

Before Alamor even turned, he and Raissa heard an agonized cry from outside of the temple. They then heard some of the guards shouting to one another, until all of their horrified screams also rang out in the air.

Moments later, they saw the temple's front doors implode. The tall wooden frames splintered and shattered as some huge shape outside tore them apart. Chunks of rock from the archway above tumbled down with them. When all of the carnage ceased, the entrance of the temple was a towering heap of debris that trapped Alamor and Raissa within.

There was silence. It was an eerie hush after the frightening sounds that had just filled the air around them. Alamor promptly took hold of his sword and shield as his eyes sat fixedly on the wreckage ahead of them.

“What was that, Alamor?” Raissa asked, fear laced within her words.

“I don't know; just stay behind me,” Alamor answered, mustering the resolve to sound confident, even though he was just as frightened as the princess was. He glanced about the empty chamber. “Do you know if there is any other way out of here?” he eventually asked.

“There are no other ways in and out of the temple beside the entrance ahead,” Raissa explained bleakly.

Alamor's features tightened. He had no idea what had suddenly descended upon the temple, or what had seemingly slaughtered Raissa's guards outside and closed off their only way out to the rest of the city. He had even less of an idea on what he needed to do to keep Raissa safe.

There was very little time for him to think before the sound of shattering glass tore throughout the chamber. Just as Alamor and Raissa looked back, they saw a huge, winged creature burst through the window. Alamor immediately placed himself in front of Raissa just as the creature landed before him.

It was a strange beast nearly three times his height, with a slender frame that was vaguely human. Mats of beige fur ran over tan skin along the sides of its torso. It had a long, whip-like tail that was covered in spines. A pair of long legs formed into twisted talons, while two wings unfolded from its chest in place of arms. The wings were coated by saffron plumage, each feather tipped in bright blue. Its face was as if a woman had been given the snout of a beast, with protruding fangs and a pair of thin, white eyes that stared balefully at Alamor and Raissa.

It threw back its head, swinging a mane of cinnabar hair as a shrill screech emerged from its fanged maw and echoed throughout the chamber.

“Raissa, go hide in the vestibule!” Alamor shouted over its cry, incredible zeal suddenly racing throughout his body.

“You'll get yourself killed!” Raissa exclaimed. “You can't fight this thing all by your—”

“*Now!*” Alamor commanded.

Raissa provided no further argument. She ran to the safety of the vestibule just as Alamor ordered, although her eyes never left him or the monster.

Alamor did not even look back at the princess as she fled; his fiery eyes were locked solely onto the winged beast in front of him. He stood steadfastly before the creature as unprecedented vigor stoked his skin.

He was the one thing that stood between the beast and Raissa. He was the only person who could protect her, now.

He would not fail his beloved friend.

*No. Never again.*

The winged monster drove toward Alamor with another horrible cry. It beat its wings and lifted itself off the ground, slashing at Alamor with its long talons. He leapt out of the way just before the claws ripped through the purple carpet down to the stone floor beneath. The creature quickly lashed out again, swinging one talon in a furious swipe. Alamor ducked underneath as the monster's nails passed mere inches over the back of his neck.

When he straightened, he saw another talon coming toward him. He lifted his shield and deflected it off the steel surface. He somehow kept his footing despite the impact of the blow, and immediately replied with a powerful sword stroke. Alamor felt his blade score over the creature's talon and dig into its skin. The winged horror drew back with a shriek, stepping gingerly on the leg that Alamor struck.

Alamor charged ahead, but he only took three steps. The monster aimed its wings at him as a salvo of feathers shot from its plumage. Alamor lifted his shield purely out of instinct, and he soon realized that it likely saved his life.

The feathers that raced from the monster's wings were stiff and sharp, like a storm of flying daggers. Most either bounced off Alamor's shield or lodged into the floor around him, but at least two managed to sneak around his defenses. Even though they only nicked him, the barbed feathers cut clear through his armor and cleaved his skin beneath.

Alamor painfully dropped to one knee as his teeth grated together. His beastly adversary seized the opportunity and swung one of its wings. Alamor was lifted clear off of his feet as he was batted aside, and skidded across the floor once he landed.

Alamor forced himself to recover instantly even as one side of his body nearly went numb. He rolled out of the way just as the winged monster tried to pounce onto him. He hastily shuffled away, and the duel between the young warrior and the monster went on.

Alamor danced across the temple floor, slipping away from many of the monster's swipes, striking back with his gleaming sword when the opportunity appeared. Even when his agility could not keep him from the creature's reach, his steel shield was there to hold it at bay, and often provide him

another chance to lash out with his own attack. They battled back and forth, a waltz between malevolent ferocity and the courage of a young man who was willing to expend every measure of energy in his being to protect his friend.

Eventually, Alamor's monstrous adversary struck with a different portion of its body. The creature sent its spine-covered tail whipping toward him, threatening to shred and render whatever it struck. It scraped across Alamor's shield twice, staggering him both times.

Then the beast aimed low and swung at his legs. The tail raked beneath his knees, and Alamor crashed onto the temple floor as a sharp holler flew out of his throat. Were it not for his crimson armor, Alamor knew that his legs would have been shattered or torn to shreds—maybe both.

The monster lifted its tail high into the air and brought it down in a merciless arc at the fallen warrior.

But Alamor met it with his blade just before it reached him, searing through the tail in one fluid motion. Alamor heard both a *thud* from the severed stump landing on the ground and an agonized screech from the beast as he hurried back to his feet.

To his surprise, the damage he inflicted on the monster did not stun it for long. It shambled toward him in a maddened rage, lashing out once more with its talons. Alamor's shield kept the ripping claws away from his body, but the blow was so powerful that it tossed him away with ease.

Alamor heard Raissa cry out in dismay as he landed against the stone floor. The world was briefly a blur to him after the jarring impact, but he somehow regained his senses in time to see the winged beast leap upon him. Its jaws fell toward his sprawling form, and Alamor only managed to lift his shield at the last moment to defend himself.

His shield became his safeguard against the monster's maw, but Alamor soon realized that he was trapped. As he lay helpless on the temple floor, the creature towered over him with its hideous face pressed against his shield and its fangs snapping incessantly. All that he could see beyond the thin layer of steel was the beast's flashing jaws and white eyes. All that he could hear was its maddened snarls and its fangs bouncing off the metal surface.

The monster was so determined to snatch Alamor within its mutilating teeth that it paid no attention to his free arm and the sword that he clasped.

Alamor eventually found the strength to push upward with his shield, creating just enough space for his other arm to stab at the creature's face.

The sword found its mark, and the creature reeled back with an agonized shriek. The monster lurched away from Alamor, screeching horribly as it brought its wings over its afflicted face.

Alamor leapt back to his feet and threw himself at his beastly foe. He thrust his sword into the creature's chest, burying the blade nearly up to the hilt before wrenching it free with a violent tug.

Alamor ignored the monster's earsplitting howl as he stepped away. The winged creature swayed incoherently as gurgled shrieks poured out of its maw, each cry weaker than the last. Finally the monster uttered one long, dull moan before it toppled onto the temple floor with a loud crash. When its lifeless body met the stone surface, it became engulfed in a blackish-purple shimmer. Inexplicably, its entire form began to fade away, evaporating into wisps of dark matter that eventually disintegrated altogether.

Heavy, labored breaths continued to flee past Alamor's lips as he stood before the slain monster. He watched its body gradually vanish for a few moments before he finally glanced back at Raissa. She appeared to be numb with shock. Her eyes were wide and her jaw was slack because of what she had seen.

He did not show it, but Alamor felt a tremendous sense of joy in his heart.

Raissa was unharmed, and *he* was the reason why.