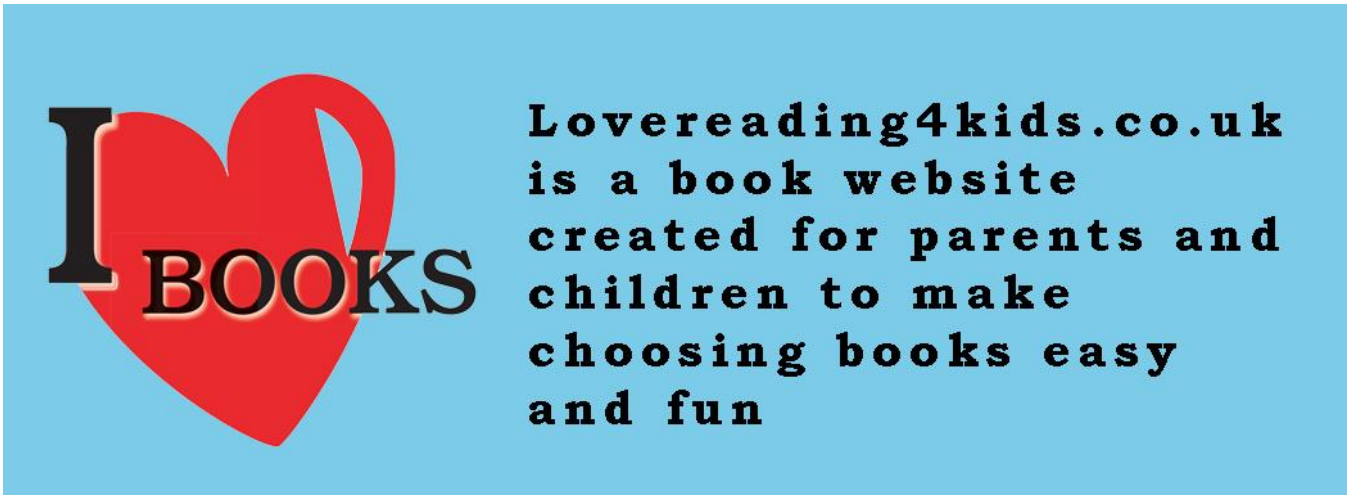


Opening extract from

The Hunting of the Princes

Written by

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Published by

Macmillan Children's Books

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First published 2016 by Macmillan Children's Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-4472-9114-5

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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1

A QUIET RIDE HOME

Taggie Paganuzzi was cycling home when her mobile rang. It was a four-mile ride from Stamford back to her mum's house. The tiny country road just outside the lovely old market town cut a winding route past fields guarded by ancient stone walls. Nobody else was using it.

Today was a warm sunny day, and now Taggie was thirteen her mum was quite relaxed about her being out on her own. It probably helped that Mum was a Third Realm sorceress and Taggie had inherited that side of the family's magical strength. So while a lot of parents these days were fussy about allowing their daughters out by themselves, getting permission to go swimming at the municipal pool with her school friends was no problem for Taggie.

The mobile kept on ringing with the annoying tune she'd deliberately chosen for her younger sister Jemima. It was the only sound she could hear. Taggie squeezed the brake and came to a halt beside one of the big oak trees lining the narrow road.

There was the faint noise of an engine in the distance as Taggie took her backpack off and started rummaging through it for the mobile. Her charmsward bracelet caught

on the bag's big zipper. The charmsward was made up of several slim bands of brass and wood that were twined together. They were engraved with symbols which, even after a year of wearing it, Taggie wasn't completely familiar with. But it was what the charmsward contained that was truly important, the memories of all Taggie's First Realm ancestors who'd sat on the shell throne. It was like having a dictionary of spells permanently in her head. A useful thing to own for a Queen who only last year had no idea she was the rightful heir to the throne of the First Realm.

Finally she pulled her mobile out of the bag, disentangling it from the wet towel. The sound of the engine was growing louder now. Taggie looked over her shoulder to catch a glimpse of a huge black motorbike slicing along the road towards her. The small rider was dressed in black leather with a matching shiny black helmet.

She tapped the 'accept call' icon.

'Death spell!' Jemima's voice yelled out of the mobile. 'Duck!'

Taggie looked up, her mouth opening to grunt 'Uh?' The motorbike was twenty metres away, rushing headlong at her with incredible speed, its rider sitting up in the saddle, an arm raised high with deadly blue magical light flaring around each finger.

Taggie instinctively shoved her own arm out towards the black rider. The charmsward bands spun smoothly, their slender engravings shining violet as the wave symbol lined up with the moonstar and a shield. '*Elakus!*'

Taggie bellowed, and felt the shielding enchantment coil protectively round her.

A vivid-blue death spell flashed out from the rider's hand like a hostile comet. It hit Taggie's enchantment shield. The impact was like being struck by the boulder at the front of an avalanche. Taggie was knocked off the bike's saddle to flail about in mid-air before crashing painfully on the shaggy grass verge. But the shield enchantment held and the death spell sizzled down into the ground, killing the grass as it went.

Taggie was badly frightened and in a lot of pain. Overriding that, however, was anger that someone should just come along and try to murder her like this. Even before she hit the verge the charmsward bands were sliding round again, aligning rock with wind. She landed on her side, skidding along through grass, nettles, and brambles. Her hand pointed a rigid forefinger at the back of the rider who had zipped past. '*Israth hyburon*,' she growled furiously, and her arm lit up like a neon orange sign. The hot summer air in front of her warped as if she was looking through a giant magnifying glass. It became a big translucent fist that surged forward. The motorbike was punched up into the air, its engine shrieking wildly, wheels spinning. And the rider went flying over the drystone wall, legs and arms waving frantically.

The motorbike thumped down, banging and scraping along the tarmac until it finally came to a halt and its noisy engine stalled. Silence reclaimed the country lane.

Taggie staggered to her feet, wincing at the sharp pain in her bleeding knee. Now the shock was fading she realized how strong that death spell had been; even Jothran, the Karrak Lord who had tried to steal the shell throne from her last year, hadn't been this powerful. 'So who in all the Heavens is the rider?' she asked herself with growing worry. Her instinct was to get back on her bicycle and get away as fast as she could, as the idea of fighting some crazed killer was terrifying. But she suspected attempting to flee wouldn't be any use. This threat had to be faced down.

She was shaking in fright as she refreshed her shield enchantment. Then it was a slow limp towards the moss-covered wall where the rider had gone over. By the time Taggie reached it, she was in no mood to waste time clambering over.

'*Droiak*.'

A wide section of wall exploded as her destruction spell hit it, sending smoking chunks of stone shooting up into the air. Mum and Dad were always telling her not to use magic here in the Outer Realm, but right now she decided normal rules didn't apply. Besides, technically, she was a Queen so she could do whatever she liked – although that never seemed to count for as much as you'd think with either parent.

Taggie stepped through the gap, and looked round for her assailant. But there was no sign of the black-clad rider. The meadow spread out ahead of her, with a flock of very startled sheep staring at her. There was nowhere for

anyone to hide. 'What? How . . .'

Another death spell came streaking down out of the sky, hitting Taggie's shield right in front of her face with a fizzing burst of brilliant blue light. Again she went tumbling backwards, smacking into the remnants of the wall. 'Oww!' she cried. Her hand automatically went to her stinging nose. When she took it away there was blood on her fingers. The sheep were running away as fast as their spindly legs could manage.

Above her, a huge black eagle swooped round in a fast curve.

A shapeshifter! Taggie realized in alarm. This was an incredibly complex magic that she'd never even tried to master. Anger finally overcame her fear. She stood up and snarled as she faced the eagle which was soaring round to line up on her.

'OK then,' Taggie snapped. 'If that's the way you want it.' She hadn't asked for this battle, but if someone was stupid enough to try and kill a Paganuzzi with an unprovoked attack, they were going to have to learn the hard way what a seriously bad idea that was. Taggie licked her lips in determination as the charmsward's bands slid round obediently.

The eagle began its dive. Magic crackled round its talons.

'*Ti-Hath*,' Taggie chanted. Halfway between her and the eagle, a wide circle of air turned rock hard.

The eagle smacked right into the patch of enchanted

air at considerable speed. Its head crunched to one side, the rest of its body and wings followed, whacking into the solid sheet of air with equal force.

'Urrgh!' a girl's voice exclaimed. And for an instant, the eagle was spread out wide in mid-air.

The dark bird slid vertically down the invisible barrier to the ground, and flopped about on the meadow grass. A couple of feathers drifted down gently above it.

Taggie pointed her finger at the befuddled bird. '*Quillazen*.' A general counter-charm, that really ought to work on a shapeshift spell . . .

It did. The eagle shimmered, turning to a ball of seething black mist. And for a moment Taggie thought she was going to see a Karrak Lord emerge; the effect was so similar to the smoke cloaks they always wore to protect themselves from any kind of light.

Instead, a girl of about seventeen was revealed, wearing the black biker leathers. She was short and slender, with skin a shade darker than Taggie's, but with hair exactly the same rich chestnut. The nose was slightly flattened, and the lips were thin. But it was the intense brown eyes that startled Taggie. It was like looking into a mirror.

The girl wiped a hand across her mouth, staring harshly at Taggie. 'You stupid little brat, you're ruining my reputation,' she said haughtily.

'Reputation?' Taggie's hand was still pointing warily at the girl, charmsward bands locked for another destruction spell. Taggie had never actually used a death spell but she

was starting to think today might just be the day.

'I always kill quickly and cleanly, and leave no sign of my presence.' The girl gestured angrily at the smoking stone wall. 'Now look!'

'Yeah, I'm really sorry about that.' Taggie said sarcastically.

The girl took a step closer, her back arching as if she was about to crouch, then pounce. Taggie wished she'd just try it. Two years of martial arts lessons with Mr Koimosi, her sensei, had taught her a lot about physical combat. Especially when it came to brash arrogant people who thought they were superior because of their size and strength.

'Who are you?' she asked.

'The last person you'll ever see.'

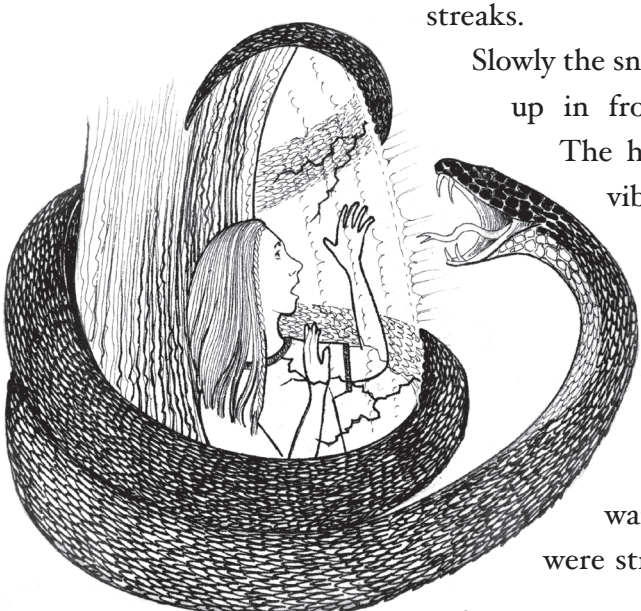
'Oh dear. Did it take you a long time to come up with that? Or was it out of a Christmas cracker?' Taggie retorted.

The girl snarled. She clicked her fingers, and another death spell came flashing out of her hand. It broke apart on Taggie's shield. Taggie flung her destruction spell, which the girl parried. Magical light flared and danced through the air between them. As it cleared, Taggie screamed. A massive snake was hurtling towards her. Taggie hated snakes. She stumbled backwards, squealing in fright, but the snake just kept coming. Its head was as big as hers, while the sinuous body with its black and livid-green scales was thicker than her leg. Jaws parted wide to reveal fangs

as long as fingers, while a nasty forked tongue flicked out amid a piercing hiss.

The snake lunged forward. Taggie jumped back, and collided with the big oak tree on the side of the road. Before she realized what was happening, the snake coiled round her and the oak trunk, binding her to the tree, pinning her arms at her side. Her enchantment shielding prevented the snake's scales from actually touching her, but the thick coil contracted, squeezing tight. Little purple cracks spread across the shielding. Taggie groaned at the pressure. She could barely breathe.

The snake looped a second coil of itself round her and the tree. Another patch of her enchantment shielding creaked as the purple stress-lines multiplied. Now most of Taggie's chest was a mass of slender glowing purple streaks.



Slowly the snake's head rose up in front of Taggie. The horrible tongue vibrated out between the fangs, which dripped gooey venom from their tips.

'They warned me you were strong,' the girl's

voice said. 'But even so, you're hardly a match for someone with my superior skill.'

Taggie didn't dare try to channel any magic into an aggressive spell. It was taking all her strength to keep her enchantment shielding in place. And that was gradually failing under the terrible pressure the snake was applying. She looked round desperately for something that could help.

The snake's head lunged forward, trying to close its jaws round Taggie's neck. It was only just repelled by her shield. Purple light rained all across Taggie's face.

Taggie caught sight of something moving across the meadow. It gave her an idea. One which was stupid, a completely mad idea. But she hadn't got anything else. '*Cozal-wo*.' She sent out a tiny courage enchantment that needed hardly any magic to make it work.

The snake's head withdrew, its red and green eyes studying her in puzzlement. 'So, you need bravery to face your doom?' the girl's voice sneered. 'Fancy having to use magic to give that to yourself.'

Taggie sucked down a breath. 'Yes. I don't suppose you need anything to reinforce your cowardice.' She was looking behind the snake's head, across the meadow where the ram from the flock of sheep began to run towards them. It was a big animal, with dirty-yellow horns curling up from its head.

The snake hissed angrily, and its head snapped forward again. Taggie thought her shield would fail this time, but

it held against the hammer blow. Just. Only a couple more strikes like that would break it now.

'I am no coward,' the girl claimed. 'My profession is amongst the most noble in all the Realms.'

Taggie just managed to gasp out: 'What Realm calls "thug" a profession?'

As she expected, her provocation made the snake pull its head back, ready to strike again. Its jaws opened wide and the enraged hiss began – then abruptly changed to an astounded wail of surprise and pain. The snake's huge head twisted round, and Taggie felt its body turn rigid with shock. The ram's horns had jabbed forcefully into the snake, and Taggie was abruptly surrounded by writhing black mist again. Then she found herself face to face with the girl who was hugging her and the tree. She had an expression of wide-eyed suffering. The ram backed away, withdrawing his curving horns from the girl's bottom.

Taggie didn't waste time forming a spell. She headbutted the girl. *Hard*. Never mind how un-regal that was.

Her assailant tottered back, letting out another anguished wail. Taggie held her arm out. It was tempting, but today wasn't going to be the day for a death spell after all. '*Israth hyburon*.'

Magical orange light flared once again. The air warped as it smashed forward, and the girl went somersaulting backwards to thud down on the road.

'Who are you?' Taggie demanded, closing in on the prone figure in black leathers. 'Who sent you?'

The girl growled wordlessly at her. Then with an impressively fast motion she sprang back to her feet like a gymnast coming out of a difficult manoeuvre. She looked over Taggie's shoulder and pressed her lips together in annoyance. 'Still need Mummy's help, do we? What a Queen you make.'

'I . . . what?'

The girl's hand made an impatient gesture, and the big black motorbike lifted itself upright. The engine burst into life, and she leaped on to its saddle.

'Hey!' Taggie yelled. Some part of her was desperate to know who she was dealing with, but an altogether more sensible part was extremely glad the terrible girl was leaving.

'Don't worry, I'll see you soon enough, Queen of Dreams,' the girl sneered, and twisted the throttle.

'Not if I see you first,' Taggie shouted in a shaky voice. It was a good comeback, but she didn't think the girl would hear her above the engine roar. And anyway she was already riding off, speeding away down the lane.

Taggie watched her go, and suddenly she was aware of her injured knee. And the mass of scratches and torn clothes from the brambles. And the patches of skin that were hot from nettle stings. And her ribs hurt where the snake-illusion had squeezed. She dabbed at her face to find her nose had thankfully stopped bleeding. But it was very sore.

It was hard not to start crying. There was nothing she

could do about her trembling legs and arms.

Her mother's big grey Range Rover came tearing round the corner. Tyres squealed, and smoke actually squirted out of the wheel wells just like it did in action films as the car performed an impressive handbrake skid-turn-stop. Taggie had no idea her mum could drive like that. But then until last year she hadn't known Mum was a Third Realm sorceress, either.

Doors slammed open, and Mum was running across the road. 'My darling, are you all right?' she demanded, looking up and down at Taggie's ruined clothes and battered skin.

'Yes, Mum. I think so.'

'That's my girl.' Mum hugged her tight, which made everything a whole lot better. Taggie hugged her back, grateful for the contact.

'Who was that?' Mum asked in a cold, angry voice.

'Don't know. I've never seen her before.'

'Her?'

'Yes. She tried to kill me! And she could shapeshift.'

Mum stiffened. 'Oh could she now?'

'Yes. And, Mum, she looked familiar somehow.'

'Really?' Mum looked worried.

'A Third Realm sorceress, then,' Felix announced. 'And academy tutored, too, if she could shapeshift.'

Taggie saw the big white squirrel had jumped on to the Range Rover's bonnet, to gaze down the lane after the motorbike. Felix was a special agent of the First Realm's Palace Guard, assigned as Jem's bodyguard. A job he took

very seriously indeed, as indicated by the tip of his fluffy tail flicking from side to side in agitation.

'I can still see her aurora,' he continued. His glasses with their purple lenses were designed to reveal magical energy from the Realms.

Jemima came racing round the back of the Range Rover. She was in her best party dress ready for her friend Sienna's birthday. 'I called you as soon as I saw the vision,' she said breathlessly. 'You took so long to answer. I was really scared for you.'

Taggie put her arms out to her sister and they hugged for a long moment. 'Thank you, Jem. I think you saved my life.' Her little sister might be irritating at times but she was shaping up to be a very accomplished seer.

'I just saw this crazy black shape flinging a death spell at you. I knew it was about to happen.'

'You saw perfectly, Jem. And crazy is the right description of her.'

Jemima smiled delightedly.

Something horribly wet and warm nuzzled the back of Taggie's knee. There was an affectionate bleating sound behind her.

'Taggie?' Jemima asked. 'Why is that sheep licking you?'

'Long story.'