

Prologue

Kase didn't know what kind of creature it was, but its dark fur begged to be touched. The hairs seemed to glimmer as the creature's sides rose and fell to the calm rhythm of its breathing. One moment they were as black as the darkest night, and the next they were bright like morning sunlight. He had never seen anything like it while growing up on the farm. It was strange. It was chaotic. It was magical. He reached his hand out.

"Don't touch it!" yelled his uncle, who had finally caught up. Eowin ran well for a chubby old wizard, but Kase was born a warrior, and was lightning fast in comparison.

Kase yanked his hand back.

The beast woke up and abruptly made its way to its feet, stretching its wings to their full span: nearly twice as wide as the creature was long. Its paws were broad, with claws that cut through the bark and mulch as cleanly as a sword. Its legs alone were longer than Kase was tall. Soft, black fur covered its massive body from the base of its tail to the tips of its fluffy wings, flowing into a ruff that surrounded its head like a mane. It had a mean glare that was further amplified by the baring of a set of sharp, ferocious teeth.

The creature towered above them, casting a long shadow. It leaned back and opened its jaws wide, as if to let out a crippling roar, but its madness quickly faded. Its head lolled at its own movement, and its piercing blue eyes fluttered. It slumped back to the ground in a tailspin of awkwardness.

“What is it?” Kase asked curiously.

Eowin stayed quiet as he examined the animal from a safe distance. He took a few steps to his left, and then took a few more to his right. He stroked his greying beard. “I thought these were creatures of myth,” he finally mumbled.

“What is it?” Kase repeated eagerly. He could feel his heart pound faster. It had been a long time since anything exciting had happened.

“Stay calm,” Eowin replied. He made his way towards the head of the winged animal and put his hand below its nose. Its breathing was slow and difficult. A warm glow shone from his hand, and he touched it to the creature’s forehead. His power seemed to soothe it.

“It’s a langara,” Eowin said in a soft, monotone voice. “A giant beast of legend. With the body of a lion and the wings of a dragon, they’re said to be the guardians of the enchanted Forest of Moiras. They are dangerous creatures: natural born killers. That’s why no one has actually seen one: because chances are, if they have, they’re already dead.”

“If it’s the guardian of the Forest of Moiras, why is it here?” Kase asked, making sure to keep his voice low so as to not startle the legendary beast.

“That’s a great question,” replied Eowin. “I’m not entirely sure if I want to find out.” He began to walk around the langara, keeping his hands, still glowing with their soothing magic, against it. He made his way across its outstretched paws and giant, powerful legs, stopping at the belly of the beast.

He turned towards Kase with a stern look. “Kase,” he said calmly, “I need you to go inside and get Anna, my staff, and a bottle of ginger bear elixir.”

“Yes, sir,” Kase replied, like a trained soldier accepting an order from his commander. He still had questions, but the look on his uncle’s face was serious, and he knew they had to act quickly.

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He ran across the field and back to the farmhouse as fast as his legs could carry him. He went straight into the common room. There was a large, stone fireplace in the centre of the main wall, while the others were lined with bookshelves and homespun tapestries. Beside the fireplace was his uncle's old rocking chair, the staff leaning against it.

Kase nearly tripped on the area rug as he rushed through the room. He grabbed the first item he had been sent for, and headed into the kitchen to find the second.

He dropped the staff on the table and flung open one of the two large cabinets beside the hearth, where a tarnished, black cauldron hung over the coals. The cabinet was full of brewing ingredients, and he rummaged through it, looking for a pear-shaped bottle. There was frog's heart, spirit juice, troll's toenails, roibus fruit jelly, greensbane, and spider's breath. He stood on his tiptoes to peek at the top shelf, and moved his long hair away from his face so he could get a better look.

He heard footsteps from behind him.

"Kase, how many times have I told you not to put things on the table," his aunt scolded. "It's for food and potion preparation, not for dirty tools and staffs."

Kase spun towards her, but was in such a rush that he didn't have time to apologize. "Where's the ginger bear elixir?" he shouted in panic.

Anna gave him a quizzical look. Her soft eyes made him feel a little guilty about his behaviour. "What's going on?" she replied calmly.

Kase took a step back from the cabinet and quickly explained what was happening outside the house in short breaths.

In response, his aunt went to the small cupboard on the other side of the cauldron and unerringly grabbed out the oblong bottle, filled to the top with an amber liquid. "Whatever Eowin needs this for, it must be serious. Grab the staff. Let's go," she said sternly.

They left the house and made their way across the field. When they arrived, they found Eowin resting his entire body against the belly of the

langara. As it breathed in, its belly moved outward, taking the wizard along with it. As it exhaled, the belly, and wizard, moved back in.

When he noticed them, Eowin left his position and walked over. He took the bottle of ginger bear elixir from his wife.

“What are you going to use that for?” she asked as she stared at the langara.

“Oh Anna, this is just for me.” Eowin removed the cap from the bottle, took a swig, and shook his head side to side. “Woo—that really wakes a man up!” he said with a chuckle.

“It’s way too early in the morning for that.” Anna rolled her eyes. “Give me that back.” She grabbed the bottle, and then took a swig herself. She walked up to the foot of the beast, but Eowin grabbed her hand, and led her to its belly instead. He placed her hands gently on the animal where he had initially put his. A soft glow appeared as she touched it.

“Oh my,” Anna murmured.

“I know, right?” replied Eowin.

“But it’s not quite ...” she said.

“I know,” he replied.

“So why is it ...” she asked.

“I don’t know that,” he replied.

“The—”

“Is anyone going to tell me what’s going on?” Kase asked, impatient with his aunt and uncle’s secret conversation.

“This is a mother langara,” Eowin explained. “She is with child. It appears that the baby’s body is twisted, so it’s unable to be born naturally. Because it can’t be born, it will die in the womb, and will probably kill the mother as well.”

Kase glanced at the mother worriedly.

“I think the langara has flown all this way out of panic. She is in shock, and a great deal of pain, because of the complications.” Eowin

walked over to Kase and grabbed his staff. “Lucky for them though, they found us.”

Eowin made his way back to his wife. “I need you to expand the womb while I try and turn the baby around,” he instructed.

Anna acknowledged and closed her eyes in concentration. A brighter glow emanated from her hands, which she lifted slightly off the dark fur.

Eowin took a step back, lifted his staff, and drove the base of it into the ground. He reached out with one hand and placed it beside Anna’s. He closed his eyes and started moving his palm, which glowed vibrantly. It went up, and it went down. It went in a clockwise circle, and then a counter-clockwise circle. He pushed his arm in, and pulled it back out. After a few intense moments, his calm expression turned into one of frustration.

“What are you trying to do?” asked Anna.

“I almost have it; I just have to turn it a little bit left,” replied Eowin.

“Do you really want to go left?” she asked.

“Yeah, that’s what I said. That’s where I’m going,” he replied sharply.

“But are you sure?” she asked.

Eowin frowned in irritation. “I know what I’m—no, wait ... you’re right. I need to go to the other left.” He adjusted his position.

“There it is,” Anna said with a smirk. Both wizards half-opened their eyes, looked at each other, and giggled. Their calm expressions returned thereafter.

Kase couldn’t help but roll his eyes.

“All right, Kase. We need your help now,” said Eowin.

Kase was ready to jump into action. “Of course! What do you need?” he asked.

“I need you to go to the rear of the beast,” Eowin instructed.

Kase made his way past the giant legs and paws, and steadied himself at the tail end. He was out of view of his aunt and uncle. "Now what?" he shouted over the hind legs.

"We're going to try and deliver this baby, but the mother has no strength," Eowin shouted back. "We need you to extend your arms, reach inside her, and try and pull the baby out. Your aunt and I are going to try and push from this end."

"Hold on, you want me to what?" Kase tried to wrap his head around his uncle's request.

"Just reach inside the animal, grab the baby, and pull it out while your aunt and I push from this end," Eowin repeated. "It's not that complicated."

Kase stared at the rear end of the langara, turned away, and then back again. There was an odour coming from it; the shifting of the baby on the inside was causing gases to escape the womb. The raunchy stench hit him right in the face as he tried to contemplate his next move. For a magical animal, it sure had some hygiene problems.

"Are you ready?" shouted Eowin. "We're starting to push."

Kase steadied himself as best he could. He reached his arms out, braced his legs, and moved towards the animal. Just as his hand was about to enter the mother, he froze. He noticed some white, slimy fur coming slowly out of her body. Before he knew it, an entire paw the size of his own hand appeared before him, followed by a second. It was like the baby was trying to swan dive out of its mother's womb.

"Are you pulling?" shouted Eowin. Kase quickly grabbed onto the paws, leaned back, and pulled with all his might. His grip slipped, and he went crashing to the ground.

He pushed himself back up and noticed that his hands were covered in dirt, sticking because of the birthing slime. He grabbed the paws again, but this time his grip was better. He leaned back, and, with a little more success, helped the baby come out of the womb. With one pull, he

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was able to see the baby's forelegs. With another, the wings emerged. On his next pull, the baby shot out of the womb like lightning. Kase and the baby langara landed together on the ground in a heap of slime and dust.

More than a little grossed out, Kase tried to sit up and shift away, but he couldn't move with the cub on top of him. It was motionless, and didn't appear to be breathing at all. Its face was resting on his shoulder, eyes closed and its neck limp.

Although he was covered in afterbirth, Kase's focus was on the health of the baby langara. "Come on, little one, wake up," Kase said to the cub in a wishful tone. He shrugged his shoulder in order to rock the baby's head, hoping beyond hope that he could somehow save it. "Come on, little one," he said again, but he felt powerless. He closed his eyes and clenched his fists, wishing there was more he could do.

His aunt and uncle joined him behind the mother langara.

"Oh no," said Anna. Both wizards rushed to help. Just as his aunt was about to touch the langara and try to use her power, it sneezed all over Kase's face. He felt the cold, slimy mucus and afterbirth combination cover his eyelids, surround his mouth, and go up his nose. He turned his head and tried not to vomit.

"It's alive!" exclaimed Eowin. The baby langara nestled its head into Kase's neck with its eyes closed, and then began licking his face. "Aww, would you look at that; she thinks you're her mother."

Kase started to giggle as the baby langara's rough tongue tickled his cheeks. The cub was purring softly to show its affection. She stopped licking and opened a vibrant set of green eyes. Kase was mesmerized by the power that seemed to radiate from the young, giant beast.

The cub shifted itself off his body, and tried to take her first few steps. At first, she could barely stand: her legs were shaking like a plucked lute string as she tried to balance herself.

As soon as she took a few strong strides, she stopped and shook herself clean, flinging the afterbirth in every direction. Kase, Eowin,

and Anna turned away and tried to shield themselves from the viscous liquid. The cub started to lope in circles, excited with the newfound power in her legs.

“I’m a little surprised at how fast the young one recovered from the birth,” said Eowin. “I actually thought she was dead, but look at her now! She’s not only alive; she’s healthy, and surprisingly mobile for being born just moments ago. It really is a magical creature to have recovered so well.”

Kase stood up and tried to clean himself off as best he could. He wasn’t as impressed as his uncle was. As he brushed his legs, the cub tackled him in a pounce, and they both went to the ground. The baby langara furiously licked his face again as he laughed and tried to break free.

The cub moved back away, sat down on the ground, twitched her tail, and waited for him to get up.

“I think your new friend wants to play,” said Anna. “Maybe you should take her for a run through the field.”

Kase got up again, brushed himself off—this time keeping a close eye on the langara cub—and then took off as fast as he could. He looked over his shoulder and saw her follow playfully. It didn’t take long for her to catch up and tackle him again.

As he stood up, the langara looked at him and almost appeared to smile. Her eyes dazzled wickedly. She took off running, as if it was her turn to be chased.

Kase ran after her, but she was a lot faster than he was. She looked over her shoulder, and seemed to slow down. He caught up, stretched his arms out, and pushed her as hard as he could. She rolled across the grass like a white, furry tumbleweed.

Their game continued as they ran across the field. He would chase her, she would chase him. At one point, he heard her make a sharp, pulsating purr. He liked it, and somehow it made him think of laughter. He knew that she was enjoying herself.

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Then, he felt her fear.

She stopped abruptly in their chase game and looked back. Her tail straightened, her head moved up, and her eyes stared at the sky. Kase stopped running, and heard something hit the ground behind him. It sounded like thunder.

Slowly, he turned to meet the gaze of the mother langara. Her blue eyes were angry, her wings spread wide. Her fangs were dripping with saliva. She let out a roar so powerful that he felt the wind of her breath rush through his hair.

Kase was frozen in place, but he didn't feel scared. He felt warm, calm, and confident.

Before he had a chance to react, the young langara cub ran between him and her mother, and let out a roar in return. The baby's roar was like a kitten's purr compared to the mother's angry bellow.

The mother looked at her baby and calmed, her fur smoothing. She looked back at Kase, and though her gaze was piercing, her teeth were no longer bared. For some reason, he felt that the langaras were communicating somehow. The mother's gaze softened even more while watching the baby pace back and forth.

The langara cub turned to Kase, and gave him another soft lick on the cheek, as if to say goodbye. The cub then went over to her mother and stood beside the enormous left paw of the beast.

The mother moved forward, dropped her head towards Kase and moved it to within a whisker-length of his face. He wanted to reach out and touch her. He felt peaceful, safe, and comfortable as he stared at the deadly creature. He believed that she was not going to harm him, even though she was still making a low, mean growl under her breath.

The langara mother ducked her head, scooped her baby up gently in her mouth, and fluttered her wings. She slowly rose into the sky, heading back to where she came from.

“Goodbye,” Kase said in a low voice. He stared at them until they disappeared.

“Kase!” yelled the old wizards as they ran across the field. He didn’t look in their direction.

“Kase!” they yelled louder. When they finally reached him, both of them wrapped their arms around him in relief as they caught their breath.

“I could feel it.” Kase kept his eyes on the sky. “We were connected. How is that possible?” He had never experienced anything like this before; he didn’t know how to deal with the emotional chaos.

“I don’t really know how to answer that, Kase,” replied Anna. “Maybe the magic of the langara caused you to feel that way, or maybe it was something that generated inside of you. As wizards, it’s easy for us to make connections with the animals around us, but I don’t know how to explain it in your case.”

“Maybe you’re a wizard after all,” added Eowin with a proud smirk.

“Don’t tease him,” scolded Anna. “He’s all ready to go to The Academy to become the warrior he has always dreamed. Don’t fill his head with nonsense.”

“I wish she didn’t have to go.” Kase continued to ignore his aunt and uncle. His eyes never left the sky.

“She doesn’t belong here,” Anna said as she put her arm around him. “Sometimes the connections we make are important, and require a lot of strength. Sometimes letting them go is even more important, and is even harder to do. The langaras are on their own path. They’re magical creatures, and we have to let them be what they’re meant to be. We have to let them go.”

Kase knew she was right, even if he wished otherwise. He wanted to keep hold of his special connection, without worrying his aunt and uncle. He hoped he would see the langara again. He hoped he would feel its power again.

He hoped it wasn’t gone forever.