

Third Starlighter

TALES OF STARLIGHT SERIES





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TALES OF STARLIGHT SERIES



Bryan Davis

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BRYAN DAVIS

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Third Starlighter

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www.scrubjayjourneys.com

email: info@scrubjayjourneys.com

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✧ AUTHOR'S NOTE ✧

Third Starlighter, published by Scrub Jay Journeys, is the second book in Tales of Starlight, a series for teenagers and adults that acts as a companion series to Dragons of Starlight, a series I wrote for young adults.

How to Read the Story World

You can fully enjoy the Tales of Starlight series without reading the companion series, Dragons of Starlight. If you read both series, however, you will enjoy a fuller understanding of the story world.

If you intend to read both series, here is my suggested reading order:

1. *Starlighter* (Dragons of Starlight book #1)
2. *Masters & Slayers* (Tales of Starlight book #1)
3. *Warrior* (Dragons of Starlight book #2)
4. *Third Starlighter* (Tales of Starlight book #2)
5. *Diviner* (Dragons of Starlight book #3)
6. *Liberator* (Dragons of Starlight book #4)
7. *Exodus Rising* (Tales of Starlight book #3)

You may switch the reading order for entries 1 and 2 on the above list without any problem, and you may also switch the order for entries 4 and 5.



* ONE *

DARKNESS is a robe that cloaks an eerie choir, and sleepless is the protector of the innocent. Adrian sat against a wide cypress trunk, listening to the swamp's chorus—the clacking of branches tossed by a wet breeze, the trilling of crickets nestled under rotting logs, and the stirring of marsh water that veiled serpents and other nocturnal predators, restless at the presence of a human intruder.

As a faint splash sounded, he tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword, his usual response. No matter how many times he reminded himself that countless frogs and bugs hopped from place to place, the slightest noise raised a reflexive twitch, an instinctive call to protect the girls in his care.

Penelope and Shellinda lay in his embrace. Their weight had stiffened his arms, creating a buzzing numbness and making it difficult to hold a sword as well as two girls. Discomfort was a minor sacrifice. After their harrowing escape, the fugitive slave girls needed as much rest as they could get, and their slumber provided a chance to pause and plan. Not only that, their gentle breathing added a soothing background hum to the choir's never-ending song. At least they were able to sleep peacefully, unaware of the surrounding peril and unconcerned about their draconic slave masters' relentless pursuit.

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Near Adrian's feet, Marcelle lay quietly, still showing no signs of conscious thought. Only an occasional blink interrupted her wide-eyed stare. The spirited sword maiden who once animated that sinewy frame seemed to be lost within, unable to surface. The torturous ordeal she had suffered while chained to the Reflections Crystal had accomplished what no battle opponent ever could—it had vanquished her fighting spirit. His childhood friend needed someone to lead her out of the fog, but who could grasp the hand of a phantom wandering in a sightless world?

Biting his lip, Adrian looked toward the sky, barely visible through the web of overhanging branches. A cloud bank obscured Starlight's triple moons, allowing the swampy floor just a faint glow to dress its murky pools. If only the Creator could shed at least that much light on Marcelle's path, maybe she could find her way home.

Adrian gazed at the girls' dirty faces, their slack muscles showing no hint of anxiety. For many children, darkness equals fear. The shadows of the unknown conceal lurking predators, especially the contorted shadows cast by the gnarled branches of wind-battered trees. Not so for children running from a whip. For them, darkness provides a blanket of protection—a hideaway, a cloaked corner of this blood- and tear-stained world where the dragons' piercing eyes could not reach.

Glancing again at the dark sky, Adrian relaxed his muscles. No dragon had shown a leathered wing for hours. Their patrol had apparently veered toward a more habitable portion of the forest, thinking no escapees in their right mind would dare venture into the snake-infested marshes that spread across the wilderness in the dragon realm. Yet, those on the run had little choice, hemmed in by the forest's natural borders—an impassable mountain range to the south and dangerous swamps to the west. Any other direction would take an escaping human out into an open plateau where he would be easy prey for the winged hunters. Even if he could elude

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the dragons under the cover of darkness, he would eventually run into an insurmountable barrier wall encompassing most of the region.

Adrian firmed his jaw. They still had one hope—to find Frederick, his older brother. He had indicated in a video message that he would try to help the Lost Ones, but searching for him in the dragons' domain had been fruitless. Every human slave agreed that the wilderness remained the only possible refuge for the would-be emancipator.

No sign of Frederick had appeared, though that was no big surprise considering the darkness, the swiftness of their flight, and the worsening terrain. After trudging into these lowlands, it had taken hours to find high ground where they could sit in relative dryness and try to get a little sleep. With dawn approaching, their refuge would soon lose its protective shield, and they would have to find an area with a denser population of trees, though the protection would come at a painful cost—wet trousers and biting insects.

A louder splash reached Adrian's ears. Holding his breath, he stared into the blackness. Something moved out there, something creeping closer, then stopping, then drawing closer again. He took in a long draw of the moldy air. A new scent spiced the breeze, a bestial odor that raised images of the mountain bears back on Major Four, yet fouler, like wet goat's hair that had soured in the sun.

"We have to go," he whispered in a calm tone. A slow-and-easy exit would likely keep the girls composed and the beast at bay. Maybe it drew near to investigate the new arrivals, and startling it might put it in a defensive mode.

He rose to his feet, his arms loosening around the girls as he propped them up. "Stay close while I get Marcelle."

"Okay," Shellinda said, her whispered voice rattling, a sign of exposure to the cool, damp air. She still wore a makeshift tunic she had fashioned out of a sheet, far too big for her undersized body,

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but better than what she had worn at the cattle camp—short, ratty trousers and no shirt at all. “Do you need help?”

“Just hold this a second.” Adrian pushed the sword hilt into Shellinda’s hand and hoisted Marcelle over his shoulder. She struggled, flailing her arms and kicking, though she said nothing. “Shhhh ...” He let the shushing sound fade slowly. Soon, Marcelle relaxed, though one hand clutched the back of his shirt tightly, her nails digging into his skin.

After taking the sword again, he guided the girls together. Although dimness shaded their faces, they were easy to tell apart. Penelope, a former dragon-cave servant, stood a foot taller than the younger, malnourished Shellinda, a recent escapee from the cattle camp. “It’s pretty dark,” he said, “but we can find our way back without a problem. Just look for the branches I broke. Since we know it’s safe the way we came, I’ll guard our rear. Okay?”

“That’s okay with me.” Penelope peeked around him. “Is something out there?”

“I think so, but if it’s hungry, it probably would’ve attacked by now. Let’s just move out of its sniffing range.” He pointed with his sword. “March slowly and as quietly as possible.”

Taking Shellinda’s hand, Penelope walked away from the tree and into shallow water, her progress slow as her head shifted, apparently in search of the branches Adrian had sliced to mark their trail. He stayed close, glancing back every few seconds while trying to listen for the slightest sounds, though the noise they made themselves threatened to drown out the stealthy creature that skulked behind them.

A slight breeze wafted in their faces, providing no help in detecting the beast’s approach. Instead, it sent their own odor, a blend of sweat from their recent run and blood from the various scratches and bug bites, back to the potential predator. If it relished

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the aroma of stinking, wounded humans, it was probably getting enough to whet its appetite.

“Now that we can travel more slowly,” Adrian said, forcing a confident tone, “we can look for signs of my brother.”

“What signs?” Shellinda asked without looking back.

“Wood smoke in the air. Stumps with no fallen trees. Bushes that ought to have berries this time of year but don’t. And once the sun gets high enough, if there are no dragons around, we can look for footprints out in open areas.”

“I hope they didn’t catch Scott,” Penelope said.

“He’s fine. Since he got us to the wilderness safely, I’m sure he could stay away from the dragons on his way back to the village. It’s a lot easier to hide when you’re alone.”

The girls marched on, their forms becoming clearer in the glow of dawn. Marcelle squirmed, grunting whenever Adrian took a harder step. “Hang in there,” he whispered. “I’ll get you home, and we’ll find a doctor. As long as you’re alive, there’s hope.”

A new odor filtered into his nostrils, the distinctive scent of urine, and wetness spread across his shoulder. Wrinkling his nose, he didn’t miss a step. “It’s okay. I know you don’t have control. When we stop, I’ll ask the girls to clean you up, and we’ll get you some more water.” As he spoke, it seemed at times that her fingers tightened around his shirt in response. Yet, the movements could also have been instinctive reactions to the jostling. Although she drank water readily, no amount of coaxing could get her to chew and swallow food. He would need to find liquid nutrients for her before too much longer.

Adrian glanced back again. The sound of sloshing water, perhaps a dozen steps behind, had definitely increased, now slow and rhythmic, as if the predator intentionally matched their pace. A slight rumble joined the rising din, a growl that could be from the

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throat of a big cat or the empty stomach of a bear. Whatever it was, the cadence of the splashes gave evidence of a four-legged beast.

As rays of dawn filtered through the canopy, Adrian touched Penelope's shoulder. "The sun's coming up. I think we can move a little faster now."

"I smell smoke," Shellinda said. "That's a good sign, right?"

"I hope so." Adrian sniffed the air. With all his attention diverted to the sounds, he had neglected the other senses. Indeed, the aroma of burning wood rode the breeze—new wood, freshly cut. With dry ground only a few paces ahead, maybe they were approaching Frederick's refuge. It made sense that he would stay close to the swamp, a source of water and a place to hide. "I smell it, too. Veer a little bit to the right and—"

A loud splash erupted. Adrian spun. A huge, catlike beast lunged, claws extended and teeth bared. With another spin, he heaved Marcelle toward the girls, shouting, "Take her!" and swung back toward the beast, both hands now on the hilt as he hacked with his sword. The flat of the blade crashed against the cat's skull, barely raising a spray of blood as its hairy body barreled into him and knocked him flat.

His sword flew out of his hands. The girls screamed. The cat's teeth sank into Adrian's shoulder. Its claws dug into his scalp. Then, it fell limp.

Lying under its crushing weight, Adrian pushed with both arms. With a final heave, he rolled out from under its smelly body and jumped to his feet. The cat lay motionless, its head separated from its shoulders. Less than two paces away, Penelope and Shellinda stood as if frozen, their mouths agape. Next to them, Marcelle wobbled on her feet, Adrian's sword in hand. Her eyes wide, she dropped it and backed away.

"Marcelle!" Adrian leaped to a run. As he reached out to grab her, she fell to her knees.

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Blinking, she whispered, "Adrian," then collapsed.

Before she could fall into the mud, he scooped her into his arms. Without looking back at the cat, he marched away from the swamp, the mud thick on his boots. "Let's go, girls! Penelope, get my sword."

Penelope snatched up the sword and scrambled to the front, slashing ferns and fronds with the blade.

"Don't get too far ahead!" Adrian called.

Shellinda half walked, half jogged at his side, her tunic slipping down her rail-thin shoulders. "Is Marcelle okay?"

"She's breathing. And her instinctive response to danger is a good sign."

"I suppose so." Shellinda let out a quiet sigh. "I'll keep praying for her."

As Adrian hurried to keep Penelope in sight, Shellinda's words reverberated in his mind. *I'll keep praying for her.* This girl had suffered so much at the whips and claws of cruel beasts, yet her faith survived. Did others still cling to hope? Or had most given up? It seemed that desperation, at least in Shellinda's case, was fertile ground for seeds of faith.

The aroma of burning wood came and went, as if teasing, first leading one direction, then another. After about an hour, Penelope called, "The smell is getting stronger!"

Adrian took in a deep draught. Yes, the distinctive odor had thickened. They wouldn't lose it again.

Soon, the ground sloped upward. Penelope halted at the top of the rise and waited, her eyes wide as a smile grew on her face. When Adrian arrived with Marcelle and Shellinda, he stopped and surveyed the area. Nestled in the center of a dense stand of trees, a primitive cabin stood, undetectable if not for a worn path weaving through the trees to the front door. With a roof of huge leaves and intertwined vines, and walls of stacked logs cemented with mud, it

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appeared to be something from a storybook, a primitive squatter's cabin from Mesolantrum's early settlement days.

"That has to be Frederick's refuge." Adrian hiked Marcelle higher into his arms. "Let's go!"

Marcelle thrashed, forcing Adrian to set her on her feet. She crouched low and hid her face between her knees, breathing rapidly.

"Everything's fine," Adrian whispered. "This is the place we were looking for." Grasping her arm, he pulled her up. As he steadied her, her legs trembled. "Would you like to try to walk?"

Her eyes darted all around, but she said nothing. He guided her forward, taking slow, easy steps to avoid the trees and brambles. As she wobbled and swayed, he held her arm more firmly. This exercise would be good for her. She needed to strengthen her muscles. Maybe more blood flow would heal her brain as well.

When they drew within a dozen paces of the door, three boys and three girls emerged from the cabin, their stares fixed on their visitors. One boy stood taller than the others. Perhaps twelve or so, he wore a hardened face—skeptical beyond his years. His muscles bulged under his thin clothes, apparently swelled by slave labor. Although clean from head to toe, all six wore ragged knee-length trousers and hole-infested shirts. One also wore a hat made of black feathers woven together with green ivy that bloomed with tiny white flowers. Since she was young, thin, and apparently bald, if not for the feminine hat, guessing her gender would have been impossible. With spotty blemishes on her face, she gazed aimlessly, as if blind.

A man appeared from around the cabin, pushing a one-wheeled cart between two trees. When he noticed the arrivals, his eyes bulged, and he dropped the cart. Blinking rapidly, he smoothed out his clothes and hurried to join the children, his fingers tight around a sword hilt at his hip. His uniform and dark handlebar mustache gave away his identity, though both appeared damp and drooping, as if he had been caught in a rainstorm.

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“Drexel?” Adrian said. “What are you doing here?”

“Hoping to help you.” Drexel bowed toward Marcelle, then toward Adrian. “You look like you have been through a battle.”

Adrian touched the bite mark on his scalp. It oozed blood, but it wasn’t too bad. “I’ve been through my share of tussles, but I’m okay.”

“That’s good, but it seems that Marcelle has not fared as well. She appears to be quite ill.”

Adrian glanced at her. With her mouth partially open and her eyes wide and glazed, she seemed to be lost in her dream world again. “She is ill. She suffered a lot at the hands of the dragons.”

“Wicked beasts!” Drexel scowled for a moment before letting his face relax. “Shall we prepare a place for her to lie down?”

Adrian eyed Drexel. As the head of the palace sentries, he held an influential position in the Underground Gateway. He had always been able to switch facial expressions quickly, aiding the cause to rescue the slaves at one moment and licking the governor’s boots the next. “Thank you. That would be very helpful.”

Drexel waved a hand toward the door. “Take her inside. The children will help you.”

“She needs to be cleaned up. She’s not ... well ... not in control of her faculties.”

“I understand. Perhaps your female companions can take her in, and Cassandra”—he patted one of the three girls on her head, pressing down her tangled dark hair—“will help with the bedding and cleanup. In fact, all three girls can help, and I will send the boys away, then we can discuss my presence here privately.”

Adrian nodded. “That will be fine.”

Penelope gave Adrian his sword, then, led by the other girls, she and Shellinda guided Marcelle through the door. When all six faded from sight, Drexel tousled the hair of the tallest boy, but he ducked away, a scowl on his face.

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“Orlan,” Drexel said, apparently unaffected by the boy’s rebuff, “find Frederick. He’ll want to know that his brother is here.”

“His brother?” Orlan stared at Adrian. “He *does* look like Frederick.”

“Of course he does. Go on now, and take the other boys with you. There is safety in numbers.”

The two younger boys looked at each other, fear in their eyes, but they stayed quiet.

“Did Frederick say where he was going?” Orlan asked. “He must have gotten up before dawn.”

Drexel nodded. “He said he was going to check his traps.”

“He checks them in the evening,” one of the younger boys said, “so the birds won’t pick them clean during the night.”

“Perhaps I misheard him. He might be trying to catch some fish for breakfast, so look for him at the stream.”

Orlan shook his head. “His fishing gear is still behind the cabin.”

“Very well. Then look for him at the hunting stand. If he isn’t there, then check the stream.”

“He’s not hunting.” Orlan pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. “His bow and arrows are still here, too.”

“Since you’re so well-informed,” Drexel said through clenched teeth, “search for him wherever you wish. If you’re frightened, take the bow and arrows. Just go.”

Orlan shot a glance at Adrian and at his sword, then scampered around the cabin with the other two boys. Seconds later, they appeared at the corner where Drexel had left the cart and ran deeper into the woods, Orlan with a bow in his hand and the two boys clutching arrows. Soon, the pounding of their bare feet faded.

Adrian continued listening. Could there be other big cats prowling the woods, or were they confined to the marsh? The two smaller boys seemed pensive, frightened. Their slave mentalities, however, wouldn’t allow them to appeal. “I would like to go with

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them.” He lifted his sword, displaying a smear of blood on the blade. “We killed a big catlike creature on the way here. They wouldn’t stand a chance against one.”

“They’re long gone,” Drexel said. “We could never catch up.”

“I’m sure I can track them. Let’s talk on the way.”

Drexel glanced at the cabin. “Who will guard the girls?”

“The door’s closed. They should be fine.” Adrian marched along the path the boys had taken, eyeing the broken twigs and flattened foliage they had left behind. His heart pounded with every footfall. After all these long months, he and Frederick would soon be reunited.

“I take it you found the dragon’s portal,” Drexel said from a few steps back.

A chill ran up Adrian’s spine. Walking in front of Drexel was unnerving. “I did find the portal, but in an unexpected way. I can explain everything when Frederick comes.”

“Of course. Retelling stories can be tedious.”

“I know what you mean.” Adrian used his blade to push a broken fern out of the way. “But do you mind telling me how you got here?”

“I found the portal Uriel Blackstone used.” Drexel pulled on Adrian’s sleeve, stopping him. In his hand, he held a small book. “This is his journal. I happened upon it in Governor Prescott’s room when we were searching for evidence. You see, shortly after you left, someone murdered the good governor, so I—”

“Murdered?”

“Yes, a tragedy, to be sure.” Drexel averted his gaze, apparently looking in the cabin’s direction. “Of course, with this portal information in hand, I decided to come here. I hoped to bring proof of Dracon’s existence back to Mesolantrum so I could muster an army to rescue the Lost Ones. I thought bringing a malnourished child home would be sufficient to embolden the hearts of our people against the dragons.”

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"I see," Adrian said, nodding. "An emotional hook. Since you have children now, are you going back soon?"

Drexel shook his head. "It seems that the journal lacks instructions on how to open the portal from this side, so I am trapped here. Since I was fortunate enough to find Frederick, I assume the Creator is guiding me on my path, and I expected, knowing your reputation as a superb tracker, that you would eventually find both of us here. Since you have arrived, it seems that my supposition has been confirmed. Now the three of us will find a way home with these children in tow."

"Maybe more than three. My father is in a place called the Northlands, and a dragon told me Jason is trying to get there."

"A dragon told you Jason is here?" Drexel's scowl returned. "And you believed the lying beast?"

Adrian cocked his head, pondering Drexel's sudden outburst. Was this real anger or another one of his calculated shifts in mood? "I spoke to Arxad, the dragon priest. He mentioned Jason's name before I did, so they must have met."

"Not necessarily." Drexel shifted his weight from foot to foot, again averting his eyes. "I have long suspected that the dragons have been communicating with Governor Prescott about a possible trade to obtain extane from our world. Perhaps Arxad heard your brother's name from him."

"Not likely. I think Arxad wants the Lost Ones to leave. He has no reason to lie."

Drexel's eyes focused on Adrian, his brow bending. "A naïve conclusion. I doubt his sympathy and his words. Jason had no way to get here. Uriel Blackstone's portal required a genetic key that Jason was unable to obtain."

"A genetic key? How did you get it?"

"I can explain at another time. For now, we need to decide how many adults will be returning to Major Four. Someone will have to

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stay with the children, and perhaps Marcelle will not be well enough to join us." He glanced toward the cabin. "What did the dragons do to her?"

"Again, allow me to explain when we find Frederick." Adrian refocused on the path. Soon the signs would be more difficult to discern. "We'd better hurry before the boys get too far—"

Something rustled in the woods, and a low growl followed. Adrian lifted his sword and searched for the source, but the dense forest gave away nothing. "Did you hear that?"

"I heard." Drexel drew his own sword. "I have been here only since last night, so I am not familiar with the beasts that lurk in these woods."

"It sounded just like the cat creature."

Drexel nodded in the direction the boys had gone. "Then by all means, make haste!"

Adrian ran ahead, again following the trampled undergrowth. The terrain sloped downward and grew moister. Maybe the boys had gone toward the stream after all. He glanced back, but Drexel was nowhere in sight. Obviously he had no intention of keeping up.

Soon, the sound of running water reached his ears. In the distance, the three boys stood at the edge of a shallow stream, staring at the water. He hustled down a vine-covered slope and halted behind them. "What are you looking at?"

Orlan pointed at the stream. "Frederick's sword." He shifted his finger. "And it looks like someone climbed out at the other side."

Adrian ran into the ankle-deep water and snatched up the sword from the stream's rocky bed. Yes, it was Frederick's. The miniature family crest engraved in the hilt gave it away. He scanned the slope at the opposite bank, a mixture of grass and mud that led upward to a ledge overlooking the stream from about five feet up. Deep gouges in the turf verified Orlan's guess that someone had crawled out.

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He leaped up to the ledge and scanned the grass beyond. Dried drops of blood dotted a trail leading away from the stream with a wide gap between each drop. The person or animal was either running or bleeding slowly, perhaps both.

Following the trail for several steps, he studied the flattened grass. The pattern definitely matched that of a running human, most likely an adult. Yet, an odd narrow depression ran down the middle of the trail, consistent in width and depth, like a wheel bearing a heavy load.

He turned back to the boys. "Did you see anyone? Hear anything?"

Orlan shook his head. "Just you when you came up behind us."

"No rustling sounds? No animal noises?"

"Nothing."

"I heard some birds," one of the younger boys said. "And the water."

Adrian leaped back to the stream and splashed across it. Showing the boys Frederick's sword, he ran a finger along the blade. "There's no blood, obviously, because of the water, but there's a nick here. I know my brother. He hones any flaw in his blade, so this has to be fresh."

Orlan touched the nick. "Could he have been battling Drexel and lost his sword?"

"Battling Drexel?" Adrian cocked his head at Orlan. "Why would you ask that?"

"Well ..." Orlan averted his eyes. "I just don't trust Drexel."

"I don't blame you. But don't worry about Frederick. He could best Drexel with a dull stick." Adrian looked at the stream again. "Maybe he fell, and the blade got nicked on the rocks."

"Then why would he leave the sword behind?" Orlan asked.

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Adrian glanced between the stream and the ledge. "That puzzles me. Unless my brother was severely dazed by the fall, he would've picked it up."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Follow the trail." He extended Frederick's sword to Orlan. "Can you handle a blade?"

"No." Orlan raised the bow. "I can't even use this. These two can shoot it, though."

Adrian gazed at the two younger boys, likely no older than six or seven, but if they were once cattle children, their growth might have been stunted by malnutrition. "I heard something prowling on my way here, so maybe you should come with me. Drexel's back there somewhere, but I can't count on him to protect you. He might have headed to the cabin."

Orlan took the sword. "Maybe you should go alone, and I'll take these two home."

"Why?"

Orlan looked toward the cabin, though it wasn't in sight. "The truth? Nothing held back?"

"Of course."

Half closing an eye, Orlan stared at Adrian for several seconds. "I think I can trust you."

"I just gave you a sword. That should tell you something."

"True." Orlan focused on the blade. "Like I said, I don't trust Drexel, especially around the girls."

"Why? What do you think he would do?"

"I don't know. Back at the mine where I work, a lot of people died after he showed up and killed a dragon."

"Drexel killed a dragon?" Adrian let out a whistle. "That's impressive."

"I know, but I still don't trust him." He looked Adrian in the eye again. "The only reason I took off to find Frederick was because I

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think you're an honest man. He wouldn't do anything to the girls while you're around."

Adrian looked at the trail of blood. Frederick was in obvious trouble, while Marcelle and the girls were likely fine, in danger only in Orlan's imagination. Apparently Drexel had done them no harm to this point, and this boy was obviously strong and smart, so with a sword in hand, he could get to the cabin safely, allowing a faster search for Frederick. The cat creature hadn't bothered them so far. "Okay. Take the boys. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Just watch out for the deer trap," one of the smaller boys said, pointing across the stream. "It's in that direction."

"A trap?" Adrian pointed at the ground. "Is it a pit?"

The boy nodded. "With spikes at the bottom."

"Thanks for the warning. I'll watch out for it."

Orlan ran up the vine-covered slope, herding the boys, one at each side. Adrian leaped across the stream in two bounds and then up the embankment. Clutching his sword, he sprinted through the grass and into the forest, dodging low branches and jumping over exposed roots. The trail stayed clear, and the blood splotches grew bigger and closer together.

Finally, he reached a glade surrounded by pine trees. Their needles covered the ground with a copper-colored blanket, making the red trail a bit harder to see, but it was still evident. As long as he stayed on the path Frederick had followed, he wouldn't fall into a pit.

Slowing to a jog, he continued, glancing left and right for any other sign of—

The ground collapsed. As Adrian toppled forward, he rammed his sword into the dirt on the far side and held on. Now dangling, he looked at the pit's floor. Sharpened stakes protruded about ten feet below. A man lay face down, apparently impaled, but the sun's

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angle didn't allow much light to reach the bottom. The man had to be Frederick, but it was impossible to tell how badly he was hurt.

As the loose dirt gave way, the sword bent. Only seconds remained before it would pry free from the wall. Adrian lunged and reached for the lip of the pit, but his hands fell short. Clawing and scrabbling, he slid down the side, bringing a miniature avalanche and the sword down with him.

He bent his body and thrust out his arms, trying to avoid the sword and the stakes, but when he landed, one stake pierced the heel of his hand and passed through, leaving at least three inches visible on the other side.

Biting his lip to keep from yelling, he grabbed the sword and chopped the base of the stake, freeing himself. With pine needles and green leaves raining from above, he edged around to the opposite side of the pit and examined the prostrate man. It seemed that his body broke some stakes, but one had rammed through his leg and now protruded from his calf.

Adrian squinted at the man's profile. His scruffy beard and shaggy hair covered all but his nose and part of his cheek. Still, his identity was clear. "Frederick! Can you hear me?"

Frederick neither moved nor answered. Adrian set his ear against Frederick's back. His heart beat steadily, but his breaths were shallow and labored.

Using the sword again, he chopped off the stake piercing Frederick's leg and slowly turned him on his side. Three stakes under his body lay fragmented on the dirt, though one section pierced his belt and stomach.

Adrian felt the entry point. It appeared to be embedded only an inch or so. With pain ripping through his impaled hand, he eased the stake out of Frederick's stomach and pressed his fingers over the hole. Blood oozed slowly—a minor wound.

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Running his fingers through Frederick's hair, Adrian found a hefty lump. Apparently someone clubbed him and threw him down, then covered the hole and sprinkled blood on top to make it look safe to cross.

Through clenched teeth, Adrian muttered, "Drexel!" That scoundrel did this. Wasn't he pushing a one-wheeled cart earlier? And his damp clothes indicated that he had perspired profusely. Apparently he had committed this crime only moments before they arrived at the cabin.

Adrian's biceps flexed. So now he had to get back to the cabin. Who could tell what Drexel might do next? But he couldn't leave his brother here.

Turning to Frederick's leg, Adrian felt the bone. It shifted, evidence of a break. Frederick gasped, his eyes clenching. When the pain eased, he relaxed, but stayed unconscious. A shiver ran across his body, but it soon eased as well.

Adrian touched Frederick's thin sleeve. In the video, hadn't he worn an outer tunic? When he traveled, he always wore at least two layers. Maybe he had given one to the children to keep them warm at night.

Looking up, Adrian scanned their trap, a circular pit about ten feet deep. Frederick likely chose this spot because the dirt was so loose, allowing for easy digging. If not for the stakes, a victim could claw at the sides until it caved in enough to allow for crawling out.

He glared at the stake still embedded in his hand. If he took it out, blood loss might make him too weak to carry Frederick, but if it stayed, it might make digging impossible, and it wouldn't take long for infection to set in.

Heaving a deep sigh, Adrian shifted to the opposite side of the pit and began clawing at the dirt. One way or another, he would get his brother the help he needed. The first step, though, would be to get back to Marcelle and the children. Drexel had to be stopped.