Ramuel's Quest : The Orion Chronicles

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Exiled from the Valley of Azion because of his unnatural dragon heritage, Ramuel sees his chance for redemption when he sets out to rescue the King's daughter who has been stolen by the evil sorceress Shazzator.

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An autumn chill swept down from the northern border of the Orion kingdom, bringing with it the threat of a dark death.

Ramuel clung to the cold stone wall of Shazzator's castle, every muscle in his body contracted and hard with tension. His claw-like nails gouged deep into the crevices between each stone, gripping with the strength of his ancestors.

The strength of the Spaltons.

For once, his claim to their lineage profited him. Whereas, until now, it seemed only a curse. *It is a curse,* he told himself darkly. If it wasn't for their blood flowing through his veins he wouldn't even be here now. Wouldn't *need* to be here. The surface of his skin numbing from the cold of the autumn night, Ramuel pulled himself up a few more inches. Despite his strength, his fingers were beginning to ache. An ache that was slithering up his forearms like the earth serpents in the black forest. Tiny, deadly little creatures that burrowed beneath the skin on contact and slowly consumed its victim from the inside out.

A sudden tremor quivered through him; now wasn't the time to think about the creatures of his routine nightmares.

Like ghost fingers, the icy breeze played through his long, black hair, freezing his scalp. By now, he could sustain more cold than the average Piador; at least the cruel fate that had born him into this world an outsider had lent him the advantages of the Spaltons. It was rumored that a Spalton could withstand extreme cold, which made them creatures of winter. But this night challenged even Ramuel's resistance.

If fate had only fitted him with the Spaltons' flying capacity as well, he wouldn't have had to scale the castle wall.

The dark balcony loomed above. The heavy bundle of braided vine attached to his back weighed him down but he kept moving. He crawled up the cold stone slowly, a lower cavern of his mind expecting some horror from the dark nether regions to seep through the stone and detach him from the wall, sending him to his death. Shazzator was capable of conjuring up just such a creature, or so the legends were told. Though few had ever had an actual encounter with the sorceress. And Ramuel had no desire to find out if the legends were true, but his options were minimal.

If he didn't bring back Tia-Mar, his exile would extend to his death. He would be forced to live out his days in the dark caves above the Black Forest, forced to hunt the forest, always wary of the earth serpents. Even in the caves, he wasn't entirely safe from the vile little creatures.

The dragon-skin pouch he'd made out of the small necromancer he'd caught by the side of the pool, slapped lightly against his leg. The thorns he'd carefully plucked from the mystic rose vine lay in the bottom. It would be easier to put the princess to sleep, rather than chance a panicked episode and get them both caught by the sorceress.

Legend had it that Shazzator could do things to a soul that would make them long for death's embrace. Ramuel couldn't imagine longing for death, but he had little doubt the sorceress could change his thinking.

Ramuel reached upward, felt his claw-like nails scratch the edge of the stone wall of the balcony, and looked up. It had seemed so far away just moments ago. He hauled himself up and over the short stone wall and dropped with a heavy thud onto the hard balcony floor.

Crawling into a squat, Ramuel studied his surroundings, eyes wide and alert. His dragon eyes saw everything, even the tiniest of creatures skittering into the darkest shadows. His hand shot out on reflex as one sharp nail snagged a plump bug from a dark corner. He popped the bug in his mouth, chewed the crunchy morsel and swallowed - all the while remaining alert, eyes searching, ears listening. One hand pressed flat against the cold stone floor, feeling for vibrations of movement inside. All was quiet. And still.

Ramuel crept to the door and eased it open slowly. A rusting hinge groaned then popped. Ramuel froze. Waited. Nothing. He squeezed through the small opening, certain the door would create more noise if shoved open any further.

The tower room was dark but for a single thin sliver of moonlight. But Ramuel could see as clearly as if the morning sun were shining brightly through the room. His green reptile eyes came to rest on a large bed elevated in the center of the room. He could hear the low even breathing of a sleeping figure.

He crept forward, climbing the steps up to the bed. One hand slid carefully into the dragon-skin pouch and withdrew a thorn. He reached out and lightly ran his palm up the exposed arm of the sleeping figure. At the inner curve of the elbow, he pressed two fingers against the flesh, felt the blood flowing through the vein underneath and pricked the vein with the tip of the thorn.

The sleeping figure gasped softly in their sleep then slowly sank into a deeper sleep. Ramuel carefully wrapped the sleeping figure in the sheet then carried the unconscious bundle to the balcony. Though small in stature like the Piadors, the Spalton strength afforded him much advantage over his benevolent kinsmen.

Ramuel removed the braided vine and fashioned a crude harness around the sleeping bundle. Again, he picked up his prized cargo and gently lowered it over the edge of the balcony. With his dragon strength, he slowly began to lower the bundle down the edge of the stone castle wall. His eyes and ears remained alert. Could the rescue really be this simple and uneventful? He'd heard many legends about Shazzator but never once did any legend imply that the sorceress was naï¿½ve.

Still, there was no sign of Shazzator. Perhaps luck was on his side this time. All things considered, Ramuel found that little tidbit of hope harder to swallow than the crunchy bug he'd eaten earlier.

Ramuel guided the small black horse through the trees, keeping the animal on the hard packed path and away from the soft ground that gave home to the earth serpents. One hand guided his mount as his other hand steadied the sleeping bundle draped across his lap. He would have to stop, but not before he left the black forest behind. Anyone who spent the night in the forest rarely lived to see the light of another day.

His mount grew nervous, sidestepped, and dropped one hoof into the soft ground. Before Ramuel could react, the horse screamed and tried to pull it's foot back. A hideous earth serpent latched onto the animal's ankle and was quickly and viciously burrowing into its flesh.

The horse screamed again, and reared. Ramuel tightened his grip on the reins, hunched forward to steady his cargo with his body as his free hand whipped out a bone-handle sword. In a swift movement, he slashed the earth serpent in two and drove his heels into the side of his mount. The horse bolted forward, free of its assailant, and raced down the path, eyes wild and nostrils flared.

Ramuel, steed, and cargo burst out of the black forest and raced across a barren field. Ramuel reined his mount to a halt when they approached a clear pool of water. Moonlight sparkled the surface of the water, causing the night fish to jump, mistaking the shimmering water for food.

Ramuel dismounted and lowered his cargo to the ground, then secured his mount to a nearby tree. Ramuel left his bundled cargo where it was and went about digging up rainbush roots to burn. During the early days of his exile, he'd learned how dangerous it could be to build an open fire. He'd made himself a target of various hideous creatures that way. It was by accident that he'd discovered that rainbush roots burned nearly as hot as any open fire, without the ill effects of flame and smoke.

When he'd gathered a sufficient pile of roots, Ramuel squatted down and used flint stone to ignite the roots. In moments, a comfortable heat began to seep from the roots and warm the air. Ramuel warmed his hands a moment then returned to his cargo.

The effects of the mystic rose thorn was wearing off. There was movement beneath the wrapped sheet. Ramuel inched closer and reached out to uncover the face of his prized cargo. He steeled himself. He'd heard rumors that Princess Tia-Mar was quite unsightly. Some had even dared call her hideous.

Ramuel turned his head away and slowly drew the sheet from her face. She gasped then shrieked, "Who are you? Where am I?" The princess' voice was high and shrill with rage more so than fear. "Look at me! Who are you?"

Reluctantly, Ramuel turned and faced her. He flinched. Truly the rumors were right. Although perhaps not hideous, she was certainly rough on the eyes. And especially his dragon eyes, for they saw more clearly and in greater detail than the average Piador.

The princess managed to sit up. Her pale drab hair hung limply around her shoulders. Her equally pale eyes burned with ferocity. "How dare you?" She hissed. "How dare you treat me in such a manner? Who are you? Answer me!"

Ramuel sat on his heels and stared at her face, though it hurt his eyes to do so. "I am Ramuel. I have rescued you from the fortress of the great sorceress Shazzator."

"Rescued me..." The princess' eyes narrowed slightly. "I don't understand."

Ramuel stood slowly to his feet. "You are Princess Tia-Mar, daughter of Hashdod, king of Azion. You were taken captive by the sorceress Shazzator. You have been under her spell. I am come to return you to your father."

The princess' eyes studied Ramuel skeptically. "If this is so...why would my father send you? You are not a Piador. Not a full blood Piador."

Ramuel avoided her probing eyes. "Does it matter? I have rescued you. That is what's important."

"Come closer." The princess urged. "Let me look in your eyes."

Ramuel stepped back, deeper into the night shadows. "You should rest. We have a long journey in the morning."

"Rest?" The princess looked down at her confined body. "How do you suppose I rest when I'm all bound up?" Her eyes probed the darkness for Ramuel. "Untie me and I shall rest."

Remaining in the shadows, Ramuel spoke low. "You're not yourself. Shazzator's spell still affects you. I can't risk you fleeing."

"You can't hide." The princess spoke quietly. "Even in the shadows, one can still see a dragon's eyes. They glow, like emeralds." She paused then added with a whisper, "Especially the eyes of a Spalton dragon."

Ramuel stepped forward. "I am no dragon." He spit harshly, defensively. Yet even he could hear the dragon hiss in his voice.

The princess smiled, but it was not becoming. "Not entirely, no. Just as you're no purebred Piador."

"What does it matter what I am?" Ramuel asked coldly. "Or what I am not?"

"It doesn't." The princess admitted. "Not to me, anyway. But it would to the king. The Spaltons are the arch enemy of the Orion kingdom and all Piadors. King Hashdod would not send a half breed Spalton to rescue his only daughter."

Tension tightened Ramuel's entire body. It was on the tip of his forked tongue to tell her to shut up. What did a spoiled princess know about anything anyway? But her steady eyes held his, and he knew she spoke the truth. Hashdod would have never sent him. In fact, the king would have him killed on sight. Under normal circumstances. But these weren't normal circumstances. He had rescued the king's daughter. He was bringing her home.

The princess smiled again. Still not becoming. "You weren't sent by the king." It wasn't a question. "In fact, it's your kind that the king's huntsmen track and slaughter. So why risk so much to rescue the daughter of your greatest enemy?"

Ramuel didn't answer.

"Am I to be a ransom for some coveted item?"

Ramuel's brow creased with a hard frown. "No." He snapped sharp. "I don't want any *thing* from your father."

"Then what?" The princess pressed, intrigued. "What do you want? Perhaps I can convince him to give the lowly half-breed what he desires."

"Shut up!" Ramuel lunged forward, looming over the princess. "Stop calling me that."

The princess was undaunted. She simply stared up at Ramuel's enraged face. Suddenly, Ramuel drew his sword. Still the princess remained unafraid. With a desperate cry, Ramuel slashed through the braided vines binding the princess.

Ramuel stepped back, clutching the sword. "You want to go?" He hissed and jabbed his finger towards the forest. "Go! Let your father pick you from the teeth and bellies of the forest creatures."

The princess peeled away the sheet. Then laughed.

Ramuel's green eyes burned. His chest heaved. "What are you laughing at?"

"You." The princess laughed again. "Calm down, brave knight, I promise not to flee."

Ramuel stared at her, uncertain. He lowered his sword and replaced it in the sheath. "Get some sleep." He muttered as he moved away from her and sat down on the opposite side of the burning roots. His brow remained wrinkled in a tight frown as his green Spalton eyes glared at the pile of hot roots.

When he felt the princess watching him, he spoke without looking at her. "I said get some rest."

"Do you think I'm as unsightly as the rumors say I am?" She asked suddenly.

Ramuel looked up. Met her pale eyes. "Yes." He said bluntly.

She laughed again. "Honesty. How refreshing. I can't imagine any one of the king's men being so honest with me. Perhaps for fear I would inform the king of their rudeness?"

"Tell him what you want." Ramuel muttered. "He's already done all he can to me. Short of beheading me and feeding me to his dogs."

The princess laughed again. Ramuel scowled. "I liked you better when you didn't laugh so much."

"I apologize, kind sir." The princess gave him a mock bow from where she sat. "But I have decided that I like you."

Ramuel sighed. "Oh glory day."

The princess left her spot and moved around the root pile to sit beside Ramuel. "Tell me your story." She said softly, serious. Though her voice lacked the sweet softness often associated with that of a princess, it was nevertheless becoming less grating on his sensitive ears.

"Go to sleep." He told her.

"Everyone has a story." She said, ignoring him. "Everyone is seeking something."

"What are you seeking?" Ramuel asked with a hard tone. "What does the princess want that she doesn't already have?"

The princess didn't answer immediately. Ramuel could feel her eyes on his face. "Isn't it obvious?"

Ramuel turned his head and met her pale eyes. "You want to be beautiful."

"Of course." The princess smiled. "Aren't all princesses supposed to be beautiful?"

Ramuel looked away. "Beauty is vain."

"Perhaps. But to be truly loved...one must be beautiful." The princess smiled again and raised one eyebrow. "Don't you think, brave Ramuel?"

Ramuel shook his head slowly. "Typical princess philosophy." He muttered.

"And what is Ramuel's philosophy on love?"

Ramuel looked at the princess. "You have to love who you are, in here." He tapped his chest with two fingers. "Before anyone else can love who you are."

She met his reptile eyes. "And does Ramuel, rescuer of princesses, love who he is." She tapped his chest gently with her fingertip. "In here?"

Ramuel looked at her for a long moment then turned his eyes to the burning roots. "No."

"And why doesn't he?"

Ramuel's thin lips tightened as he stared at the pile of roots, feeling their heat on his tough skin. "I'm an abomination." He said low, tight. "The only one who ever saw me as anything more than a creature...is dead."

"Your mother?" The princess asked softly.

Ramuel looked at her. "How did you..."

"To a mother, her child is precious...and beautiful." She touched his arm. "Tell me about your mother."

Pain tightened Ramuel's face. "What I remember most is how she risked her life to save mine. I was very young when she died, but I remember that much."

"How did she die?"

Ramuel's hands slowly clenched into fists. "The king's captain of the guard, Dorian, killed her." Ramuel's voice lowered to a bare whisper. "He gutted her like an animal. I was hiding and he was trying to draw me out by torturing her. I almost came to him, but my mother begged me with her eyes not to show myself."

"She could see you?"

"Yes." Ramuel whispered. "She knew right where I was. Then he butchered her. I tried to look away." Tears wet Ramuel's face. "But I couldn't. She died slowly, in great pain, because of me. Because I was an abomination. It wasn't my mother's fault. The Spalton caught her alone when she was out picking flowers. He..." A sick look crept into Ramuel's eyes. "He forced her. She almost died from the attack. Then she had me."

Ramuel fell silent. He stared at his hands, his claw-like nails, his rough skin. "I think at first she was able to hide the truth about me, that I was half...dragon. But she couldn't hide it for long. What choices did she have? Turn me over to be killed...or hide me outside the kingdom."

"How did they find out about you?"

Ramuel shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe someone followed her once when she came to bring me food. I never knew how they found out."

The princess glanced around through the darkness. "How did you survive out here when you were so young?"

Ramuel picked up a small stick and traced in the dirt absently. "My mom taught me a lot before she was...before she died. Taught me about the earth serpents and the caves where I would be the safest. Most of it I just learned as I went along. I don't know how I survived. I just did. I was more terrified of Dorian finding me than I was of any creature in the forest." Ramuel looked at the princess. "You asked me what I wanted? What I was seeking?"

The princess met his dragon eyes.

"Up until this moment..." Ramuel turned his gaze to the burning roots. "I thought I wanted back in. Back in the kingdom, to be a part of my mother's people. Maybe I thought it would make her feel alive to me again."

"And now?"

Ramuel's jaw tightened. "I don't want to be a part of any people who would do to their own what they did to my mother. She was innocent."

The princess followed his stare to the pile of roots. "What is it you seek now?"

Eyes hardening, Ramuel could feel his heart begin to thump heavily in his chest. "I want the Spalton who raped my mother." A momentary pause. "And Dorian."

"Will you bargain with the king?" The princess asked quietly. "My life for Dorian's?"

Ramuel looked at her and frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Will you tell the king that you will let me live only if he has Dorian killed?"

Ramuel stood quickly to his feet, unsettled. "No." His reply was sharp, abrupt. "You have nothing to do with it. I will return you to your father as planned. I will deal with Dorian and the Spalton in my own manner."

The princess rose to her feet. "You are very honorable, Ramuel the rescuer."

Ramuel turned cold reptile eyes on her. "How can you look at me and see anything that resembles honor?"

The princess reached up and touched his face. "I see much, sir Ramuel."

Ramuel stared into her eyes. Eyes that were no longer pale, but a myriad of all the colors of the forest. Ramuel looked away, turning his face from her touch. "You should rest. It will be morning soon."

The princess slowly lowered her hand. "Of course."

Ramuel watched her return to the opposite side of the burning roots, wrap the sheet around her, and lay down.

You're not so unsightly, Ramuel thought.

Wrapped in the sheet, her back to Ramuel, the princess smiled and closed her eyes.

The tip of Dorian's sword pressed against Ramuel's throat. The well muscled Piador captain stomped a heavy foot on Ramuel's chest, pinning him to the ground. "I remember you." Dorian growled. "And your mother. That filthy whore of a dog. Breeding with that beast." Dorian spit in Ramuel's face. "You're nothing but an animal to be slaughtered - just like your mother."

Ramuel strained for breath beneath Dorian's pressing foot. "My mother was innocent." He hissed. "You murdered her!"

Dorian cocked his head. "Innocent?" He sneered. "Is that what she told you?" Suddenly the pressure of Dorian's foot was gone and the sword withdrawn. Dorian yanked Ramuel to his feet. "Does that look

innocent?"

Dorian grabbed Ramuel by his long black Spalton hair and spun him around. Ramuel's eyes widened. He shook his head. "No."

"Yes." Dorian growled.

Just yards away was Ramuel's mother wrapped in the intimate, sexual embrace of a Spalton dragon. She wasn't crying or screaming or trying to get away. She was *embracing* the creature in the throes of ecstasy. Caressing its man-like body with affection.

"No!" Ramuel cried through a clenched jaw.

Chapter 2

"No!" Ramuel sat straight up out of his dream, chest pounding, skin damp with sweat. He looked around, breathing hard. It was morning. A heavy fog covered the ground, and blocked out the sun. But it wouldn't be long before the sun burned through.

He left his make shift bed and went to wake up the princess. The sheet was empty. The princess gone. Ramuel's face tightened.

A hand touched his shoulder and he spun, drawing his sword on a fast turn. The princess gasped as the tip of the sword touched her throat. Ramuel immediately sheathed the sword. "I'm sorry."

"I...I just thought you might be hungry." The princess held a handful of berries.

Ramuel stared at the berries. The Paidors were vegetarians. Ramuel had been born with the appetite of the Spaltons. He craved meat. But she had taken the time to pick them. He could stomach a few.

"Thank you." Ramuel reached for the berries.

The princess laughed and shook her head. "These aren't for you. The berries are mine."

Ramuel looked confused.

The princess smiled - somewhat more becoming than the day before. She offered him the contents of her other hand. A small forest creature. Dead.

Ramuel looked at her. "How did you know I preferred meat?"

The princess shrugged as he took the dead animal. He looked at her a moment, hesitating. Piadors found the Spaltons' eating habits disgusting.

"Please." The princess said. "Eat." She sat down on the sheet and began to eat the berries one at a time. Her eyes remained on Ramuel.

Ramuel hesitated again but his stomach was screaming for sustenance. He grabbed the scalp of the carcass, dug in his claw like nails and in one swift yank stripped the dead animal of its fur coat. He dropped the skin on the ground and lifted the freshly killed creature to his mouth. The scent of blood and fresh meat was more than he could resist. He bit into the tender muscles of the animal with his sharp dragon teeth and ripped loose chunk after chunk, chewing and swallowing, savoring the meat.

The princess watched him with intrigue as she continued to slip one berry at a time into her mouth.

Ramuel finished in minutes. He tossed the skeletal remains on the pile of burnt roots and wiped his mouth. The princess was smiling at him. "Good?" She asked.

"Very." He nodded. "Thank you."

Ramuel retrieved his steed, mounted, and lifted the princess up behind him.

Ramuel shifted, unnerved, as the princess' arms tightened around his waist. He hadn't been touched by another living soul since he was a child.

"Are you all right?" The princess asked when Ramuel shifted again.

He grunted and nodded.

"Did you sleep well?" She asked.

Ramuel frowned. "Why?"

"You seemed restless, in your sleep." She said. "I woke in the night and you were tossing and turning."

Ramuel was silent for a long moment. "Just a bad dream."

"Do you have many bad dreams?"

Ramuel sighed. "Every night."

"Tell me about them."

Ramuel's face tightened. "They aren't important. They're just dreams."

The princess rested her chin on his shoulder. "Are they about your mother?"

Ramuel clenched his jaw. "I told you, they are just dreams."

"Mm Hmm." The princess nodded slowly. "What is it that disturbs you so much about your dreams?"

"What does it matter?" Ramuel snapped.

"Tell me." She urged gently.

"Why?" Ramuel groaned. "Why would a spoiled princess want to hear about my bad dreams?"

"Tell me."

Ramuel shook his head and urged his mount forward. "Fine. If it will shut you up."

"It will."

Tension tightened Ramuel's face. His green dragon eyes burned with the memory of his nightmares. "Dorian is there." He said low, tight. "He shows me..."

"What?"

Ramuel shook his head. "Forget it."

"No." The princess urged. "Tell me. What did Dorian show you?"

"My mother." Ramuel whispered. "My mother and the Spalton dragon."

The princess drew a soft breath. "He showed you your mother's rape?"

Ramuel's throat tightened until he could barely breathe. "The dragon wasn't raping her." He faltered, gagging on the words. "She was with him."

"With him?"

"With him." He spit out harshly. "She was there of her own free will. She wanted him to be touching her."

"Oh." The princess said. "Do you think..."

"No!" Ramuel snapped. "I told you, it was a dream. That's it. My mother would have never given herself to a creature like the Spalton."

The princess was silent for a long moment. "What if...the Spaltons aren't as savage as the legends tell? Maybe they can love...like the Piadors. Maybe your mother and this Spalton-"

"Shut up!" Ramuel hissed. "Just shut up. The beast raped her. I saw the scars of his attack myself. They are animals. Savage beasts. Nothing more."

The princess fell silent and rested her cheek on Ramuel's back.

Ramuel stared straight ahead, reptile eyes hard and cold, true to his dragon nature.

Ramuel drew the black steed to a halt at the border of Azion. A cool breeze swept past the travelers and down the bright green hills spotted with purple and white flowers. At the bottom, the majestic city of Azion stretched out in all directions. A large stone wall surrounded the city. Atop the walls, watchmen were stationed, ready to warn the king of impending invaders.

A wide mote circled the city with a single draw bridge the only entrance into Azion. Ramuel's keen dragon eyes could see the deadly water creatures swimming just below the murky surface of the mote water.

"If you enter the city." The princess said quietly. "They won't let you leave. You will be imprisoned...or worse."

Ramuel said nothing as he stared at the walled city. She spoke the truth. He wouldn't leave the city alive. Even if Hashdod pardoned him, he would never be accepted, never be safe.

As he watched the city, Dorian approached one of the watchmen. Even from this distance, Ramuel could make out the details of Dorian's face. The face that had twisted with cruel, deadly pleasure as he ripped the life from Ramuel's mother.

"Let me walk from here." The princess said. "They don't have to know about you. Dorian doesn't have to know you're still alive."

As Ramuel stared at Dorian, he felt his blood begin to boil. He would never run or hide from the bastard again.

"No." Ramuel muttered. "I will take you."

The princess gripped his shoulders. "He will kill you."

Ramuel ignored her and urged the small black horse down the grassy hillside.

"Halt!" Dorian commanded from the top of the stone wall.

Ramuel reined the steed in a short distance from the edge of the mote. His body was tight with tension. His hand aching to grab his sword and sail it at Dorian's chest. But the distance was too great and Dorian was adorned in steel armor.

The princess loosened her arms from around Ramuel's waist and slid off the back of the horse. She looked up at him pleadingly. "Please, good Ramuel, go."

Ramuel looked down at her. "I can't."

"Yes. You can. Go now and they won't catch up to you."

The draw bridge creaked then groaned as it slowly began to lower.

"Go!" The princess urged. "You can still get away."

"Don't you get it?" Ramuel hissed. "I don't want to get away. I told you what I seek."

The princess turned her eyes to the captain staring down at them from the top of the wall. "Don't do this." The princess looked at Ramuel with fear in her eyes. "Please. Go."

Ramuel turned his attention to the draw bridge. It was half way down and lowering slowly, loudly. He looked up at the wall. Dorian was gone. Ramuel returned his eyes to the bridge. As it gradually came down, Ramuel saw Dorian's face slowly come into view. He was mounted on a large steed, both him and his mount adorned in armor.

As the bridge touched down, Dorian drove his heels into the steed's side. The large animal bolted forward, its strong hooves pounding across the hard wood planks of the bridge. Dorian drew his sword as he crossed the bridge and approached Ramuel's smaller steed.

Dorian thrust the tip of his sword to the Ramuel's throat. Ramuel sat unflinching, cold reptile eyes burning into the Captain's deep blue Piador eyes.

"Speak, half breed!" Dorain ordered. "Identify yourself!"

Ramuel glared at the Captain of the Guard. "I am Ramuel." He spoke tight, voice hard as the steel pressed to his throat. "I have rescued Princess Tia-Mar from the sorceress Shazzator and have come to return her to her father, King Hashdod."

Dorian's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "Rescued the princess?" He looked around as more of his men gathered and formed a circle around Ramuel and the princess. "Was she missing?" Dorian cast a sharp glare at his men. "Why was I not informed that the princess had been captured by the sorceress?"

The men glanced at each other then began to roar with laughter. Dorian grinned but his eyes remained cold and deadly when he looked at Ramuel. "Do you take me for a fool?"

Ramuel frowned, glanced at the princess, then back to Dorian. "I don't understand." he said, confused. "I have brought the princess with me."

Dorian kicked his steed and it jumped forward as he circled Ramuel's mount. The princess stood close to the small black horse, her face pressed against the animal's warm body, her back to Dorian.

"Show your face!" Dorian ordered her. "Who dares to impersonate the princess?"

When the princess stood unmoving, Ramuel stared down at her. "What is happening?"

Dorian reached down, grabbed the princess by the hair and yanked her around. She cried out and fell to the ground at the feet of Dorian's large steed. She slowly raised her head and looked up at the captain.

Dorian's eyes burned as he jumped off his mount and grabbed the princess by the hair, hauling her to her feet. "Behold! The princess of Azion!" He shouted. His men roared with laughter once more.

"What are you doing?" Ramuel shouted at Dorian.

Dorian thrust the woman to the ground and drilled Ramuel with hateful eyes. "How dare you bring this filth into the Orion Kingdom?" Dorian reached down as Ramuel watched, and ripped open the back of the woman's garment.

"What the hell?" Ramuel recoiled. His green eyes were wide and shocked as he stared at the woman's back. Small, thin wispy wings grew from her shoulder blades. Their transparent feathers clung to her ribs like a second layer of skin.

"Did you really think you could pass this hideous thing off as our princess?" Dorian growled. His piercing blue eyes surveyed Ramuel's dragon features. "Take them!" Dorian ordered. "Chain them in the dungeon." He swept a warning glare over his men. "The King need not be bothered with such trivial matters as these." His cold gaze returned to Ramuel. "I will deal with these two creatures myself."

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