

an excerpt from

the
TAKER
AND THE
KEEPER

THE RED MONOCLE SERIES: BOOK 1

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DEADLY ILLUSION

Whatever was moving through the thicket was very close now. Behind Gregory, the others huddled together in the center of the clearing. As they all stared in the direction of the sound, a smooth turquoise nose poked through the thicket. A long forked tongue flickered out right in front of Gregory's face, then a monstrous copper-colored head pushed through the poisonous vines. Gregory found himself face-to-face with a creature that opened its mouth in a huge and horrible grin.

"It's a dragon!" exclaimed Yola.

"'Tis no kind of dragon I've ever seen," said Merlin.

But Gregory recognized the creature, changed though it was—recognized its grin and its glittering eyes with slitted pupils.

"It's that snake that was in Merlin's cottage," gasped Gregory.

"That's no ordinary garden snake," observed Palamon.

“Not any more,” said Gregory. “And I don’t think it’s just hunting mice.”

Now the thing was sliding through the vines, pushing farther into the clearing. Gregory could see the familiar pattern of turquoise ovals on its metallic-looking scales. Both copper and turquoise glowed, as though the creature was lit from inside.

The snake curled around, making one big coil on the ground in front of them. Much of its long serpentine body was still somewhere back in the vines. Glaring at Merlin with its vertically slitted eyes, the creature arched its thick neck.

“It’s going to strike!” yelled Gregory. Without thinking, he raised the only weapon he had at hand—his flashlight—and aimed it at the creature’s face. Colors sparked and flashed from the snake’s eyes, and the huge head jerked backward.

“Wow!” Yola cried. “That stopped it!”

“Keep the light in its eyes!” Mildred ordered.

But then transparent yellowish lids appeared, closing over the snake’s eyes. And the creature swung its head directly toward Gregory.

Gregory waved his flashlight wildly, but it had no effect on the serpent’s now-shielded eyes. Frantically he tried to think what to do as the snake grinned widely and again pulled back to strike.

A shrill whistle rang in Gregory’s ears. He spun around and saw that Yola had whipped her recorder out of her jacket pocket. She was blowing a painfully shrill, sharp, high note that made Gregory’s teeth hurt. The sound must have hurt the snake, too, because it hesitated. It swung its evil head to glare directly at Yola. It opened its mouth wide.

Whoosh! Yola dodged aside as a greenish liquid shot out of the gaping serpent mouth and across the clearing. The liquid hit the vines behind Yola, and a few drops splashed on her arm.

“Owww!” Yola dropped her recorder, rubbing at a burned spot on her arm. Smoke rose from the vines where the liquid had hit near her.

“It spits acid,” she squealed. She scrambled to pick up her recorder as the snake cocked its head back again, opened its mouth, and aimed itself at Yola—as though to swallow her whole this time.

“Venomous beast,” cried Merlin, stepping forward. The wizard raised his staff and called out:

“Coward beast with coward eyes,
Come after someone more your size!”

The huge head swung around toward Merlin. The creature slid slowly toward the wizard, grinning widely.



Merlin stepped backward to keep out of range of the venom, but that put him closer and closer to the deadly vines behind him.

Merlin called out again:

“And now—begone! Enough of you!
Go hide your ugly face from view!”

But the snake kept gliding slowly forward, as smoothly and steadily as before. In another moment, Merlin would be strangled by grasping vines and pierced by their poisonous thorns—or he would be killed by the snake’s venom.

“His magic’s not strong enough!” cried Palamon.

“Can’t you do something?” cried Gregory.

“Not by myself,” said Palamon. He thought for a brief moment, then said, “Repeat these words with me— over and over again.”

“All together, say this rhyme,
And let not evil have its time.
All together, say this verse,
Making useless Morgan’s curse.”

Gregory and Yola began to chant the words along with Palamon. Then Gregory heard Merlin’s strong

voice join in. The only one not chanting was Mildred, who looked too dazed to form the words.

The snake paused. Its head moved no closer to Merlin, but the creature’s long, scaly body kept sliding through the hole in the thicket, coiling up at one side of the clearing. Coil after coil, the snake’s body piled higher. Soon, the whole giant creature would be in the clearing with them.

“Louder!” roared Merlin. “And say it like you mean it!”

“All together, say this rhyme,
And let not evil have its time.”

“You too!” Merlin snapped at Mildred. “What’s the matter? Snake got your tongue?”

“All together, say this verse,
Making useless Morgan’s curse.”

Mildred’s voice joined in. Again and again, they all repeated the verses.

“All together, say this rhyme ...”

The snake’s head wove from side to side, but came no closer.



“... And let not evil have its time.”

They chanted louder, until at last they were all screaming the words at the snake. The monster’s glowing copper and turquoise colors dimmed to a dull orange.

“All together, say this verse ...”

The creature began to shake, all its coils writhing against each other.

“... Making useless Morgan’s curse.”

Then came a blinding flash of light and an explosion that hurled Gregory to the ground. He braced himself for a blast of poison or the stab of sharp teeth. As the explosive bang echoed away into silence, Gregory opened his eyes, but he remained blinded by the flash. It took him a few moments to recover his sight. Then he saw Palamon, Merlin, Mildred, and Yola all sprawled motionless on the ground.

Are they all ... ?

Am I the only one ... ?

(to be continued ...)

