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PRISCILLA SHIRER

WITH GINA DETWILER

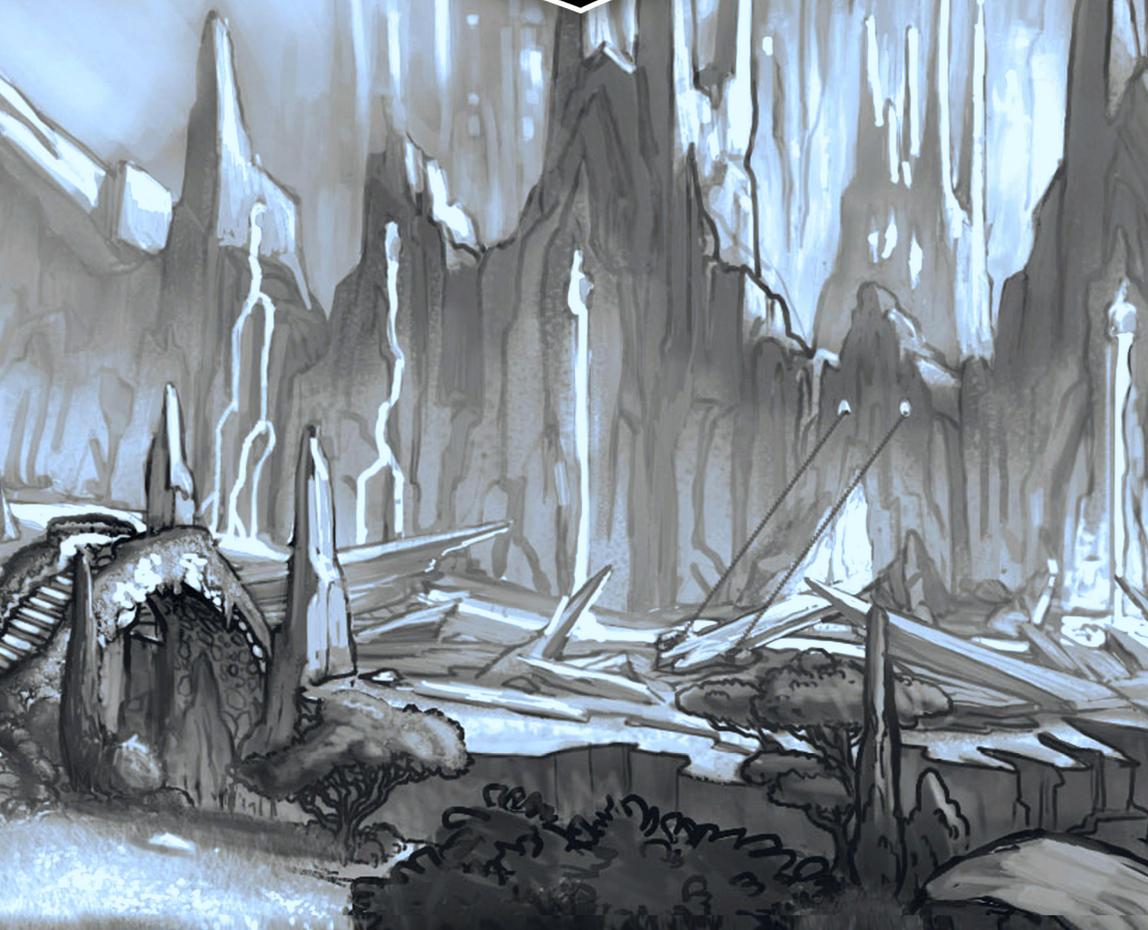
THE
PRINCE WARRIORS

AND THE



UNSEEN INVASION

II



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*For Jerry Jr.
Our second born son.
Our Prince Warrior.*

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Prologue

A small figure, clothed in deep purple, skimmed silently across the floor of the vast room. Snakes slithered out of his path, thousands of snakes that littered the floor, hissing and rattling their tails. The figure paused before the throne—a huge sculpture made of greenish iron. It had the shape of a crude tree made of entwined human forms, scrawny legs and arms twisted in bizarre contortions. Behind the throne was a wall of fire, the flames illuminating the agonized faces embedded in the sculpture, making them seem alive.

More writhing snakes carpeted the seat of the throne, their green, iridescent scales gleaming in the firelight. They lashed out with their forked tongues as the figure in the purple robe raised up one draped arm. A hand emerged from the sleeve—pure glowing white—piercing the darkness. The snakes recoiled, deserting the throne, hissing furiously in protest.

The figure lifted the seat of the throne to expose a compartment underneath. He pulled out its contents: a small metal object with four corkscrew crosspieces. A key. He slipped the peculiar key into his purple robe.

The violent hissing of the snakes rose to a fever pitch as the figure turned from the throne and sped away. The faces in the sculpture cried out in a fresh agony.

A shadow rose up from the seat of the throne, uncoiling like a giant snake, striking out at the intruder in purple. But it was too late—he was already gone.



PART ONE

The Smallest Seed

CHAPTER 1

The Prisoner

Rook knew that things were not going according to plan.

He jumped from beam to beam, pulling his companion along with him, the prisoner he'd just released. "Hurry!" he whisper-shouted, although he knew no amount of coaxing would help. The prisoner's legs were encased in metal, the joints stiff from disuse. His arms were still flesh, however, which made it somewhat easier to keep a grip on him.

"I can't," the prisoner panted. "I . . . need . . . to . . . stop. . . ."

Rook paused to let him rest, balanced precariously on a narrow girder that hung across a stretch of empty space. Below them lay a black abyss. Above them a maze of steel girders wound upward in a twisted skeleton, blocking out most of the churning, red sky.

It sickened him to be back in the Fortress of Chaós again, the dark castle at the edge of Skot'os, the lair of Ponéros, the enemy. Rook had escaped from this place not long before, rescued by a group of schoolkids who had brought him a message: *Once freed, always free*. He'd returned to bring that message to another prisoner. He'd also brought a key. It was the same key that had been taken back from the enemy by the kids—the key that opened prison doors. He reached

into his pocket, fingering the long shining object with the scroll-y handle, making sure it was still there. He couldn't lose it, whatever happened.

"This way." He beckoned to his companion to follow him along the beam. The boots that Ruwach had given Rook gripped the steel girder like rubber, giving him assurance he wouldn't slip. But the prisoner's metal feet scraped eerily, making Rook's hair stand on end. He remembered all too well what it felt like to hobble along on metal feet. And how he had been restored, thanks to those kids. And to Ruwach, the one who had sent them.

If only Rook had thought this through a little more. Getting into the fortress had been easy, *too* easy. The narrow beam of light from his breastplate had lit up his path with each step. No one tried to stop him. The Forgers—the fully mechanized soldiers of Ponéros's evil army—were nowhere in sight. Yet Rook had had the feeling he was being watched. The Ents, perhaps, those nasty metal bugs that liked to pass themselves off as butterflies. They'd probably been tracking him with their red laser eyes, unseen.

Rook should have known better than to simply go out the same way he'd gone in. But he was so determined to free a soul and get out of that horrible place as soon as he could, he hadn't taken proper precautions. He thought he knew the way. But the fortress seemed to have shifted around him, morphed—his path wiped away, every exit he had known blocked.

Chaos. Confusion. *That* was Ponéros's security system.

The beam under them shuddered, forcing them to stop. Loud booms filled the air around them, the sound of heavy footsteps echoing through the maze of girders.

“It’s them,” said the prisoner in a squeaky, pathetic voice. “They’re coming now.”

Forgers, Rook thought. They had trapped him. Now they would come to retake him and the prisoner both.

“What’s your name?” Rook asked.

“It’s . . . F-f-finn,” stuttered the prisoner.

“Well, Finn, we have to get to the end of this beam. And then . . . we’ll figure something out.” He hoped his voice didn’t sound as hopeless as he felt. He inched his way along the slender path, keeping one hand on Finn’s arm so he wouldn’t lose his balance and tumble into the abyss underneath them.

After what seemed like forever, he got to the end of the girder and grabbed a vertical beam that projected from the empty space below. Finn grabbed on as well. The whole structure trembled and shook with the sound of approaching *Forgers*. Red, round, glowing orbs appeared in the inky blackness, closing in around them.

“Which way?” whispered Finn.

Rook looked up. He couldn’t really see anything but small angular blotches of red sky peeking through the tangled web of beams overhead.

“Up here!”

The voice seemed to come from the sky. A young voice. A *girl’s* voice.

Rook strained to see who had spoken. Stars seemed to be pouring in from the cracks in the girders above them. Not stars . . . *Sparks* . . . those tiny, brilliant balls

of light that dwelled in the Cave. *Ruwach had come!* But the voice was not Ruwach's. . . . It definitely belonged to a young girl.



“Come *on*, will you?” the girl’s voice scolded him. By the light of the Sparks he could just see the outline of a human standing on a girder above him.

“This way! Climb!”

How in the world did that human—a girl—get all the way up there? Maybe it was a trick. Ponéros was good at tricks. Deception was his game. Yet what choice did Rook have but to follow?

He turned to Finn, whose half-human face stared back at him, fear roiling in his eyes. “Did you see that?” he asked, pointing upward.

A huge Forger vaulted onto the girder they’d just crossed, its metal fists closed and ready to strike. As

the Forger lunged for him, Rook drew his sword and swung, slicing off one of its metal arms. The Forger bellowed, its red eyes spinning with rage. It stumbled backward and fell from the beam to the dark void below. But soon there was another one to take its place. And another.

“Great,” Rook muttered to himself.

“You coming or what?” said the voice above him.

“How am I supposed to . . . ?”

“Use your belt!”

The belt!

Rook suddenly understood. As the second Forger charged him, Rook took off his belt—a wide, plain white belt that had no visible clasp. He tossed one end upward. It stretched out to several times its own length, the end wrapping snugly around a beam above. The belt, stretched thin, began to hum like a tightly wound guitar string. “Hold on to me!” Rook said and jumped, his boots launching him and the prisoner into the air as more Forgers converged under them. Rook swung one leg over the beam on which his belt was wrapped, hauling himself and Finn over the top.

“Piece of cake,” he said breathlessly, giving Finn a little encouraging smile. Finn tried to smile back with his half-metal face.

“You’re too slow!” said the girl, who had scrambled up to an even higher perch.

That girl was starting to get on Rook’s nerves.

Rook looked down, saw the Forgers climbing up the steel girders toward him. *Pretty nimble*, he thought, *for big, hulking hardware*. He unwrapped his belt, threw

one end up to yet another beam and jumped again, holding tightly onto Finn.

Rook could see the girl more clearly now. She had scrambled up toward the top of the fortress, where bare beams thrust into the swirling, red-purple sky. Her fiery red hair whipped around her face in the biting wind. She held on with one hand, glancing out over the expanse of sky.

“Come *on*, already!”

Rook jumped again, Finn clinging to him, the belt propelling them ever upward. Below them Forgers continued to gather, scaling the beams, their red eyes piercing the darkness. Where on earth was that girl going? She seemed to be leading him into a trap.

When finally Rook and his half-human charge made it to the pinnacle, the little girl with red hair greeted them with a big sigh.

“Took you long enough,” she snipped.

“Hey, you try dragging up a two-hundred-pound hunk of metal—no offense.” Rook glanced at Finn in apology then turned back to the girl. He unwrapped his belt and refastened it around his waist, making sure his sword was still secure. The girl, he noticed, didn’t have a sword, only a belt, breastplate, and boots. Like those other kids, he remembered. The ones who had rescued him. But this girl hadn’t been with them when they’d come for him. Again, he wondered if this was a trap—if this girl was working for Ponéros himself.

“Who are you, by the way? Did Ruwach send you? How are we getting out of here?”

“We’re going to jump, of course!”

The Prisoner

“What?” Rook blinked, hoping he’d heard her wrong. The beam on which they were perched shook with the vibrations of the Forgers clambering toward them.

“Now!” the girl said, with something like glee. “Let’s go!”

Before he had time to react, she’d grabbed his arm and jumped straight into the turbulent sky, taking Rook and Finn with her.