

DESCENT™

LEGENDS OF THE DARK



VAERIX

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A warm wind was blowing through the streets of Tamarir, making timber shutters and wooden shop signs bang and clatter and causing the inhabitants of the Free City to swelter, sticking to the shade of alleyways and door lintels where they could. This heat was nothing compared to the heat of the Black Ember Gorge.

Vaerix stood, their long-limbed, scaly frame clad only in a turquoise shift and white undershirt, on the corner of one of the many markets crowding Tamarir, close to Red Bridge, bustling with the seasonal upsurge of merchants, travelers and envoys that came from all corners of Terrinoth. All roads, it was said, lead to Tamarir. Since they had taken post overlooking the square, Vaerix had noted humans, dwarfs – most of them Dunwarr – a trio of hyrrinx merchants and a party of orc mercenaries. None, however, were afforded as wide a berth as Vaerix. Dragon hybrids weren't entirely shunned in places such as these, but they were hardly welcomed either.

Such an attitude was nothing new to them. They had long stopped caring about how others felt toward their kind. Yet even in the heat of Tamarir's streets, with the sights, sounds and smells of the marketplace to occupy their senses, the memories cut them, cold and sharp as any northern winter. They had been banished from the Molten Heath, dismissed from the service of Dragonlord Levirax, struck and mutilated, cast out from the company of their kin.

It had started with the dream, though that had merely been the first raindrop in the storm that Vaerix's life had become. It was not natural for dragon hybrids, they had been told, not right. But they could not deny the truth of what they had experienced. One night, as they had slept, scenes of carnage and slaughter had played out in their mind, as real as if they had already happened, a terrible reckoning for the dragon hybrids that had sworn themselves to Levirax.

What else could they have done? Not told any of the vision? Remained silent, and followed their kin on the road to what now seemed like sure destruction?

There was movement amidst the bustle ahead as an emissary bearing the heraldry of the barony of Carthridge and his bodyguards moved to give a wide berth to two figures that had just stepped out of a sutler's yurt that had been erected near the center of the marketplace. They were dragon hybrids, their scales russet red and aquatic blue respectively, their long, rangy bodies clad in light leather armor. They were on the road, heavy packs on their backs and raw lengths of tusker shank, freshly purchased, in their fists. They conversed between themselves as they gnawed on their breakfast, seemingly oblivious to the ripple in the crowd as those nearby avoided them.

Vaerix had been aware of them since they'd entered the square almost an hour before. It was the reason they had retreated to its edge. They had no intention of chancing upon the two. Vaerix wanted no distractions right now.



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They knew that word had spread about them since their exile. One of Levirax's foremost advisors and a teacher of the dragon hybrids sworn to her, turned traitor, shamed and shunned. At first the shock of it had been too much. They had gone into hiding, avoiding all contact, trying to find a means to forget what they had seen, what they had dreamt. Eventually they had realized such a hope was in vain. The dragon hybrids bound to Levirax's service were doomed unless they could be convinced to abandon the destructive path she had chosen for them. That was part of the reason they were in Tamalir, seeking a caravan travelling north, to Frostgate, hoping to reach any hybrids and in the northern baronies beyond and stop the spread of Levirax's teachings.

The route the feasting pair of hybrids were taking through the crowd was bringing them closer. Just seeing them made Vaerix afraid, though they knew it should not. It brought on the phantom ache they felt where their wings had once been, before they had been ripped out by Levirax's foremost lieutenant, Xenith.

One of the hybrids glanced up, and caught their eye. They felt a now-familiar pang of concern as the two spotted them and gestured briefly to one another, before approaching. Vaerix stood their ground, clutching the staff of their ironthorn warbell.

Both came to a stop and brushed their claw-tips across the base of their horns.

"Forgive us, strongscale," said one. "We have seen few of our kind on the road these past months. How fare you?"

"You greet me as you would a dragonlord, or their right hand," Vaerix observed, not touching their horn in return. "I am neither."

The two exchanged a glance, before the blue-scale spoke.

"I am Darix, and this is my egg-kin, Falzar." The red-scale, Falzar, nodded a more general greeting.

"Forgive us," he added. "We did not mean to offend."

"No offence was taken," Vaerix replied, unable to avoid sounding terse. The two looked at one another again, clearly nervous, before Darix spoke up once more.

"We do not wish to pry but... are you by chance Vaerix the Prophet?"

Vaerix noted Falzar casting an angry look at his companion. They shrugged their shoulders.

"I am Vaerix, yes, but I am no prophet. Is that what the kindreds are calling me now?"

"Some are," Falzar spoke up before Darix. "But not all."

"Those who cleave to Levirax deny it," Darix said, now the one with the angry expression as he looked down on his shorter, red-scaled companion. "But not all adhere to the claims of the dragonlords. I believe what you have said, Vaerix."

"And just what have I said?" Vaerix asked, offering the pair little. At times they felt the need to teach what they had dreamt of to the kindreds, to try and turn them away from the destructive future Levirax had planned, but at others they wished only to be left in peace. The memories of Xenith's talons sinking into their scales, the heat of the branding iron, the dagger that had carved their tongue into a fork, it was all still too raw. Vaerix knew they needed to find the courage to speak out more often against Levirax and those who followed her, but it was difficult, so difficult.

"You had a vision," Darix said, sounding almost hesitant at first, but with mounting confidence as he went on. "You saw the slaughter of the kindreds. The doom of the dragon hybrids, the very opposite of what Levirax is claiming to offer. You were one of her teachers. You would not have spoken of such a thing were it not true."

"I saw that much, yes," Vaerix allowed. "Though I hope each night that it is not true."



"It is a warning," Darix said, nodding sagely.

"It is a possibility," Falzar countered, shifting and shaking out his wings. "How will we know unless we meet with Levirax ourselves?"

"My companion here fancies himself a champion of the dragonlords," Darix said to Vaerix in an exasperated tone. "He has been trying to convince me to accompany him to her for months."

"I would think long and hard before making such a journey," Vaerix said, doing their best to maintain their reserve. "Levirax promises much, but grants little. Those who fail her are... seldom given a fair trial."

"She would lead us all to ruin," Darix said, looking down at his companion.

"We are already on the cusp of it anyway," Falzar responded sharply. "Perhaps I am wrong, but from all I have heard, Levirax is the only one offering hope! She's the one who's going to give us a place of our own, security and stability, a land where we won't be cursed by every passing stranger!"

"False hope," Darix corrected, as Vaerix took a step back. "You would have to be blind to think the dragonlords have ever offered us anything other than slavery and servitude!"

"We are bound to them, whether you like it or not, Darix," Falzar said, scratching at his scales as his anger rose. "Their fate is ours! You cannot simply avoid it!"

"Levirax's hybrids are a cult," Darix shot back. "She is using them for her own gain, and leading them to destruction. We owe the dragonlords nothing!"

"You speak of cults, yet you call this one a prophet," Falzar countered. "Can you not hear the reverence in your own voice? Perhaps Levirax's plans are currently doomed because not enough of our kindreds have joined her? Maybe if more did, they would know success!"

Vaerix had heard enough. The raised voices were drawing attention, and that was not what they wanted, not right now. As the two hybrids continued their argument, Vaerix slipped away, leaving the square. They were angry, and frustrated. They had never touted themselves as a prophet, as some sort of mystical seer. The threat facing the dragon hybrids was not an esoteric or unknowable matter. It was real, and it was already upon them. Arguments like the one they had just witnessed were only the beginning.

As they walked, their resolve hardened further.

Levirax was going to tear apart every hybrid she could sink her talons into. She had to be stopped. Vaerix was going to be the one to do it.



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