

*An Excerpt from...*

*Ri Beithir's Quest by Neva Franks*

## Chapter One



## JARED

With fiery lungs and strained muscles near collapse, Jared dragged his terrified younger sister through the shadowed, twisted forest. She slid on wet leaves and cried out in fear and pain, only his desperate clutch kept her on her feet. If she faltered, he knew without a doubt they would both die.

The Hunter's right behind us. How can we possibly survive this night?

They had been running since dawn. Sweat-drenched, and in a panic, he nearly pulled her off her feet. "Hurry, we haven't much time."

The baying of the excited dogs and drumming of horse's hooves roared in their ears, as they neared with each thundering heartbeat. The gasping boy stopped and searched the surroundings for what he knew was hidden in the dense underbrush. For years he and his father hunted this area and he sighed in relief when he heard the small stream just beyond a precipitous embankment. *I found it.*

"Over there," he whispered and pointed.

They scrambled for the water, waded into the middle, and dunked to their shoulders to ensure they didn't touch the overhanging foliage.

Kyleah gasped. "It's so cold!"

For a brief moment Jared gazed with deep longing toward Dragonlair, then his attention returned to the wisp of a girl and he squeezed her hand. "This is the only way. You know that, don't you?"

Bottom lip trembling, she nodded.

He took a moment to study his frail sister. She was only thirteen-years-old, and sheltered all her life. She knew nothing of the world and its dangers, but trusted him to protect her. He didn't understand why Kasson demanded that he bring her. He could have easily left her there which would have been much easier on him, but his father's aide, Kasson, was concerned what would happen to her.

His strong voice still reverberated in his mind, “Your Highness, now that Trey has full control of the castle, both of your lives are in grave jeopardy. You must take her with you. Most important, do not return before the Centennial Golden Dragon’s Moon, not one minute sooner. Do you understand?”

Unfortunately, he agreed with the loyal servant and nodded.

Hours later, cold and tired, he gathered another shaky breath, it was a huge responsibility and so far, she only slowed him down.

“All right then, we need to go right now.”

“I’m ready, Jared.”

They stumbled in the dark, as they struggled upstream. The cold water was difficult enough, without battling slippery moss-covered rocks, and overhanging, thorn laden blackberry vines. With only raw courage to guide them, the siblings moved in the direction they hoped the Hunter wouldn’t expect them to take.

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The cloaked man reined his large blood bay horse to a sliding stop, while pebbles clattered on the riverbank. He threw off his hood and tangled, blue-black hair cascaded down his wide shoulders. With dark, penetrating orbs set deep in their sockets; he watched the five whining hunting dogs, their noses to the ground. They coursed the water’s edge on the opposite bank, in their desperate search where the children crossed. But the Hunter knew they hadn’t crossed, but used the river to disguise their scent from the hounds.

His dark eyes squinted as he combed for minute signs of any disturbance. West would take them to Bearhaven and supposed safety, and East, back to Dragonlair, now under their distant cousin Trey’s domain and certain death. North would soon be covered in deep snow and the South barren desert.

The Hunter’s keen instinct roiled his gut and warned him the crafty boy would choose East to confuse him, but that would make no sense. With only one opportunity to make the right decision, the Hunter cursed under his breath. He wheeled his horse toward the only sensible direction, West. The eager, baying dogs followed.

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Bones and muscles aching from the frigid water, the bruised children pulled themselves from the creek and collapsed on the muddy bank, their chests heaved from fatigue. Their escape in the stream proved challenging and demanded the last of their strength. Too frightened to cry earlier, Kyleah shifted toward her brother, snuggled close and wept in the crook of his arm.

Pushing his sister’s waist length, light golden blond hair from her face, Jared gave her a gentle, reassuring hug. “I know you’re scared and tired,

Kyleah, but we must keep moving. This is our only chance to escape.” To calm herself, Kyleah took deep breaths and brushed away her tears with muddy fingers, creating brown streaks across her cheeks. “You’re right. I don’t want to be a burden.”

He glanced skyward and hissed. “That damn raven is giving our location away, no matter which way we go, it screams an alarm!”

She glanced up and smiled. “Maybe it’s helping us?”

He snarled, “That makes no sense, now, come on!”

She stood, shivered and nodded.

Concerned, Jared held her at arm’s length as he studied her condition. “You’re in bad shape, but I have an idea. You need to remove your outer clothing. Everything’s soaked through anyway and the weight will only slow us down.”

Without a word, Kyleah slipped the heavily embroidered skirt, jacket and the many layers of petticoats off, until she stood in her camisole and bloomers.

Seeing her teeth chatter, Jared asked. “How are you doing?”

Another shudder quaked through her. “I’m not sure.”

Tight-lipped, Jared wrapped his knee-length, drenched cape around her thin shoulders. “It’s not warm by any means, but it’ll keep the wind from getting through.”

He gathered her clothing, climbed an oak tree and placed them high in the branches, then returned to her. “When the Hunter comes this way, and he will eventually, this will attract the dogs and keep them busy for a while. Hopefully by then, we’ll be far enough away that he won’t hear the ravens following us.”

Jared glanced back toward Dragonlair and sighed. “I just hope Kasson hid the Dragon’s sword somewhere in the main hall, but I’m not exactly sure just where. Remember though, we must never speak of it again, not until it’s the appointed time, understand? Trey will be searching for it too. He cannot have full reign of Dragonlair until sword’s in his possession.”

Kyleah’s voice quivered, “Are you certain he’s after us?”

Frustrated, he sighed. “That’s what Kasson said. For Trey to rule Dragonlair as King, he must eliminate father and me, then find the Dragon’s sword. Kasson was adamant; we’re not to return until the Golden Age of the Dragon has arrived.”

“But that’s five years away. How will we survive until then?”

With the sun’s lowering in the sky, and the oppressing, dark forest looming around them, he considered their dire situation and shrugged. “To be totally honest with you, I have no idea, but standing here discussing it won’t help us either. Come on.”

Jared started down the path, but realized Kyleah hadn’t followed. Exasperated he turned and scowled at her. “Now what’s wrong?”

Delicate lines creased between her pale brows and she cocked her head. “Listen.”

Then he heard it as well and his spirit plummeted. Just as the sun started to lower on the western horizon, casting golden fingers across the deep cerulean sky, the village's church bells tolled the King's death.

Their father.

While Kyleah sobbed, Jared gripped her hand tighter. He sprinted for the distant, snow-capped mountains, not wanting his sister to hear the dogs closing in on them.

An hour later, as dusk fell across the land and the dog's baying faded away in the distance, Jared found a small thicket where a deer had bedded down some time ago. It was sheltered on three sides and the grass trampled into a soft mat. He ducked under the overhang and stepped inside. Satisfied, he nodded, and pulled Kyleah next to him. She hadn't said a word since hearing the church bells. They sat, wrapped in his cloak as they huddled together.

She fell asleep instantly in his arms while he continued to gaze at the last rays of the vivid red sunset, surely as red as their father's blood when he was murdered, for without a doubt his throat was slit. Soon millions of brilliant stars emerged and the deep golden moon took the sun's place as it cast deep shadows across the wooded valley.

He glanced down at his sister and brushed a few stray hairs from her face.

*Why did Kasson bring you to me? It still makes no sense; you would have been safer there. Trey has no reason to dispose of you, only me. How can I possibly be responsible for you when I don't even know how I'm going to survive?*

*During this exile, you'll soon be entering adolescence. I know nothing about young women and the changes they go through. You had the comfort of the palace and five personal hand-maidens to beckon for your every need, even before you realize what's necessary.*

*Oh, Kyleah, I should probably send you back.*

And yet, Kasson was adamant, "You must take your sister with you! Hurry, time is short, use the hidden passageway – go now!"

He wiped away an errant tear.

*Stop crying! Father said that was my major downfall. How many times did he yell at me, "You're just a weak child, stop that sniveling. Show your authority as a ruler and future King! How do expect to have power and lead others when you can't even control yourself?"*

*Alright father, I'll try. No more childish tears. Don't show honest emotions; wear the mask of royalty strength. I promise you that from this day forward, I'll be the man you expected me to be. Not just a mere man like a commoner, but as the future King and Golden Dragon. Never again will I allow childish emotion get in the way of being a true monarch.*

Jared spoke in a low tone, "In five years, Trey, I promise you this, cousin, I will return to claim my throne and title of Golden Dragon."

It surprised him when Kyleah nodded.