

Excerpt

Paul's Pursuit

Dragon Lords of Valdier book 6

By S. E. Smith

Twenty-six years earlier

Paul Grove stood tall and proud as the cold breeze swirled around him. There was the promise of the first snow dancing in it, but he already felt a numbness that not even the cold weather could touch. He was a huge bear of a man, even though he was only twenty-one years old. He had always been big for his age and years of hard work on his parent's ranch had sculptured his muscles early, giving him an even more formidable appearance.

He wore his black hair short simply because it was easier to maintain. At six and a half feet, he had lost the gangly limbs of just a few years earlier. His deeply tanned face reflected the hours he spent outside working in the wilds of Wyoming. Today, it was not his height or build that captured the attention of those standing around; it was the grief reflected in his dark brown eyes and the small bundle wrapped protectively in his arms.

His arms tightened around the tiny body pressed up against him. Tears clouded his vision, but he refused to let them fall. He focused on the small, sweet warmth he held close to his heart. It was all he had left of Evelyn, his beautiful young wife who died less than a week ago from a brain aneurysm. A part of

him wanted to rage at God for taking something so precious, so beautiful, far too early. Her beautiful brown eyes shining with love and laughter shimmered in his mind. The way she would dance around their little house with a laugh and a song on her lips still a vivid memory.

He had loved her forever, it seemed. When her family moved to town when she was in first grade and he was a big third grader, he swore that he would love her forever and take care of her. He remembered her parents kneeling down next to her curly head and promising that she would be fine. He had walked over and introduced himself. Ten minutes later, he was holding her small hand in his and walking her to class as her parents watched with worried eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Paul," another one of their former classmates from school said. "If there is anything I can do...."

Paul nodded automatically, his arms drawing his tiny daughter closer as if to shield her from the looks of worry, sadness, and pity. He knew what many were thinking. That he was too young to be raising a little girl on his own. He had already had several offers to take his baby girl from him, to let others raise her. Hell, even Evelyn's mom tried to insist she take Trisha and raise her. She tried to tell him it would be best if another woman raised his little girl. He had turned her down with barely restrained politeness.

"Paul," Evelyn's mom, Rosalie, walked over to him. "Let me take her."

Paul turned his grief-stricken eyes on the woman who had changed over the last few years from a pleasant, if strict mother, into a first class bitch when it had come to her own daughter.

Rosalie had changed when Evelyn's dad left her and Evelyn when Evelyn was in sixth grade. Paul had listened as Evelyn cried as she told him that nothing she did was good enough for her mother. He had doctored the bruises and welts on Evelyn's delicate skin from the times her mother had gotten drunk and hit her over some small infraction.

He had even gone and warned Evelyn's mother that if she ever hit her daughter again, he would show her no mercy. Her mother had tried to keep them apart, but he would have fought the entire world for his beautiful wife. He would do no less for his precious baby girl.

"No," Paul said shortly, looking into eyes that would have reminded him of his wife if not for the anger and bitterness in them. "She is fine. She's sleeping," he added in a gentler tone.

"Give her to me," Rosalie begged. "Haven't you taken enough from me? Haven't I lost enough? Let me raise my granddaughter. You are young. You can find another girl, marry, have more children. I'll never have another Evelyn. I'll never have another chance."

Paul felt the rage building inside him as he listened to Rosalie. "You never appreciated the beautiful daughter you had. What makes you think I would ever let you take mine?" He asked in a cold,

barely controlled voice. "I loved your daughter more than life itself, Rosalie. I love our daughter just as much. She is my life now. I am her father and I will always be her father. I will be there for her. I will be the one to teach her, guide her, and love her with every fiber of my being."

Rosalie's eyes grew as cold and bitter as the wind blowing through the graveyard. "We'll see about that. I have money. I will fight for my daughter's child. I will take her and raise her if it is the last thing I ever do. She will be mine!"

Paul felt a calm resolve course through him as Trisha shifted and raised her curly little head. She pulled her tiny thumb out of her mouth and looked up into his eyes. A small, innocent smile curved her tiny, pink lips and her dark brown eyes lit up with love and trust.

"Dada," she giggled, leaning forward to hide her cold nose against his smooth cheek.

Paul looked at Rosalie with a new determination and maturity not often found in a twenty-one year old. He had discovered the painful lesson that life was not fair this past week. Perhaps fate had stepped in, knowing it was important for he and Evelyn to marry young. Evelyn might not have lived long, but she had given him something very precious in her short life; the knowledge of what it was to love and be loved and a beautiful daughter.

His hand moved up and cupped the back of Trisha's curly head. He buried his nose in the wild curls; breathing in the fresh scent of the strawberry

shampoo he had used on her hair earlier that morning. He refused to let anyone take his reason for living away from him without a fight. Right now, Trisha was the only thing keeping him moving forward through the grief and heartache threatening to consume and tear him apart. When he turned his eyes back to Rosalie, they were almost black with quiet rage.

Rosalie took a step back, her hand going to her throat as she recognized that she had just pushed her son-in-law too far. Subconsciously, she had always known that Paul would be a formidable opponent if cornered or provoked. A shiver coursed through her at the knowledge that he could also be a deadly one.

Paul shifted Trisha again and looked down at Evelyn's mother with a cold, grim expression on his face. "I can promise you will never get your hands on my daughter, Rosalie," Paul said before he turned and walked away without a backward look.

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Twenty-one years before:

"What is this?" Paul asked quietly, kneeling down along the narrow animal trail.

A small bundle of long curls fell forward almost touching the ground as the tiny figure next to him squatted down. Small fingers reached out and barely touched the soft imprint in the moist soil. Trisha focused on the shape, picturing in her mind all the different animals that lived in the region and what their footprints looked like. She curled her hand around the small bow her dad had made for her

before she looked up and around her with dark, serious eyes.

“Mountain lion,” she whispered with wide eyes. “It is an old one from the size of the print. Do you think it is close?”

“You tell me,” Paul asked quietly smiling down proudly into her intense face. “How old do you think the track is?”

Trisha looked down at the track again before her eyes moved to the next one. “Not old. See how the leaves are pressed down into the print? It is still damp and firm. Maybe this morning,” she murmured.

“Good job, baby girl,” Paul said standing. “We need to get back to camp. Ariel and Carmen are going to camp out with us tonight.”

Trisha grinned excitedly up at her dad. “Is their daddy coming too?”

Paul laughed as he swung the large pack up onto his shoulder. “Yes. Their mom has gone to visit her sister so he figured it would be a nice break for the girls from his cooking.”

Trisha laughed as she skipped down the narrow animal trail. “Will we still get to talk to mommy tonight?”

Paul’s chest tightened at the innocent delight. Every night they would lie outside when the weather permitted and look up at the brilliant stars in the sky. And each night, he would pick a different one where his beautiful Evelyn would be looking down on them. He thanked her each and every night for giving him the precious gift that was skipping in front of him. It

was only when he was out in the wilds with his baby girl or lying under the stars talking to his beautiful wife that he felt a sense of peace. His eyes drifted up to the clear, blue skies. He wondered if he would always feel that nagging feeling that there was someone else out there for him. He had searched but none of the women he had met so far calmed the restlessness in his soul.

His eyes jerked down suddenly as his ears picked up the changes in the forest. Trisha recognized the changes at the same time, her little body freezing into perfect stillness. The hair on the back of Paul's neck stood up in warning.

"Trisha, come to me, baby girl," he said quietly.

Trisha immediately stepped backwards, scanning the forest for whatever had caused both of them to realize that danger was near. Paul raised his rifle to his shoulder and widened his stance so that whatever came at them would have to go through him first.

"Trisha, get in the trees now," he hissed out quietly. "Don't come down until I tell you."

He listened as Trisha scrambled over to a low tree branch and started climbing. He didn't turn around to watch her. He let his ears guide him in knowing when his precious daughter was safe.

Out of the woods to his left, he heard a crack before the old mountain lion burst out in a rush of speed at him. Paul held his stance until he knew he had a clear shot. He held himself motionless, waiting. If he missed, it could leave the animal wounded, making it even more dangerous. He took his shot as it

leaped. The force of the blast cut through the mountain lion's heart, knocking it to the side where it rolled and disappeared into the high ferns covering the forest floor. Paul pulled the bolt back, releasing the spent shell and loaded another shell into the chamber with a calm efficiency built from years of training.

"Daddy," Trisha whispered. "I can see it. It is the mountain lion. It's not moving."

"Stay there, baby girl. I need to make sure it is dead," Paul said, walking slowly forward.

Paul moved through the ferns until he was next to the mountain lion. It had been a clean kill. It was unusual for one to be this far down the mountain. He knelt down next to the huge, old cat and did a quick inventory of it. It was very thin. He pulled back its upper lip and saw that its teeth were in bad shape. He looked down at its paws and could see the left back paw had a deep cut that was infected.

"It is time to seek the next life, old friend," Paul said quietly as he rested his palm on the head of the old cat for a moment. "May the Earth take your body and keep it to nurture others."

Paul stood and walked back to the tree where Trisha was standing on a limb watching him. "Come on down, baby girl. There is nothing we can do for him."

He kept his eyes glued on Trisha as she climbed down, reaching up and swinging her down when she was close enough. He smiled down as the wild curls swirled around her as she clung to him for a moment.

He was going to have a time brushing out the knots tonight.

He looked up one last time at the clear blue sky and thanked his beautiful wife for looking out for them. His heart lightened as if he could feel her smiling down on them.

One day, he thought, one day I am going to find the one woman who can fill my heart the way you did.