

## Chapter One

Nathan Sullivan cowered before the altar of the Sol Dragoness. He slapped his palms against his ears, trying to silence the horrible shrieking. His soul burned along with hundreds of dragons, as their voices pushed his spirit to its limit. Without understanding their terrible agony, he knew something shocking had occurred.

Summoning his strength, he strained his neck upward. Looking toward the altar, he saw shadows darting in every direction like a flock of startled birds. Tears streamed from his eyes as he stared ahead, looking for guidance, an answer, a sign.

He hadn't sensed the evil presence until it shoved him violently away from the altar.

His shoulders and head slammed against the far wall. Fighting to stay alert, he watched the shadows above the altar change. The bodies, wings, heads and tails of the dragons reshaped themselves. A painful grimace crept across Sullivan's face as he recognized creatures he hadn't seen in over twenty thousand years.

"The prophecy approaches," hissed a shadowy voice. "The fourth sun has passed, the fifth sun awakens."

Sullivan opened his mouth to respond. His throat blistered as a fiery breath swept into his lungs. He tried to cough but couldn't, tried to exhale but failed. His eyes burned as he gasped for air.

A powerful wind rushed through the room. It thundered down the opening behind the altar. Sullivan's body slumped to the floor. The shadows disappeared. A second later the horrible cries returned.

## Chapter Two

"So, Diego," said Alvaro, watching his son gobble down his breakfast. "Today you go into the seventh grade. You're el hambresote now, eh?"

"Big men don't eat at the trough like un cerdo," said his mother, Alejandra. "At least, not unless you want to end up looking like this one." She patted her husband's ample belly.

Alvaro smiled as he draped his arm over his wife's shoulder. "What can I do? I married the best cook in the county."

Alejandra crossed her arms and gave Alvaro one of her special looks.

"All right," he said, "the best cook in California."

Diego smiled at his parents. Their playful antics always made his heart sing. Watching the love in their eyes made his home that much better.

He slid from his chair while dragging a napkin across his mouth. He folded and dropped it on the table before clearing away his setting. He walked into the kitchen, reached over the sink, and rinsed his plate, fork, and glass thoroughly before placing them in the dishwasher.

"I'll be ready in a minute, Dad," he said, racing around his parents. He got two steps past his mother before she

abruptly cleared her throat. Diego knew what the sound meant. He turned, looking back toward the kitchen.

"Sorry, Mama," he said. He walked to the table and pushed his chair in.

"Good boy, Diego," said Alejandra. "We can't have you growing up to be lazy, now can we? Where would your poor wife be, then?"

"Mama," said Diego, "why do you always talk about when I get married? I'm only twelve years old."

"It's never too early to learn good habits, Mijo."

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Alvaro turned his truck onto Twin Oaks Valley Road. He assumed his favorite driving posture, his right palm resting on the steering wheel and his left elbow bouncing on his knee. He checked his mirrors, making sure he'd entered the main road safely.

"Did anyone ever find out what happened to poor Racquel?" he asked Diego. "It was terrible when she disappeared like that, poof, overnight, without a trace."

"Yeah," said Diego, suddenly missing her again. "No one knows anything. The police never found her. Nobody did. It's like she just walked away and never came back."

"Maybe someday she'll come home," said Alvaro, crossing himself. "At least her parents are finally coming to terms with it. For a while I thought her father might lose his mind."

"Wouldn't you, Papa? Wouldn't you go crazy if you lost me, or Esteban?"

"Are you kidding? I'd be loco, Diego. My children are everything to me, except for your mother, of course." He looked over at his son, smiling.

"Are you happy about Esteban, Papa?" asked Diego, changing the subject. "He has a job, and a new girlfriend."

Alvaro drove silently for a moment. He choked back a tear, thinking of his oldest boy, about how close they came to losing him for good, about his own role in Marisol's death. He shuddered, asking the Blessed Mother for relief.

"Es maravilloso, Diego," he said. "You have your brother back, and he has returned to our home. The change is remarkable. Catalina has been a Godsend to him."

Alvaro turned into the school parking lot. He took his place in line behind a dozen parents waiting to drop their kids off for the day.

"I'll just jump out here, Papa," said Diego. He grasped the door handle in one hand, the straps of his backpack in the other.

"Wait a minute, Mijo," said Alvaro. "Let's wait until the other cars drive away. I want to talk to you about something."

Diego looked confused for a moment. Then he let go of the door. "What is it, Papa?"

"I want to know how you're feeling. It's a new year at school for you, and this is your first day. Are you okay? Is there anything you want to talk about?"

"No, Papa," answered Diego. "Why? Are you alright?"

"Si, Mijo, I'm fine, but your mother and I had a long talk last night about you."

Diego slumped back into the truck seat. He felt another one of his father's lectures coming on. He'd have to sit quietly and take it.

"What about me, Papa?"

Alvaro cleared his throat. "Strange things happened last year, Mijo. You got a little weird for a while, do you remember? Walking out of the house in the middle of the night, going on and on about that strange statue Señor Sullivan gave you. We're a little worried, that's all. We want to know that our little Diego is going to be okay. We're wondering if what happened last year might happen again."

"Dad, I'm not little!"

"I know, son, I know. You're a big man now."

Diego stared at his father, scrunching his cheeks tightly.

The truck reached the drop-off point. Alvaro reached over and squeezed Diego's shoulder.

"Whatever happened to your statue, Mijo? Magnifico, I mean. He went away about the same time Racquel disappeared. Have you seen it?"

"No, Papa," said Diego.

"Do you think he's gone for good?" asked Alvaro.

Diego thought about the last time he saw Magnifico. In his dream with Racquel he'd looked up and spotted him in the sky. Magnifico had signaled him with a mighty roar before vanishing into the clouds.

"I don't think so, Papa. Magnifico and I are friends, and like you always taught me, a true friend is a friend for life."

Much to Diego's dismay, Alvaro ruffled his hair. He pinched his shoulder again, too. Diego socked him on the leg as hard as he could. He may as well have been swinging a feather at a piñata. His fist bounced harmlessly off of his father's thigh.

Alvaro wrapped a strong arm around Diego's neck. "See you this afternoon, Mijo."

"Bye, Papa."

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