

DESCENT™

LEGENDS OF THE DARK



SYRUS

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The bird had been a thing of beauty once, of that Syrus was certain. The magical avian was perched upon a bar above a stone slab erected at the center of the summoning chamber, hunched over, its fires extinguished but for the small flames that still licked at the tips of its furled wings. Its feathers were the colors of charring and ash, and its eyes were dull and blank.

"It's a phoenix," Syrus said. Greysdon, his elementalist professor and tutor, looked up from the book he'd been consulting, frowning slightly.

"It is," he said looking back down at the tome.

Syrus moved closer to the slab. The phoenix did not respond to their words, beyond a slight ruffling of its dulled feathers.

He felt a pang of sorrow for the creature. It was trapped, bound on both the physical and magical planes, one talon strapped to the bar, while six bowls filled with motes of elemental water – Aquos – sat arrayed on the slab beneath it, bleeding away the innate magics that suffused it. Growing up, he had joined his parents in bouts of falconry on many occasions. He knew when a raptor was in distress, magical or not. This one seemed close to death.

"You're sure you can heal him?" he asked Greysdon.

The professor didn't respond. He was standing behind his podium on the opposite side of the channeling chamber. The glass-domed room, located at the top of one of the University of Greyhaven's highest towers, was shaped like an amphitheater, tiered rows of stone seating rising up around a central bowl where the slab and its avian prisoner had been placed. During daylight hours it served as a lecture hall for students practicing the channeling of energies to and from carefully selected reservoirs of elemental energy. Tonight, however, Syrus, Greysdon and the sickly phoenix were its only occupants.

Syrus had been woken from his dorm in person by the professor and brought to the tower as soon as he was properly dressed. The summons had been wholly unexpected. Greysdon was a stern tutor, a gifted practitioner of elemental magics who clearly took his role as a teacher at the university seriously. Syrus had scored only middling results in most of his first-year classes under him, but he'd done well in the one-to-one sessions, classes relating to the use of elemental energies and how those energies manifest in living beings. He felt as though he had been improving, slowly, but the elementalist's stern presence still intimidated him.

"Don't disturb the bowls," Greysdon said sharply, looking up once more from the tome resting on his lectern and seeing how close Syrus had strayed to the bowls of Aquos on the slab. He pulled back as Greysdon shut his book with a thud and stepped down to join him, staff in hand.

Syrus hastily clutched his own staff, an altogether simpler length of gnarled ashenwood that he had



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carved and inscribed during his first week at the university. He cleared his throat, feeling suddenly pensive.

"You know the incantation for the binding charm?" Greysdon asked, the weak light being cast by the phoenix's few remaining flames leaving his lined, aged face in deep contrast.

"Yes, professor," Syrus said, hastily running through the arcane words in his head while clutching the vial of elemental air energies that Greysdon had given him when he'd entered.

"When the time comes, I will ask you to repeat it," Greysdon went on, reaching out and starting to remove the minor null stones from the slab. "If the phoenix is to survive, you must anchor its energy while I work on it. Is that clear?"

"Yes professor," Syrus repeated. He looked down at the phoenix, feeling his nerves starting to flare. There had been rumors that Greysdon had been able to summon such a creature. Syrus had only half believed it before tonight, before Greysdon had summoned him and told him in hushed, urgent tones that unless an intervention was made, the phoenix would perish. When Syrus had asked him about experiments, he had said only that he was trying to save the creature's life. Syrus hadn't had an opportunity to decide yet just whether he believed his tutor or not.

"If I can ask, Master Greysdon," he said hesitantly. "Is this a test?"

Greysdon looked at him over the phoenix's bowed head, and offered a terse smile.

"No, Novice Indahlu, it is not a formal test. An informal one, perhaps. You seem to have a degree of aptitude when it comes to life energies and the elements. I need someone else for the binding, while I perform the primary incantations. If we are successful, it will certainly benefit you at this institution."

Syrus nodded his understanding, clutching his staff a little tighter. Greysdon removed the final null stone, placing them on his lectern, before returning and removing an oval-shaped object from the folds of his robes. Holding it in one hand, he nodded to Syrus.

"Begin the charm."

Syrus took a breath and opened the vial of Anemos before blowing on it. It was an elemental spell, utilizing the mystic properties that bled from the natural functions of Mennara. With the wind that suddenly gusted from the small artifact, he was able to anchor a soul and the magical properties bound to it. As he spoke he focused on his staff, using it as his channeling locus, feeling the first energies rising up, then surging.

The phoenix let out a dull croak as Syrus's spell enveloped it, the sphere of energy only faintly visible as a light copresence closing over the bird. Syrus closed his eyes briefly as he repeated the charm, trying to fix it more securely in place. When he opened them again, Greysdon had placed the oval he'd been holding beneath the phoenix. He realized it was some sort of egg, its shell mottled with dark spots.

"A salamander egg," Greysdon said, seeing his look. "It will entrap the potency of its fire."

Greysdon followed the words up with a murmured an incantation of his own, and the egg seemed to glow with a deep, white heat.

Syrus's confusion gave way to a terrible realization. He'd seen bowls of Aquos placed beneath the phoenix, elemental water energy that he'd assumed were to try and rebalance the phoenix's spirit. That was clearly not the case though. The arcane liquids had drained its fiery essence, and now the egg was being used to drag what remained of its flame magics from its body.

The phoenix shrieked. Flames reignited along its wings and back, flaring briefly before they hauled, as though by a sucking draft, down toward the stone beneath it, wreathing it in a corona of fire. Greysdon was still speaking the spell, the fire gleaming in his eyes as he held a hand above the trapped phoenix, calling forth its



power, draining it into the egg.

"Stop," Syrus shouted, his horror overcoming his deference. Greysdon grimaced as his chant was interrupted, the power still flowing beneath his hand. His burning eyes fixed on Syrus.

"This creature's magics are innate, Syrus," he declared over the sound of the phoenix's pain. "I have been studying its kind for decades, trying to harness its abilities. Imagine if an ordinary human like you or I were able to tap into the Turning the way it does, instinctively, without even the need for elemental sources or runebound shards or spoken incantations. We're so close to understanding it! If I can heal it, it can help my research."

"You're not understanding it," Syrus said urgently. "And you're not healing it. You're killing it!"

"I'm trying to save it," Greysdon said grimly. "If it can survive this, its excess energies will be safely bound to the egg. It will sicken no more, weaken no more!"

"No," Syrus said and, without giving himself time to think, lunged for the egg. He heard Greysdon's exclamation, and felt a surge of pain as his hand seemed to collide with something solid – his fingers came to a quivering stop, inches from the egg, interrupting the fiery flow between it and the trapped, shrieking phoenix.

The elemental energies surged once more, even more powerful than before. Syrus felt it all around them, suffusing the channeling chamber with the wrath of Mennara itself, making the stone vibrate and rattling at the stained glass of the domed ceiling. It surged through his staff and through his body, his hand acting like a conduit between the leeching power of the egg and the phoenix's energy.

Too late he realized he hadn't dispelled the binding wind he had first cast over the creature. He had entered its sphere of power, and was now locked into it as firmly as the phoenix itself. The elemental energies within him had been snagged, and now his fire was being dragged toward the salamander's egg too.

"What have you done?" Greysdon bellowed, striking the base of his staff against the flank of the stone slab in an effort to scatter and dissipate the energies threatening to shatter the chamber. "You fool!"

"It's... too much..." Syrus managed to snarl, his whole body taut as the elemental energies rebounded into him, the localized wind trapping the phoenix surging and snatching at his robes, hair and beard, carrying with it the heat of the salamander egg.

"It will kill you if you don't break contact," Greysdon exclaimed, his expression one of panic now as he realized that Syrus was trapped by the magical energies. "Let go of your staff and pull back!"

Syrus wanted to. He could feel the egg, blazing hot, just inches from his fingertips, leeching the life from them, creating a burning sensation that had began to spread up his arm. It filled him with fear, with panic, but he could sense something else too. The phoenix's fiery essence, its burning, magical spirit, was being intertwined with his own as they were hauled together into the egg's core, beginning to meld as one.

The head of his staff burst into flames. He felt the same heat spread through him in counterpoint to the fiery hunger of the egg. It was the phoenix's essence joining his own, the fire that coiled from its plumage redoubling as light re-entered its eyes, fixed upon Syrus.

"If I break contact... it will die..." he managed through clenched teeth.

"If you don't, you both will," Greysdon shouted, raising his staff. He was about to strike the phoenix, to sever its life by force before it could conjoin any more with Syrus.

He couldn't allow that. He felt the creature's soul, knew her name – Indris – and her molten core, her very thoughts. She was afraid and defiant in equal measure, refusing to surrender the last of her flames to the egg, desperate to flee, to soar once more and feel the untrammelled magics of the Turning flowing through her. She did not want to perish like this, bound and trapped, reduced to a withered mass of charred feathers and hollow bones, still bound to the slab.



Syrus wouldn't let that happen. He realized in that moment that he would rather die than see so noble a creature perish. Instead of trying to drag his soul away from the confluence of energies, he drove back into them, once more trying to reach the egg.

The barrier that had initially repelled him was unable to stop him now that he was suffused with the phoenix's power. He forced himself to endure it as he lunged at the cursed egg, a cry of pain and determination ringing through the shuddering chamber. His fingers clenched around it, fire encasing them, blazing with the fury of the phoenix resurgent. Her own pealing shriek seemed to meld with his voice, so piercing that great splits appeared in the stained glass overhead, cracks running like jagged bolts of lightning down the dome.

With a crash, the egg burst apart. Its core had been burned out by the phoenix's wrath, channeled by Syrus's own body. It splintered in his grasp, its energy detonating. Syrus's breath was stolen from him as he was thrown back, slamming into the lowest tiering of the amphitheater's sides. He somehow managed to keep a hold of his staff, its flames guttering but not dying out wholly.

Dazed, he looked up through the smoke, and witnessed Indris's rebirth. The phoenix rose, the egg and the bowls beneath her shattered, her body and soul free from Greysdon's snare. Her wings unfurled in a blaze of brilliance, the white heat at her core lighting up the chamber. She flew with an exclamation of avian delight, soaring around the cracked dome above, her light making the glass glitter. For the first time, Syrus's bruised soul was filled with the joy of flight, the limitless, surging thrill of being untrammelled and free. It brought him back to his feet, his soul revitalized.

He raised the hand that had grasped and broken the egg, flexing it. It seemed unharmed, but for the heat that was slowly wearing off. He looked beyond it, at the rest of the chamber.

Everything had changed, he realized. He could see multicolored energies now where before they had been invisible to him, the residual after-effect of the arcane explosion that had shaken the chamber. The elements were all around him now, his mind alive to their presence. He raised a hand and watched with fascination as it swirled at his touch, forming a small, kaleidoscopic whirlpool that was just waiting to be directed.

He had power now, more than he had ever imagined. His bond with Indris had ensured that.

Greysdon had survived the blast. He was on his knees, panting, the protective ward he had summoned from his staff beginning to fade. He was staring up at the phoenix, but as she swooped down toward Syrus he met the pupil's eyes. His gaze was filled with fury.

"This is... an outrage," he managed to say. "A disgrace. I had it under control. The creature would have recovered, but your interruption could have killed all of us!"

"Better that than standing by and risking seeing a living creature such as Indris reduced to a husk," Syrus said, conviction making his voice firm. As he spoke, he held his fist out, feeling Indris's intention as she fell toward him. The magical raptor alighted on his wrist, her talons digging into his vambrace, molten fire streaking from her blazing plumage. Its heat held no fear for Syrus though. Their fires were as one.

Greysdon seemed to consider the words as he took in the sight of the burning phoenix and the flames crackling from the former novice's staff. "This will change everything," he said. "If the faculty finds out..."

"The faculty didn't know about this?" Syrus asked. Greysdon grimaced and shook his head.

"They didn't, but they'll have felt the discharge of energies here, and I suspect will soon bear witness to your newfound powers. Regardless of what happens, Syrus, you must be wary of this new magic. Learn to use it well, for such gifts are not afforded to many."

