

THE PEGASUS'S LAMENT

This is a sample chapter of The Pegasus's Lament by Martin F. Hengst.

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PROLOGUE

The lovely maiden of summer had matured, growing into matronly autumn. She would stand guard over Solendrea as long as possible before the ice queen of winter descended, stripping the trees bare and laying out their naked bones against the cold grey sky. The first hint of that frigid air hung on the wind, buffeted by the magnificent white dragon's wings. Forty feet across and nearly twice that long, Stryne would have been a terrifying sight to behold if anyone had been able to see him. His command of the Quintessential Sphere kept him hidden from prying eyes. Any stray mage or magical being wandering nearby would have to know where to start looking to find him. Even the beating of his impressive wings was too high above the ground to be felt or heard. He was alone, as he had been for hundreds of years.

Movement on the ground caught his attention, and he dropped his long neck to look more closely at the spot that held his interest. There was a minuscule speck of black moving across the landscape. A shadow moving across a deeper shadow, barely discernible, even with his magically augmented vision. It was the Warleader of the Xarundi. He had hovered in this same spot, day after day, week after week, for four years. He was careful, watching and learning. He would bide his time until it was perfect.

During the Age of Dragons, when Stryne had been free, and his brothers and sisters in command of the entire continent, the Xarundi had been a surface-dwelling race. In the interim, the wolf like warriors had fallen far and fast. No doubt due to the meddling influence of the humans. The dogs called them vermin, but humans were much worse than vermin. They were an infectious disease that, unchecked, would destroy anything it came into contact with.

The Xarundi had lost nearly as much to the humans as the dragons had. However, the dogs had been fortunate enough to retain their lives. Stryne was the last of his kind.

During his entombment in the ice, he had been forced to endure the loss of each of his kin. As the spark of each psychic link to the rest of his kind had died out, he had experienced what it was like to be truly alone. Turning his thoughts away from that painful memory, Stryne instead looked toward the slightly darker smudge in the foothills that was the entrance to the Xarundi's subterranean empire. The Warleader began each day standing in the entrance tunnel to the cavern complex, and then would set out on his daily duties. Duties that Stryne would often survey from high above.

As long-lived as dragons were, they were gifted with incredible amounts of patience. A dragon could plot and plan and scheme for decades before settling on a course of action. Stryne was unique in that patience had never been one of his strong points. He preferred action over

inaction, which was what brought him to the Warrens in the first place. There were still creatures on Solendrea who remembered the reign of the dragons and possessed long enough lives to remember old alliances and affiliations. The gargoyle who had given him the information about the Xarundi had also been imprisoned by the humans. Though the manner of his imprisonment was different, the result was the same. A burning hatred for humankind and a desire to see them eradicated.

Reestablishing his alliance with Sleeper had given Stryne what he needed most-- information. Gargoyles had an uncanny ability to know everything about anything. Stone was everywhere on Solendrea, and the gargoyles could commune with the stone as easily as men could speak to each other. Sleeper's assistance had been invaluable. Now, as he hovered over the foothills that hid the extensiveness of the Warrens, the dragon was ready to enact the first phase of his plan. The Xarundi wanted the humans destroyed as much as, if not more than, the dragon did. They would be well suited as allies.

Folding his wings against his back, the dragon dove, feeling the cold wind rushing against his sides and belly. The tip of his tail whipped back and forth in the air that screamed past. Dropping the spell that made him invisible, Stryne spread his wings. They snapped taut, catching the air and pulling him backward as they met sudden resistance. The powerful sweep of his wings ripped leaves from the trees at the edge of the clearing and bent the grass underfoot. The Warleader leapt backward at Stryne's sudden appearance. Four-inch claws slipped from their sheaths and glimmered in the light of the pale moon that was just beginning to rise.

Stryne neatly backwinged, dropping to the ground and folded his wings against his back. He wrapped his tail around his haunches and lowered his neck, looking at the Warleader with glowing violet eyes. To the Warleader's credit, he didn't flinch under that regard. Instead, he stared back with his own pools of luminescent blue fire. Though his claws were still extended, the Warleader hadn't made any aggressive movement. Instead, they stood in the clearing maybe twenty feet apart, staring at each other.

"Greetings, Warleader," Stryne said in a passable, if unpracticed, approximation of the Xarundi tongue. "Though the manner of my appearance was sudden, I mean you no harm. I wish to parlay."

The Warleader cocked his head to one side, his ears twitching as the dragon spoke. There was a long pause before he replied.

"Respectful greetings, Great One," the Warleader was speaking hesitantly, as if feeling out the words as he said them. "You speak the tongue of the Xarundi as it was in ages past. I fear there may be misunderstanding betwixt us."

"Then let us use the language of the lesser races," Stryne replied in the low tongue. "I don't wish there to be any mistake about what I offer, or require. I am Stryne the Forsaken, Dragonlord of the East and the last of my kind. I come with information for you and a proposal."

The Warleader's claws slipped slowly back into their sheaths. "I am called Xenir, of the Xarundi Combine. What information do you bring?"

"I know who you are, and I know how you came to live in this place you call the Warrens. An interested third party, a gargoyle named Sleeper, directed me in finding you. You are familiar with him?"

The Warleader nodded, and Stryne continued.

"I was exiled under the ice, far to the north before your kin released me from my prison. One of them, your High Priest, was captured during the ensuing battle."

Xenir nodded. "Few of the war party I sent north returned with life and limb."

“You didn't know I was there. You sent them because you had a vision of a powerful relic buried in the ice.”

“Yes.” Xenir's tone was unapologetic. “Had I known you were the relic, I'd not have sent the war party.”

“No, I suspect not.”

“If you wanted my life as penance for the war party, I'd be dead by now. So why are you here?”

“I seek not penance, Warleader. We share a mutual interest in seeing the human plague eliminated. I offer a way for both of us to get what we want.”

Xenir hunkered down and rested his arms on his powerful legs. A gentle breeze stole through the clearing and Xenir watched the movement of the branches for a while before he replied.

“What is the offer?”

“I offer you a way to recover the High Priest in return for your alliance against the humans. The city they call Dragonfell is an abomination, an affront to the Draconic Empire. I wish to see the vermin exterminated and control of the land returned to its rightful owner.”

“You.”

“Yes.” Stryne snorted. “Who else has the right to rule?”

“The world has changed,” the Warleader said slowly. “You said it yourself; you are the last of your kind. How can you hope to hold and keep all the land that was once part of your vast empire?”

“I don't. I require only the land around Dragonfell. The rest of the lands of the Human Imperium belong to you to do with as you see fit. Isn't it long beyond time for the Xarundi to stop living in holes and return to the surface world? To return to the proud race they once were?”

Xenir shook his head. “My people struggle against themselves. The fall of the High Priest has convinced many that our cause has been forgotten by The Six.”

The dragon snorted again. “Primitive nonsense. As if the Eternals concern themselves with the petty machinations of such short-lived creatures. Regardless, what if I could offer you a way to reunite your people? To restore their faith?”

“You've just dismissed the importance of The Six, how can you hope to restore faith when you have none?”

“My faith isn't important, or required. If I return your High Priest to their people, I think that their faith would be bolstered, at least for a time.”

The Warleader shot to his feet, his good eye blazing. For a moment, Stryne was sure he would attack, regardless of the fact that he was outclassed in both size and power.

“Do not mock me!” He roared, his long fangs glistening white in the light of the moon. “The High Priest is gone. Not even you can restore the dead.”

“Your war party returned to you misinformed, Warleader. Or perhaps they feared being sent to retrieve that which they lost. Regardless, the High Priest lives. At least, as far as being imprisoned by man and cut off from the Sphere can be considered living.”

“How do you know this?”

Stryne rumbled deep in his throat, the dragon's equivalent of a chuckle. “The dragons were long allies of the Shadow Assembly, long before the Xarundi took nominal leadership of the darker races. I have my own allies and methods of gathering information.”

“The High Priest,” Xenir began, his eye sparkling. “You'll tell me where he is, in return for our allegiance in eliminating the vermin?”

“That is what I offer, yes.”

Xenir shot to his feet. “Then come, we must free the High Priest at once!”

The dragon half extended his wings, arresting the Warleader's excitement.

“We will be doing no such thing. I will provide the location of your High Priest. No more. Finding and freeing him is your responsibility. I prefer to remain in a supervisory capacity.”

The Xarundi looked as if he wanted to protest. Stryne thought that he probably would have if he had been facing any being other than a dragon. However, as it turned out, Stryne was a dragon, and the Warleader wasn't foolish enough to jeopardize the information he wanted just to argue the finer points of the arrangement. The indignation left his eye nearly as quickly as it had flared there, and Xenir nodded.

“Very well. The location of the High Priest for our allegiance.”

Stryne drew power from the Quintessential Sphere. At first, filaments of cerulean light seemed to litter the air in a haphazard jumble. As the dragon further worked the intricacies of his spellcraft, the lines began to shift and merge, forming patterns and shapes. Glowing trees sprung up along shimmering hillsides. Rivers of light flowed down from the hills, sparkling as if touched by an unseen sun. Before long, the countryside was laid out before them in miniature, and the dragon used the power of the Sphere to show Xenir where the quintessentialists were holding Zarfensis.

“My part of the bargain is fulfilled,” Stryne said as the map collapsed, fading from view. He unfurled his wings, preparing for flight. “I trust that your portion will be fulfilled as soon as you have the High Priest in your possession.”

“Yes. Once we have restored the High Priest's place among the Chosen, we will gladly fight by your side. The vermin will pay for what they've done, to the dragons and the Xarundi alike.”

Without a further word, Stryne launched himself skyward. His powerful wings carried him up, level with the tops of the trees in the clearing, then beyond. He climbed steadily upward until the air was cold and thin, then he turned toward the cave where he had temporarily made his home. The plan was in motion. All that remained now was to watch it unfurl and ensure that the players did as they were instructed.

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“There!” Xenir hissed, stabbing an extended claw at a flickering light at the base of a towering hill. “That is where they are holding the High Priest hostage.”

It had taken them five days to cover the distance between the Warrens and the prison camp where Zarfensis was being held. During their journey, the Warleader had plenty of time to think. He had to admit that there was no way they'd have found the High Priest, or had any hope of mounting a rescue, without the dragon's help. The land was some of the most inhospitable Xenir had ever experienced.

Large boulders dotted a field of loose shale that slipped and slid underfoot. What wasn't covered in rocks as sharp as a blade was waist deep in brambles and thorns so dense that they had given up trying to hack their way through and instead detoured around them. The detour had its own hazards, in the form of a fetid black bog that slowed their progress to a frustrating crawl.

Finally, they had climbed out of the muck, up a gentle grass-covered hill to look down on an expanse of rolling grassland that ended against a much larger hill. As they pressed on they could

see, tucked away in the elbow of that union, a squat grey rock building. Half buried in the earth and the hillside beyond, it had a heavy wooden door banded with black iron with a single window beside it. The window was guarded by two sets of bars, one inside and one out. The door itself had no need of bars. It was made from tree trunks banded together, with no hinge nor hardware, nor even a handle on the outside. It might as well have been a city wall, save for the little square peep window that was tightly shut.

One of the warriors snarled with frustration. He was young, just out of adolescence, with pale yellow fur striped with brown. One of these stripes ran across his eyes, giving him the appearance of wearing a mask and earning him a nickname among his peers. Xenir wasn't even sure what his given name was. He had simply been called Bandit for as long as the Warleader could remember. Several of the other warriors growled in support and Xenir brought them all up short with a savage snarl. One by one they turned to face him, their eyes lowered in their submission.

“Are we vermin?” Xenir asked them. “To be blocked by thick doors and barred windows?”

“No Warleader!” Their voice was one voice of many parts, and their burning eyes met his at the challenge to their honor. The merest implication that they might be vermin had driven the frustration from them and replaced it with the burning desire to conquer.

They'd need that desire, Xenir knew. The humans might be the inferior of the two species, but they had an uncanny knack for causing trouble. They had been a thorn in the side of the Xarundi since the days when the two races had first collided. They had been clashing with each other ever since. The vermin would never forget their subjugation to the claws and fangs of the Xarundi and the Chosen would never forget how the humans had driven them out of the light into the perpetual twilight of the Warrens. Peace simply wasn't an option.

The wind brought a sound to his erect ears, and the Warleader motioned them all to the ground. They crouched in the cover of the trees, eyes and ears alert as the prison door swung inward. Two soldiers in heavy plate armor emerged, each with a towering shield on one arm and a long, heavy spear in the opposite hand. They took up positions outside the door, spears and shields at the ready. Another, smaller man in plate emerged from the pale light beyond the door, his eyes scanning the hills. For a moment, Xenir felt the weight of the man's eyes upon them. He held his breath.

Xenir had received no premonition about their mission. No vision had visited him giving a clue to the success or failure of their endeavor. He knew that a seer's power came and went as it pleased, occasionally favoring the seer at the moment of greatest need. Other times it was cold and silent as an angry lover. Whatever he had done to fall out of favor with the power that imbued him with insight into the Quintessential Sphere also prevented him from guessing how their current endeavor would end. So he watched, and waited, though he could feel the younger warriors quivering with anticipation.

The third man made a final survey of the darkened landscape and turned to the door. He waved his hand and said something far too distant for Xenir or the others to hear. Another figure, this one enrobed in thick cream colored folds of cloth, stepped through the door and stood talking to the short man. They exchanged words, then the robed figure started off down the small, winding trail that lead away from the prison door. As he walked, a glowing orb blossomed over him, casting a wide circle of light that surrounded him.

The heavy thud of the door drew his attention back to the building, and he saw that the soldiers had retreated there, sealing off the entrance. Trying to get through that door would be futile. By the time they worked their claws through the wood, the wicked spears would have

been thrust through the window bars and into their flesh. They'd have to find another way into the building.

“Pursue the mage, Warleader.”

To Xenir's surprise, it wasn't one of the warriors who had given the impudent order. It was the tiny grizzled cleric who leaned heavily on his staff. The cleric had doggedly followed them on the trek through the swamp, though his infirmity and age prevented him from keeping the grueling pace the youngsters set. He had often fallen behind, sometimes disappearing entirely from view, during their trek here. Still, he had somehow managed to catch up with them again.

“Quickly, Warleader.” The cleric motioned beyond, to the bend in the trail where it turned and disappeared from view. “I have a plan, but we must be swift.”

“Very well, cleric,” Xenir said, deciding to humor the old-timer. “What would you have us do?”

The cleric gave orders in a series of low, short growls. Bandit and another of the young Chosen were sent to intercept the quintessentialist on the path. They were told to take him by surprise, to keep him quiet, and most importantly, bring him back alive. The cleric had stressed that last point so strenuously that Xenir had to assure him that the younger Xarundi would obey his orders as they would have obeyed the Warleader's. The pair of hunters slipped off into the darkness and the rest of the party waited.

Xenir began to worry as the silvery disk of the moon climbed ever higher in its arc across the night sky. Though he had stressed the need for stealth, he doubted that even the younger Chosen would need so much time to bring down a single human, even if that human were a quintessentialist. He made up his mind to move to a different vantage point if they didn't return before dawn, just to ensure that the mage didn't discover them if he managed to defeat Bandit and come looking for others.

As it happened, Xenir's worry was unfounded. Shortly after he had decided to move the war party to a different location, there was a rustle in the underbrush. The sound and movement was no more than a rabbit would make, but the Chosen warriors appeared in the thicket, the mage, bound and unconscious, carried between them. They cut his bonds and laid the quintessentialist on the ground before the cleric, calling a rather obnoxious amount of attention to the fact that no tear or even a single drop of blood marred the purity of the billowing robes.

“Stand him up,” the cleric commanded.

The warriors shot a look at the Warleader, who nodded. If the cleric had a plan that would get them into the prison, he was a step ahead of the rest of the group. Xenir was a good enough leader to know when listening to subordinates was the best course of action. Besides, he was curious as to how all this was going to play out. The cleric was old, nearly ancient, but it was obvious that he was still in full command of his intellect.

Once the mage was upright, the cleric laid his staff on the ground and began circling the clearing, tracing arcane symbols onto trees with a single outstretched claw. The sigils pulsed with a flickering, blue-green light. They seemed to grow brighter and livelier as the cleric made each subsequent symbol. As the cleric made the sixth and final sign, the marked trees bowed inward, blocking out the light of the moon and plunging the Xarundi into velvety darkness.

Thick vines snaked down out of the trees and across the ground, twining themselves around the quintessentialist's wrists and ankles. Bandit and the other warrior stepped away, as their support was no longer required. A low moan escaped from between the man's lips. Though it was pitch black in the clearing, Xenir could see the man's face plainly. The myriad shades of

grey that made up the Xarundi's night vision produced vivid detail even when there was no natural light.

The man's eyelids fluttered. Whatever the cleric was planning, he needed to complete it quickly. If he didn't they'd have a panicky quintessentialist in their midst and that would do none of them any good. The cleric seemed to grasp that reality, however, as he continued to intone the words of command to whatever ritual he had in mind. Stepping up behind the mage, he extruded a sharp fore claw and pressed it into the skin at the base of the mage's skull. The flesh dimpled and a small bead of blood welled up around the puncture.

A moment later, the claw slammed forward with a speed that belied the cleric's age. The mage gave a single spasmodic leap and then sagged limply against the restraints. The body seemed to lift off the ground as the cleric withdrew his claw, bringing with it a sinewy blue-white mist. The cleric pulled the strand out of the body, separating the last of it with a little tug that made the empty body give a little jump. With a drop of his jaw that equated to a Xarundi's smile, the cleric displayed the shifting mist to the Warleader.

"What is it?" The Warleader reached out to touch the mist, but the cleric shook his head in warning.

"You don't want to touch this, Warleader. It's the vermin's soul. Don't sully yourself."

Xenir was both impressed and sickened. That the cleric could so nonchalantly hold the very essence of a vermin turned his stomach. The cleric spread his hands apart, spreading the mist thin between them. He spoke a single word and the blue-white light left the strands. As the light vanished, the soul disintegrated.

"How frail they are," the cleric said, still grinning. "Frail even in spirit."

Before the Warleader could respond, the cleric stepped up to the mage's body and grasped the neck, his thumbs holding the wound his claw had made open by the edges. Another guttural command and there was a flash of green light that dazzled all the Chosen. They threw their hands up in front of their eyes at the brilliance of the flash. As the Warleader drew breath to scold the cleric for giving away their position, he saw that the vines were gone. The trees had returned to their natural state and both the body of the mage and the cleric lay crumpled next to each other.

Xenir rushed to the cleric's side, but he was still. His eyes were open and dull. The blue fire that danced in the eyes of every Chosen had gone out. The cleric had failed. The rest of the warriors gathered around, looking down on their fallen comrade with a mixture of pity and disgust. The Warleader passed his heavy hand over the cleric's eyes, closing them for the final time. He rocked back on his haunches, trying to decide what to do next.

When the body of the human stirred, Xenir was so startled that he retreated to the loose circle of warriors ranged around him. As they prepared to spring, Xenir got a strange feeling in the back of his head and held up a hand, stopping them in their tracks. The quintessentialist turned to face them. His eyes blazed blue for a moment, and then faded to the dull, lifeless color typical of all human eyes. Xenir was aghast.

"Cleric?"

"Warleader."

The voice that came from the quintessentialist's body was plainly human, but there was something underneath that the Xarundi's hearing could just barely detect. It was definitely the cleric's essence in the human's body. The Warleader felt sick.

"I don't understand," Xenir said slowly. "Why?"

"The vermin will gladly open their doors to one of their own, Warleader. What better disguise than their own skin?"

“But you...”

“I am old, Warleader. My time has come and gone. Once my task is complete, you will release me. Give me a warrior's death. An honorable death. Regardless of this fragile, disgusting form.”

“You are a hero and a patriot, cleric. I will grant your death by my own hand.”

The cleric bowed his human head. “My thanks, Warleader.”

Xenir turned to the others.

“Witness the sacrifice of one of our brothers, who offers his life in trade for another of our own.”

The warriors accorded the old cleric with a ragged howl, the sound echoing through the trees. After a moment it died away and the woods were silent.

“Watch closely, my brothers. Our time is at hand,” the cleric said, flipping the cowl of the robes over his head.

The sun was just beginning to lighten the eastern sky as the mock quintessentialist made his way down the hill and across the rolling valley. The warriors followed, keeping to the shadows of trees and gentle rises, staying out of sight of the prison door. The cleric approached the door, knocking loudly. A moment later, the peep door popped open and someone looked out from inside the prison.

“Master!” A surprised voice said from the other side of the door. “Is everything alright?”

“Yes, of course,” the cleric replied earnestly. “I merely forgot to leave something with you when I departed. May I enter?”

“Certainly! A moment please.”

The peep door closed and the prison door swung inward on silent hinges. The cleric-mage stepped into the doorway, blocking sight from inside the prison. Xenir motioned to the warriors and they rushed forward. As he reached the door, his claws flashed out, parting the cleric's head from the borrowed body. The Chosen spilled through the open doorway, falling on the startled soldiers in a swarm. The plate armor offered little protection as sharp claws found the seams and pulled them apart, limb from limb.

In less than two minutes, the three soldiers that stood watch over the prison were dead and the floor of the watch room was slick with blood. Xenir crouched over the watch commander and plucked the ring of keys from his belt. As a unit, the Chosen moved toward the door at the back of the watch room. Finding the appropriate key, the Warleader opened the door and they descended into darkness.

A long stone corridor was lined with cells on either side. A few flickering lamps cast feeble circles of light on the corridor floor. Most of the cells were empty. Xenir checked each one, looking for the hulk of the High Priest. His despair grew with each cell they checked. Perhaps the dragon was wrong. Perhaps Zarfensis really had perished and his incarceration here was just a sick ruse by the vermin.

As they reached the last cell on the left hand side of the corridor, all Xenir's doubts evaporated. Crouched on the stone floor was the emaciated frame of the High Priest. Only the slight rise and fall of Zarfensis's breathing gave the Warleader any indication that he was still alive. Xenir was horrified that the High Priest, once a hulking brute, had been reduced to the creature he saw before him. Even so, it could be no other. The twisted brass and blackened rubber of the artificial leg could belong to no one else.

“Your Holiness?” He asked quietly. “Can you hear me?”

Zarfensis uncurled from his crouch, getting to unsteady feet with slow, steady deliberation. One side of his face was a ruin of naked skin and puckered scars that had robbed him of an eye. The skin hung from his bones like laundry on a line and the flame in his eye had died to the flicker of a single candle, holding its own against the growing black. With shuffling, grating steps, Zarfensis made his way to the door of the cell, standing well back from the bars. He stared at Xenir, his ash grey tongue flicking out to lick his muzzle. At length, he seemed to gather enough strength to speak.

“My brother,” Zarfensis rasped. “Is that really you? Has my freedom finally come?”

Xenir found the key to the cell door and wrenched it open, crossing the threshold and crushing the High Priest in an uncharacteristic embrace. Xenir felt him tremble and knew that they had arrived not a moment too soon. Any longer and he might have succumbed to the harsh treatment the vermin had subjected him to.

“You are free, my brother. It is time to go home.”

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