of our friends and family."

Barradin made his way straight for the black armory, one of several places where the warriors of his sector kept their weapons.

Memory was strong and tales fresh of the Burning Night, and the Black Dragon Sky. Strange dark clouds that seemed to consume Apollo's Chariot now rose against the distant red horizon. All warriors throughout Loughmar felt a stirring within their insides—that prelude to battle or deep war which many had prepared for yet never seen, and the rest had seen and hoped never to see again.

Alarm bells split the air throughout Loughmar—loud, insistent, angry. Hoes, baskets, shovels—all fell to the ground as each warrior went for their weapons. Armor quickly buckled in place, they gathered at their

appointed places. Today all of Loughmar would fight as one.



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