



Runt the Hunted

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TaMir's Prophecy

In burrows deep through winter's sleep,
 In tunnels cold as stone,
In damp, in gloom, in chamber-room,
 Skin stretches over bone.

Kit and Mouse in mourning-house,
 Lamenting Seer's doom,
Fear not fate; the claws of hate
 Are carving out your tomb.

Split in two, the mad pursue
 The weak: let city burn!
Hope will flee. Humility
 Must face Lord Wroth's return.

In life, in death, at love's last breath,
 When sounds the Badger's call;
The widow cries, a promise dies,
 And Tira-Nor shall fall.

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JaRed

They waited till after sunset to arrest him.

JaRed turned on his pallet as a familiar nightmare touched his spine. His body twitched. Faces stared at him through a sheet of white linen, jaws stretching open.

“Heeah we ahhhh,” a voice said.

He opened his eyes.

Claws circled his throat. His attacker pulled him out of the tiny sleeping space into the entry chamber of the ReDemec family home. Light from a glowstone exploded in his face, hovering on the outstretched paws of a huge mouse.

Mice ringed him, newcomers to the kingsguard, foreigners with elegant accents, their voices floating on too much air.

“Yes,” whispered the one with eyes like fish eggs.

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“Thaaat’s him. Thaaat’s JaRed. Son ahv ReDemec.”
He offered a weak smile, eyelids drooping.

A fist smashed into JaRed’s ribs, knocking the breath out of him with a sound like a bellows. He fell forward. His nose slammed into the anvil of a rising knee.

White sparks curled in the darkness. Laughter. Words he didn’t understand, followed by a curse, clear and unashamed.

A series of hammer blows crashed into his face, someone’s elbow rising and falling. His eyes burned. Teetering, he reached for the ground, but it lurched sideways and slid beyond his grasp.

He groped, caught one of them by the ankle, and twisted. It made an unpleasant sound. His victim shrieked and fell, clutching at one leg.

“He still shows signs ahv life? RahUhlf?”

“Not for long, ThuBrik.”

Lieutenant ThuBrik. The new officer from Cadrid. JaRed’s mind clutched at this information as though it might save him, though he knew it meant nothing good. These mice were part of the kingsguard now. They wouldn’t have attacked him without orders.

TaMir was right. *The king is going to kill me.*

Paws jerked him onto his back, tugged at his arms and legs, stretched him into a taut, scarecrow X.

A new voice surprised them. “What are you doing? Who are you? JaRed!” KahEeshah, JaRed’s sister,

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stepped into the light of the glowstone. Her sleep-heavy eyes widened. She screamed as one of the attackers clapped a paw across her mouth and shoved her against a wall.

“This one has been eating well,” the mouse grunted. “Fat for a commoner.”

“No!” ThuBrik said. “She is not to be harmed. Only him.” He pointed at JaRed.

ReDemec, JaRed’s father, stumbled into the chamber, his eyes lit with fire. It took two of them to restrain him. They failed to keep him quiet.

JaRed’s older brother, HaRed, entered the chamber and stood frozen, watching. A blow to the back of his head knocked him to his knees.

Fists hooked under JaRed’s armpits, the Cadridians yanked him upright.

“Take him to the Great Haahl!”

They dragged him through the winding tunnels, his heels scraping shallow grooves in the earthen floor, his father’s rage trailing after them.

Faces shot from other chamber holes along the corridor, then disappeared, curiosity stunted by fear. Old Grouser, his wire-brush eyebrows knotted. Gurgy, the fat digger who hauled for the engineers. SindHu, daughter of MarSihLu. Luk and Raz, the kits who played at war all winter, unbelief written on their faces. Whispers spread in his wake.

“JaRed Ratbane!”

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“The war hero.”

“The one who saved the city?”

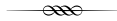
“He’s only a boy.”

“Arrested? Why?”

“What has JaRed done wrong?”

He noticed, for the first time, the rough texture of the tunnel ceiling, how it cracked and pitted above the corridor. The expanse above the palace, where the king would be feasting on raisins even now, ran plaster-smooth.

What has JaRed done wrong? What does it matter? Right and wrong don't concern the king any more.



The beating continued when they reached the Great Hall. ThuBrik motioned for an end when the thugs who had restrained JaRed’s father returned. RahUlhf gave JaRed a final exhausted kick and dragged him to the center of the massive chamber.

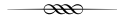
Pain racked JaRed’s body. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, dry as sand.

Mice from the Commons appeared in the tunnels. When no one drove them away, they inched closer. They were going to be allowed to watch. Some talked about JaRed as though he were already dead.

In an hour, the shadows near the walls of the Great Hall swelled with on-lookers. Words dribbled through the crowd—rumors, half-truths, speculations.

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A voice in the back of his mind sang out, mocking him. *Too late to run, now! Too late! Too late!*



The old seer, TaMir, huddled in one corner of his chamber, his white fur gray in the shadows. Immensely fat, his joints creaked when he moved. His knees mounded like boils under thinning fur, stiff and swollen with age. His eyes shone with intelligence.

“You must go soon,” he said.

“Why?”

He grunted. “SoSheth will kill you if he can.”

JaRed squinted into the darkness. TaMir’s private chamber smelled like earth and moldering straw and the air after a rainstorm. “ElShua will protect me.”

TaMir didn’t answer.

“Won’t he?”

“He will be ... with you.”

JaRed stood. “Something terrible is coming, isn’t it?”

TaMir’s voice came like a long sigh, low and thin and full of weariness. “The king no longer serves ElShua. He no longer serves Tira-Nor. He serves only himself. And that is a dangerous lust, for the self is easily steered by Lord Wroth.”

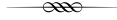
Wroth. The undying rat demon who—according to the stories—had brought evil into the world.

“What about the Commons? What about the kings-

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guard? Will they turn against me too?”

TaMir reached out, clutched JaRed’s paw in his own. “If ElShua’s promises looked possible,” he said, his yellow teeth gnarled and dull in the darkness, “we wouldn’t need them.”



The royal prosecutor arrived; a tall thin mouse with gray fur and a cold, friendless face. ThuBrik saluted and retreated to one side, a picture of disciplined loyalty.

The prosecutor gazed at JaRed’s prone form for a long moment. His nostrils flared, and he turned to look at the gathered mice. Silence descended, leeching down from the prairie overhead through the gloom-shrouded hill. “JaRed, son of ReDemec,” he hissed, “You have been found guilty of sedition and treason.”

A sound like rain spattered among the commoners, then evaporated.

“You plotted to overthrow the rightful king of Tira-Nor. You planned the destruction of this city.” A long pause. The prosecutor lifted his chin, as though finding a lost heirloom among sewage. “You deserve to die. However, His Majesty King SoSheth is inclined to mercy. In view of your past service to this city, lest any mouse question the benevolence of their Sovereign Lord, the King of Tira-Nor has ordered

that your life be spared.”

A sigh ran through the crowd. Relief. Gratitude. Disappointment.

“Henceforth you are exiled from the city of Tira-Nor and His Majesty’s realm. You have until sundown tomorrow to find refuge in the north meadows. If you are found within the Known Lands after that time, your life is forfeit.” The prosecutor turned to challenge the crowd with his gaze. “From the mice of Tira-Nor you will receive neither comfort nor aid. Lieutenant!”

ThuBrik stepped forward, one eyebrow raised. “My Lawd?”

The prosecutor blinked. “No. Not you. *You*. Lieutenant KoVeek. You will lead the kingsguard in a show of loyalty to our king. What do we give a traitor?”

Lieutenant KoVeek, JaRed’s friend, stared with eyes wide. At last he said, “The king’s enemies are my enemies.”

A thin sneer played across the prosecutor’s lips. “That was not my question.”

KoVeek hesitated. His gaze rose to the mice of the commons, the militia, the dozens of kingsguard warriors who busied themselves with studying the packed earthen floor. “Disdain,” he said at last.

The prosecutor’s sneer widened. “Show us.”

KoVeek’s face hardened. He approached in a wide

circle and stopped at JaRed's back.

JaRed turned and looked up, realizing too late why KoVeek had moved behind him.

"Show us," the prosecutor said again.

KoVeek's jaw moved, as though he were chewing something. A dried berry, a piece of leather, a curling leaf. When he spat, nothing came out.

"Yes." The prosecutor gloated. "That is what we give a traitor. And who is next?" He looked to the Cadridians.

ThuBrik bowed, stepped forward to tower over JaRed, and smiled. He displayed no signs of difficulty gathering saliva.

One by one they marched past him. MeerQo. HarVik. LimJik. First the kingsguard, then the mice of the Commons.

They don't understand what's happening. What's about to happen. They don't know what evil hunts them.

Some were gleeful in their spite. Others, like KoVeek, spat air, illustrating their divided allegiance with a wet puff. Many looked away when their turn came. NewFal, who worked next to him on a scavenging crew. NeVin, the gruff black-hair who helped him bury his brothers, Merry and Berry, after the siege of GoRec. Oli, who chatted incessantly about the weather. JaRed pitied them, in spite of his own pain.

The line grew. Kirsten. UnDrew. Deq.

JaRed's head throbbed. His left cheek pounded

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with a great pressure, a lump of clay crammed inside his flesh. The swelling drew his mouth into an awkward shape.

He could not tell them what he knew, that theirs were the faces of his nightmare. It was their bodies he saw when he slept, scratching air through a linen sheet, eyes staring like soap bubbles into a black sky.

Luk. Raz. The warrior kits, baffled at the strangeness of the universe, that their hero, once the pride of the commons, could have come to this.

JaRed closed his eyes to shut out their shame, but they did not vanish. In his mind, they beamed at him outside the ReDemec family chambers. Their faces contorted in his memory. Luk's eyes popped, and his jaw hung wide enough for a yawn, but he was too tongue-tied to speak. Raz, his brother, stuck out his chin. "I'm you!" he said, "And Luk is GoRec! See my white?" He pointed to a lump of fur on his head, slicked back with saliva. He referred to the patch of white fur that dropped across JaRed's eyes, white being the mark of a true Seer.

"I'm gonna kill that rat," Luk said. "Easy. Just like you. See?" He rose on hind legs no bigger than twigs. "HAARRGGHH!" he said, and kicked out at his brother, who tripped over his own tail. Raz bounced up, red-faced, and JaRed laughed.

A touch on his arm. JaRed opened his eyes, dispelling the memory.

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Raz bent over him, whispered, “You didn’t do it, did you?”

Before JaRed could reply, someone pushed the kits along.

Afterward, the commoners melted away. KoVeek remained with half a dozen kingsguard warriors, his face concealed in the mouth of one of the eastern tunnels that opened into the Great Hall.

“And now,” the prosecutor said, staring at JaRed over his long snout as the last of the onlookers disappeared, “Lieutenant Thu—” he glanced toward the Cadridian. A smile played across his mouth. “Lieutenant KoVeek will escort you to the Mud Gate. You just have time to reach the North Meadows—if you hurry.”