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“Gemstone of Prophecy: A Story of Argonia”

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Gemstone of Prophecy

A Story of Argonia

Jonquin dropped from his vantage point in the towering oak, landing with catlike, effortless grace. Pulling the hooded cloak over his head, he consciously slowed his pace as he approached the forest's edge. He must do nothing to capture the humans' interest.

Rounding his shoulders, he forced himself to slouch like so many of them did, as if life itself was a burden unbearable. Stepping onto the cobbled road, he attached himself to a steady stream of the humans funneling into the castle grounds. It had been years since he'd last been to this particular settlement, but his king needed an answer—and he'd been sent to find it.

The line of humans stalled before him as, one by one, each was stopped by a palace guard and asked his or her business at the castle. An aged crone pushing a rough-hewn wheeled cart hobbled past the guard, and it was Jonquin's turn. Slouching forward, he dropped his gaze to the ground, scuffing the toe of one travel-worn boot into the dust.

"Name?" The brawny guard towered over him.

"Marcus, sir," Jonquin mumbled, giving a human name no one would question.

"What?" The man glared down at him. "Speak up, boy. Who are you and what do you want in Tressalt?"

"My name's Marcus, sir," Jonquin said louder, infusing every word with hesitation and a peasant's slurred speech. "I'm here to meet my cousin. He works for the brewer, sir."

The guard scowled. "Where are you from?"

He named an eastern village many had heard of but few had visited. The guard nodded. "Fine, fine. Get along with you, then. See that you stay out of trouble while you're here."

"I will, sir." Jonquin bobbed his head and shuffled forward across the causeway that led over the moat and then beneath the raised portcullis. If he did want to cause trouble, he'd be in and out long before this guard or any of the others knew what was happening.

But that wasn't his task—had never been his task. His people had not battled with or against humans in nearly a millennium. If what he'd heard was true, most humans had no idea his people existed. Which was the way his king preferred it. For now, anyway. They were only to observe, keeping a careful, thoughtful watch on the others who shared Argonia with them.

Stepping around the old woman and her cart, he turned sharply to the left, taking a path that led not to the brewer's shop, but toward the guardhouse in the courtyard behind the keep. The young princess was as predictable as the phases of the moon, he'd been told, never missing her training sessions with the palace guard. It was because of this human princess he had reentered the land of Tressalt.

Working his way stealthily through the narrow alley between the keep itself and the inner wall, he soon reached the rear courtyard. The place was a maze of activity. Grooms hurried horses between the blacksmith's and the stables. Drovers hauling in heavy loads of brick shouted at their oxen. Servants unloaded potatoes from a farmer's wagon, while a dairy maid struggled to

the scullery door with a full jug of cream. Chambermaids chatted with each other while shaking out linens, and two young lads scurried by, arms loaded with firewood. Across the way, stonemasons repaired a crumbling section of the wall, while children dodged through the crowd, chasing each other, laughing.

They would be the ones to watch. Children were always unpredictable—no matter the species.

The only guard stood on the steps to the guardhouse, facing away from the commotion. Apparently the King of Tressalt did not fret about invaders attacking from the back of the castle. Shrugging, Jonquin shifted his pack on his shoulder, lowered his head, and trudged toward the workmen. He had no intention of joining them but if the guard or anyone else looked, it would appear he was aiming for them. Gradually, though, he angled away. Reaching the wall some distance from where the masons worked, he ducked under the streaming fronds of a large willow that swept to the ground in the courtyard. The tree had been there for decades. He'd used it the last time he was here, monitoring these humans, and it appeared as solid as ever. Slipping behind the sturdy trunk, he paused. Listened.

No shouts of alarm. No children running to investigate. Rolling his shoulders, he looked up, spotted the branch he wanted—an easy twenty feet above his head—and leaped. Grasping the branch, he threw his leg over it and pulled himself upright. Hidden from the humans by the thick flowing leaves, he quickly, quietly, scrambled farther up the tree until even the keen eyes of his own kind would not have seen him. Leaning back against the trunk, he settled in to wait.

It wasn't long before the door leading to the castle back entry burst open, and a young girl rushed out. She looked to be about fourteen in human years—just beginning the transition from child to woman—but still as gangly as the long-legged colts of the horses these humans so loved. Her dark hair was plaited into two braids, and for a moment he thought she was one of the many servants scurrying about, but something about her ... He frowned. Even in her flyaway state, something about the way she carried herself belied a servant's status. That, and the way a path seemed to open before her as she wove a speedy trail through the crowd. The way the actual servants bowed before her, or rather, attempted to bow as she dashed past them.

This was her—Princess Lyric, the heir to the throne in this human kingdom, and the person he'd been sent to observe.

Did she have the stone?

He squinted as the girl flew across the courtyard to the guardhouse. If she carried the stone, he hadn't seen it. She paused long enough to receive the bow from the guard at the door then hurried inside. The door slammed.

Jonquin sat back. More waiting, but this was the nature of his duty. The Lady Amira, who'd given him his orders, said the princess's training sessions were just an hour in duration, so he settled against the tree once again to wait for her to reappear.

Sometime later, movement in an enclosed, grassy area outside the west end of the guardhouse caught his attention. Benches were scattered about the area and he'd noted, on earlier visits, that palace guards often met there between shifts to drink their ale and banter. A small sparring court had been set up for practice. Men gathered there now and appeared riveted by

something he couldn't see in the practice court. Most likely some of their companions, testing their skills against one another. He shifted position in the willow, seeking a better view.

But it was the young princess who stood in the sparring court, gravely attending to something an older man was saying. Her dark braids were flung back over her shoulders, and both hands gripped the blunted sword she held before her.

Even with his superior hearing, Jonquin couldn't catch the words passing between master and pupil, but he could guess their meaning. The master put her through the defensive positions—high, middle, and low guard, as well as the back guards. They moved on to drills, practicing strikes, thrusts, and parries.

He struck. She parried. He instructed. She listened.

Then she struck, and they began again. Step by step. On and on. She held her head high, teeth clenched, eyes never straying from her opponent. She wasn't bad, Jonquin admitted, surprising himself. Rough, of course, amateurish, but determined. And quick.

For a human.

Cheers erupted from the assembled guards, and soon other people, hearing the commotion, left their tasks and wandered over to watch. So many others that Jonquin could no longer see the princess or what was happening in the sparring arena.

Checking the ground below, he saw he was alone—everyone, it appeared, had either gone inside the castle or now watched the princess's training session. Even the masons and their assistants had joined the audience. Jonquin slid down, dropping to the ground from the same branch he'd climbed. Landing lightly, he peered through the leafy curtain, then headed toward the practice court, exchanging his lithe steps once again for a human's trudging pace.

A cheer went up from the crowd as he drew near. "You're going to spar with her, Master Thomas? Are you certain?" A raucous young voice called out. "She might best you, you know. You're getting up in years."

Hood covering his head and most of his face, Jonquin stopped on the edge of the crowd in time to see the swordmaster's narrow gaze scan the group. "Was that you, Master Charn?" The man's voice was silky smooth. "Her Highness might indeed best me—being of royal blood and very well trained—but I have no doubt I can manage *you* without difficulty. Tonight, perhaps, after the evening meal?"

A great hooting broke out—mostly from among young Charn's companions—but Jonquin's gaze had not left the princess. Her face had reddened, he knew not whether from the exertion after her drills or embarrassment at the swordmaster's defense of her, but she held her stance, unwavering.

Master Thomas returned his attention to his future queen, expression sobering. Sweeping his sword back to his side in a gallant gesture, he inclined his head in salute. She mirrored the courtesy, returned her sword to middle guard, and, surprising Jonquin once again, leapt to the attack. Thomas parried her strike and countered with one of his own, but the princess deftly lifted both hands high, blade angled downward, blocking it, then lunged forward, thrusting her blunted blade under the swordmaster's arm.

Thomas sidestepped, evading the charge, and with a series of quick slashing moves, pressed forward, forcing the girl into retreat. She parried furiously but was soon out of her element, and the tip of the swordmaster's blade came to rest at the center of her brocaded tunic.

"I yield," she said softly, but Jonquin saw fire in the violet eyes and found himself impressed. The girl might make a queen someday after all.

"Very good, Your Highness," Master Thomas said, bowing. "If you had not overswung on that last flurry, leaving yourself open, we might still be at it."

"Again." The word was a demand.

"Excuse me, Your Highness?" The swordmaster faced her, bowing again.

The girl gulped, her eyes widening. "I'm sorry, Master Thomas, truly, but would it be possible to have one more go-round today? I think ... I think I can do better."

The man smiled at his young charge. The swordmaster was a relentless instructor but he obviously held a soft spot for his royal pupil. "If that's what you want, Your Highness, of course." He returned to his side of the court and the princess moved back to hers, rolling her arms and shoulders. A servant stepped forward, taking the sword from her. Another approached, holding out a mug. The princess took it with a word of thanks.

Only now, during this brief respite, did Jonquin take note of the growing crowd. Glancing around, he saw the young guard Charn was still entertaining his companions, telling some ridiculous story, judging by his expression and extravagant arm gestures. His audience laughed along, except for one lean, dark-haired youth standing nearby. Though clearly part of the group, this one only half-listened, it appeared, gazing over the crowd toward the mountains and forest beyond the castle wall.

Jonquin turned back to the sparring court and saw the princess staring at the group of guards and their followers, a wistful expression on her young face. Following her gaze, he found it was not the group that fascinated her, but the dark-haired guard he'd noticed himself. He couldn't blame her—Charn's companion was a good-looking young fellow. He had a feeling his own daughters, far away in Ashkyld, would be impressed with this one.

He wrinkled his nose at the thought. Thank the Maker they weren't here.

The young guardsman continued his perusal of the wilderness, apparently oblivious to his princess's interest.

It was just as well. Jonquin couldn't imagine the king of any land encouraging such a match.

"Whenever you're ready, Your Highness."

Handing the mug back to the servant, Princess Lyric turned to face the swordmaster. "I am ready, Master Thomas." Retrieving her sword, she stepped to the center of the court, chin held high.

Again, the respectful salutes, and again, the princess took the offense. But this time, she fainted to the left, then swept her blade low and to the right, forcing her opponent to leap back to save his legs. In spite of himself, Jonquin smiled. *Good for you, girl.*

Thomas blocked her assault, but not as decisively as he was no doubt capable of. Leaving himself open, he drew her in for attack, giving her the opportunity to show what she could do. Jonquin's opinion of the man grew. The swordmasters in his land couldn't have encouraged their students better.

Someone pushed through the gathered crowd, and Jonquin was forced to step back. Glancing over his shoulder, he noticed Charn and his nearest companions were completely distracted, scarcely watching the match. The lean, dark-haired fellow did, though, observing every move with keen, intelligent eyes.

The match continued for another minute—a long time for such sparring—and the princess began to falter. Thomas parried her last strike, their blades crossing between them, and she lost her balance. She stumbled, slipped, and landed on her backside in the grass. Muffled ohs sounded from the observers, and the swordmaster leapt forward, hand out, to lift her up. Just as he did, another sound burst from the crowd.

Laughter.

The princess had been smiling as her mentor raised her to her feet, but at the laughter, she glanced into the crowd. Her face fell.

Jonquin knew Charn and most of his fellows hadn't been watching, but the princess didn't. Given the timing, she would assume they were laughing at her. She sought out the dark-haired guard, but his back was now to her, facing his companions. She bit her lip and turned away.

Jonquin found himself sympathizing with the young human. His mate had the sometimes odious task of dealing with their daughters' frequent heartbreaks. So dramatic, these young ones. But still, as Sareta often reminded him, their pain was real to them. From Princess Lyric's expression, it was clear her pain was real, too.

The girl turned back and he took a second look, eyes widening. A gold chain hung about her neck. He had not seen it earlier, so it must've slipped out from under her tunic during the match or when she fell. Hanging from the chain, a milky-white gemstone gleamed. Even from this distance, he could see the coral, green, and gold sparkles radiating from its center.

Jonquin stared, transfixed, needing to make sure beyond doubt that this truly was the gemstone of prophecy. The stone he'd been sent to ensure the humans still possessed.

And truly, it was. Menjar—the opal stone of prophecy.

His king would be relieved.

And Jonquin could go home.

Tearing his gaze from the stone, he looked up, and found the young princess's perceptive violet eyes staring deep into his. Truly seeing him—as no human was meant to.

He dropped his gaze, spun around, then, reminding himself, slouched slowly away, fearing, dreading, the royal cry that would call all these guards down upon him.

It didn't come.

He slid in among the crowd of retreating servants, hoping to vanish among them and from the princess's thoughts, as well.

Reaching the castle wall, he dared a quick glance over his shoulder.

She still stared after him, expression intense, brow wrinkled. But she didn't speak. Didn't call for the guards.

She only stared.

Slipping into the alley, Jonquin raced away, not waiting for the princess to change her mind. What were the humans thinking, entrusting the opal stone to a child? Perceptive or not, she could have no true knowledge of its value. Of its power.

For that matter, did any of them?

What would they do if, as the rumors said, the wizard had returned to Argonia? It would be only a matter of time before he began his search for the gemstones.

And when he found them, what then?

Jonquin shuddered and slid to a stop as he approached the crowded road that led out of the castle. Adjusting his hood, he lowered his head and trudged toward the gate.

He didn't know what would happen when the wizard came searching. He could only hope someone did.

And that they would know how to prevent the coming disaster.

Enjoy this story? Watch for *Kingdom Lost*, book 1 in The Lost Stones of Argonia series available soon through Amazon and IngramSpark.