

TALES FROM THE GRYPHON SAGA: BEAST

by L.E.HORN

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2018 Sherrington Publishing

Canada

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloging in Publication

Pending

I SAT ON THE EDGE of the cliff, my legs dangling.

Below me, the rebel camp bustled with energy in the valley. Soldiers moved with purpose, preparing their weapons for war.

My weapon lay beside me; I seldom strayed far from it these days. Sheathed in a scabbard of tiny scales, the obsidian pommel with its eight-inch long spikes gleamed in the evening sun.

I examined my hands: long, strong fingers, and palms callused by many battles. I remembered a time when my skin blistered from long days doing chores on the family farm. Back when I worked hard to complete the tasks, so I could ride either my horse or a dirt bike; when my biggest concern was whether a certain girl would be at the party on the weekend.

A lifetime ago.

The sun moved below the horizon, painting the sky red and gold. My mind filled with memories of family as I marveled at the dancing kaleidoscope of colors. It reminded me of the sunsets back home.

At least it did, until the moons rose.

Two moons, one much larger than the other. They appeared on the horizon one moment and then seemed to leap into the sky. Their light bathed the surrounding cliffs in an eerie blue light, and all semblance to home vanished.

As if I needed any reminders I no longer resided on Earth.

THE MOMENT MY FRIEND SHOWED up, I knew I was dreaming.

Every time he appeared, I suffered through the usual gamut of emotions: guilt, loss, and a fierce longing for the past. They raced through me and left me drained, clinging to a single hope: that this time, I would not wake up.

We were surfing, the California sun baking our salty skin. My friend rode the board like a pro, his sandy hair darkened by the water. Raised on neighboring farms, we'd been best friends since we could speak. Both prairie boys, but his family's land possessed black gold, enabling them to do many things, including renting a house on Bodega Bay. We escaped the winters often to spend weeks enjoying the warm climate. In my dream, our carefree laughter carried over the

crash of the surf and the gulls' cries. I could see people on the beach, stretched out on towels to absorb the sun's rays.

A curvy form clad only in scraps of cloth waded into the shallows. The distraction proved my undoing. I hit the water hard, bobbing to the surface a moment after the surfboard.

Movement from below drew my gaze; a dark shadow glided past. *Shark*. I climbed onto the surfboard, but the shape kept moving away, uninterested in my human form when there were fat, juicy seals nearby.

Something about the creature—my heart accelerated. My mind filled with images of green eyes and dark blonde hair, a wide smile that could light up a room, a body with contours my fingers itched to explore, and a tail that twitched behind as she walked . . .

Her tail.

Dreams and reality swirled together into a vortex of memories. I found myself snatched from the safety of the Californian beach, toward a very different world filled with darkness and despair.

But the haunting image of the blonde-haired woman surfaced with me, and as I opened my eyes to the twin moons, I experienced the faintest shred of hope.

My heart knew the truth. She may be as alien as the world around me. But in reality, so was I.

And we were destined to be together.

OUR GROUP HEADED OFF BEFORE the dawn. My friend Karn detected my pensive mood.

“You good?” Gryphon had a hard time with English, so his words tended to be brief and open to interpretation. He shook his feathered mane, tilting his long head to regard me with one huge violet eye. My freakish height meant he only topped me by two feet, compared to the usual three-foot plus difference between human and Gryphon. Still, his muscular four-legged frame sported a bulk impressive enough to dwarf me.

“Yeah, fine.” I adjusted the sword sheath across my back before grabbing a spike on his torso and swinging onto his broad back.

His head turned on a long neck to eye me with skepticism, but when I stared pointedly back, he sighed and looked away. After so many battles together, he had become accustomed to my moods.

Beneath my butt and thighs, the muscles of his huge frame shifted, and I let my body follow the movement. Gryphon didn't ride like a horse; when they were in full gallop, they leaped more like a cat. Back home on the farm, I was on a horse almost before I learned to walk, and although different, those years of practice helped me now.

He stopped at the camp's fringe. Around us stood a group of humans and Gryphon, all watching my mount. Although I cared little, I had powerful friends: Karn led the Gryphon in this venture, just as my friend Drake led the humans.

Muscular with close-cropped dark hair, Drake rode up beside us on a Gryphon that dwarfed mine. Much like my feathered friend, the man eyed me, one dark eyebrow raised.

"You good?" His Aussie accent was faint, but discernible.

I sighed and made an effort to stop glaring at the world. "Yes."

He nodded and switched his focus to Karn. "Intel has them south of last night's coordinates. I sent their location to your datapad."

Karn spun, and we were off. Roz, the giant Gryphon who carried Drake, kept pace alongside us. I sensed the human rebel leader watching me out of the corner of his eye. I ignored him, focusing between Karn's ears, to the tall trees that formed a dark smudge along the horizon—the jungle, and our target.

Within me, something stirred. Like a serpent uncoiling to welcome the sun, the thing I kept caged deep inside raised its fanged snout and sniffed the air. I gritted my teeth and pushed it back down, but I would lose the battle, and it knew it.

Its time would come.

WE HAD BECOME MASTERS OF the sneak attack. The next rising of the twin moons witnessed us hunkered down in a dry creek bed within the jungle. Twenty-five Gryphon with their human riders, now dismounted and crouched along the muddy edges of a dry creek.

Gryphon ranged in weight, averaging three thousand pounds, measuring between

eight and ten feet to the top of their feathered heads. Such bulk struggled to maneuver in the dense foliage. Therefore, to hunt our prey, we used the creeks as highways to penetrate deep into the jungle.

A tall bipedal form slipped out of the foliage. Disheveled blond hair revealed Sean, who had taken advantage of human stealth to scout for our target.

“Our target unit has moved farther west than expected. Hannah took me right to them. The entire unit camped only half a klick from here, in a small clearing. Fang commander's tent is closest to the western border.”

The Fang commander. My hatred of the reptilian aliens ran deep. Sean's words ramped up my tension, and I clamped down on my inner beast with the viciousness of sheer desperation. It pushed back, eager, panting for release. The battle had yet to begin, but my personal fight already slid into the final round.

Blackness hovered at the edges of my vision. Not silent, but filled with the chaos of war: human screams pierced by the sizzle and pop of lasers, overridden by the clash of swords. And smells, those of fear and blood, scorched flesh and foliage. The visuals wove throughout like flashcards, fellow soldiers contorted in death, the empty, bleak gaze of the survivors. My heart pounded and my body stretched the skin over muscles gone rigid. Every sensation merged into a roar within my brain where it strained to morph into teeth and claws and death.

There was one vision, one memory I must avoid at all costs. I focused on the leaves overhead, on the scents of moss and damp bark, and breathed.

Movement overhead made me react, my muscles twitching with adrenaline. A small form dropped from the overhanging branches to land beside Drake. Human, but not. The Healer flipped long reddish braids over a shoulder as her tail curled in the moonlight, and it invoked images of another, taller form. *But she's not here.* With the beast rattling the bars of its cage, I avoided thoughts of her—and of the void caused by her absence. I caught Drake's eye, and he frowned at my expression.

Hannah reached out a hand to touch Drake's arm. The two shared a closeness that many envied, including me.

Dammit. I shifted my feet and gazed at the leaves.

Karn moved forward to peer at Drake's datapad. From my height I could see it showed a map of the jungle surrounding us, with the creek beds outlined. Sean pointed to a location between two forks of a winding creek. A small red dot marked where we stood a short way along one of the forks. “They are here. Within easy reach of both sections of the creek.” He shook his head. “Seems too easy.”

“They know we use the creeks as highways.” Drake glared down at the datapad. “Why camp so close?”

Karn snorted. “Pincer move. Trap.” Sometimes the stilted words led humans to believe Karn was a bit dim. I knew otherwise: a sharp mind existed beneath all those feathers.

“They expect us to move in from both sides to free the slaves.” Drake obviously agreed with the big Gryphon. “But if the slaves are the bait, where is the shark?” He turned to Karn. “They must have another fighting unit in the jungle, the logical spot would be here,” he gestured with a scarred finger well beyond where the creek forked. “They are poised to spring on us without crossing the creek bed.” The muscles of his square jaw tightened as he made plans for the battle. “We’ll split up. Six Gryphon stay here to wait—you’ll hear us when we attack, make your move then. Roz will take nine back to where the creek forks and work his way around the other side.” The giant Gryph behind him nodded, while Drake looked up at Karn. “I will need you and the others to take men north along the creek bed, then drop us. You can return here and wait until you hear us make our move, then you can get in to free the slaves.”

“You find shark.” The big Gryph’s ears twitched as he struggled with the unfamiliar word, but his bright eyes revealed the calculating mind within.

“Yes. Hannah, we’ll need you with us to scout from above. The Fang fighting unit must be waiting for us to make our move.” I noticed Drake swallow as he gave the order, his eyes fastened on the small woman. “Be careful.” He looked up at me. “There will be nine of us, but I must be honest, I will count on you to take them out.” His gaze intensified as he scanned my face. “Will that be a problem?”

With the beast closing in, he appeared in my vision as though surrounded by a black, whirling halo. “No,” I said.

Dark eyes narrowed. “You still there?”

I clenched my jaw. “Yes. So far.” My words came out as a ratcheting croak. The closer I came to losing control, the harder it became to speak.

“Hold on, but don’t bury it, we’ll need it. We didn’t come equipped to handle whatever they have waiting for us. I wouldn’t even consider this if you weren’t here.” Drake turned to Karn. “Your signal to go will be our attack.” His eyes slid over me. “We’ll hit them before they can spring the trap.”

His words triggered a surge of chaos. The cage bars within rattled and bent, and the shrieking darkness threatened to overwhelm me. My lips peeled back in a snarl and a low growl rumbled from deep in my chest. The adrenaline flowed as I leapt

straight from the ground to Karn's back.

Karn's ears flicked back, and he spun, calling to eight of our Gryphon warriors. Drake, Sean and six other men mounted and clung grimly as we accelerated ahead along the creek bed. My body moved on autopilot, swaying to the Gryphon's rhythm, while I struggled to hold onto my sanity and my self.

Overhead, Hannah swung through the trees, climbing ever higher as she searched for those intending to trap us.

My big Gryphon friend knew me well. Karn flattened his body as he increased speed, recognizing we operated on borrowed time. He had to get us into position before all hell broke loose.

Much as I wished that to be an exaggeration, I knew it to be the truth.

DRAKE LED HIS SOLDIERS INTO the dense foliage. We had to close on the Fang with stealth, or risk alerting those who hid in the jungle before us.

Somewhere behind us, Karn raced to get into position along the creek fork, having dropped us as far north as he could penetrate. If killers waited for us, it would be our responsibility to take them out.

I heard Hannah coming long before I saw her. My new talents included enhanced senses; I saw Drake startle when she dropped from the overhead branches.

“Commandos,” she breathed to him. “Thirty-two of them. They are alert, as though waiting for a signal, spread out along the north edge.”

Commandos. The elite of the Fang fighters, fierce and deadly. I hated them almost as much as I did the Fang commanding the human slaves. My vision progressed through the swirling blackness to the high-detail technicolor that preceded my total loss of control. It complimented the intense sensory input from my ears and nose. The sounds of war echoed in the chambers of my mind, making me wince as I struggled for sanity.

I saw Drake nod with a grim expression, and beside me, Sean shook his head at her news, glancing sideways at me. “Can't fool the Aussie. Between Drake and Karn, the Fang are dead meat. Let's kill us some lizards.”

I tried to agree with Sean but the words came out as a rumbling growl.

His pale eyes shifted, and I saw them widen. “Of course, that is, if you leave anything standing.”

Drake glanced our way. “Ready?” he asked me. “We’ll mop up around you.”

Now incapable of speech, I nodded but said nothing. Something within me broke open with the sound of shattering metal. Sean backed away as I reached over my shoulder and drew my sword: five obsidian feet of triple-edged death. I closed my eyes, hating what I would become almost as much as I hated the Fang.

Memories flooded me. Of a red-hued gaze spaced far too wide on a scaly face tapering to pointed crests, and a long snout lined with sharp teeth. Of clawed hands holding a lithe blonde form as screams rent the air despite her determination to remain stoic in the face of terrible pain; of green eyes in a white face and blond hair soaked in blood as teeth chewed their way closer to the vessels beneath the fragile skin of her throat.

Her throat. The Fang's teeth.

The last vestige of my control shredded on the cusp of a roar, and I let it go. For her, they would die. All of them.

Stealth abandoned, I remained dimly conscious of my fellow soldiers crashing through the foliage behind me, part of my peripheral awareness. Everything before me became crystal clear as if outlined in an aura of radiant light. The plant life glimmered in greens and browns, the humans in blues and oranges. But the Fang, those ruthless reptilian aliens, they glowed the color of old blood.

Within seconds the blood was no longer old.

I burst upon them like a tornado into a field of wheat, the sword swinging like a scythe to cut clear through their leathery skin. These were experienced warriors, but I sliced through them without effort, feeling neither their stabbing knives nor slashing claws. I possessed claws of my own, and any time my hands were free those claws drank deep until my arms ran purple with reptilian blood. My skin sizzled with close range laser fire but I didn't even flinch.

The commandos fell on me from all directions. I shrugged them off like a horse does flies. The beast reveled in the fight, my awareness remained as an observer, a prisoner in my body. I could see, and smell, and hear. I felt the push and pull of muscle and sinew as my body spun and leapt, witnessing blood flow from the cuts of the enemy's weapons but experiencing no pain. I could not have stopped the slaughter even had I wanted to.

Our soldiers dispatched anything left moaning in my wake.

Not far off, I heard the whistles and trills of Gryphon as they descended on the slave fighting unit and took on the single Fang commander protected by his alien bodyguards. I possessed no doubt as to the outcome. Those slaves would soon be freed.

A single commando stood before me, his armor running with blood and lips drawn back from needle-sharp teeth. Hatred shone in his eyes, an emotion the beast and I reflected in full force. He ducked within my sword and plunged his knife deep into my side. The beast snarled and removed his head with a single back-handed swing of my sword.

The Fang's hand fell from the knife, leaving it buried. Carnage surrounded me, much of it unrecognizable. The jungle fell silent as I stared down at the protruding handle. I sensed the beast recede a step as the blood flowed down my body.

“Hey, mate. You okay?” Drake's craggy face appeared, covered in gore that smelled reptilian. Sean emerged from the slashed foliage, his eyes falling to the buried knife.

“Ouch,” he said. Behind him, Hannah dropped to the ground. She approached me, stepping with care around the dead commando's head.

“Easy,” she said. With the keen hearing of the beast, I thought I detected the slightest tremble in her voice as she reached out to me. Hannah could heal my wound with a touch of her clawed fingers, a skill granted her by the very creatures at our feet.

Why does she tremble? Is she afraid? After enslavement and months of fighting for the rebellion, Hannah feared little. Not the Fang, or the battle. Is she afraid of me, of the beast I have become?

With a snarl I yanked the knife out of me, freeing a fresh surge of blood. Along with the beast, came my own ability to heal: I did not need her help, and did not want it either.

I turned away from them all and stalked into the jungle. I would deal with the wound, and the beast, in my own time.

MY FRIEND KARN IS BRAVE.

Time after time, he finds me, not knowing if he will encounter his friend, or the monster.

I heard him coming. Even a Gryphon cannot move silently in so much foliage. He approached without fear and lowered his big body to the ground beside me.

“You look nice,” he commented in his stilted English.

I did not laugh, but I felt my lips twitch in response to his comment. My clothes hung in shreds, and there wasn't an inch of me not covered in gore. I could smell it on me.

His humor had its intended effect. The beast slunk further into the darkness, and I focused on winding my imaginary bars closer around it, caging it within my mind.

Finally, I breathed in relief. Contained. *Until the next time.*

I sighed and broke off a leaf, using it to wipe the mess off my sword. As usual, the black weapon shed the blood with ease. The leaf, however, became worse for the experience.

Karn stood when I did, his long-lashed violet eyes calm as they surveyed me. I had little doubt he searched for human blood among the reptilian, but my wound had already sealed. It would take another day to disappear; my ability to heal paled in comparison to the Healers.

“Go home?” He tilted his feathered head and raised one furry eyebrow.

In answer, I grabbed one of his thick torso spines and swung aboard.

“Home,” I agreed.

I WATCHED KARN WEAVE THROUGH the camp, his washed fur dripping wet and feathers matted against his neck. He would roll in the sand pit and emerge shiny clean and freshly fluffed.

Shaking water from my hair, I bunched the remains of my ripped shirt into a wet wad, picked up my scabbard and headed for the supply tent. For me, being clothed was a transient state and required frequent raids on the clothing stores. My pants were barely respectable.

The route took me past the Healers' tent, and I struggled not to look for a certain blonde-haired form. I longed to see her yet feared to, an eternally confused state.

Story of my life. I sighed and slung the scabbard over my shoulder, the point banging against the back of my thigh as I walked. The entrance to the supply tent required that I duck, lest I clobber my head on the beam overhead.

As I bent, I banged into something else. Or rather, someone else.

Her arms filled with fresh sheets for the medical cots, the Healer made a sound of dismay as she swayed. I reacted by reaching out to steady her, my hand closing on her upper arm.

Green eyes looked up into mine, and both my mind and my body froze. Her hair hung in thick cornrows over her shapely skull and down her back, and her golden furred tail twitched hard.

We had known each other once. Before the war. Before the Gryphon. Before the Fang tore into her and left her in pieces.

Back on a world whose nights were lit by a single moon.

A lifetime ago.

Half-naked, I stood exposed in more than just the flesh. My surprise gave me no time to shield my gaze; I am sure she read an entire novel in my expression before I clamped down and schooled it into submission.

Emotions I was desperate to catch flitted across her mobile features. My heart thudded into my boots when her face went stiff and her eyes skidded from mine. But then she looked back, and wonder of wonders, she smiled.

It all fell away: the war, the killing and the dying, the Fang, the pain and blood, and above all, the beast. Warmth flooded my body and soul, and as I smiled back, the world seemed full of potential.

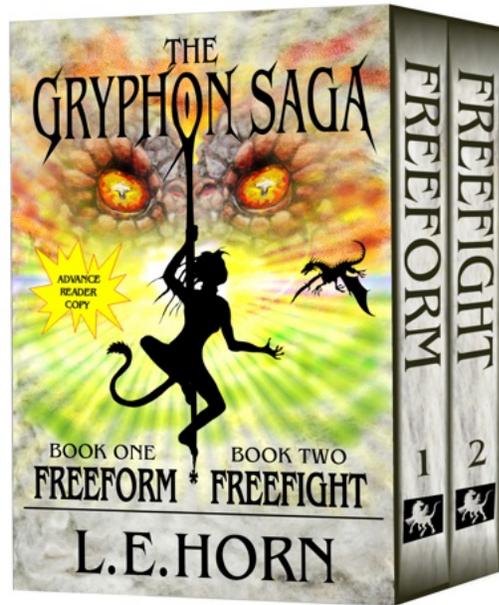
It only lasted a moment before she slipped past me and was gone. But I had seen the possibility of a future, and my heart soared.

Flooded with sensations, it proved a heady enough experience to make me tremble. But over and through it all wove the most vital of emotions, one capable of driving Gryphon and human alike through the darkness onward to a brighter future.

Hope.



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