

PROLOGUE: FALKOR



*H*ello?" the boy calls. "Can anyone hear me?"

In the darkness, I taste his movements with my flickering tongue. He's not afraid like the others, though he should be. The caves have many turns, many dead ends that swallow up the light. The creatures that come in here for warmth or shelter stumble or flap among the rocks until they're completely lost. Some talk to themselves; some sob as terror closes its fist around their hearts. I take them silently, sliding across the ground and seizing them in my coils. Their cries die quickly, leaving only echoes.

"Hello?" he whispers. "Issy, are you in here?"

The boy's footsteps scuff nearby. Snout first, I drift like a deadly breeze toward him. My scales grip the cold rock

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and push me onward. My fangs sing with anticipation of my next meal.

There he is! A young boy. The burned-out torch in his hand trails a gray plume of smoke; it led me straight to him. These humans never learn! He has his back to me, so I thread around a boulder and slither on my belly toward him. I lift my head from the ground, ready to strike.

My movement disturbs a trickle of stones, and he turns, gasps, and staggers backward to the wall of the cavern. He holds his shepherd's crook across his chest as our eyes meet. But what's this? Something stops me from delivering the lethal blow.

It cannot be.

Along the sinuous coils of my body, a new feeling stirs. New, yet ancient: fossilized into the very fiber of my being. It's him! The one who is chosen for me.

I lower my head, edging closer to him, seeking his scent with my forked tongue. His breath comes in pants. As I bring my head to his level, I see the reflection of myself in his wide eyes. The blunt head, my forked, darting tongue.

I still expect him to scream, or cry, but instead he lowers the crook and smiles.