

Fuel to the fire

# Ruler's Desire

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## C H A P T E R

# 1

Basalt tumbled like a leaf. Davran screamed, but heard no sound. Lightning lashed around the dragon's flesh. This was a place of contradiction, where everything and yet nothing existed. The void, that chaotic chasm of the boundary, was a place where seconds became millennia and millennia became seconds. Distance was immaterial; time was of no consequence.

In a sudden painful rush, all at once as alien as breathing dirt, a tremendous noise roared through their ears. Amongst it came Ronyn's shouts of hold on, Davran's shrieks of fright, Khalil's expletive cries, and a rumbling tumult: a sound of boulders smashing, of sea crashing, of thunder rumbling, of travelling through an increasingly thickening atmosphere at too fast a velocity.

"We need to slow down," shouted Khalil, noticing the smouldering edge of Basalt's wings. The cocoon of protection that had shrouded them from harm in the void no longer seemed to be protecting the dragon.

The blood-black sky wrapped around the chaos, smothering it, as Ronyn pulled back the angle of Basalt's descent. Illuminated fog and sheet lightning melted into blinding blackness. Their eyes unaccustomed to the vision of reality struggled to focus. A fork of lightning shot toward them from the chaos, like a grasping claw of energy trying to prevent their escape. It lit up the ground below as they flew out of reach. Harsh shadows showed craggy mountain peaks and amongst it, small in the distance, yet still dominant, stood a tower of black that resembled a clenched fist.

Saurian's tower.

Davran shrank into Ronyn hoping for comfort but felt only the tension in his muscles. At that very moment she would almost have welcomed a return to the boundary.

Basalt came to land on a wide ledge and looked around as if expecting a reward to be waiting there. Ronyn slipped a leg over her neck and slid to the floor.

“No nectar here my friend.”

Ronyn stroked the vulnerable flesh of her throat. Davran slid her dagger over the rope binding and allowed the bags to fall to the ground. Raising Khalil to her shoulder, she slid down Basalt’s flank to land beside Ronyn. Basalt turned slightly as she landed and held her gaze for a moment. Ronyn braced himself ready to counter an attack. Basalt did not attempt to attack. Instead she raised her head, looked around, and then slumped to the ground. It seemed the dragon was no happier to return than Davran was.

“This ledge looks just like the one we set off from,” Ronyn observed.

“It’s the exact same ledge,” Khalil confirmed. “One in the gaps of the other.”

The ledge narrowed to a rough weather-worn path. In the world they had left behind it would have descended into a forest of trees. Ronyn helped Davran carry the bags to the top of the descent and placed them on the ground. She would not manage to carry them all, and would have to return with her father for the rest.

“That’s where I live,” she said, pointing toward a sprawling black growth in the shadow of the palace. It came to her then why the area of Southern Scar had given her such an eerie feeling. Masked by the greenery of all those trees and rolling grassland was the landscape she had looked upon all of her life. As Khalil had said, these were the exact same mountains, the exact same, but absent of woodland, the exact same, but absent of a raging river and the glistening lake where, in this world stood Saurian’s palace.

“I don’t know why,” Ronyn said, with a hint of confusion, “but I expected a village, a small town at most, not a large city.”

Davran glared at the towering fist, her eyes glazing with moisture. She slipped her hand into Ronyn's and looked into his eyes. He squeezed, took his hand away and turned.

"Ronyn?" Davran took one step, but then halted as he walked silently away from her, heading back towards Basalt.

Davran watched him, her trembling arms stiff by her side as the distance between them increased. He didn't even pause to glance back. She wanted to call to him, to shout at him, demand to know his reason for not even saying goodbye. She wanted to run up to him, embrace him and beg him to stay. She didn't. She couldn't. He had to leave her and forget about her, she knew that. But she wanted him to at least care. Just that. Just knowing that out there, in some distant unreachable place, there was somebody who cared about her; that would have been enough to sustain her.

Ronyn stood before Basalt and patted her flank. He looked to his right, at the horizon. Davran thought he was at last going to turn and wave goodbye. That would be something, some small measure of affection onto which she could hold. He turned back to Basalt, his body tense in readiness to leap aboard. Davran resisted the urge to shout and ask him to stay. Such a request would be unfair, selfish. She wanted him to be safe. She wanted him to be happy.

"Wah-tilp," Ronyn shouted, stepping back. "Sh-hillah."

Basalt stretched her wings and took to the air. She circled twice and then hovered as if she were going to land. "Sh-hillah," Ronyn shouted, more forcefully this time, flinging his arms out for emphasis, throwing the harness beyond the ledge. Basalt beat the air and rose to the command. Banking into a sweeping arc, she soared into the distance, heading for the southern mountains. Ronyn stood and watched until the dragon was a black speck in a boiling blood-black sky and then turned to face Davran, a hint of uncertainty in his straight lipped smile.

"I thought I might stay."

"Are you crazy?" Davran shouted. "Call her back. I don't want you here."

Ronyn strode across to her, a broad smile on his face. He gripped her shoulders and pulled her into an embrace. “I know, Davran. I love you too.”

There was no other choice now; Basalt was gone. So laden with bags they set out for Davran’s home. Sticking to shadows proved a difficult exercise, for Ronyn was used to walking tall, not skulking in cracks like a bug. Khalil agreed to suffer the indignity of being a passenger in Davran’s backpack in order for them to make better progress. He must have feared for his life, though, as it continually crashed into overhanging rock.

“Skulking like this is ridiculous. We must have at least twenty miles of ground to cover. It’ll take till daybreak at this rate.”

“Just so you know, there is no daybreak.” Davran’s tone came quiet but menacing. Here she was a different person. Here she couldn’t relax. “And if you knew what we’re heading for you wouldn’t be so eager to get there. We always stick to the shadows – remember that. And keep your voice down.”

Ronyn shook his head and looked at her in puzzlement. “There’s nobody here,” he whispered.

“Still too loud,” said Davran, her eyes searching every hiding place in the near vicinity. “You never know. *You* wouldn’t see them if there was. You’ve got to understand Ronyn. Here your life is in danger every minute of every day. Nobody truly trusts anyone else. Even those you’ve known all your life are held in suspicion. People kill if they’re uncertain and save any questions for after. Then there are the razor hounds, and who knows what else. I’ve rarely been out here, and never this far.”

The rocks to her right clattered. Davran shot a gaze on the spot and stared.

After what seemed an eternity, Ronyn nudged her shoulder. “Come on, it’s nothing. A small creature, maybe.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I’ll decide when it’s safe to move on, alright?”

\* \* \*

Sufficiently admonished, Ronyn smiled with acceptance. There was little need for more words and as Davran continued the painful progress, Ronyn followed in silence. Howls and yelps penetrated the darkness. Ronyn perceived movement everywhere. His mind raced with doubt and concern as a melancholy mix churned his gut.

He'd had half a mind to defy Hesperus and fly Basalt to some far corner of his own world. What if the boundary tumbled after all? What if they died in this place and it all turned out to be for nothing? Why did Hesperus have such faith in the prophecy? And would his remaining here do as much harm as it supposedly would have if Davran had remained in his world. No, he decided, in this he was unimportant. Davran was the key. The prophecy said she had to return to her world. Faith without proof, he pondered, wondering if Hesperus had told them all he knew.

A distant moan lifted into the chill air; a chorus of voices in a uniform cry of misery.

"The suicides," said Davran without turning, a tremor in her voice.

Ronyn recalled the account Davran had given when she had discouraged him from destroying the harness. In coming here in his father's place, in accepting the task willingly, he wondered, if he were to die, had he unwittingly committed suicide. No, he determined, he had no intention of dying. He had told no lie. He did intend to return home, and what's more, with Khalil's help he intended to find a way for Davran to return as well. This definition of suicide had to be wrong. Even so, doubt snagged his spiralling thoughts.

The suicides groans grew louder still; the razor hounds' howling became more frequent.

"I think they can smell us," said Davran, looking over her shoulder, before looking forward into the massive canyon. In Ronyn's world it conveyed a swollen river. It plunged into ever

increasing darkness between two mountains. She suspected the canyon led to the place where the unfortunates gathered. “We need to hurry, but I don’t want to go down there.”

They decided to veer to the right, and skirt the canyon’s upper edge. It was a longer route, climbing up and down, but it avoided the unfortunates. The razor hounds were a different matter. Every time they howled they seemed closer. Davran flinched every time the ominous cry filled her ears, clenching her fist and feeling the tug of an imaginary chain. The ground under foot had changed somewhat, the craggy rocks now giving way to gentle smooth undulations. There was an acrid smell in the air and as they crested one of the mounds she realised what it was.

A faint shimmer skimmed the bubbling surface of the expansive tar pits. She had been here before, but from the opposite side, collecting pots of tar with her father. The razor hounds howled behind them, and as if in reply a huge flame erupted from escaping gas.

“We can’t cross that,” said Ronyn, as a flame erupted and screamed across the surface. “And those creatures sound like they’re getting closer.”

Davran looked back at the canyon then turned to the tar pits. Small pathways cut through the bubbling mass, occasional rocks rose from the surface. To knowingly walk towards approaching razor hounds was perhaps suicidal, but to attempt to cross the tar pits was definitely so. Reluctantly she nodded.

They would have to risk the unfortunates’ gorge, as daunting a prospect as it was, it seemed the least dangerous.



## C H A P T E R

# 2

Davran shuddered at the unfortunates' constant wailing as they neared the gorge. To the right came the howling shrieks of razor hounds, sounding louder and ever closer. Even if they made the gorge in time the hounds would surely follow. Davran and Ronyn were now running, all thoughts of slowly skulking amongst shadows left behind.

An unexpected noise almost made Davran halt. It was a sound she had heard only once in her life: the death cry of a razor hound. Another howled its death cry, then another. Davran guessed they were attacking each other. She lost count, thinking perhaps twenty had so far been killed. Then no sound came, other than the constant drone of the unfortunates.

They turned into the gorge, slowing their pace, and approached the noise of the wailing dead. It was almost the exact opposite of the void. Within the void was all vision and no sound; here it was all sound and almost no vision.

Ronyn stepped in front of Davran, taking the lead as she slowed her pace. "These are supposed to be the spirits of the dead aren't they?" He asked, glancing over his shoulder.

"Yes."

Ronyn stopped walking and turned, holding her by the shoulders he looked into her eyes. At such close proximity she could see well enough to read his expression, and it read as defiance.

"I've been thinking about this suicide thing. What you said about knowingly putting yourself in a situation which will bring your own death being suicide. I don't believe it."

“I do.” Davran glanced behind, expecting that at any moment a razor-hound would leap from the blackness.

“I don’t mean it doesn’t happen. I mean... I think it might depend on how you interpret it. We’re walking into this valley because we’ve got little choice. We’re not choosing to die. We’re choosing the best possible chance to live. Surely, to die while trying your best to stay alive can’t be suicide.”

“Whether it is or it isn’t, like you said, we’ve got little choice. Now come on, let’s get moving.”

“Hold on,” Ronyn said, holding Davran in place. “How do we know this is the best chance we have? I mean, what if these unfortunates are worse than the razor-hounds? They’ve stopped howling. Maybe they’ve fought so ferociously that they’re all dead.”

As if reminding them of the prior threat, there came a solitary howl: the victor perhaps, just one solitary creature which had survived the battle, and therefore the biggest and strongest of them all.

“I say we face the unfortunates,” Khalil shouted from Davran’s backpack. “What harm can spirits do us? If they’ve left their bodies they should be without substance.”

“Makes sense,” Ronyn agreed. “Come on.”

Ronyn set a pace through the gorge that was as quick as his eyes allowed. The path was smooth and descended steeply. As they progressed the wailing seemed to close in around them. The deeper it got the harder it became to see. Still Ronyn kept the quick pace. Carrying her share of the bags Davran struggled to keep up. She could only just make out Ronyn’s outline. Then, sensing rather than seeing movement, she became aware of dark shapes closing in. She heard Ronyn yell. Dropping her bags, she took her dagger in hand and ran towards him. Crying out in agony, clutching his right shoulder with his left hand Ronyn fell to his knees. He lashed out with his knife but his arm passed straight through the dark form gripping his shoulder. More were

closing in: ten of them for every step Davran took. She could think of nothing that might help. It was obvious that Ronyn's blade was having little effect; hers would be no different. Why would it, she realised, they're already dead.

Ronyn was on the ground, crying pitifully, his face pressed against the rocky surface. Although the dark forms surrounded Ronyn, Davran could see through them, as if they were nothing but blackened mist. They were not attacking as such, just laying their hands upon him. Nonetheless, whatever they were doing it was causing Ronyn pain.

"Get off him," she screamed. "Leave him alone."

One by one the unfortunates lifted their heads and turned to face her. Ronyn's crying ceased. Maybe he was already dead, maybe now an unfortunate himself. She suddenly saw them as if real, not as forms of mist but solid, solid people garishly sporting the evidence of their deaths. She knew they weren't solid; how could they be. They just looked it. And it was dark, too dark to see, so she must have been imagining it. No not imagining, seeing by some sense other than her eyes. Something strange was happening here, with eyes closed the image remained. It was as if she were sensing them, seeing them with her mind. As far as her vision stretched, or would have if she were actually using it, down into the depths of the gorge, there were more unfortunates, thousands of them, all standing, all facing her, all silent.

Ronyn struggled to his feet. The way he walked towards her it was obvious he was suffering. He was limping and holding his ribs. She could see the unfortunates so clearly, and yet Ronyn was barely visible. It confirmed he was not one of them. He was alive. His breathing was laboured, but he was still breathing.

Ronyn looked around and squirmed as if shrugging a jacket from his shoulders. "What happened?" he asked, as he walked past Davran to collect the discarded bags. "I was in agony, and then it just stopped."

"I don't know. I told them to stop and they did."

“Told who?”

“Them, the unfortunates.”

“Where?”

“All around us. Can’t you see them?”

“I can hardly see a thing. It’s too dark.”

Davran took her bags from Ronyn, and almost dropped them in fright as the solitary razor-hound howled. It sounded close. “Come on,” she said, “I think we’re going to be alright.”

The unfortunates separated for them as they walked forward, closing back in as they passed. The unfortunates behind went to their knees and made gestures of pleading. Davran tried her utmost to hide her disgust, finding the sight of the unfortunates’ wounds sickening. The wounds from which they had died were quite visible to her, somehow illuminated, despite the near-blackness. Maybe she was imagining it. She couldn’t be certain, not really.

The razor-hound howled. It was close. She knew how ferocious these creatures were. She had seen them in battle, seen how easily they could rip a man apart. As it howled again, she and Ronyn whipped their heads around to face it. She could see unfortunates trailing way into the distance, but could not see the beast. She could hear it though, could hear its howl, even its paws drumming the rocks as it speeded up its approach.

Then the unfortunates buckled, tumbling forward in a wave. From amongst them, she heard the death cry of the hound. By some miracle, they had been saved.

When they finally exited the gorge the landscape opened to reveal a vast plain. Beyond it they could see the city with Saurian’s tower rising up above. She looked back. Somewhere up high on the gorge walls was the gap through which she had first looked out on the unfortunates before being transported to Ronyn’s world. Would it work again, she wondered.

“I thought you’d died,” she said, finding Ronyn’s arm and sliding her hand into his.

“I felt like I wanted to. I saw the most wonderful light, too. And somehow I felt, if I can touch that light, if I can immerse myself in it, this pain will end. You... didn’t see a light, I suppose?”

“No.”

“I must have imagined it, but it seemed so real, and so comforting.”

“You didn’t see the unfortunates?”

“I saw only dark shapes closing in on me, like a dark mist. The pain was incredible, like I was woven from string, and was unravelling. Like piece by piece I was being torn apart. But then the light came and, even though it didn’t touch me, the pain went away.”

Ronyn leaned over Davran’s backpack and spoke into the flap. “What about you, Khalil, you see any light.”

“Yes, I saw a light. A light so bright it lit the inside of this pack.”

“I didn’t imagine it then.” Ronyn raised his voice with triumphant emphasis. “How come you didn’t see it?”

“Shush,” Davran said, realising how loud they were speaking. “The city’s close, and there may be others out here.”

How come I saw something different? Davran thought, as once again they made arduous progress amongst the shadows.

The unfortunates far behind them, they finally reached the edge of the wasteland. A wide cut in the ground now barred their way. About twelve feet across, it swept in an arc that disappeared into the distance in both directions. The sides were steep, sheer-sided, the bottom an impenetrable mesh of razor-sharp rock.

“We have to find a crossing pole.”

Ronyn followed Davran without question as she set out to the right. They skirted the edge of the cut, keeping low, always hidden in shadow. Settled behind a large boulder, Davran

explained, pointing to a pole spanning the gap, “these poles have to be narrow to stop Razorhounds entering the city.”

“It looks narrow enough to stop me from entering the city,” said Ronyn forming a circle with his finger and thumb tips touching, “I bet I could close my hands full around it. And it doesn’t look strong enough.”

“It’s strong enough,” Davran confirmed. “The poles are old, and father once told me that old wood becomes hard as rock.”

“Mmm,” Ronyn muttered. “Where’s it come from? There’s no trees around here, and old wood can just as easily rot as gain strength.”

“There used to be trees. The rains stopped falling before I was born. The trees must have all died or something.” Davran admitted to not knowing anything more about it, but insisted she had never seen rotten wood.

“Wood will only rot if water is present and combined with oxygen,” Khalil confirmed.

Ronyn shrugged. “But, is it safe to cross?” Ronyn pointed to the nearby dwellings.

“There are pacts which everyone respects. The crossing poles are one of them. Everyone has to cross at some point. Because of this none is ever attacked while on a crossing pole. It’s just not allowed.”

“A very trusting act for people with no trust.”

Davran glared at Ronyn for a moment. “It’s just the way it is. Why can’t you just accept that some things are just the way they are? If there’s no trees, it’s just because there’s no trees. If it’s safe to cross a pole in a place full of danger, then it just is.”

“It’s because,” Khalil cut in, “he has grown up in a world where it’s alright, no, encouraged, for a person to question rather than to accept.”

“Yes, because of that.” Ronyn agreed, his serious expression breaking into a smile.

Crouched near the edge, Ronyn looked into the cut. At the halfway point lay the remains of someone who had no doubt fallen while crossing. “Wonder if he’s an unfortunate,” Ronyn said, tipping his head and smiling at Davran.

“You think this is funny?”

“No. Just trying to mask my fear. Sorry.”

Slender spikes poked through the gaps in his or her rib cage. A longer, more robust spike penetrated the back of the skull and exited through the eye socket. As much as he’d tried humour, Ronyn really did wonder if falling from this pole counted as suicide. Already, in spite of what Khalil had just said, Ronyn realised he was falling under the influence of obedience through fear of the unknown.

“Looks like he’s been there for some time.” Ronyn’s voice now carried a cadence of uncertainty.

“A couple of days at the most,” Davran corrected. “Food doesn’t sit around waiting to rot here. It isn’t buried either.”

“It’s a person, Davran, not food.”

“Something stripped the flesh. That makes it food, person or not.”

“Davran, I’m sorry.”

“For joking, I know. You already said.”

“No. For when you killed the bird. I realise I’m going to have to change my values.”

After Davran and Ronyn had embraced, Khalil declared that he would rather cross on foot than in Davran’s pack and strode along the pole as if it was a wide footpath. Ronyn, still uncertain the pole would hold his weight, insisted that Davran cross before him. The pole flexed slightly as she crossed. Having cleared the pole, Davran slipped into a shadow at the other side, joining Khalil.

Ronyn gingerly placed one foot before the other, his arms extended for balance. Something moved in the bottom of the cut. He could see nothing, but could certainly hear movement. He tried to focus on the bottom and almost lost his balance, his arms flapping like an ungainly bird. Something down there, some creature, was waiting for him to fall. He squinted, one eye on the pole, the other searching through inky-blackness. Eventually he saw it. An eight legged creature, its legs longer than his own, but with a width as slender as his finger. The legs slipped through gaps in the spikes. Its torso skimmed above. Two more of the creatures came at speed from the opposite direction. The three of them wavered below him. Teeth like combs rasped as their jaws chattered. They couldn't reach him, fortunately, and he had no intention of falling. Scavengers waiting for the unlucky, or the clumsy, the best they could hope to do was scratch at a person's nerves and cause a lapse in concentration.

"Ronyn, hurry up," Davran urged.

Ronyn looked at Davran and grimaced nervously. If he rushed he was more likely to fall. He intended to take his time. Crossing the pole was easy as long as you were careful. Got to concentrate, he told himself. Filled with doubt over his balancing ability, Ronyn slowed all the more, shuffling his feet now rather than stepping along the pole. Again, he wobbled. His fear of falling, it seemed, was making it more likely to happen. Gingerly he crouched, and placing his hands on the pole, he began to crawl at an even slower pace.

"Hurry up," Davran insisted.

Refusing to look up, Ronyn looked at the pole, at his hands gripping it tightly, his knuckles white from the pressure of squeezing so hard.

The rasping noise of the creatures came louder, higher pitched, and took on a liquid quality. Ronyn realised, as he slowly edged along, that it was not their teeth which made the noise, as he had supposed, but their throats. They were no doubt angry, he considered, because he had not yet



fallen. He chuckled, delighted at the ownership of his superior brain, thinking that to be a scavenger, to rely on the mistakes of others was the lowest form of life.

Then they spat.

Sprays of liquid shot into the air, landing on both the pole and his hands. His grip slipped. His chest banged against the pole, pushing the breath from his lungs. He grasped for new purchase as he felt his weight sliding to the right, and he rolled under the pole. His left leg shot out as an automatic response to the shift in weight and he hooked his right leg for all he was worth. As his fingers struggled to find purchase, he risked all. Letting go with his right hand, he stretched forward and managed to grab a dry patch. The creatures scuttled before him rattling more spittle in their throats. There was a brief respite as it seemed they needed to generate more of the slick spittle. Ronyn grasped tightly and scudded, underneath, along three feet of pole. One of them spat sooner than he had expected. It went high, missing the pole. More of the creatures were coming. Ronyn could hear them, could hear the spit already rattling in their throats. He had another third of the pole to navigate and was torn between rushing, perhaps falling as a result, or taking his time and giving them the chance to spit. Either way he risked falling onto the waiting spikes. He decided rushing was his best option. He swung himself atop the pole, where he jumped to his feet. The pole bounced with the impact, the ends clattering on rock. Loose rubble rolled down the walls. Ronyn tipped backwards, his arms reeling in an attempt to regain his balance. He was falling. He could feel his weight catching up with the momentum. Still reeling, half leaning backwards, he ran forward.

The pole began to roll as it bounced under his pounding feet. Each step he took landed less squarely, as he wavered on the edge of a fall. Knowing somehow that it would be his last chance, he leapt. The pole clattered into the cut as he landed.

Ronyn blew a sigh of relief and was about to voice it when Davran clamped a hand over his mouth. She shook her head and steered him behind a low wall where she placed a finger to her pursed lips.

Tramping feet then stole through the silence – heavy footfalls in the distance, at least twenty men, twenty men who were certainly not skulking in shadows.

“Magistrate,” Davran whispered, “with a troop of guards.”