

Chapter 1

Cypher's lips curled back, exposing a muzzle full of teeth as the distant scent of blood tingled in his snout. He'd been hunting this patch of forest for years, and this scent was new. It wasn't a goblin or kobold. It wasn't a deer or hare. Something else had invaded his territory. His clan, the Moonfang Gnolls, never came this far North. They avoided the mountains and the deep forests, preferring the plains and savannah to the South. But Cypher was fed up with the 'Fangs. They only knew killing, pillaging, raping, burning. He loved the thrill of the hunt, sure, but at heart the clan was no longer his home. This forest was. He struck a deal with those gnolls he used to call brothers. He would hunt for them and scout for them. Pay them off with food. He delivered kills back to the 'Fangs once a week, and they stayed out of his woods. He made sure no serious threats approached them from the North, and they occasionally shared some of their spoils. This forest was his, and he knew and protected every inch of it.

The gnoll crouched down on two back paws, looking at his mottled brown and black coat. He had a wide chest, adorned only with a fang-tooth necklace. His fur was damp and dirty, and his wolf-leather loincloth was smeared with his last kill. He had a sharp bone-bladed knife strapped to his outer thigh, and carried a mid-length, feather-adorned spear. He reached a large paw down between his knees to scoop up a handful of damp leaves, lifting them to his wide snout and taking in the scent of the earth. There was something magical - Primal - about this forest. When he was here, his already keen senses were heightened. His clan hadn't had a shaman in several generations, but Cypher felt the calling of nature. He knew that with a bit more practice, the spirits may aid him when he called. But he couldn't think about such things right now. He had an intruder to deal with. It was a wet, cool fall evening and the sun was setting. Darkness was Cypher's domain. Perhaps the blood tingling his nose was a Troll. He hadn't tasted their blood before. The scent on the air tonight was tangy... metallic... Definitely blood, but he couldn't place it. He checked the point on his spear and started off in silent pursuit of his prey.

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Kirsa peered up at the trees warily. She was more used to the comforting stone ceiling of a nice cave than she was the open skies of a dense forest at dusk. Food, however, liked the trees. These trees were tall, vine-laden trees that rose into the darkness and blotted out most of the sky. Even the sky sent a shiver up her scaled spine. The vast openness of the world around her was as alien as the bright moon in the sky. Speaking of the moon, its light glinted dimly off the sky-blue scales of Kirsa's wingless form. She slinked along on four sharp-clawed paws, stealthily stalking quite well for a lizard the size of a horse. Her soft-scaled pads made little noise in the damp leaves. The young cave-dragon smelled the recent rains in the air, and the wet soil and bark that were so different from her cavernous home. They weren't unpleasant, however. Earthy. Fresh. Different than stone. If only the stars would stop staring at her... Mingled in with the smells of the forest was the reason she left what shelter she had found and traipsed off into the woods. The scent of her prey. A deer passed by here not long ago. A grand meal for a young dragoness such as herself. She followed its scent, her long tongue occasionally flicking out to taste the air.

An hour later, the cervid meal-on-hooves was in sight. It was grazing in a moon-lit clearing, getting a last

meal of long grasses and the occasional mushroom before it was off to bed down for the night. Kirsia approached from down-wind, hoping her stomach didn't growl before she was close enough. At times like these she wished to be one of her winged cousins and just swoop down from the skies to scoop up prey. But the sky... No.. She couldn't fly. It's way too open up there. The young dragoness moved forward silently, watching with unblinking eyes as the deer lowered it's head to take another bite. With a quick contraction of muscles she launched herself forward and snapped, catching the deer by the throat in her powerful jaws and buried all four of her clawed feet into it's body. It was over before the deer even knew what had happened. She felt it's warm blood seep into her throat as she held it securely until it died. She was going to eat well tonight.

After the deer breathed its last breath, Kirsia relaxed her grip on it and started dragging it out of the clearing into the more-secure trees. Her stomach rumbled and she swished her tail in anticipation. A quiver ran up her spine that wasn't related to hunger, and she swished her tail again. The rhythmic movement of her lanky rear appendage rubbed her netherscales just right. She knew she had to be getting close to her first cycle. Over the last week she'd become more sensitive. More swollen. But she couldn't think about that right now. She gave the deer another good tug as she stepped back into the trees and her world went sideways.

With a Deafening CRACK! a trap was sprung, and Kirsia felt intense pain in her leg as she was flung into the air! A claw trap combined with a hanging tree net had caught her firm. "Tha-sik!!" she screamed out, cursing in her draconic tongue as she swayed back and forth in the trap. The net was too tight, the ropes too thick for her to chew or claw through them. She couldn't even look down to see that her leg was trapped in the iron jaws of a large bear-trap, but she could feel the blood running up her leg and over her belly before dripping down to the ground from her back-scales. She squirmed and fought against the ropes for an hour, wailing and crying and cursing before the blood loss, hunger, and pain caused her consciousness to drift slowly away...

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The moon was higher in the clear sky now, all traces of sunlight gone for hours. Even on a moonless night, his eyes could see clearly as if the sun still dappled through the leaves. Cypher could taste the blood in the air, it's thick, metallic quality overwhelming his senses. There was a lot of it. Something was seriously injured or dead. He was close now and he had his spear always at the ready.

The gnoll proceeded silently, climbing up a small hill and passing under two giant Fir trees. A clearing in the distance caught his eye, and on the far edge, a deer lay cold and dead. He approached slowly, his eyes scanning the ground and the trees for signs of danger. He found the tracks of the deer and then something else. Larger tracks... Reptilian. Too big to be a kobold. These tracks could only be a dragon. Cypher had never encountered a dragon before, but he knew of them. They were dangerous. They were not welcome in his forest.

Cypher examined the deer and the massive amount of blood pooled around it. He knew the scent of deer. Most of this blood did not belong to that animal. He swiped a finger through the mess and tasted it with a wide tongue. The Dragon blood was almost spicy. He wondered how this deer managed to injure the dragon so badly when the slight creak of a rope brought his gaze quickly up. Peering into the tree-tops he saw the dead dragon hanging in a net trap and the story became clearer.

He found the trap mechanism and examined it. "Damned Goblins" he thought. They were great trapmakers, and good at covering their scent too. He had killed many a goblin in his forest, but they seemed to be a never-ending threat. Cypher pulled his knife and sliced the traps support rope to let the dead dragon fall to the ground. He mused to himself that this unlucky dragon wouldn't hunt his forest again, but he wouldn't leave the feast here for them to gorge on. Deer and Dragon, both were meat for him and the clan, he just had to get them back to his home.

As the rope cut, the net released and the dragon's corpse crashed to the ground. It was a blue dragon. Wingless. Cypher had never seen one like it. Cypher cut the thing free and examined it. It's back right leg was caught in a nasty, iron-toothed bear trap with teeth dug deep into the muscle. The leg appeared to be broken from the impact of the trap. The corpse was still warm and hadn't been dead for long. Cypher stood and used the heel of his foot to compress the rusty release on the trap and the metal jaws opened. The blue dragon let out a weak whimper and pulled it's crushed leg in closer to it's body.

"Gyah!" The gnoll jumped back and nearly fell over. When the 'corpse' of this dragon suddenly moved, Cypher had one of the rare few moments where he was caught by surprise. He didn't think anything could lose as much blood as this dragon did and actually survive. He squared himself and brought his spear up, ready to finish it off when it whimpered again. The dragon's blue scaled lips muttered "Lor.. Lor hu..." and Cypher tilted his head like a confused puppy. He knew that language.. It was the dragon-tongue of the Kobolds. He had dealt with plenty of Kobolds further north. "Lor hu.." "Help me.." This dragon wasn't just an injured beast. It could speak. It was intelligent.

Cypher stared, conflicted for a moment. Creatures that invaded his territory died. He had killed many. But the forest brought him to this creature.. Kept it alive. This creature was different and asking for his help. He suddenly realized that if he killed it, he wouldn't be much better than the Moonfang Clan that he had left. But if he helped it, it could bring more dragons. Or it could kill him once recovered. His spearpoint hovered above the creatures chest as it took ragged, shallow breaths. Then the dragon opened it's eyes. Bright green eyes that begged for mercy and showed more pain than was bearable. Green eyes that needed help. Those eyes captivated the gnoll, and he knew he couldn't kill this dragon. He lowered his spear and crouched down, laying a comforting paw on the blue dragon's side. Her scaled quivered at his touch.

The gnoll worked to recall the bits of Kobold language he knew. "Shhh. Hu lor hus. Nama." I will help you. Rest.