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Opening extract from

The Broken King

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Flora shouted again. Simon, who was still half asleep, was terrified at what he saw. There was Flora, hands held in front of her instinctively to protect herself. There was something – a blackness, a beast. He couldn't tell what it was but it was coming straight at him.

Simon flung his torch at the thing, then immediately wished he hadn't. The torch bounced off its hide and rolled away.

Then the creature was on him. It was about the size of a large dog, and he yelled as he felt its claws dig into him. Its stench choked his nostrils; its slobbering seemed to fill the world.

It's too strong, thought Simon, feeling it sniff along his body. *It's going to kill me. Before I've even left the county, I'm going to fail in my quest.*

A vast sadness filled him and he felt his body grow limp.

The creature, sensing its prey losing the will to live, readied itself to tear into his flesh.

I'm ready, thought Simon. *Ready.*

Then, as if from a huge distance, he heard another scream, but this time it sounded like encouragement.

Something was stabbing into the beast. It whined. It struggled and snapped.

'It won't get off him!'

That's Flora, thought Simon. Her voice made him remember. He had to get out of this. He stiffened his body, ready to try to push the thing off him.

He could feel someone slashing at the beast. Simon clamped his hands on its muzzle and stared into its burning eyes. They were hypnotic, terrible, evil. If he had been able to do so, he would have been sick at the smell coming off it. He was aware too of some scuffling around him.

'Help me!' he managed to yell.

Something tried to stab at the beast; the blow glanced off its scales. Again, and

this time something cut into the flesh. The beast snarled.

'Get it off me!'

'I can't!' yelled Flora.

Simon gritted his teeth. He clamped down harder on the beast's muzzle with his right hand, and felt in his jeans pocket for something, pulling it out with difficulty. It was Anna's porcupine spine.

'Simon!' shouted Flora. 'Look out!'

Another stab of a knife just missed his shoulder. Simon tensed himself and thrust as hard as he could with the spine, right into the creature's eye. It snarled and whimpered. He felt it relax. He jabbed the spine deep into the cavity of its other eye, and he felt its body go limp. He threw it off, and then someone else was beside him, sticking a knife again and again into its body. The whole thing shivered and convulsed; two spurts of blood shot out from where an artery must have been hit, and then it was still.

Simon collapsed on to the ground, and was immediately and violently sick. Over his retching he heard Flora shouting, 'Hey, come back!'

Flora was panting. The shock of what she'd seen came over her suddenly, but she steadied herself. She was bleeding. A boy had come out of the woods with a knife – she ran towards the edge of the trees and looked for him, but couldn't see anything. He'd run off. If he hadn't come . . . She hadn't been able to see much of him. Who was he? A noise from Simon made her turn back to him.

Simon was bent over, wiping his mouth. Flora went tenderly to his side.

'Are you all right?' Her voice sounded loud in the quiet. An owl hooted and a bat dived across them into the woods.

Simon stopped retching. He was breathing deeply, heavily. 'I think so,' he said. He felt a dull pain all over his body.

'Here.' Flora rushed into the tent and came out with some water, which she gave to Simon. He drank it in one go. When he'd finished, she asked, 'Did you see

him?'

Simon was now lying on his back, clutching the spine he'd stabbed the creature with. He released his grip, slowly. He wiped the spine on the grass, cleansing it of blood, and placed it back in his pocket.

'See who?'

'The boy. The other boy. He came and stabbed that thing with a knife.'

'No,' said Simon. 'I had other things to worry about.' He smiled ruefully.

'Glad to see you're feeling OK,' said Flora.

'Who was he, then?' *So there had been someone else*, thought Simon. A boy – a boy with a knife. Was he following them? If he was an enemy, why had he saved them? Was he an emissary of the Broken King? The Knight of the Swan? Was he one of the Golden People? There had been no light around him, though.

'I didn't get a chance to look at him properly. He was a boy. I didn't really see his face. He looked . . .' Flora stopped herself. 'He looked . . . well, like he didn't have a home to go to.' She remembered grey, loose clothes, and a pale, pudgy face with eyes that gleamed.

'He helped us,' said Simon. 'We should find him – thank him. We could have died.'