

-THE SCARF-

A Hickory Lace sci-fi fantasy quest
(Book 3 of the Prosperine Trilogy)

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Temloki

Temloki's leathery wings rippled in the blustery breeze, rousing him momentarily from his slumber. The journey from Avanaux had been long and arduous, and the sword grew more burdensome with each passing mile. His strength would not last forever, he knew, but it would suffice until he reached his destination. *The Scarf*. He quivered with excitement in his half-sleep. At last, he would be with his kinfolk.

He'd nested alone these past three hundred years, ever since that dire day Ka-Varla had failed to return from the hunt. He'd woken with her screams echoing through his dreams and immediately left the lair to search for his mate. Temloki tracked her to the marshlands outside the city of Crodal. There, amongst the white water lilies, he discovered Ka-Varla near death. She lay on her side, pierced by a score of arrows, with thick black blood oozing from her belly, swollen with the nymphlet she'd carried these last eighteen months. She lifted her head and keened as he approached. Temloki dripped water into her mouth and brought her fresh meat until she could no longer swallow. Her breathing became weaker and more labored, and finally, it ceased with a sigh. He remained with her until long after she'd grown cold.

Temloki grieved many months for the loss of his mate. She'd been with him near a century, the mother of four nymphlets, all of them dead at the hands of the wingless ones. Each night before they slept, they relived the joy of the chase and the kill, and shared their bewilderment over the endless wars between the six kingdoms of Erlach.

Ka-Varla and Temloki were the last of their kind on the northern continent, and after his mate's passing, Temloki lived in solitude, emerging from his cave only to hunt, his sorrow and hurt souring to anger and hate. The rage festered inside him day by day until all thoughts but those of revenge fled his mind. He brought terror to the wingless ones, the Erlachi, demanding they give him their children, their mates, as they had taken his. His revenge knew no limit. Many of his victims he swallowed whole to satisfy his hunger, but others he tore apart slowly for the pleasure of watching them die. His appearance at the gates of any city created hysteria amongst the population and earned him his epithet, Riv-Amok, 'bringer of death.'

And in two hundred years he had never heard another voice until the warrior from the stars whispered in his mind. At first, he thought he dreamed again of Ka-Varla, then with mounting excitement, he hoped the whisperer might perhaps be one of his own, miraculously come from a far country to seek him out. But hope turned to bitterness when he realized the stranger was nothing but a wingless warrior. He sought her out, but her will was strong, and she evaded him. In the end, he devoured two of her companions before the White One commanded him to leave and take the sword to the Scarf.

In the first days of his journey, he fancied he'd heard the weapon murmur to him, urging him forward with promises of great treasures, but he laughed at it. Nothing created by the hand of a wingless one could hold sway over him.

Temloki grasped the sword more firmly in his talons and coasted lower, cocking his

head to survey his new home: a hot and steamy place with salt-encrusted white rock cracked and broken into a million pieces by rivulets of seawater, and seemingly devoid of life. There was nothing for him here. He groaned, but beat his massive wings and flew on.

The sun sank beneath the sea, and the planet Prosperine's two orange-dusted moons rose high. The aurora unfolded like a curtain, and the sky was blanketed with pulsating sheets of emerald, ruby, and turquoise. A thin ribbon of gold rippled slowly across the heavens and sank beneath the horizon. Temloki cared naught for this natural beauty and fastened his eyes on the land below.

Gradually the terrain changed. Occasional patches of lichen and algae joined together, and the salted crust gave way to rushes and ferns and then to swamps infested with biting insects and creeping plants. Bushes and scrubby trees emerged, growing taller by consuming their own branches, leaf litter, and the occasional dead animal. The land rose in places, forming hillocks and ridges in the otherwise flat vastness.

A flicker of light caught his eye, and Temloki turned towards it, his heart suddenly aflame.

Trouble in the Scarf

Admiral George Lace, Earth representative at the Intragalactic Agency, stared at his adopted daughter, his fingers tapping the table between them. “You’re telling me this sword has magical powers that enhance the strength of whoever happens to own it?”

Hickory squirmed in her seat. She was aboard the admiral’s flagship, the Jabberwocky, being debriefed on her recent assignment to Erlach. She found it hard to accept this man as her father, preferring to think of him as the Admiral, with a capital “A.” After her mother died giving birth to her younger brother, he’d offloaded both of them to his sister, Maddie. For ten years, the only communication Hickory received from him was an occasional birthday card with his name printed on it. In the last five years, there’d been nothing. Then, out of the blue, she’d been transferred from the Alien Corps to work with him on a mission to Prosperine.

Hickory was a neoteric, one of a small percentage of the population born with nascent empathic ability, a rare mutation that emerged during the Dark Age following World War III. As a result of this, she could sense the emotions of others and tell when someone lied or distorted the truth by reaching out to them with her mind.

She knew the Admiral scorned anything hinting of the paranormal. She spread her hands wide. “I don’t say *magic*, sir. Sequana’s strength could have been coincidental, but the Sword of Connat-sèra-Haagar affected his mind. Those who knew him say his whole personality changed in the weeks before I killed him. He remained a charismatic leader of the rebellion and a brilliant thinker much loved by his followers, even after his defeat. Then, a few months after acquiring the sword, he became paranoid and suspicious of everyone around him. I believe the sword helped Sequana to become powerful, but in the end, it also made him vulnerable. The legends of the Avanauri say that the sword magnifies weaknesses as well as strengths.”

The admiral snorted, then changed tack. “And you lost this weapon? You had it in your hand, yet you lost it?”

Hickory nodded carefully. She didn’t want to lie to the Admiral, but she didn’t want him to know the truth—that Gareth, her sidekick, had given the Sword of Connat-sèra-Haagar to the Avanauri mystic called the Teacher, who in turn had placed it in the keeping of the ferocious telepathic creature, the Riv-Amok. “I have an idea where it might be, though. I heard someone say it was taken to the Scarf for safe keeping.”

“Someone?” The Admiral laughed. “And who would that *someone* be, I wonder? Never mind.” He raised his hand. “I don’t want lies, and in any case, if it’s in the Scarf, it may not be so safe as you think.” He shook his head. “I don’t know how Yonni is going to take this. He desperately wants that sword back.”

Hickory’s eyes flashed. The admiral had made a pact with Avanaux’s ruler, Yonni-sèr-Abelen, to bring him the sword in exchange for a license to mine crynidium, a vital ingredient in the fuel that enabled FTL travel. The liquid metal had been discovered on only a handful of planets, and the IA was desperate to secure the long-term rights on

Prosperine. Hickory suspected that part of the deal also involved getting rid of the Teacher whom Yonni believed to be a threat to his authority.

Hickory had been seconded from the Alien Corps to retrieve the fabled weapon when Sequana had stolen it from the temple. In the end, she had decided that Prosperine and its people were better served if the sword remained hidden.

“I understood the Scarf to be uninhabited,” she said.

The admiral’s eyes fixed on hers, but he said nothing.

Hickory poured water into her glass and sipped at it. “The ship’s vids describe it as a barren place—mostly swamp and jungle. The only things that live there are flies, spiders and a bunch of other squishy creepy-crawlies.” She shivered. “I would have thought it the perfect place to lose anything for a few thousand years.”

The admiral’s chair scraped across the floor, and he walked to the viewscreen where the planet Prosperine shone like a blue and red jewel swathed in white clouds. “Our initial exploration of the Scarf may have been a little less than thorough.” He darted a glance at Hickory. “When our first flyby indicated no sentient life there, I made a decision not to expend resources exploring the area. Later analysis of the data showed that higher life forms do in fact exist—on some of the islands, at least. I decided to run another scan, and we picked up signals indicating the presence of small bipedal populations. We think they may be nocturnal cave-dwellers, which would explain why we didn’t find them on our first scan. So far, we’ve located six groups of between two and three hundred each. We can’t get more detail because the radiation in that area is pretty bad and it interferes with our scanning.” He laughed with a short bark. “Given what you’ve just told me, though, I don’t have any alternative. I’m going to have to send a team down there to look around.”

If there was one thing Hickory didn’t want to do ever again, it was to go into a jungle—any jungle. She recalled her mission two years back on Aquarius Four. For six months, there’d been tropical rain, leeches, and carnivorous plants to deal with. She’d hated it, but she could have coped if she hadn’t gone against all her training and allowed herself to become romantically involved with one of the crew. She received a note from an anonymous well-wisher telling her Jacob had been married for seven years. The ensuing break up was vitriolic, and she’d lost her focus on the operation. To top it off, her main quarry had been assassinated under her nose.

When she returned to Earth, emotionally and physically exhausted, her boss, Prefect Cortherien, had dismissed her from active service and transferred her to a job teaching at the Saint Philip Research Academy—the training ground for the Alien Corps.

The admiral’s eyes locked on hers. “I know you have issues with working in these sort of conditions, and if you don’t want to go, I’ll find someone else.”

A tear came unexpectedly to her eye. *He’s trying to manipulate me.* She was nothing more than a pawn to this man who called himself her father, a pawn he would have no hesitation in sacrificing to achieve his own ends. She’d been on the planet twice in the last six months masquerading as one of the natives. If she undertook the maquillage treatment one more time, she’d have to return to Earth for re-humanizing. That would be a particularly unpleasant experience—not that he cared. She blinked the moisture away. “That’s what you’d better do, then. I’ve had enough of adventure for a while.”

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Hickory sipped at her glass of Barbaresco and flicked the hollo-channel over to classical. She selected the Slovak National Philharmonic Orchestra's rendition of *Rhapsody in Blue*. The quirky mix of classical and jazz elements perfectly reflected her conflicting emotions. She'd been back on Earth for two weeks, eating at the best restaurants, attending recitals and stage shows and catching up with Jess, Mack, Gareth, and Jenny. It was great to see how happy they all were, and how very much in love and unafraid to express their affections in public they'd all become. *There*. The pang of envy, or was it self-pity, seared her heart, and she wondered if she would ever find a soul mate. She shook her head. Such is life. The affair with Jacob had been nothing more than a fling. The nearest she'd come to being in love had been with Kar-sèr-Sephiryth, the alien known as the Teacher, on her last mission to Prosperine. But that was different, wasn't it? She was attracted by his gentleness, his compassion, his selflessness. She felt safe in his company, and if he had been human, she might have fallen head over heels. She shook her head, tutting at her self-delusion. *God, I'm a moron. Every time I see him, I feel a wild impulse to wrap my arms around him.* Kar was the most exciting, mysterious person she'd ever come across, and perhaps something more.

The Alien Corps had searched the galaxy for signs of the Messiah ever since the discovery of an ancient manuscript in 2095 prophesied that he would appear on an alien planet at the end of days. Cortherien had reinstated Hickory as a commander in the Corps specifically to discover the truth about the Teacher. The report she'd provided to the Prefect concluded Kar-sèr-Sephiryth represented an early manifestation of a predicted leap in the evolution of the Avanauri species. She still wasn't sure if this was the case, but Kar was no more attainable to her than if he'd turned out to be the reincarnation of the Christ.

She sighed. How badly did she need to get a life? Mooning over an *alien*.

The holo-screen beeped to signal an incoming message. Hickory checked the identity of the caller. The Admiral. She pushed her glass to one side, straightened her collar and accepted the call.

"Hickory! How are you? Enjoying your vacation?"

"Sir, you didn't call to check whether I'm having a relaxing time."

He shook his head and smiled. "Always the same mistrustful daughter, desperate to get straight to the point. Would it kill you to be pleasant to your father for a change?"

She maintained a blank expression with difficulty. The admiral wasn't her birth father and, considering his indifference to her over the years, their relationship was anything but familial. She knew it, and he knew it, but he wasn't beyond playing the family ties card to get what he wanted. She hated that. "What do you want?" she said.

"Alright, have it your way." He gave a curt nod. "There's been a development on Prosperine. After you decided not to help, I sent a team into the Scarf to look around. They've disappeared."

Hickory's eyebrows rose. "What happened?"

"I don't know. We lost track shortly after the pilot reported seeing a crashed jet."

A shadow crossed Hickory's heart. "What kind of jet?"

"Bikashi."

Hickory felt the heat rise up her neck. The Teacher's last words before she left Erlach sprang to mind: *Something stirs in the Scarf. I fear the sword is no longer silent.*

"There's Bikashi in the Scarf?" The Bikashi, a warlike species, had once been

members of the IA. They'd been thrown out after several attempts to defraud the other representatives. On her first mission, a squad of Bikashi troops had joined forces with Sequana and his Avanauri rebels, intent on seizing the planet's stocks of crynidium.

"I can't say for certain. Brox didn't report seeing any on his fly past, and unfortunately, he went off-air soon after. Rescue are out there now looking for our people. But we can't take the risk." He paused. "Hickory, they could be after the sword."

Hickory snorted. "Even if they knew about the sword, how would they know to look in the Scarf? Surely it's a coincidence? You don't know how long they've been there. They might have crashed years ago."

"Perhaps," said the admiral. "But I can't afford to take the chance of someone like Vogel getting their hands on it."

"Vogel! You don't think he's in the Scarf?" The commander of the Bikashi Shock Pack had kidnapped and tortured Gareth on their first trip to Prosperine. The Teacher had done what he was able to heal the boy, but some of the emotional scars remained with him.

"Just putting two and two together. We know he escaped after the battle of Ezekan, but we never heard of him after that. It may not be him."

"Sounds like a long shot." But if there stood a remote chance of it being Vogel, the admiral couldn't afford to ignore it. She swallowed hard. "Admiral, I can't go back to Prosperine, not to the Scarf. I'm sorry, you'll have to find someone else."

"Oh I know, Hickory. I didn't expect you to. I've found someone who's keen to do the job. I just called to let you know that Gareth Blanquette is on his way here."

Hickory's head swirled: if there were any chance of him getting a chance to exact revenge on Vogel, Gareth would indeed be more than eager to go.

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Hickory and Jess sat at a table outside the Cafe Dolce in Rome. They'd ordered pasta for lunch, but neither felt like eating. "Sometimes that boy is as thick as two bricks, genius or not," said Jess, her eyes afire. "He didn't say a word to me."

"Because he knew you'd try to stop him going—the same as I would, that's why. It's too late to be angry, Jess, he's half way to Prosperine by now."

"The admiral's bullying you into this, you know that don't you? You don't have to go. Gareth's a big boy now." Jess pushed some gnocchi around her plate with her fork. "Do you think it's Vogel?" She gave Hickory a sidelong glance.

"I'm *afraid* it is. And if so, losing Gareth isn't the only problem we'll have. If the Bikashi gets his hands on the sword, God knows what he'll be capable of."

"So, you're going?" Jess nudged her plate into the middle of the table.

Hickory raised an eyebrow and smiled wryly. "Much as I wish I didn't have to, I don't feel there's any option. I've asked the admiral to keep Gareth in cold storage until I arrive."

Jess folded her arms. "Until *we* arrive."

Vogel

Vogel's long snout twitched as he slammed the micro-solder down on the comms panel. Broad and tall, even for a Bikashi, his head resembled an enormous soft-shelled turtle, and his body was covered in micro-scales. He hissed through the thin, ragged slit of his mouth. *Shrelek!* Another wasted morning. The ship was obviously beyond repair. The FTL drive appeared unharmed, but unless he could get her off the ground he'd never know for sure. He glanced out the doorway and across the swampland to where his soldiers sat playing cards. They were no help. They'd given up any hope of getting off this planet a long time ago. He glared at them. If they ever managed to return to Auriga, he'd have the lot of them flogged and then the skin flayed from their flesh an inch at a time. He should kill them now, but useless and undisciplined as they were, they were still Bikashi, his own people. In truth, it had been harder on them than he—at least his personal radiation shield had survived the crash. The Prosperine sun hadn't been merciful to his troops. Typically hard and toughened like cracked basalt, their exposed flesh was now covered in red welts. Without doubt, they'd be dead in a few months, even if they escaped from this planet.

Vogel jumped from the ship onto the squelchy bed of reeds and vines that supported the space-fighter. They'd been first-rate soldiers once, the finest in the Bikashi army, but that was before they were routed at Ezekan, forced to flee from the marauding Charakai. As a reflex, his eyes darted skyward. He shivered as he recalled being pursued by the reptile-birds, snapping at his neck and screeching in frenzy. The raised voices of his soldiers chased away his meandering thoughts.

Revlek, his lieutenant, was running towards him leaping across half submerged creepers while pointing to the sky. He called out to his commander, jabbering in his excitement.

Vogel turned and shaded his eyes. He frowned. Something, a seabird perhaps, flew high overhead. He watched as it banked towards them, growing bigger by the second. No, not a bird; it was a reptile of sorts, by the look of its membrane wings and elongated head, but much bigger than the vicious Charakai that plagued his sleep. He drew his blaster and checked the gauge, even though he knew the load was almost depleted. At most, he had two decent shots left. He started towards the thick forest two hundred yards away, shouting, "Revlek, get those *craiks* into cover. Now!"

Revlek drew his sword and urged the four Bikashi across the swamp. Seized by panic, they bumped into each other, stumbling as they ran. One of the warriors glanced over his shoulder and tripped on a vine. He fell through a break in the vegetation and disappeared into the murky water below.

Vogel sprinted to the scene, but there was no sign of the missing soldier. He kicked at the water, cursed, then resumed his flight, bounding over the swampland and crashing through the scrub to join his remaining troops.

The Riv-Amok circled the spaceship several times before it landed on a firm patch of reedy tussocks. It stretched its neck, shook its massive leathery wings, then folded them

close to its body.

Crouched behind cover at the edge of the forest, a soldier nodded at the weapon clutched in the beast's claw and whispered to his comrade, "What magic is this, that a creature wields a sword?"

The Riv-Amok's head snapped towards the Bikashi, its long beak hovering barely inches above the swamp. It dropped the sword on the matted vines and crept stealthily towards the trees, stopping every few yards to listen.

Vogel motioned with his gun for his troops to move further into the forest. A branch snapped beneath Revlek's foot, sounding like a crack of thunder in the still air.

The creature opened its beak and emitted a shrill shriek.

The sound terrified the Bikashi troops, and they bolted, careless of the noise they made. Vogel's eyes grew wide, but he remained crouched, still and silent, his attention fixed on the approaching monster.

The Riv-Amok crashed through the trees, its great wings snapping them like matchsticks and its clawed feet tearing bushes up by the roots. The Bikashi broke in four different directions, but the beast was too quick for them. One by one, it plucked the weakened soldiers from their surroundings, tossed them into the air and swallowed them whole. The beast's throat bulged grotesquely whenever a Bikashi soldier slid down its gullet.

Vogel watched horrified from his hiding place in the hollow of a large tree. He saw Revlek, the last of his crew, dash out of the forest and make a dash for the ship. Leaping over gaps in the ground cover and skirting larger pools of open water, he had almost made it when the monster pounced. Revlek screamed as a great claw pinned him to the ground and the beast devoured strips of flesh from his still conscious body. With a cry of triumphant joy, the Riv-Amok silenced him, tearing his head from his body.

When it finished eating, the creature settled on its belly and licked the blood from its claws. Then it rose and sniffed the air. It reentered the forest, less than twenty yards from where Vogel crouched.

Cold sweat broke out on the back of the Bikashi commander's neck. He tore his eyes away from the monstrosity and pushed himself as far back into the tree hollow as he could go.

Should he try to run? If he could get to the ship, he might survive—though he didn't doubt the monster had the strength to rip the hull apart. He felt something wet ooze onto his head and crawl down his neck onto his shoulder. He ignored the slimy insect, keeping his eyes fixed on the creature. Its back was turned, about fifty yards away. He crept out of the tree hollow and shook the bug from his hand, then crawled on his belly to the forest's edge. He noticed the sword lying where the creature had left it, about half-way to the ship. One last glance over his shoulder to make sure the monster hadn't spotted him and Vogel ran. He scooped up the weapon on his way past, then scrambled through the ship's doorway.

The monster's screams followed him inside. Vogel sucked in his breath as the Riv-Amok emerged from the trees and launched itself at the spacecraft, half flying, half running, its claws spraying water. The Bikashi commander scrambled away from the doorway just as the monster's head probed the opening, dripping blood and gore. It opened its jaws and filled the cabin with its shriek and the stench of death.

A faint echo of the beast's cry sounded from outside the ship. It withdrew its head and turned to the west. The sound came again, and the monster shrieked an answer. Taking a last malevolent look towards the ship, the Riv-Amok skimmed across the clearing, unfolded its wings and launched itself into the air.

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Vogel staggered outside, placed his hands on his knees and vomited. He brushed his mouth roughly on the back of his sleeve and glanced around. Revlek's helmet, with his head inside, lay just this side of the trees. Vogel searched, but little other than the dark blood and a few severed limbs indicated the Bikashi had ever been there. He slumped to his knees and buried his head in his hands. Ten minutes before, he had been planning to have them executed, tortured as their reward for letting him down. Now, all Vogel could think of was what they'd once been and how proud he'd felt to be their leader.

He stared at the sword he had captured. Strange the creature would carry such a thing. Perhaps it had been attracted to the shiny metal. He scratched at an itch on his leg. He was alone now. But he felt thankful to be alive, even if life had been reduced to the most basic level in this *Herek*-forsaken land. He rubbed at his cheek absently. He'd have to forage more widely for food. His troops had just about hunted the surrounding area to extinction. Animal life was scarce anyway in the Scarf, but fish were plentiful in the nearby lagoons—strange, brightly colored swimmers with legs as well as fins, and eyes that looked unsettlingly intelligent. It caused his stomach to churn when one of the bigger ones had been set on the fire to cook. Its eyes had turned to his, and he'd decided that he would eat them no longer. His soldiers didn't have had the same scruples. He rubbed his head, then scratched at his crotch. *What the—?* He stood up and brushed at his clothes. Tiny insects covered him. They had burrowed under his clothes and into his hair, and they bit.

Vogel ran back to the ship, his arms flailing. He flicked on the purification system and stripped off his clothes. Hot water from the lagoon delivered via a crude but effective pipe system steamed forth and scoured his skin. He lathered soap into the small patch of hair on his head and scrubbed his body until it hurt. He stayed under the shower a long time, letting the warmth penetrate and soothe.

Afterward, the commander put on a fresh set of underclothes and his alternate uniform and then re-adjusted his radiation protection. He would miss the small comforts afforded by the ship when he moved on, but he wouldn't survive in this swamp much longer. He picked up the sword absently and stared at it. *Where did you come from, I wonder?* The long blade gleamed brightly. Avanauri weaponsmiths sometimes fused crynidium to the steel to improve its sharpness and durability. He heaved the sword in his hand, surprised at how light it felt. He swung it back and forth in a series of Bikashi training routines, and it felt almost as though the sword anticipated his moves and led his hand.

Vogel placed the blade in the corner of the ship where he could keep his eyes on it and mixed himself a glass of Shirezan. The Bikashi liqueur was standard issue on every ship from his home planet, Auriga. This was the last bottle. He settled himself into a chair and sighed. As he sipped the drink appreciatively, the Bikashi commander's eyes sought the sword time and again. Eventually, he retrieved the weapon and laid it across his knees. Recent events and the bleak future that stretched ahead made him weary. Tiredness overcame him, his head drooped onto his chest, and he fell into a deep sleep.

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Connat-sèra-Haagar sat astride the massive yarrak, her body encased in chain mail and an armored helm upon her head. Despite the bulky protection, she felt light of heart and filled with energy as she watched the Erlachi hordes approach. She'd waited for this day. Tensions had been building between the two neighboring states over sovereignty of the border for almost a year. When a party of Avanauri farmers decided to settle the land around Crodal, Erlach's patience snapped. The Erlachi army slaughtered one hundred and twenty naurs and nauris and then marched south.

They were many, come to Ezekan to kill and enslave her people in the name of the one God, Balor. Connat spat. Both countries believed in the same God but would happily slay innocents as well as other believers in his name. Her glance took in the city guard stretched out in a sparse front to either side of her. They looked nervous, undecided whether to run or fight. She could sense they were almost resolved to surrender.

Since the sword had chosen her to be its champion, the young nauri's sensitivity to the thoughts and emotions of those around her had flourished. Oftentimes, she understood what others were thinking and sensed what they were about to do even before they, themselves, knew. This was one of many changes wrought by the sword. Connat's strength was unequalled in Avanaux, and her skill with any weapon such that none could stand against her. She had also developed an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Rarely did she feel the need for sleep, spending each night reading books and scrolls when all others had gone to bed. She'd studied every tome in the city library, a small building to look at, but one that held the priceless, written wealth of the nation, and she had journeyed far seeking to learn more.

The more wisdom she absorbed, the stronger grew the bond between her and the sword. The stronger the bond, the more its power flowed through her.

These wonders came at a price. Her family could not comprehend the extraordinary warrior she had become, and they shunned her. Friends she had grown up with feared to come near lest they be consumed by the strange lights dancing in her eyes. Contrarily, strangers idolized her and left her little privacy. An object of awe and veneration among the Avanauri common people, Connat-sèra-Haagar drew attention everywhere she went. The lack of close friendships meant little to her, and she knew this was also part of the change the sword had wrought in her.

She struggled to remain faithful to the person she had been before the sword claimed her, cultivating a strict regimen of exercise, meditation, and prayer. She succeeded at least partly in retaining a vestige of the farm girl she had once been, hunting wild loopas with her friends in the woods and sitting at her father's hearth listening to tales of the magical folk, the Lonilki.

But today, Connat knew it would be different. The enemy would come amongst them, and she would turn the power of the sword loose. She prayed to Balor for the strength to regain her mortality when the day was done.

She pulled on the reigns of the yarrack so that it reared high, then raised the sword and let the Avanauri and the Erlachi alike glimpse its power as it flared bright in the light of the sun. "Ayeiii!" she screamed. "Today is a day to fight. Today is a day to maim and kill. For if we, the chosen ones of Balor, do not vanquish the barbarians, they will surely lay waste to our homes and murder and mutilate our families. Follow the sword, Avanauri, and it will

lead you to victory!”

A roar of approval from the ranks was met by calls of derision and jeering from the assembled Erlachi. Connat urged her yarrak into a gallop towards the enemy. Hundreds of fighting naurs and nauris holding pikes and banners followed her and crashed into their adversaries. Yarraks and Perines alike shrieked with the lust for battle.

Connat swept the sword in a circle above her head and, uttering a primal scream, she scythed into the enemy. The Erlachi warriors facing her threw down their swords and crawled under the feet of yarraks in their desperation to escape. Others turned to flee but were pressed close by those behind. Every swing of the sword separated half a dozen heads from their bodies. Many others lost limbs or suffered wounds to their chest and stomach. All the while, Connat controlled the movement of her steed with her knees and an occasional mental order to veer right or left. She sliced into the ranks of the enemy and swept out the other side. She turned time and time again, shredding the might of the Erlachi army so that her own troops found it an easy task to mop up the remnants. Occasionally, an arrow found its target but glanced harmlessly off her armor. No swordsman came within striking distance of the furious berserker.

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Vogel woke abruptly, his heart hammering. Shafts of daylight poured through the open cabin door, temporarily disorienting him. He shook his head. The dream had been spectacularly vivid, real. He could still feel the astonishing power of the sword coursing through him; hear the anguished screams of the fallen; smell the blood of the victims and feel the exultation as he routed their forces. He had been as one with the female warrior, sharing her blood lust, her struggles to remain Avanauri in the midst of her excesses, her exhilaration, and her regrets. Connat-sèra-Haagar. The name came to him easily—the legendary Avanauri heroine who had been responsible for the defeat of the Erlachi thousands of years earlier.

What had brought this long dead general into his subconscious? After all, he had only passing knowledge of this legend from the mists of time. Perhaps the devastation caused by the giant flying reptile had affected his mind more than he realized.

The sword lay on his lap where he'd placed it. He brought it close, examining the weapon in detail for the first time. It looked identical to the one Connat had wielded: long, double-edged and shining, with a distinct hand-guard encrusted with multicolored gems and molded in the shape of a bird of prey. He ran his fingers across a row of faded symbols inscribed on the hilt, almost erased by time. In his dream, the sword possessed an incredible power. The heroine had been a vessel; at least partly an unwilling one, but a channel through which the sword worked its magic.

Abruptly, Vogel went outside. He gathered twigs and tree branches from the forest's edge and built a fire on top of the hillock where the winged monster had landed. He added more fuel until the interior glowed white and blue. The commander searched the ship for a hammer and selected half a dozen metal rods from the wreckage. He heated the rods until they were yellow-orange, then fashioned a rough scabbard for the sword. He would wear it on his belt. The makeshift holder would prevent the sharp blade from cutting into his leg. He tested out the combination and was pleased with the result.

Vogel considered his position. No one knew of his whereabouts, so it was unlikely

anyone would arrive to rescue him. The communications panel was beyond repair, meaning he couldn't send a distress signal. Indeed, little of value could be salvaged from the ship. It seemed pointless to him to hang around now that his companions were dead. He wondered what manner of monster had killed them. He'd never seen the like of it, on this planet or any other. Perhaps it was indigenous to the Scarf. Why had it carried a sword, and one so finely crafted as this? Could there be a connection between his dream and the winged creature? He pondered these mysteries for a few minutes but came up with no satisfactory answers. He shrugged. The beast must be involved in some way.

He gazed across the inlet at the island with the strangely shaped mountain. It looked only a few miles away. The monster had left in that direction. Vogel decided to search the island for the creature and hope he would find answers before he killed it. He bore the monster no grudge: it was a wild animal; the slaughter of his men had been instinctive. The creature could bear no malice. But it was a matter of honor for him. His soldiers' deaths must be avenged. This would be a fitting final quest to end his life.

He went back to the spaceship and bundled up the remaining food, water, spare clothes, an extra pair of boots and a variety of tools, and looked around one last time. He picked up his blaster, then threw it back on the couch. No point in bringing useless junk. It would only slow him down.


TO BE CONTINUED....