

SEVENTH INTERLOGUE: FOUL FORTUNES



“Can he ... handle those things?” Jason asked, trying to catch his breath as Aria finally slowed up to a walk. He immediately regretted the question.

Shoulders heaving as she worked to steady her breathing, Aria shook her head. “I don’t know. But Grandfather was right. We had to get out of there. You would’ve been torn to shreds before we could stop them.”

“Woah, woah,” he said, holding up his hands and stopping. “Okay, so I know Cinaed is some kind of mystic warrior who completely manhandled that doppelgänger ... thing. But I’m not exactly helpless. I’ve won my share of scraps.”

Aria rolled her eyes. “Impressive, I’m sure. But these aren’t the kinds of creatures that you ‘scrap’ with. You heard Anargen’s story tonight. How many war-trained Ords fell like fawns to werebeasts at Ordumair?”

Jason shuddered. The night was growing cooler, all the more as the story of the wolf-like monsters rending steel and bringing a fortress filled with warriors to its knees returned to him.

“Dread fangs in the night,
Fear at its height,”

he recalled under his breath.

“You do remember,” she said. “I don’t want you to face that sort of evil.”

Pretending to adjust his cap, he redirected. “Where do we go now?” He tried to look casual as he peered down the street one way and then another. Pale-lit dark stones raced in either direction, with neither appearing inviting.

“When I was young, Grandfather told me if we were ever separated to look for him by the Wernstrum Fountain in Elkland Square ...” Aria trailed off as she seemed to remember something. She laid her bundle of cloth on the ground and began to unroll it. There was an ornate belt with some kind of long holster. Immediately she began wrapping the belt around her waist and buckling it.

“This is a bit out in the open, isn’t it? I mean, what if those evil things come for us again?”

“Aha!” She had unwound a bit further and reached the bundle’s center. “We will be ready the next time those things come for us.”

Pulling aside the last fold of fabric, she revealed a thin rapier-like sword with engravings along the blade. Aria grabbed the hilt, and the moment she did, fire caught from the cross-guard to the tip.

She waved it in the air triumphantly, its flames doubling the light in the street. Jason almost tripped trying to backpedal away. A name for such a blade struck him: *Machaira tou Pneuma*, the Spiritword.

“You’re one, too!” he accused, watching with wide eyes as the fire coursed along the gleaming silver Spiritword. The

implement of the Knights of Light, endowed with the fire of the High King of All Realms.

“Of course,” she said with a smirk. “Did you think you were the only one my grandfather’s stories resonate with?” She put a hand on her hip and let the burning blade rest on her shoulder. As if unaware the flames licked and crackled off it, she casually added, “Or did you think it was only for men?”

For a few seconds, Jason couldn’t speak. He had to work some moisture to his mouth before stammering out, “I thought Cinaed was the only one.”

Her brows furrowed a degree. “Oh. He told you his name?”

Jason looked at her for a moment, trying to figure out what to say. He settled on honesty. Aria seemed to draw it from him like a poultice infection. “Not quite. That thing that had us arrested called him that.”

She nodded and then cocked her head to the side. “May I ask you something?”

“I suppose you just did,” he cracked dryly. “But go ahead.”

“Did you see the flames before or after the creature revealed itself?”

An odd question. “Uh, it all happened so fast. Before I think?”

“I see.”

There was a beat of silence between them. Jason got the impression she was studying him, searching for something. He tried to focus on the Spiritword, which had engravings he could read. It was written in Middle Ecthel, so it read a bit funny, but a few words stuck out to him: “The High King is a shield for all those who take refuge in him.”

Suddenly other words seemed to flare to life for him, and he drew in a sharp breath and looked away. “So, we just go to the fountain?”

“Not quite directly, but, yes,” she answered. Reverently,

she put the Spiritsword into the holster, which Jason now understood to be a scabbard, and then strapped it onto the belt at her waist. Retrieving the cloth, she folded it and began walking past him.

Jason chuckled mirthlessly. How had he gotten into this insanity?

Aria stopped. "What's so funny?"

"You and your grandpa have the same tendency to sow answers that reap more questions."

A slight smirk turned up one corner of her mouth. "You just have to know the right questions to get the right answers."

"Ugh, that sounds eerily familiar. You've got his maxims down."

"Not all of them. Enough to keep you on your toes, I'd wager."

Jason's heart picked up its pace. There was something in her eyes that reminded him of earlier in the night when she had him spellbound. "Well, while we're waiting at the fountain, perhaps you can regale me with some of your wit and wisdom."

She nudged him playfully with her shoulder and kept walking. The trip was in mutual silence the rest of the way to the enormous Elkland Square. The wide plaza was a key point in the sprawling city of Brackenburgh. Looming over the square were buildings over a hundred feet high, each a facet of the ethos of Brackenburgh. Shops of every sort imaginable, a newly developed park, and the imposing building for the Ministry of Justice. Standing amidst the enclosure of buttresses and soaring columns and arcades was the spectacular Wernstrum Fountain. Once it had been known as Perandis, but after the Rehalcyon Empire claimed the region, the original was torn down and replaced by Rehalcyon's triumphant dragon, which shook off its shackles and soared proudly after being laid low by its foe, the bear. Jason was among the many who had no idea what that

mythic symbolism was supposed to mean. He found the whole thing ridiculous and ostentatious.

As they reached the plaza, Jason realized it would not be as ideal for meeting as in the day. Most of the lights on the square weren't lit. In fact, from the equipment and cables lying about, it was clear the city was in the process of transitioning the gas lamps to the new electrical lanterns Jason had seen elsewhere in his travels. There were perhaps a third of the originals still in place and trimmed for the night, but they only gave enough light to navigate to the huge fountain with its noisy, frothy splashing.

They stopped about two dozen yards from the fountain toward the south-central section of the plaza. Everything looked so different. No stars aided them. Without the extra light, the stuccoed façades of the buildings were steeped in shadows, and their entrances, particularly to the Ministry of Justice, looked like the yawning jaws of a beast ready to devour its prey. Jason put his hands in his pants pockets and tried not to shiver.

His last trip to the square had been much more inviting. Whatever Rehalcyon attached to this place in terms of meaning, it was the locus of romance to the youth of the city. Couples often came on moonlit nights to stand by the fountain and pledge their love to one another. He was fourteen when he came to do the same with sixteen-year-old Melania. His sole brush with love in the entirety of his life. What a disaster when his family found out.

He glanced at Aria. Perhaps, of all the differences in this evening and the last, she was the most pleasing. It was probably crazy to even consider that amid all this upheaval and crazier still for how briefly they'd known each other. As the minutes dragged on to close to an hour, it felt easier and easier to focus on something not wholly otherworldly.

“What are you thinking?” Aria asked, her voice a velveteen purr. Did she understand the significance of this place? Even in the midst of whatever turmoil consumed her own life?

Low light notwithstanding, she was stunning. Hair down, unabashedly herself. Her wit, her verve, and, if he was honest, every supple curve and contour of her body appealed to him. No, stronger than that; it beckoned him, like the dawn sun bidding a morning glory to spread its petals and bask in its radiance. He should kiss her now. Before the world tilted off its axis again and he lost his moment.

But he couldn't. Reality was too potent—or perhaps he should say it was the ethereality. Some part of him remembered that even if he knew her in all the ways that mattered, there was one mystery left: Cinaed. Whoever he was, whatever he was, would define Aria to some degree. And would redefine his entire world. If Cinaed the storyteller was the Sir Cinaed from the tales Jason heard at the inn, he was over 300 years old. What would that make him?

He could tell from the subtle shift from come-hither coyness to concern in her expression he was deliberating too long.

“How old are you?” he blurted and immediately cursed himself as an imbecile.

Her surprise was like the sun briefly breaking through a cloud cover, only to be buried still deeper. “You know it's generally not polite to ask a woman that?”

Flustered, he shrugged. “True. But it wouldn't be fair of a worldly guy like me to take advantage of you if you happen to be, um, young.”

Aria pulled back a step and patted him gently on the chest. “I can take care of myself.”

She turned to walk away, and he managed to grab her hand. “Wait!”

To his surprise, she did.

“I’m sorry. This is new to me.”

“What is?” she asked, her voice almost a whisper.

“All of it,” he answered quickly on another rush of frankness.

She nodded and then started to pull free. Before Aria could, he added, “But especially you. You know, at first, I stuck around the inn to be near you. I’ve never met anyone like you. Brave. Beautiful. Smart ...”

There was a small smile forming on Aria’s lips. Delicate as the brush of a springtime breeze, she put her hand on his cheek. Coming closer, she leaned up as if to kiss him.

She didn’t, but it shorted out his ability to speak all the same. Which only seemed to please Aria further. With a tug, she pulled his cap down over his eyes. “Come on, worldly man. We need to keep an eye out for my grandfather.”

Jason fixed his cap, annoyed for a second. Only a second, because he realized she was still holding his hand. “Absolutely.”

“Touching,” a raspy voice commented from somewhere nearby. It wasn’t one Jason recognized and sent chills throughout his body. He spun, trying to face the speaker.

There was no one there, only shadow-swathed stone, barely flickering in the lamplight. At his back, Aria stirred, trying to move out from behind him. He had stepped around to protect her instinctively. He held her hand tight and called out, “Who’s there?”

“A more appropriate question,” the speaker replied but from a different side of the street and closer, “Is what is here. Do you want me to tell him, little phosphila, or shall I?”

Jason blinked, “Phos-what?”

“It is the ancient tongue,” Aria murmured. Raising her

voice as she moved beside Jason, she added, “It means lover of light. Which, I presume, means you do not.”

“Light serves a purpose. We have no personal quarrel. But your sort is a problem for my employer.” The street shadows a few feet away writhed and bulged, stretching in odd shapes and thickening. They pooled and coursed until, instead of the impression of dark, there was a figure formed from it. A man. Tall and slender, he wore a hooded cloak, and his mouth was covered in cloth. All of it black as the shadows. His eyes were grey and pupilless, and his skin was only slightly lighter. The icy sensation inching along Jason’s skin intensified.

“It has been many decades since I faced a Knight of Light. Pity your grandfather isn’t here. It would be worth boasting to best you both.” His voice was heavy with the accent of one from Knorland.

Through all of this, Aria had stood very still. Now she stepped forward to stand between Jason and the shadow-thing. “What do you want, Sombra?”

The shadow-man cocked his head as if confused. “To do my duty, phosphila. If you know my kind, then you know I cannot leave till the blood be spilt that paid my wages. I will be quick.”

From within his cloak, he drew—or possibly formed—a short, black throwing knife.

“As will I,” Aria muttered, her hand drifting to her side.

Like a sudden bolt of lightning, the Sombra flicked his wrist, and the dart cut through the air, a black streak, straight at Jason.

He froze and clenched every muscle in anticipation of the piercing pain.

CHINK.

Black shards of the knife dropped onto the plaza. But Jason’s eyes didn’t linger on their dissolving forms long. Before

him flashed the fire of Aria's Spiritsword, its warmth and soft crackle the most welcome thing in the world.

He wanted to smirk at the shadow-man, but he was gone. Jason looked around and cleared his throat. "Where did—"

Aria grabbed him with her free hand and shoved him out of the way of two more darts slicing through the air to their left. Each met its fiery end. Again, it was dead calm in the square.

Aria whirled around to the opposite side of him as she blocked another knife midair. From a few feet further out, two more blades zipped towards them. This time he caught sight of the creature as it rolled to the side, launched one more knife, then dove into the shadows like a man might the water and disappeared.

Jason didn't dare speak, hardly dared breath. His eyes roved frantically over the dark square and its familiar shapes. All seemed menacing even in their familiarity.

How do you fight a ghost?

That was what this thing, this Sombra was, wasn't it? Nothing else made sense. Even if it was a ghost, it was still ridiculous. He didn't want ghosts to be real. He didn't want any of this to be real.

Aria walked away from him, stepping cautiously toward a deep pool of shadows near a candy shop adjoining the plaza.

A chill crept down Jason's spine. His gaze fixed on a dark swell around the central fountain's eagle in front of him. He swallowed with difficulty. He tried to whisper a warning as the bulge slowly formed into the man hanging off the fountain.

Without a splash, the man dropped into the waters of the fountain and drew a knife. He launched it quick as a viper's strike.

Before the cry for help passed his lips, Aria flung herself in front of him and narrowly blocked the blade. She crashed hard to the stone at his feet and let out a shriek of pain.

The Sombra didn't hesitate. He bounced out of the fountain in an ebony vapor storm. When he reformed steps away, he wielded a strange weapon with whip-like blades. Each little cutting-edge slicing through the space between them faster than Jason could process.

Aria, too, was a blur. Back up on her feet and intercepting the attack, her fiery Spiritsword cut through two of what looked like nine cutting strands. They, like the knives, dropped to the ground and sizzled away.

The Sombra leaped to the side, a dark streak that, at the end, partially formed back into a man. A second weapon formed into his palm from the nebulous void of his cloak, and he whirled about. Spinning. Striking. Spinning. Striking. Every attack swift and precise and beyond Jason's ability to predict. Somehow the Sombra broke its momentum and jumped back several feet away in an instant only to reappear near its initial point of attack once more.

Jason dove out of the way as a single strike made it past Aria's guard and almost sliced across his neck. By the time he rolled and bumped along the ground back to his feet, she had skewered the last of the blades from the shadowy weapons.

The creature tossed them aside and swore. For a moment, he seemed to hesitate. Torn. His misty form seemed to waver. His voice was raspier, strained. "It seems you are more formidable than you appear, little phosphila."

Holding the Spiritsword so that it pointed squarely at the creature, the flames seemed to swell. "There is nothing about me that is formidable. The High King makes the weak strong and lifts up the lowly."

Eyes narrowed, whether annoyed at her humility or squinting from the growing brightness, Jason couldn't be sure. "We shall see."

The creature surged forward, arms wrapped to either side

of his body. Only a half dozen strides away, he pulled them out and flung six knives at once. The obsidian missiles sailed straight at Jason too fast and spread out to avoid.

Fire flashed out from Aria's sword, and Jason had to cover his eyes. When he opened them, all the knives lay destroyed, and Aria wheeled around. With an upward swing, she slashed across the Sombra's back.

He crashed to the ground with a wretched cry, cloak burning. He rolled on the pavement screeching horrible obscenities and vile curses at them both. The dark pall on the plaza began to recede.

Aria bent down next to Jason. "Are you okay?"

His mouth lolling open, he just stared at the creature, fire now out, but smoke twisting up from him as he writhed on the ground. Jason had seen men burned before and how horribly it hurt. This seemed worse.

"Jason?" Aria repeated, concern in her voice.

He looked into her deep green eyes and nodded. "I'm fine. You, uh, you were right. I won't be picking any fights with you."

She breathed out a sigh of relief and chuckled. Mussing his hair with her free hand, she stood and walked over to the Sombra. Jason was happy to stay where he was. He fixed his newsboy cap back in place but did get to his feet.

"I ... hate ... you," the creature moaned.

"Who hired you to kill my grandfather and me? Who replaced the councilman with a doppelgänger?"

"Die ..." The Sombra mumbled something more, but it was too low to understand and perhaps in Knors.

Holding her burning blade closer to the creature, it lurched and squirmed away from the brilliance exuded. "You don't have to be a slave of the dark," she said. "You can be free."

A hoarse laugh came from the monster. "You may be free, but your boyfriend here is a dead man."

She flicked a glance back at Jason. “What do you mean?”

The laughter rose in volume, and the Sombra edged away enough to prop himself up. “I wasn’t sent to kill you or your grandfather. My employer wants him dead.” He pointed to Jason with a wavering hand.

Again, Aria looked at Jason, and this time her eyes shone with fear, lips tight with worry.

“And there will be others,” the creature said before rolling back and exploding into the shadows all around.

For several seconds Aria stood tensed, looking all around the square. Jason’s eyes never left her. At length, her probing of the inscrutable dark ended, and she drifted to his side. “We can’t wait for grandfather. We need to get out of town right now.”

He nodded, “I’m inclined to agree. Where to?”

Gesturing around them, she replied, “Best not to announce it. Do you trust me to keep you safe?” She held out her hand to him. Earlier in the night, he’d have happily accepted with much different motivations.

After a moment, he did take it, still marveling at how a hand so soft could be so skilled with a sword. “I trust you. Lead the way.”