

Masters & Slayers

TALES OF STARLIGHT SERIES



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Bryan Davis

Masters & Slayers

Volume 1 in the Tales of Starlight® series

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NEVER make a woman bleed, my son.

Adrian stood at his corner of the tourney ring, tightening his grip on the hilt of his sword as he listened to silent echoes of his father's words.

If you draw your sword against those you were born to protect, the very ones who trust in your strength, how will you convince them that you are a shield when the dragons come to take them away?

When the dragons come, Adrian repeated in his mind. If those beasts ever returned, they wouldn't find easy prey this time. No humans would be dragged away to slavery again, not if he could help it.

He lifted *Spirit* and looked at the sharp point. As usual, the tournament officials had attached a stab guard at the end of the blade to prevent puncture wounds deeper than a half inch. Still, that was deep enough. These blood matches were more than mere displays of competitive showmanship; they were tests of courage in the face of real bloodletting.

He shook his head. The stab guard mattered nothing. No battle courage would be tested in this match, and no blood would be spilled. The only showmanship might be how his opponent would react to the decision he had already made.

At the other side of the ring, Marcelle stepped across the fighting boundary, her confident stride combining with her athletic lines to draw the usual gaping stares from men young and old. Tucked

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into her form-fitting gray trousers, she wore a loose, high-necked white tunic with a red dragon emblazoned over her chest. The dragon's mouth was wide open, and a sword protruded from its belly—a conquered beast, perfectly appropriate for this warrior.

Since her previous match had ended only moments ago, sweat discolored her chest and armpits, and a spot of blood stained one shoulder, her opponent's blood no doubt. Still, her slender, petite frame would have made ignorant men laugh. A woman! And a scrawny one at that!

Adrian knew better. Anyone who doubted Marcelle's skills would soon be skewered, his own blood marking her garment as a symbol of another conquered foe. Yes, she was a formidable woman indeed. She had won her earlier matches against men twice her weight. Ever since she turned twenty-one about three years earlier, every tournament swordsman in the region had learned a simple truth—no one laughs at Marcelle.

She looked his way, her shoulders not quite as square now and her dark eyes lacking their usual fire. With her auburn hair tied back in a ponytail, the hint of sweat on her brow was obvious. She lifted her elegant rapier. The hilt's ornate hand guard revealed her position in society, the highbrow nobility, a caste represented by half the audience—the well-dressed, perfumed half, separated from the peasants by an invisible wall that divided the amphitheater.

Adrian let his gaze drift around the circle of onlookers. The break between the classes was obvious—browns and grays changing over to purples and scarlets, and mops of labor-scattered hair shifting to velvet hats adorned with feathers and silk. The day's cooler weather prompted the ladies to don their autumn finery, embellished with the aroma of the season's flowers, another stark contrast with the poorer class, those who enriched the air with leather and lye soap.

While eyeing Adrian, Marcelle ran her fingers across the dragon emblem, as if smoothing out her tunic. Her gesture

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transmitted a message. As a secret believer in the ongoing human enslavement on Dracon, the legendary dragon planet, she desperately wanted to search for the portal to that world, and she would do anything to procure the assignment. Even wearing this draconic vesture would bring punishment to a peasant, but as a noblewoman who claimed that the design mocked the silly tale, she could get away with it. She often tiptoed on the edge of safety while exercising just enough caution to stay out of trouble.

As the buzz from the crowd grew, any thought that Marcelle was less than battle-focused vanished as her fingers flexed around her sword hilt. She was ready, more than ready.

Adrian suppressed an emerging smirk. Did she really think this contest would end any differently than the previous three times they had met in tournaments? Of course, she didn't know if she could really win. Even when they were eight years old and battled using tree branches, both weapons broke, and they fell on their backsides. He had laughed. She was furious and let him know it with a barrage of oaths, promising to cut out his heart and feed it to her cat, though the twinkle in her eye never allowed him to believe a word she had said.

"Your swords," the referee said in detached monotone.

Adrian approached the center of the ring and handed his sword to the tall, middle-aged official, and Marcelle did the same, again training her stare on Adrian.

"To your corners." While the referee examined the stab guards, Adrian backed away. Marcelle withdrew a few steps, her gaze still riveted on him.

"Shall I say it for you this time?" she asked, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Adrian squinted at her. "Say what?"

With a sparkle in her eyes, she swept an arm in front of her waist, bowed, and spoke in a sarcastic tone. "In honor of the lady's expertise, I surrender."

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As laughter erupted from the nobility section, heat surged into Adrian's cheeks. Marcelle's mimicry was all too calculated. Obviously she had practiced both the bow and the cadence of speech, but her sarcasm carried more than its usual bite.

His ears burning as the laughter grew, Adrian bowed in return. "Let it be as you have spoken."

When he rose, Adrian looked beyond Marcelle into the peasants' half of the crowd. His father sat stoically, while his mother covered her face with her hands. Next to her, his younger brother Jason ran tight fingers through his tawny hair, obviously angry at yet another forfeit to Marcelle.

Adrian retrieved his sword from the referee and stalked toward his family, glancing at Marcelle as he drew near her. She caught his gaze and offered a disarming smile. "I was stupid," she whispered. "I'm sorry."

"Tell it to the crowd. Then I'll believe you." Adrian hurried across the grass separating the ring from the amphitheater's steps. As he climbed to his family's row, he tried to ignore the glares and whispers, but they pressed in on him like a vise. One remark rose above the others, obviously intentionally louder.

"Adrian Masters, master of cowards."

Then a whispered answer from nearby reached Adrian's ears. "Just like his father."

Adrian stopped. Firming his lips, he stared at the ground. *Don't even look at them. They're not worth the trouble.*

After exhaling slowly, he continued until he reached the ninth row. He found two empty spaces next to his father and sat at his side. "Where are Mother and Jason?"

His father breathed in, filling his barrel-chested frame. As a cool breeze fanned thin gray hair across his weathered scalp, he replied in a resigned tone. "Your brother is preparing for his match with Randall, and your mother went with him. She was ... well ... rather despondent."

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"I see." Adrian looked at the tourney ring. Governor Prescott placed a laurel crown on Marcelle's head while the crowd on the opposite side cheered. Jason's bout was next on the schedule, the finals for the older teens, the only other division allowed to compete in a blood match. Because of the quick forfeit, plenty of time remained before that contest, so Jason and his mother hadn't departed because of the schedule.

"My son," his father said. "I see the torment in your eyes. Resist fretting over this. Rare is the man these days who understands chivalry. Be content that your sword will never be used—"

"I know. I know." Adrian propped his elbows on his knees and glared at the grass around his shoes. "I was born to use my sword in defense of women and children." He raised his head and looked into his father's gray eyes. This veteran of wars understood the tragedy of bloodshed, the reality of danger, and the duty to keep the innocent out of harm's way. After another humiliation in front of both nobles and peasants, maybe it was time to ask again.

"Father, I intend to make such a defense. You know I'm going tonight with or without your approval, so I was hoping—"

"For a blessing?" he asked, lifting his bushy eyebrows.

"Yes." Adrian lowered his voice to a whisper. "Tonight is the appointed time, so I cannot wait any longer."

His father leaned closer. "Why you, my son? An old man can take only so much grief. After losing Frederick—"

"But Frederick might still be alive! And the brotherhood believes that I am the most qualified for the mission. If I can find the portal before we complete the deal with the dragons, I will be in position to enter their world even if they renege on their part of the bargain."

"Mistrust is appropriate," his father said, nodding. "Any beast that would kidnap and enslave our people cannot have integrity."

Adrian folded his hands and stared at his intertwined fingers. "True, and if mistrust were the only consideration, then another

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warrior could go in my stead. But it's not that simple. I see attempts at faithfulness on the part of this dragon that no one else perceives."

Laughing, his father gave him a loving shove but kept his voice low. "Are you saying that you have met this beast? We're thankful you didn't invite him home to dinner."

Adrian grinned. "I've never seen him, but I have read his messages. Apparently he leaves them close to a willow tree near Miller's Creek, the same place we found Frederick's hat. He warns us that the portal is elsewhere, and he will reveal its location after we deliver the extane tank. He will trust us to deliver more gas later."

"Such trust indicates a faithful negotiator. Perhaps he is conflicted for some reason."

"Exactly my point," Adrian said. "I hope to talk to him when he comes into our world tonight and learn more about him. I'm wondering if..." He paused. What word would fit his thought?

"He is a rogue dragon?" his father suggested.

Adrian pointed a finger. "Yes, that's it. He is promising only access to his world, not a trade for our people."

"Because he is not in a position to offer them." His father took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "And you're concerned that you're the only one who would treat this dragon with the respect he might deserve, depending, of course, on what you learn about his character."

"You know me well, Father." Adrian looked away and gazed at a little girl, maybe eight years old, sitting two rows ahead. Wearing a ragged sun bonnet and a work smock that revealed a neck bronzed by the sun, she slid closer to her older brother, a lad of about ten years. Her brother laid an arm over her shoulders, and the two leaned their heads together. The image of brother-sister love was beautiful indeed.

"The dragon's message," Adrian continued, "said that human children are being brutalized there, and since he demands extane in trade for our passage, I cannot but wonder at his motivations. If he

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has integrity and cares at all about the children, he would welcome our transport without any payment.”

“True, son. Wariness is called for.”

Adrian looked at his father, who was now staring straight ahead, as if in a dream. “Does that mean I have your blessing?” Adrian asked.

With a tear sparkling in his eye, he turned and set a hand on Adrian’s shoulder. “Only if you swear to return. As you know, the people here can ill afford to lose another man of wisdom. It is a rare quality in Mesolantrum.”

Adrian shook his head. “You ask too much. I cannot swear what I cannot control. But if you will give me your blessing, I trust that my path back to your home will be straighter than if I go without it.”

“And *will* you go without it?”

“Only as a man who is dragged by chains. I must go. I have no choice. I am compelled by unseen forces I must obey, but I would rather march into battle unhindered by the worries of those I leave behind.”

“I understand those forces ... all too well.” Edison shifted his hand to Adrian’s head. Adrian bowed and covered his face. “Son, you are very dear to me, and I cannot stand the thought of losing you, but by faith in the great Creator, I give what I can.” He took a deep breath before continuing, his voice trembling. “Go with wisdom, strength, and integrity. May you put an end to the oppression and set free the captives. And may you return to us safely, bringing with you a host of unshackled souls, so that we may celebrate the Creator’s purpose that every man, woman, and child should be free from all shackles that bind their wrists, ankles, or hearts.”

After a moment of silence, Adrian felt his father’s hand lift. He raised his head, and the two locked gazes. “I will rescue the Lost Ones,” Adrian said. “I will find Frederick, and he and I will restore the honor of our father’s good name. Edison Masters will again

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pass through the lips of young and old alike as an inspiration to warriors in training.”

Edison leaned close again. “Although I have given you my blessing, that does not mean I am excited about your departure. Please be kind to a poor old man and leave while I am not looking.”

Adrian rolled his hand into a fist. Yes! His father had given his blessing. What a relief. “All that remains is for me to resign my post and pack one bag—”

“Shh!” Edison’s eyes darted around. “Not every ear is sympathetic to our cause.”

Adrian calmed his breathing. Control over his emotions was one of the reasons he was chosen by the Underground Gateway. No sense in blurting out unguarded words now.

“Governor Prescott will not be pleased,” Edison said, “unless you already have a suitable replacement in mind.”

“Jason, of course. He will make a perfect bodyguard.”

A proud smile spread across Edison’s face. “I would like that. I would like that very much.”

Adrian patted his father’s knee. “I have to change into my uniform. Prescott will be expecting me to sit with him during Jason’s match. He also wants me to attend him at tonight’s invocation of the new counselor, but I will be gone by then. Jason will have to take my place.”

“Marcelle will likely follow custom and sit with the governor, so you will have, shall we say, awkward company.” Edison’s smile wrinkled into a mischievous grin. “Changing to your uniform is a good idea. We wouldn’t want people comparing the blood and sweat on your clothes to those on Marcelle’s. All the whispers would distract you from your duty.”

“No worries about that. Everyone will be gawking at her crown.” As Adrian shook his unruly hair, the ends tickled his ears and the back of his neck. “Who needs leaves getting tangled in this mess anyway?”

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"I assume you will be keeping this journey a secret from her," Edison said.

"At all costs. If Marcelle knew I was going in search of the portal, she would hound me from one end of Mesolantrum to the other."

"My lips are sealed, but would Drexel divulge it? He is a mysterious fellow."

"I'm not sure," Adrian said, letting a smile break through, "but I do know how to handle Marcelle."

Edison laughed. "Then you are the first. She is untamable."

Adrian jabbed with a pretend sword. "I just keep her infuriated at me. She's predictable when she's angry."

* * * * *

Now dressed in his soldier's uniform, Adrian sat at Governor Prescott's side on the nobility half of the amphitheater as they awaited the final event, the youth championship round. With his polished leather boots, dark gray trousers, sparkling sword and scabbard, and silky forest green shirt, Adrian felt akin to a traitor, a peasant in wolf's clothing guarding the head of the wolf pack. Not only that, Prescott's own son, Randall, stood at one side of the tourney ring ready to battle Jason, making Adrian a double traitor. A good brother would have been cheering with heart and soul from among the peasants, but the traitor would sit quietly amidst a sea of satin and feather caps.

Marcelle sat at Prescott's opposite side, still dressed in her tournament attire, complete with blood, sweat, and crown. She leaned forward, peered around the governor, and flashed Adrian a smile as she adjusted a trouser cuff. The material slid just high enough to expose her muscular calf.

Adrian averted his eyes. What did her gesture communicate? A woman dressed as a man had shamed him? It seemed that she had the same plan, to tame him by keeping him infuriated at her.

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Taking in a deep breath, Adrian began a slow count to ten. It wouldn't work. Her theatrics wouldn't raise the slightest hint of ire, at least not this time.

After a trumpeter blew a long, shrill note signaling the start of Jason's match, the governor nodded. In response, the crowd quieted and settled into their places. While the referee announced the rules, Adrian kept an eye on Drexel, the palace's head sentry, who sat on the lowest row, about three seats to the left. This middle-aged guard, more politician than protector, had been glancing toward the governor every few minutes, as if expecting something to happen. Since he was a secret member of the Underground Gateway and the man in charge of negotiating the gas trade with the dragon, Drexel was no true friend of the ruling class. He had to be watched carefully.

A courier, tall and lean, ran up the amphitheater's steps carrying a foot-long, metallic tube. After bowing, he presented the tube to the governor and hurried away. Prescott looked through one end of the tube, a frown growing with each passing second. Finally, he lowered it and pressed a button, erasing the message. Although his face flushed red, he said nothing.

A buzz from the crowd drew Adrian's attention back to the match. Randall charged Jason, and the two locked together, blade to blade. Adrian cringed. Brute force wouldn't help Jason win this battle. Randall was too big, too skilled. It would take cunning to overcome the physical disadvantage.

When Jason finally pushed Randall back, Randall swiped his sword across Jason's arm, ripping his sleeve. The crowd stood as one, the nobles cheering and the peasants moaning. Prescott, to his credit, stayed quiet, as did Marcelle.

Adrian focused on his brother's torn sleeve. So far, no sign of red appeared. Maybe Jason's mistake hadn't cost him the match, but his strategy would have to change drastically.

Jason looked up at the royal section. Their gazes met. Adrian laid a hand over his chest and mouthed, "Listen to your heart." He

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then pointed at the side of his head and formed, "But use your brain," with his lips, trying hard to make the words clear. As brothers sitting through long sermons at cathedral, they had mastered lip-reading as a way to pass the time, telling jokes and riddles while trying not to burst out laughing. Now they could finally put the skill to use in a more practical way.

Jason nodded and turned to face his opponent. After a few seconds, the referee raised a hand and shouted, "There is no blood! Let the match continue!"

As he and the crowd returned to their seats, Adrian let out a breath. How long had he been holding it? The tension had wrung out his sense of reality like an old rag.

Jason used his sword to scratch something in the dirt and motioned for Randall to look. The two conversed for a few seconds before Jason, taking advantage of Randall's momentary lack of vigilance, lunged and jabbed him in the thigh. Blood oozed from the wound and darkened his pant leg.

Again the crowd stood. Catcalls sounded from the nobles' section. "Foul!" and "Bad form!"

Adrian stayed seated, now unable to see the ring. Marcelle squeezed behind Prescott and stooped next to Adrian. "Your brother tricked him," she whispered.

He kept his focus on the people standing in front of him. "I saw that. It was within the rules. Randall was bigger and stronger, and Jason had to use cunning to overcome the advantage."

Marcelle laid her hand on Adrian's cheek and forced his head around. "Look at me. Do you think *I* would use trickery? Do you think *I* care about bigger and stronger?"

Adrian let his eyes drift from Marcelle's sinewy body to her fiery eyes. "I think you care very much. The bigger and stronger your opponent, the more your head swells when you win."

Her lips drew so tight they nearly disappeared. Her face reddened as if ready to explode, but Prescott's voice doused

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the fuse. "Come. Both of you must accompany me to crown the champion."

Adrian leaped up and followed Prescott, staying behind by his usual three paces as he negotiated the grassy stairs. Marcelle threw her leafy crown back on, now somewhat mangled, and stalked at the governor's side with her fists tight at the ends of her stiff arms.

As they descended, Adrian caught sight of Drexel again. Their stares met for a brief moment before Drexel turned and marched away. The glimpse raised a tingle across Adrian's skin. Something new prowled in that calculating mind, a scheme that went beyond the already complex negotiations with the dragons.

"Jason Masters!" Prescott called as they walked into the ring.

When Jason turned, Prescott held out a pristine crown of laurel. Marcelle scooted close to Adrian and whispered, "Take it back."

He replied in a lower whisper. "The statement about your swelled head?"

"Yes. Take it back, or else."

"Or else what?"

With a mischievous grin, Marcelle sang her reply. "You'll see."

Prescott extended the crown toward Jason. "Bow, please."

After Jason bowed and rose again with the crown on his head, he mouthed to Adrian, "What's wrong?"

Adrian replied with a silent, "I'll tell you later."

"And now," Prescott said as he laid one hand on Jason's shoulder and the other on Marcelle's, "let us honor the warrior champions in the adult and youth divisions!"

After the crowd finished cheering, Marcelle shook Jason's hand. "Congratulations, Jason." Her eyes darted between him and Adrian. "It was a pleasure to watch a son of Edison Masters do battle in the final round. I'm glad to see that you're courageous enough to face an opponent who might be able to defeat you." After flashing a triumphant smile at Adrian, Marcelle strutted out of the ring and into the mass of people.

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Adrian set a hand on Jason's back, barely keeping his fingers from clutching his shirt. "You'd better go home as soon as you can, Jason. I'm sure Mother and Father will want to congratulate you."

Jason leaned close and whispered, "Will you be home for a while, or are you going out on one of those dragon-hunting missions again?"

"Shhh!" Adrian nudged Jason with an elbow. "I'll meet you at home this evening. We have a lot to talk about."

"Okay, I'll see you then." As Jason walked away, Adrian took his place behind the governor, who was now conversing with an elderly noble. He searched the sea of heads for Marcelle. She stood near the exit path, talking to Drexel, her crown again in her tight fist and her sword at her hip. She seemed annoyed, maybe even scared.

She glanced at Adrian, a look so quick, Drexel probably didn't notice. Then, she grasped a handful of her shirt, clutching the dragon's head in a tight squeeze.

Adrian gripped his sword's hilt. Had she relayed another silent message? Had Drexel told her about the mission? Was she saying that she wanted to go with him to find the portal to the dragon world? Or was she signaling a warning? Of course she could protect herself against the likes of that skinny hack, but something had certainly spiked her emotions. What could it be?

He let out a silent sigh. No use worrying about it. She probably wouldn't appreciate his intervention, and he couldn't leave Prescott anyway, at least not for a phantom suspicion.

As if straining against a rusted hinge, he slowly turned his head away. Keeping his mind on plans for finding the portal remained paramount. The lives of countless slaves hung in the balance, and every moment delayed meant another moment suffered under the dragons' cruelty. Tonight would begin their emancipation.

* * * * *

"Would Adrian trust a dragon over his friends?" Drexel smiled, lifting his tidy mustache toward his pointed nose. "Marcelle, it seems that the ladder leading to his good sense is missing a few rungs."

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Marcelle glanced at Adrian, still standing dutifully with Prescott in the tourney ring as the audience dispersed and filtered out of the amphitheater. No doubt Adrian *would* trust a dragon over most humans. With “friends” like Drexel, it was no wonder.

She squared her shoulders and stealthily looked Drexel over. Dressed in his sentry uniform, complete with battle sword, gleaming chain mail, and polished leather boots, he displayed a stately presence. Even the gray-speckled hair flowing from underneath his black felt hat and down the nape of his neck was pristine and tangle-free, and his handlebar mustache had been recently trimmed and waxed. To casual observers, he likely took on a persona of royal integrity. Yet, she knew better. This keeper of Governor Prescott’s iron-clad doors guarded his darker side better than most.

“If this dragon is more than a myth,” Marcelle said, lowering her voice as she crumpled the leaves in her crown, “then trusting it would be a mistake.” She grabbed a fistful of her tunic and crushed the dragon’s head. “If I were allowed to secretly trail Adrian, I could be his skeptical shadow and jump in to help him if the dragon proves untrustworthy.”

“No doubt you could, but His Excellency has a new assignment for you that—”

“A new assignment!” She lifted a pointing finger close to his nose. “You promised if there was another attempt to find the portal—”

“Promised?” He pushed her hand to the side. “I made no promises. I merely said that I would try to persuade the powers that be.”

She lowered her voice to a seething whisper. “If you wanted me to go with Adrian, you could find a way. Everyone knows about your bargaining skills.”

“Then kindly control your passions long enough for me to explain. Perhaps you will get your wish.”

She took in a deep breath, then, as she let it out, she answered with a growl. “Very well, but don’t test my patience.”

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“That is the last thing I want to do.” Drexel glanced both ways before continuing. “In anticipation of Adrian’s resignation as bodyguard, I told Governor Prescott that I required Adrian’s services, hoping to smooth the path. When Prescott agreed, I thought my plans were proceeding quite well, but then he presented an unexpected obstacle.”

“And that was?”

Drexel pointed at her. “He wants you to be his new bodyguard.”

“Me?” She shook her head hard. “Certainly not! I refuse to be a ... a toy soldier! If he needs his posterior protected, let him wear chain mail trousers!”

“I think you lack understanding. This was not a request. It was a command. He seemed quite eager to procure you, in his words, mind you, as a lovely escort.”

“That’s my point. I didn’t train as a warrior just to dress up for a parade. And besides, have you ever noticed how he looks at me? As a bodyguard, won’t I have to be alone with him at times?”

“I have noticed his leering eyes, and that could be your way out of the assignment.” A weaselly smile turned his lips. “He has quite a weakness for, shall we say, provocative persuasion?”

Marcelle whipped out her sword and set the point under Drexel’s chin. “I should cut out your tongue and make you choke on your own blood.” Her heart pounding, she pressed the blade, pricking his skin. “And I swear on my mother’s grave that those who mourn your passing will join you in hell.”

A gasp sounded from a group of four peasants, stragglers who had not yet left the tournament grounds. They spun and hurried to the exit path. Marcelle let her gaze sweep across the rest of the amphitheater. Only a few people milled about, and no one looked their way.

Drexel swallowed, his eyes focused on the blade as his voice pitched up a notch. “I assure you, Marcelle, that my comment was not intended to insult your person. In fact, I was complimenting

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your physique. A skillful woman knows how to use her ..."—he swallowed again—"her attributes to her advantage without sacrificing her virtue."

Scowling as she glared at his terrified eyes, she muttered, "What do you know about virtue?" With a quick swing, she thrust the sword back to its scabbard. "Or women?"

Drexel breathed a sigh. As he dabbed a trickle of blood near his chin, he reached into his tunic's inner pocket and withdrew a folded parchment, brown and wrinkled. "At the risk of raising your ire once again, allow me to explain. Our esteemed governor has been visiting the lower level of the dungeon from time to time, always insisting on going alone. I suspect that he has a secret way to access the main gas line from there. Why? I believe he is meeting someone from the gas company, but the details are not important. What is important is that you discover his access method."

When Drexel paused, Marcelle prodded for more, stretching out her words. "Okay. I'm still listening."

"I'm glad your confidence in my skills has returned. You see, during the tournament, I sent a message tube to the governor that should lure him back to the dungeon. You will follow him and see what he does. As his new bodyguard, you will have an excuse if you are caught. You were doing your duty and had no idea that he wanted to be alone."

"Then after I find his secret," Marcelle said, "I can get caught intentionally so I can talk him out of assigning me as his bodyguard."

"Allow him to hide his tracks first, or you might be terminated in a more permanent fashion." He extended the parchment toward her. "Take this and learn its contents. It describes how we are attempting to rescue the captured slaves by trading extane for passage to the dragon world. If you succeed in bargaining with Prescott, you will have to figure out a way to stay behind and access the gas lines. What you must do is described at the end of the note."

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She extended her hand. As her fingers closed on the paper, she hesitated, searching Drexel's eyes for deception. This was a dream assignment, exciting and adventurous, unless he was leading her into a trap.

She pinched the note and pulled it away, keeping her stare in place. "Anything else?"

"Just a warning." Drexel looked both ways before continuing, his voice lowering to a growl. "You have a sharp blade and a sharp tongue, little lady, but take care to restrain both and heed what you find in those words. I doubt that either your sword, or your tongue, or even your virtue will keep you and Adrian alive if you fail to deliver what the dragon wants."

Marcelle glanced at the parchment but said nothing. Talking too much could ruin the opportunity. No matter what Drexel was hiding, turning down this chance to join Adrian would be stupid.

"Memorize the note and then destroy it. If Prescott finds it in your possession, your life will be forfeit, and if any of his loyalists finds out what you are doing, your mission will be short-lived."

Barely suppressing a nervous swallow of her own, Marcelle gave him a quick nod, spun toward the exit, and marched away. She couldn't let him notice her fear. So far, every battle had been fought within the confines of a tourney ring or a training class. If faced with a dragon opponent, surely she could muster the nerve to drive a blade through its heart, but what about a fellow human? What about another soldier who was just doing his duty by obeying orders handed down from his officers? If he interfered with their mission to go through the portal, could she shed his blood?

As she slowed her pace along the path toward the governor's palace, she shook her head, casting away the troubled thoughts. No matter what obstacles she faced, she would have to rely on her training and respond in a way that would complete this mission—rescue the slaves at all costs. Nothing else mattered.

