



DRAGONS OF STARLIGHT

liberator



BRYAN DAVIS

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Bryan Davis

 ZONDERVAN®

Table of Contents

Cover	
Title Page	
One	
Two	
Three	
Four	
Five	
Six	
Seven	
Eight	
Nine	
Ten	
Eleven	
Twelve	
Thirteen	
Fourteen	
Fifteen	
Sixteen	
Seventeen	
Eighteen	
Nineteen	
Twenty	
Twenty-One	
Twenty-Two	
Twenty-Three	
Twenty-Four	
About the Author	
Other <i>books by Bryan Davis</i>	
Copyright	
About the Publisher	
Share Your Thoughts	

One

Jason steadied himself on the stone-movers' raft and scanned the sky from horizon to horizon. Still within the confines of the Southlands, he dipped his steering pole into the river as quietly as possible. Elyssa had said dragons lurked in the area, and her Diviner's gift of detecting a presence in the air or hidden in the shadows seemed as sharp as ever. At least one fire-breather was out there ... somewhere.

As he, Elyssa, and Koren floated northward on the river's slow current, clouds hovered low to the east over the Zodiac's spires, drifting closer on a freshening breeze. The western view revealed a forest beyond the riverbank — peaceful and quiet. Now late in the day, Solaris had already settled near the treetops. They would have to make camp soon, but definitely not until the dragons' village lay well behind them. Although no scaly-winged beasts sailed or shuffled anywhere in sight, sleep would come more easily if they could put some distance between the dragons' abode and their intended camping spot.

Jason allowed his gaze to settle on the forest once more. Somewhere in that area Randall and Tibalt marched in search of Wallace and the cattle-camp children, meaning the lack of dragon patrol was good news. Maybe they would find the refugees in time to warn them about the deadly disease spreading through Starlight, a hard-enough task even without dragon interference. Since the disease was so contagious, and since Randall and Tibalt had both been exposed, providing a warning while staying at a safe distance would require more than a little ingenuity.

Turning to the front of the raft, Jason looked straight ahead. The first obstacle to their journey stood due north: the great barrier wall separating the Southlands region from the rest of Starlight, the same barrier that imprisoned hundreds of slaves and kept them from escaping the dragon kingdom. Now he and his friends had to break out and travel beyond the forbidden boundary.

Less than an hour earlier, the dragon Arxad had assured them that the wall was clear of guardian dragons when he passed by. He had escorted his daughter, Xenith, part of the way to the Northlands as she ferried Cassabrie's finger to Uriel Blackstone, who they hoped could use the girl's genetic material to find a cure for the disease the punctured Exodus star had unleashed on the world.

Arxad then returned to the dragon village to care for his injured mate, Fellina. He offered the humans no direct transport, only a brief message describing how to get past the wall — vague advice based on what he had been told by those who constructed that section centuries ago. Still, if his advice proved reliable, easy passage would help them avoid a delay they couldn't afford.

With the army from Jason's home planet of Major Four marching southward from the Northlands, and Taushin, the new dragon king, planning to send a diseased human into the ranks in order to infect the soldiers, someone had to warn the troops to stay away from the contagion. Since Elyssa was immune to the disease, she was the only one who could deliver

the warning safely, making her transport vital.

Jason glanced down at his chest. Although Cassabrie's finger embedded under his skin seemed to provide immunity for him as well, no one knew how long the protection would last. Though if danger cropped up, he would go in Elyssa's place.

He settled to a sitting position and laid the steering pole next to his sword near the raft's left edge. Built for moving stones from the mining pits to the barrier wall, the raft seemed quite steady, easily carrying its three riders — he and Elyssa near the front, and Koren close to the back—as well as two gunny sacks filled with food and extra clothing.

Still aching from cuts, scrapes, and bruises he suffered in his battle with a dragon named Hyborn, Jason let his muscles relax. The Southland's warm weather drew sweat from his pores, but the long-sleeved tunic and cloak would feel much more comfortable when they reached the frozen Northlands.

Elyssa and Koren were also recovering from wounds, though a gap in Elyssa's hair was now the most noticeable result of their recent battles. Her glow from consuming a stardrop had faded, but it seemed that the manna pendant dangling from a chain around her neck still carried a slight radiance, the remnant glow from a recent healing.

During the first part of their journey, Elyssa had been chatty, providing updates on the sensations she felt as they procured the raft and provisions. Lately, however, she had grown quiet and somber.

Koren, sitting cross-legged with her cloak's hood pulled over her head, had hardly uttered a word — just a thank you whenever Jason helped her move from place to place. With the Exodus disease ravaging her body, she seemed to be getting feebler by the hour. Her face had turned pale, a stark contrast to the physical traits of a Starlighter — red hair poking out around the edges of her hood and sparkling green eyes.

Less than a quarter mile away now, the wall loomed. The uneven stones, cobbled together with pebbly mortar, seemed to rise before them as the raft drifted closer on the placid current. They would arrive in a few moments.

Leaning close to Elyssa, Jason whispered, “Do you sense anything?”

“I still sense a dragon, if that's what you mean, but I can't tell how close it is. I don't detect anger or a heightened sense of alertness.” She rubbed her thumb and finger together. Her eyes, not quite as green as Koren's, gleamed in the sunlight. “I sense a change, the way the air feels after a bolt of lightning strikes nearby.”

Jason searched the sky again. Though the clouds to the east seemed benign, it was wise to heed Elyssa's gifts of perception. Hers may be subtler talents than Koren's vivid abilities, just as her auburn hair seemed a shadow of Koren's more striking red, yet the two girls were equally remarkable. “I don't see any storms,” he said. “What else could be causing what you're feeling?”

Koren spoke up, her voice wispy. “The history of Starlight holds many mysteries. It's obvious that humans lived here long before we slaves arrived, and they were far more advanced than humans today, either on Starlight or on Darksphere. I didn't really understand Arxad's description of how we're supposed to get past the wall, but when we try, I think we might learn a lot about what the earliest humans here were able to do—and what is signaling

Elyssa.”

Jason nodded. Arxad’s instructions were puzzling, something about an opening at the river’s surface and a lever near that spot. As one of the oldest dragons, the high priest of the land, he was privy to many ancient secrets, and now one of those secrets was about to come to light.

After another minute, the raft’s front end bumped against the wall, and the current turned it until the side abutted a mortared gap between two vertically stacked rough stones. The slight collision made Jason’s sword clink against the steering pole.

Jason pressed his palms against the stone, pushed the raft back a few inches, and looked at the line where the water met the wall. According to Arxad, a spillway had been cut into the stones somewhere, but since the water level fluctuated seasonally, he wasn’t sure if the opening would be exposed.

“This is where the Diviner comes in,” Jason said. “Can you probe for a hole and a lever?”

Elyssa rose to her knees and laid a hand on the wall. “It’s too dense to probe through, but I’ll look for a hole of some kind.” Closing her eyes, she rubbed her fingers along the imperfections, as if tickling the nooks and knobs. Tiny twitches and flinches danced across her face, as if her skin had taken on the dips and divots her mind searched through. Finally, her brow arched. “I think I see something. Move us a little to the left.”

Pushing against the wall, Jason shifted the raft, first a few inches, then a couple of feet.

“Wait!” Elyssa called, her eyes still closed. “Keep it right there!”

He held the raft in place. “What do you see?”

“A gap of some kind.” She opened her eyes and pointed at the river. “Down there. Just below the surface.”

Jason reached into the water and felt the wall. About six inches down, the stone gave way to a hole. A wooden grating covered the opening, allowing water to pass through. “Found it.”

“Do you feel a lever?” she asked.

“No. Do you see one?”

Elyssa drew in the air with a finger. “I think there’s a cave behind the wall, and I sense a protrusion jutting into it.”

“Into it?” Jason pushed the grating, but it wouldn’t give way. “If the lever’s on the inside, we can’t reach it from here.”

“Jason!” Elyssa hissed. “A dragon! Straight up!”

Above, a dragon perched atop the wall’s parapet and looked straight down at them, its wings extended as if ready to swoop. Webbed spikes fanned out behind its head, and fangs appeared over its scaly lips. Beginning with a growl, it shouted, “How dare you humans approach the wall!”

Jason inched his hand toward his sword. “We are here at Arxad’s bidding.”

“Arxad has no authority to grant such permission.” The dragon reared back its head. “No one will die!”

Koren lifted a hand. “Wait!”

The dragon looked at her, blinking. "Why should I?"

"Because I said so." Koren slid her hood back, revealing her scarlet locks. "I am Starlighter. You must listen to me. I am no danger to you."

"No danger," the dragon repeated, its eyes becoming glazed. When it glanced at Jason, the dragon began clarifying again. "He has a weapon."

"Ignore the other humans!" Gasping for breath as more color drained from her cheeks, Koren kept her gaze on the dragon. "You must pay heed only to me."

The dragon's head swayed from side to side, its eyes locked on Koren as she rocked with the gentle waves. "Only to you."

"While you're talking," Elyssa whispered as she slid into the river, "I'll find the lever."

"Elyssa!" Jason lunged, but she submerged before he could catch her hand. The sudden shift tipped the raft, sending him over the side. He popped to the surface and slung water from his hair. She was nowhere in sight.

Koren clutched the side of the raft, steadying herself. Her stare still fixed on the dragon, she waved at Jason. "Find her! I'm all right!"

Jason dove. His eyes open in the clear water, he probed the area. The wooden slats covering the hole were broken at the center, creating an opening big enough to fit into. With a quick stroke, he glided through the breach and into darker water, too dark to see beyond a few feet.

He swam straight ahead until a second wall blocked his progress. A narrower, cruder hole had been cut into the stone, leading down and away. It seemed big enough for a slender person to fit into, but Elyssa, who had once again skipped steps, was far too smart to venture into a death trap like that.

He pushed to the surface and looked around. A few feet above the water, Elyssa clutched a wooden rod protruding from the wall, her knees pushing against the stone as she struggled for leverage. Water dripped from her hair and clothes. "I can't get it to move," she grunted.

"Are you sure we want it to? Maybe it's not the right —"

"Augh!" The lever jerked downward. Elyssa slipped away and splashed into the river. Jason pulled her to the surface and held her trousers waistband to keep her steady.

"Thanks." Water sprayed from her lips. "The river tastes different under here, sort of acidic."

"I didn't notice." Jason glanced around the dim cave. The two walls blocked movement upstream and downstream, but it was too dark to see how far the water extended to the sides. "Any other sensations?"

A loud clunk sounded, then a buzzing hum.

Elyssa lifted her hand and felt the air. "Heavy static. Something big is happening."

A creaking sound echoed. As pebbles drizzled into the water, twin vertical gaps appeared in the downstream wall about ten feet apart, and a horizontal line joined the two gaps at the top. Above, the humming sound heightened. Sparks arced across the ceiling from wall to wall like miniature lightning bolts, revealing a set of wheels connected by a long belt. The wheels

spun furiously, driving the belt and a notched wheel on one side. The mechanism appeared to be sitting on a shelf-like protrusion from the downstream wall, but the intermittent sparks provided only brief glimpses.

The newly formed wall section pushed outward, and water rushed toward the opening, dragging Jason and Elyssa with the flow. Still holding Elyssa's trousers, Jason lunged for the lever and hung on with one hand. With his legs dangling in the current and with Elyssa half-submerged, the current pounded against them, making his grip slide down the rod. Since the exit was now much bigger than the hole they had entered, the river's surface descended. With support from the water lessening, their weight seemed to increase with every passing second.

Another clunk reverberated through the cave. More rocks fell. Two vertical gaps appeared on the upstream wall. As if copying the downstream wall, the section began to push inward, bringing in a fresh rush of water. The surge slapped them from the lever, wrenched Elyssa from Jason's grip, and sent them hurtling downstream.

Jason tumbled in multiple somersaults, making it impossible to tell up from down. Water ran up his nose, and gritty silt stung his eyes. After several seconds, the current slowed. Still disoriented, he focused on a light and swam toward it, glancing in every direction in search of Elyssa.

When he broke the surface, he gasped for air. No sign of her, either in the water or on the banks. After taking a deep breath, he dove again. No longer dizzy, he searched the depths, now becoming clearer as the turbulence settled. Grass grew here and there in tufts, and bristly heather covered most of the terrain.

A dark, humanlike shape appeared at the bottom. Jason thrust his arms and kicked, whipping his body into a fast glide. As he neared the shape, Elyssa's form clarified. Her foot appeared to be wedged under a log, anchored in place by a boulder. Her limp arms undulated with the current, and her face and closed eyelids stayed slack.

Jason surged toward the log, shoved his hands under it, and heaved it away. He grabbed Elyssa around the waist and kicked toward the riverbank. When he reached shallow water, he trudged up toward a grassy shore, dragging her limp body, but with the river still spreading out over the flat meadow, it seemed that dry ground and a place to lay her retreated as quickly as he could walk.

"Jason! I'm coming!" Koren drove the raft toward him, standing as she thrust the pole into the river, her cloak fanning out behind her. By the time she reached him, he stood in thigh-deep water.

His heart racing, he rolled Elyssa onto the logs. Her lips were blue and her limbs slack. He pressed his ear against her chest. No heartbeat. No breathing. Nothing at all.

Heat surged through his skin. Bile spilled into his throat, burning as he tried to speak. "She's ... she's gone!"

"Maybe not yet! Exodus is showing me something." Koren dropped to her knees, slid her hands over Elyssa's chest, and began thrusting down with rhythmic repetition, making the raft bob wildly.

Jason swallowed down the bile and grabbed the edge of the raft. Her green eyes flashing, Koren nodded at Elyssa's head. "You have to help! Blow into her mouth! You'll have to pin"

her nose and seal her mouth with your lips so the air goes into her lungs.”

While Koren eased away, Jason pinched Elyssa’s nose, set his lips around hers, and blew. Her chest expanded, but when he pulled back, nothing happened. She remained blue and motionless.

Koren returned to her task, her body rocking with the raft as she continued thrusting. “O Jason!” Her voice weakened, and her face again grew pale. “I don’t know if I’m doing this right. The images are so blurry!”

“Should I blow air into her again?”

Tears now streaming, Koren nodded and pulled back, giving him room.

Jason took a breath and blew into Elyssa’s mouth. Her chest rose, then sank. She lay motionless, limp, and silent.

Koren set her hands on Elyssa’s chest. Her thrusts punctuated her words. “Keep ... doing ... it... Don’t ... stop... Both at ... the same time.”

With the raft shifting and tilting, Jason’s lips kept sliding away from Elyssa’s. He lifted his head and held it still as he blew again and again. *This has to work! Koren’s vision has to be true!*

Out of the corner of his eye, light flashed. A fireball slammed into the edge of the raft, and flames splattered across the surface. As the sloshing water doused the fire around her knees, Koren continued shoving down on Elyssa’s chest.

The guardian dragon dove at them. Jason and Koren ducked under its surging claws. Jason reached for the sword, but Koren batted his hand away. “Keep breathing into her! Get on the raft while I talk to the dragon! The farther we get from the wall, the better!”

Jason pushed off the riverbed and thrust the raft into the current, sliding onto the logs with the same motion. He knelt next to Elyssa and again pressed his lips over hers. As he breathed into her lungs, sucking in a breath after each blow, Koren kept thrusting against Elyssa’s chest while shouting toward the sky. “Pay heed to me again ... guardian of the wall! ... If you wish to ... protect your domain ... leave us be! ... We are fleeing ... your protective flames ... and we have no desire to ... pass the barrier!”

As they rode the current downstream, the dragon flew toward them from behind, its toothy maw spitting sizzling wads of fire. “I will ensure that you make haste!” With its forelegs extended, it grabbed the back edge of the raft with its claws. Beating its wings, it propelled them forward, faster and faster.

While Jason continued breathing into Elyssa’s mouth, the sound of rushing water reached his ears. As the rush became a roar, the current grew swifter. A rising spray appeared in the distance. He glanced at the steering pole lying on the raft. He couldn’t stop breathing into Elyssa to battle the dragon or try to halt their momentum. She would die. Only one option remained—ride it out.

Jason hugged Elyssa close, still breathing into her. The raft hurtled toward the falls. The front tipped over the precipice and stopped. Below, the water cascaded down a steep slope of grass and rocks, including boulders partially hidden by violent splashes.

“Leave us be!” Koren shouted, her voice failing. “You must ... pay heed to me!”

“As you wish.” The dragon lifted off, calling as it ascended, “Pay heed to yourself!”

Starlighter. You are weaker than you realize.”

Two

As water gushed from behind, the raft teetered in place. Spray cascaded all around. Koren pointed at the sky. “Look!” A different dragon flew northward, carrying a human in its claws. “He’s taking Yeager to your army.”

Jason pushed another breath into Elyssa. Her chest lifted, then settled again to a motionless state. “We have to warn them!” His arms trembling, he grabbed the steering pole, lurched to the front, and jammed it against the rock. Pulling against the pole with his full weight, he battled the jamming stone and the pounding current.

Finally, the raft broke free and surged backwards several feet. With water splashing and sloshing over her body, Koren snatched the supply bags and held them in her lap. Jason threw the pole down, hooked elbows with Koren, and scooped Elyssa into his arms.

As the raft again reached the precipice, this time missing the stone, Jason leaned backwards. “Here we go!”

The raft slid onto the slope and streaked down the rushing current. Bumping and bouncing, Koren clutched a side while Jason tightened his grip on her arm and Elyssa’s body. Water crashed over the front and splashed into their faces, veiling the path ahead and the sky above. As the raft rattled, the logs shook against the binding vines, as if ready to fly apart at any moment.

A boulder protruded straight ahead, only seconds away. Still clutching both girls, Jason lunged over the edge of the raft and slammed against a flat stone just inches below the river’s surface. The force ripped Koren from his grasp. With Elyssa clutched tightly in his arms, he tumbled down the slope, turning somersaults in the shallow water and bouncing against the riverbed again and again.

Finally, he slid to a stop on his bottom, Elyssa in his lap, and the water beating against his lower back. While thrusting on her chest with one hand, he pinched her nose with the other and blew into her mouth, once ... twice ... three times. *Come on! Breathe!*

Still carrying the supply bags, Koren sloshed toward him from downstream. With every step, she teetered back and forth, and water dripped from her hair and her sagging cloak.

Jason pressed his lips over Elyssa’s once again and blew hard. She coughed, sending a stream of water into his mouth. He pulled back a few inches. A strand of saliva still connected their lips. She spat, breaking the connection, then heaved in a constricted breath, making a wheezing noise as precious air squeezed into her lungs.

Koren splashed to a stop at his side. “Give her room! Let her sit up!”

Jason slid Elyssa from his lap and helped her sit in the water. While blocking the current with his body, he slapped her on the back. She drew in breath after breath, each one easier than the last, and each exhale finishing with another cough. Wet, stringy hair covered her eyes. Her head continued swaying as if she were bouncing on a stormy sea. “I think—” She coughed again. “I think we made it.”

Jason swallowed a hard lump. His heart pounded, and his own breathing rattled. "I guess you could say that."

He rose to his feet and helped her stand in the calf-deep water. Pieces of the raft floated by—broken logs, some with torn vines still attached. Her clothes clung to her body, outlining her rail-thin frame, the result of weeks in the dungeon. "Good thing I found that lever," Elyssa said as she pushed her hair out of her face.

"Right." Koren, her voice weak, arched her brow at Jason. "Good thing."

Elyssa glanced at Jason and Koren in turn. "You two look awfully worried about something."

Koren narrowed her eyes. "You act like dying happens to you all the time."

"Dying?" Elyssa blinked rapidly. "What do you mean? I just swallowed some water the wrong way."

Koren shook her head. "Your heart stopped for a long time. You weren't breathing."

Elyssa's skin paled. "Did you revive me?"

"Jason did." Koren nodded at him. "I helped, but he did most of it."

"Not really," Jason said. "Koren showed me how."

Elyssa stared at Jason, tears trickling down her cheeks and blending with the river water. She threw her arms around him and held him close. Her body trembling, she whispered in his ear. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He returned the embrace. With wet clothes pressing against his skin, the contact raised a chill.

Jason pulled back and brushed a wet strand of hair from Elyssa's eyes. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm okay." Offering a weak smile, she grabbed a fistful of hair and began wringing it out. "I mean, I nearly died. Give a girl a break."

After tossing her wet hair over her shoulder, Elyssa took one of the supply bags from Koren. Water streamed from the bottom. "I guess the food will be all right. Just soaked."

"Probably." Jason looked at his boots through the river's clear water. "While you two go to dry land, I'll look for my sword."

He slogged upstream to the boulder where the raft met its demise. Near the upstream side, the blade lay in the bending grass, gleaming in the sunlight. He snatched it up by the hilt and hustled back to the girls, who now stood at the river's edge, squeezing out the edges of their clothes.

He propped the sword against his shoulder and surveyed the river upstream and downstream. They had tumbled into a meadow and now stood in a field of grass and flowers. The river curved toward the west where it spilled into its original north-flowing channel and proceeded on its way at a pedestrian pace. To the south of that spillway, the old channel carried only a small stream that originated from a rocky slope. From that section of the slope, lying to the west of their wild ride, water trickled from several holes, giving evidence that the river once exited from those springs, the river's escape route when the wall blocked the

flow. "It looks pretty calm downstream."

Koren gazed at the sky, her face paler than ever. "And no sign of either dragon. Maybe things will get easier for a while."

Elyssa squinted. "Either dragon?"

"We saw a dragon carrying Yeager while you were napping." Jason winked. "Let's go. Maybe Koren will tell the tale, and you can see what happened."

After taking the second bag of supplies from Koren, he followed the edge of the river. Koren to his left and Elyssa to his right. Their wet clothes swept through calf-high grass and flowers, raising a sweet fragrance from the red and yellow four-leaf-clover-shaped blossoms.

When they reached the river's original channel, Jason stopped and scanned the forest beyond the opposite bank, his sword hilt tight in his grip. Maybe the dragon carrying Yeager hid within, waiting for the army from Major Four to arrive. If the dragon took notice of the three escaping humans, would it try to stop them? Taushin had said in the other dragon's presence that Koren would likely overhear their plans, so if a hidden dragon recognized her, it might realize that they were on a mission to warn the soldiers.

Elyssa and Koren joined Jason, one on each side. Elyssa slid her arm around his and leaned her head against his shoulder. "What are you thinking?"

He cocked his head to look at her, but her face stayed out of view. He whispered in reply. "The dragon that carried Yeager. We have to watch for him."

She pulled away. Narrowing her eyes, she stared into the forest. "I sense a presence, something smaller than a dragon. Not human."

"I know there are wolves around," Koren said. "I was dragged through this area by the leader of a pack."

Jason looked down at the muddy riverbank in front of his boots. Paw prints drew a line parallel to the river, pointing northward. If the wolves were smart enough to walk single file, there could be dozens. "It looks like we might have company."

"Someone else has been here." Elyssa pointed across the river. "I see markings in that tree, the big one closest to the bank."

Jason set the supplies bag down and waded across the river, trudging through waist-deep water and soft sand at the bottom. When he arrived at the tree, he set the point of the sword on the mark. Someone had carved a large letter *M* in the trunk at about chest level. A line radiated from the center of the top of the *M* and pointed to the left at an angle of less than ten degrees. "It's Adrian's mark," he called. "He was here early in the morning, just after sunrise."

"Today?" Koren asked from the opposite side.

Jason shifted the point to the base of the *M*. Tiny spheres rested within the notch. He dug them out with a finger and laid them in his palm, five brown kernels no bigger than grass seeds. He pivoted and looked across the river where Elyssa and Koren stood next to the supply bags, both watching with tired stares. Still wet, their shoulders slumped under the weight of their clothes. "What number day is this since we got here?" he asked.

Elyssa looked at her hand, raising a finger every few seconds until she had extended a

four and a thumb. "This is day number five."

Jason dropped the seeds to the ground. "He was here this morning."

"Can you tell if he's heading north?"

He looked again. A line protruded from the bottom-right leg of the *M*, pointing to the right. "He is."

"Alone?" Elyssa asked.

Laughing under his breath, he looked across the river again. "How much do you think I can tell from a mark in a tree?"

Elyssa wrinkled her nose. "I thought you Masters boys might have a whole language made out of tree carvings."

"He was not alone." Koren raised her wet hood over her head. Her green eyes sparkled brightly. "He is accompanied by friends."

Adrian appeared, carving the bark with the point of a sword. Semitransparent and completely white, he looked like the ghostly girls who lived in the Northlands. Wallace stood nearby, gripping the handles of a cart that held someone inside. A girl stood next to Wallace and a bald child, perhaps another girl, sat on the ground in front of the cart.

Adrian blew into the carving, scattering dust. He and Wallace spoke to each other, but no sound came from their lips. Adrian poured seeds from his palm into the carving and kept his fingertip over them until they stayed in place. He studied his mark for a moment, then marched northward. Wallace pushed the cart behind Adrian, and the two girls shuffled along at each side, their heads and shoulders low.

As the cart passed, Jason looked inside. Partially covered by an animal skin, Marcelle lay curled on a bed of straw. Her eyes were open in an unblinking stare. A few seconds later, the entire company faded and vanished from sight.

Jason turned slowly toward the girls. Koren knelt at the edge of the river, shivering. Elyssa crouched next to her and hugged her from the side. With the Exodus disease ravaging Koren's body, the effort to tell a tale had likely sapped her reserves.

Sword still in hand, he hurried across the river and laid an arm over Koren's shoulder, linking arms with Elyssa. "Do you have the strength to go on?"

She nodded, her face locked in a grimace. "I don't think I have a choice."

"True, but we're still a long way from the Northlands." Jason looked at the river. Pieces of the broken raft drifted by, some still bound together. If only the raft had survived, they could ride the current at least as far as the waterfall.

"I sense something new." Elyssa closed her eyes. "In the forest. I think it's a dragon. He's perplexed. Uncertain as to what to do."

"How close is he?" Jason asked.

"It's hard to tell. I normally can't sense a living presence outside of hearing range, so it's probably pretty close, but since a dragon is so big, maybe it's farther than I think."

Jason combed the forest with his gaze. Maybe the dragon carrying Yeager could be persuaded to carry Koren instead, but could she summon the energy to hypnotize it? How far

might it be willing to take her?

Cupping a hand around his mouth, Jason shouted, "Dragon! If you can hear me, come forth. I want to speak to you."

"Jason! What are you doing?"

"Skipping steps." He tossed his sword to the side. "I am now unarmed. I know you are contemplating your next move. Come to the riverbank. Maybe we can help each other."

A rustle disturbed the silence, then a rumbling growl penetrated the trees from deep within the forest. "How do you know what I am contemplating?"

"You are carrying Yeager, the diseased human, in an attempt to infect the approaching army. Yet you have stopped here in the forest, and you're wondering what to do next. My guess is that Yeager has died, and you're unsure if he is contagious any longer."

"You are perceptive ... for a vermin." The rustling continued. A human flew out from between two trees and landed on the opposite bank. When he flopped over face-up, his diseased arm slapped the water. Yeager was barely recognizable. Sores covered his face, and most of his hair had fallen out, revealing ulcers on his scalp and a missing ear.

Elyssa gasped. Koren swallowed but said nothing.

The dragon pushed himself between two trees and shuffled closer. His head swayed at the end of his curled neck, and his wings fluttered, half-extended. When he stopped, he grabbed Yeager's torn shirt with a foreclaw and lifted him a few inches. "He died only moments ago. The disease is hungry. It is merciless."

Jason glanced at Koren. She had pulled her hood low over her eyes, making her expression difficult to read. So far, she had stayed silent. He would have to persuade the dragon himself.

"The disease kills quickly," Jason said, "so you need another victim, someone who is still alive."

The dragon's brow slanted. "Why would a human suggest a living victim to be used to infect other humans?"

Jason touched the top of Koren's head. "We hope to find a cure in the Northlands. She will die soon if we don't get help."

"Yours is a believable answer." The dragon dropped Yeager back to the ground. "Now tell me why I should help you spoil our best defense against the human army that seeks to invade our domain?"

"Unless you deliver a living victim of the disease, you can't be sure of fulfilling your mission, and returning to Taushin without that assurance might be fatal to you. While you hope for infection, we hope for a cure. If we are successful, which is far from guaranteed, that won't be your fault. You will have accomplished your task."

"How do you hope to find a cure? If I deposit her in the path of an advancing army south of the Northlands, she will not reach the destination you desire."

"Wherever you wish to leave her, we will take her the rest of the way, even if it means exposing the army to the disease. So we need you to carry all three of us on your back and—"

"No."

“No?” Jason drew his head back. “Then how will you deliver an infected human if you don’t take her?”

“I will take her. Alone.” The dragon beat his wings and lunged toward them, his foreclaw extended. He dug them into Koren’s shoulders and zoomed upward.

Koren cried out. Jason leaped and swiped a hand at her foot but missed. Within seconds the dragon ascended above the treetops and sailed toward the north, Koren dangling underneath.

Jason snatched up his sword and chopped down on a branch floating by in the water. “I can’t believe it! What a fool I am!”

“Stop it!” Elyssa grabbed his arm and gave it a shake. “Don’t punish yourself. It was a good idea.”

“Not good enough. I didn’t think he would —”

“It doesn’t matter.” She pulled him into the river and began slogging across. “Let’s get moving. He has a huge head start.”

Jason followed her lead to the opposite bank and then northward along the edge. “Why this side?”

Now jogging steadily, she pointed at the eastern bank. “The wolves are over there.” She then pointed to the west. “Your brother’s mark was over here. Maybe he’ll give us more clues.”

“Good thinking, as usual.” Jason caught up and kept pace at her side. “There’s no way we can catch up with him, and it’ll be dark soon.”

“I know,” she said, her eyes staying fixed on the path.

Still gripping his sword tightly, Jason said nothing more, glancing between the muddy, root-infested ground underneath and the trees to his left. So far no wolf tracks, marks on trees, or human prints appeared. Since Marcelle’s cart probably would have bogged down in the mud, Adrian must have traveled in the forest.

Ahead, the northbound stream would soon tumble into a chasm. They would have to cross before that point and travel to the chasm’s east before finding the southbound stream and following it northward. Many miles lay between them and Koren, and not a single one would be easy, especially after nightfall.

Standing in the forest clearing on Major Four, Edison shed his cloak and laid it on the ground. As he drew his sword, he let his eyes dart from one section of the forest to the other. With Solarus high in the sky, light streamed through the branches above, providing plenty of illumination. No one could sneak up without warning. Just a few steps away across the portal, the same sun hovered at a similar angle, though it should have been near evening or Starlight. For some reason, Solarus never seemed to set in the Northlands.

Orion stood next to him, wrapped in a thick, ankle-length black cloak in spite of the warmer temperature on their side of the portal. “Any sign of Marcelle? Or anyone else, for that matter?”

“We’ll see.” Edison sniffed the air. Although a variety of aromas entered his nostrils—oak mold, and deer feces — no human scent blended in. Yet a relatively new odor drifted by, or

recently learned. As he exhaled, he raised his sword. "I smell a dragon."

Orion swiveled toward the portal. "Should we run?"

"Not yet." Edison sniffed again. This time the odor of sweaty humans became evident, and rustling noises followed. "Soldiers are coming. I don't think Magnar will show his face yet."

Soon a line of soldiers dressed in heavy coats, double-thick trousers, and leather boots tramped through the underbrush. Their faces reflecting both nervousness and resolve, they marched around the edges of the clearing and organized themselves in concentric circles, each with a scabbard strapped at his hip and a rectangular shield at his side.

The leader, a middle-aged man with a graying beard, broad shoulders, and a slender waist stopped in front of Edison and saluted with the traditional arm across the chest. He carried a canvas knapsack stitched with an officer's insignia. "I am Captain Reed. I assume you are Edison Masters."

"I am." Edison sheathed his sword and returned the salute. Turning his gaze back to the men, he raised an eyebrow as he took stock of the company's weapons. "No photo guns?"

"They are slow to reload and unpredictable in rapidly changing conditions. Whenever they're around, soldiers tend to rely on them too heavily. I prefer that they rely only on muscles, minds, and blades."

"Well spoken." Edison touched a sheathed dagger at his hip, then his sword at the opposite hip. "I prefer sharp metal to bursts of light anytime." He took in a long draw of the moist air. "Prepare your men for battle. There is a powerful dragon hereabouts, and he could strike with a barrage of flames at any moment."

Captain Reed glanced up, as did many of the arriving soldiers. "If you are speaking of Magnar, you may be surprised to learn that he is acting as our ally. It would seem he wishes to topple a usurper on the dragon planet." Captain Reed reached into his bag and withdrew a finger-length dragon spine. "He allowed us to carry out a mock battle with him so we could learn typical dragon maneuvers. One of my men became too aggressive and removed the spine from Magnar's tail. He was furious, and I thought he would incinerate the soldier, but he quickly cooled and congratulated my man on an excellent attack."

"Very interesting." Edison cocked his head. "How did you become friendly with him?"

"The sword maiden Marcelle established the alliance."

"Where is she now?"

Captain Reed nodded toward the sky. "Riding on Magnar's back. I assume they're flying close by and waiting to be sure the portal is open. She hasn't told me her plans. She is a very mysterious young woman."

"Yes," Orion said in a low tone, "we noticed. A chilling personality, to be sure."

Captain Reed returned the dragon spine to his bag. "Where is this portal Marcelle told me about?"

Edison swept an arm toward the space behind him. "It's invisible. Anyone who walks from here toward the other side of the clearing will find himself in another world."

"How intriguing!" The captain leaned to see around Edison. "Shall we go into this other

world now? Many of us are quite ready to embark on a new adventure.”

Edison scanned the troops. Standing shoulder to shoulder, at least eighty men had filled the clearing except for the center section where he and the captain stood. A long line of soldiers waited to join them, perhaps another three to four hundred. Their eyes, wide and wandering, didn't confirm Captain Reed's assertion. Many were young and scared, not nearly as hardened as their commanding officer.

“Yes,” Edison said, “we can go now.” He stopped himself from saying more. As a former soldier himself, he had to stifle the instinct to tell Captain Reed all. He couldn't risk diluting the effect of what Cassabrie had planned.

“I will see if Cassabrie is ready for our arrival,” Orion said, turning toward the portal.

“No!” The sound of dragon wings filled the air. Magnar swooped toward the ground, Marcelle riding low on his back. “Don't let him go!” she shouted. “He'll close the portal!”

Orion leaped through and disappeared. Magnar and Marcelle darted after him. In a flash of light, they both vanished.

Three

Cassabrie hovered within Exodus ten feet above the ground and thirty feet in front of the portal. The characters and setting for her tale were ready, but how long could she keep everything in place? Edison hadn't indicated the time of his return with any certainty.

She reached into her pocket. The tube she had taken from the spear that had punctured Exodus lay at the bottom, along with its control box. The words on the tube's scorched label still pulsed in her mind — *Danger. Explosive.*

Cassabrie shuddered. The grim reality of her plan had never felt so close. Soon every man, woman, and child on Starlight would have an opportunity to get a taste of what the true purpose of a Starlighter was all about.

Shaking off the thoughts, she scanned the area. To her left, a stream flowed through pebbles-and-sand terrain. Bare-chested children followed the shoreline, carrying buckets filled with stones, while a dragon with a whip kept watch on her right. Red, bleeding welts striped the children's backs, dirt smudged their cheeks, and gnats swarmed around their matted hair.

When one of the smallest girls neared the dragon, she stumbled and fell. The dragon beat her mercilessly with his whip while the other children looked on, stoic, hopeless, as if they were watching the same tale they had seen a hundred times before.

Although in reality, snow lay on the ground, Cassabrie had replaced it with arid landscape in order to simulate cattle-camp conditions, but removing the snow in the air presented a far more difficult challenge. No matter how effectively she might be able to mask the falling flakes, it would be nearly impossible to keep the soldiers from noticing snow accumulating on their heads and shoulders. At the very least, they would feel the cold wetness seeping through their clothing.

Cassabrie waved her arms. The line of children retreated and began a new march from left to right, as they had done a dozen times already. She would allow the scene to replay again and again until the soldiers arrived, for any man who could witness this cruelty without feeling a passion to rescue these poor waifs didn't have the heart they needed for the upcoming battle.

After the tenth repetition, rain began mixing with the snow. Soon every flake disappeared, replaced by a cold drizzle that only served to make the destitute children seem that much more pathetic, though a close observer would notice that they did not get wet.

Without warning, Orion lunged through the portal. He gave Cassabrie a quick glance, then stooped between a boulder and the line of crystalline pegs, a hand reaching toward the center one.

“Wait!” Cassabrie shouted. “Did Edison tell you to close the portal?”

Magnar burst through in full flight, his wings snapping out to propel him skyward. Behind him, Edison and a line of soldiers materialized out of thin air—ten, then twenty, then thirty, all marching in double-time past Orion. They blinked at the rain. Some held out open palms

to feel the drops.

“No more!” Orion jerked out the peg and tucked it under his cloak. The stream of soldiers ended abruptly. The arriving men, perhaps fifty in number, halted and stared at Cassabrie’s slavery scene, focusing on the children as they restarted their emotionless march.

Above, Magnar flew over the treetops toward the white dragon’s castle. Although no one rode on his back, a scabbard hung from one of the protruding spines near the base of his neck, as if an invisible rider might snatch a sword from it and go to battle.

As vapor rose with every drop that struck Exodus’s skin, Cassabrie looked at Magnar and sighed. He wouldn’t come back, not as long as she was around. She wouldn’t even have a chance to calm his fears. And now that he was here, what would his entry into the Northlands spell for all of Starlight? Only time would tell.

Orion held the peg over the boulder. “I will open the portal again,” he said as water dripped from his hair to his lips. “When I do, these men will go back immediately. I have rescinded the order to come here. If you refuse, I will break the crystal.”

Edison glared at him through the misty air. “Then we will all be stranded here.”

“There is another way to return,” Orion said, “but even if it is inaccessible, I will not allow —”

“Orion!” Cassabrie called, spreading out her arms. “Hearken unto me!”

He looked at her, blinking the water from his eyes. “Stay out of this, witch! I will not have you interfering with the affairs of the righteous.”

“Do the righteous ignore the plight of tormented children?” She waved an arm toward the mirage. “They toil. They suffer. They bleed. If you send the soldiers home, who will set them free? Who will apply salve to their wounds? Who will be their liberator?”

Orion tilted his head, watching the solemn parade of children passing by. When the girl stumbled, he flinched, and when the dragon lashed her with his whip, he fell to his knees and stared, the peg now loose in his hand.

Edison and the other soldiers looked on as well, mesmerized. Finally, one man broke free from his daze and charged toward the phantom dragon with a drawn sword.

Cassabrie fanned out her cloak. Making her characters respond would be difficult, but in their confused state, the men might be convinced, especially since her hypnotizing influence would make them want to believe.

Breaking from his previous iterations, the dragon turned his scaly head and shot a blast of fire. The soldier, a young man barely past his teen years, dodged left and rushed forward, thrusting his sword into the dragon’s chest, where the blade plunged in easily. The dragon lurched to the side, his tail and claws twitching in spasmodic death throes.

Stooping, the soldier held out his arms. The children ran to him, some kissing his face while others formed a circle around him, jumping and cheering.

“Edison!” Cassabrie hissed. “Shake off the effect!”

Edison gave her a boyish smile. “He saved the girl. Isn’t it wonder —”

“Wake up!” Cassabrie drove Exodus forward, just enough to bump his shoulder with the

outer membrane.

Edison stumbled to the side but quickly regained his balance, blinking at her while rubbing his shoulder.

“Take the peg,” Cassabrie whispered. “Open the portal.”

As if awakened from slumber, he staggered toward Orion. Orion scrambled to his feet and still holding the peg, jogged toward the forest, slipping and sliding along the way.

Cassabrie twirled her cloak and sent her scene into oblivion. She had done what she could.

Keeping his stare locked on the trees, Edison stopped his pursuit and waved a hand. “Captain Reed! Come here!”

A bearded soldier shuffled his way, his legs unstable. “What’s happening here? I expected snow and ice and —”

“I will try to explain in a moment. For now, we have to retrieve Orion and the peg or else the other soldiers won’t be able to join us.”

“He will hide the crystal,” Cassabrie said. “It’s the only way he can maintain control.”

Captain Reed raised a shielding hand, his face pale. “What kind of creature are you?”

“I am the guiding angel of Starlight.” Cassabrie offered a graceful curtsy. “As the Creator’s messenger, I have been called to tell tales that will instruct mankind.”

“Amazing!” After shaking his head to clear his fog, Captain Reed forked his fingers at two men. “You two, kindly retrieve the former governor.”

While the soldiers marched away, Captain Reed kicked at the slush. “So why this unexpected climate change?”

“Cassabrie?” Edison turned toward her. “Can you explain?”

Pivoting in place, Cassabrie scanned the landscape. The river now ran freely, with only a few ice floes drifting in the current. Gaps in the valley’s white blanket appeared, revealing boulders and bare ground. Solarus hovered near the horizon, apparently ready to set.

Cassabrie set a hand on her hip. In all her years traveling to and fro on Starlight, Solarus had never descended this low before in the Northlands. Something dramatic had happened but neither Alaph nor Arxad had warned about this possibility. The change had begun while Edison and Orion waited for the troops to arrive, and a more sudden disruption occurred when Magnar flew out. Perhaps he was close to the portal during the times Edison opened it to check for the troops, thereby causing the earlier subtle changes.

“I think Magnar broke the curse,” she said. “He wasn’t supposed to come here.”

Captain Reed nodded. “Marcelle spoke of this curse but knew little about it.”

“I care not to tell what I know,” Cassabrie said. “I see no need.”

“Very well. What of the children we saw? Where are they now?”

Cassabrie pushed Exodus closer. “They were part of an illusion. I created it to infuse you with the passion you will need to march into the dragons’ territory. Hearts aflame are essential if you wish to do battle with these monsters, so I hoped to inspire you with a portrait of the suffering taking place in the Southlands.”

“We would not have come if our passions had not already been aroused,” the captain said. “but if we are unable to open the portal again, we will need all the passion we can muster to overcome the lack of soldiers.”

Breathing a sigh of white vapor into the air, Edison scanned the gathered soldiers. With a drizzling rain soaking their heavy clothes, their shoulders began to sag as they stared at him expectantly. He walked toward the star, blinking at its strengthening radiance. Looking at Cassabrie in the eye, he whispered, “With so few men, do you think we stand a chance?”

Cassabrie took in a deep breath. It seemed that a new stream of wisdom flowed into her mind, more than a tale—a principle, a maxim straight from the Creator. Replying in an equally soft tone, Cassabrie nodded. “A better chance than ever. The Creator prefers a few men with noble and humble hearts over ten thousand who know not how to bend the knee, and it might have been the closing of the portal that acted as the separator. The bold of heart dashed through, while the hesitant remained.”

“Then so be it.” Edison firmed his jaw. “We march south.”

“Wait.” Cassabrie waved a hand, gesturing for him to come closer. “Please. I need to speak to you and Captain Reed privately.”

As she drew back, the two men followed, each one raising a hand to block the light. When they stopped out of the soldiers’ earshot, she whispered, “I must tell you about a new danger that has arisen. A disease has broken out in the Southlands. It is highly contagious and always fatal. If the men come into contact with any infected slave, they are likely to contract the disease.”

“We were warned about the possibility of an outbreak,” Captain Reed said, “and we led them behind those who didn’t want to take the risk. Now that an outbreak has actually occurred, we will certainly have to be careful.”

Edison nodded. “This means we can’t take the slaves home. They’ll infect the people of Major Four.”

“Not yet,” Cassabrie said. “There are promising efforts in the works to find a cure. In the meantime, you can still conquer the dragons and free the slaves from oppression.”

Edison stroked his chin. “Freeing the slaves without coming near them will be a difficult task.”

“Perhaps even more difficult than we know,” Cassabrie said. “It’s possible that the disease might still be in the air in the Southlands, and the menace would ravage the men with an invisible assault even without direct contact with the stricken.”

Captain Reed glanced back at the soldiers. Some had shed their wet cloaks in the warming air. “How confident are you of this cure?”

“I have no way to measure confidence, but is my level of certainty important? Your men came here knowing they could die. Does it matter if death comes because of an unseen enemy rather than one that has wings and scales?”

Captain Reed’s face reddened a shade. “A warrior would rather oppose a mortal enemy he can see rather than one he cannot. I will try to encourage them myself. They might not listen to assurances from a woman who has never faced death.”

Cassabrie lowered her head and touched her pocket. "Very well," she said, taking a deep breath. "Perhaps you should encourage them, Captain. I will stay silent."

A jumble of shouts pierced the forest. The two soldiers tromped back into the clearing with Orion between them, struggling madly. Captain Reed hurried back to the gathered soldiers followed by Edison. Cassabrie drifted slowly closer, hoping to hear from far enough away to avoid melting too much snow. The area was already too muddy.

When the soldiers stopped, one saluted. "He doesn't have the crystal. He must have hidden it somewhere."

"And there it will stay!" Orion said. "If your captain refuses to protect you from certain death, your rightful governor will."

"I will deal with him in due time." Captain Reed drew a sword and raised his voice loud enough for all to hear. "Men, I know you are not afraid to die, but I hereby warn you that the dread disease we were told about has spread through the slave population, which could bring us great peril. If this news weakens your knees, then you are free to stay here until the return of us return."

Orion's face flushed. "Can't you fools see that this is a march into carnage? Not only for you, but for your wives and children! Even if you conquer the dragons and release the slaves, you will conduct a fatal disease back to your loved ones!"

A few of the men murmured, but with a rise of Captain Reed's hand, the voices quieted. "We will not carry a disease home. You have my sacred word. If we become infected and a cure is not found, we will die here."

"He confirms my claim," Orion said. "Stay here with me, and I will lead you safely home."

"As cowardly failures." Captain Reed scanned the soldiers. "Actually, I will need some men to stay here with Orion. I will not force him or anyone else to march into this invisible danger, but I cannot trust him to stay here alone. If he opens the portal, the disease of fear he could spread back home might be more dangerous than any other."

After surveying the men, Captain Reed found six who volunteered to stay, mostly young fathers. Once the matter had been settled, he turned back to Cassabrie. "How will you let us know if a cure has been discovered?"

Cassabrie nudged the explosive tube in her pocket. "Trust me, good captain. If I am successful, everyone will know. When the cure is ready, I will bring it to you."

"Trusting her," Orion growled, "is like trusting a fox with your chickens. She is a deceiver and a charmer. Even her truths are wrapped around lies."

"Ignore him," Edison said. "It's time to get going."

Captain Reed's eyes darted back and forth. "Where is Magnar? He was supposed to help us. Fighting without him would double our vulnerability."

Cassabrie looked again for the great red dragon, but he was nowhere in sight. His fear of retribution for killing her might be the greatest remaining obstacle to freedom for the slaves. "I know why Magnar left, but it is a private matter. He will likely join you for battle long before you get to the Southlands."

"Very well," Captain Reed said. "I will not pry into it further. Marcelle has already

provided directions to Frederick's wilderness refuge, so even if Magnar joins us late, we will be able to find our way." He grasped Edison's shoulder and spoke in a low tone, though not too low for Cassabrie to hear. "With so few men, success appears to be an empty hope, and promises of a dragon ally are tenuous at best. Do you have any counsel?"

Edison whispered in return, glancing at Cassabrie. "There is another crystal that will open the portal, and I think this Starlighter knows where it is."

Both men looked at her, their brows lifted. "Do you?" Edison asked.

Cassabrie blinked. She had used that peg to unlock the device that held her body suspended in the sanctuary below the Zodiac. Might it still be wedged in the ceiling disk? If not, maybe someone picked it up. Arxad scooped a stardrop from the floor disk, but he was moving so quickly, he could have grabbed the peg without anyone noticing. "I left it in the Zodiac. Maybe Arxad knows."

"Maybe?" Edison shook his head. "We need certainty. And since Arxad isn't around, we —"

"Wait!" Cassabrie raised a hand. "Allow me to probe Starlight's tales for a moment."

While both men looked on, Cassabrie set her hands at the sides of the invisible crown that provided contact with Exodus. Images streamed in, fast and frenzied. Her time within the stardrop had been so brief. Becoming an expert at sorting through the maze of tales probably took weeks or months. Yet, only moments remained. She had to locate the tale quickly.

Closing her eyes, she focused on the memory of Arxad's hurried flight from the sanctuary while she lay on the floor recovering from reentry into her body. The scene appeared, but not at the angle from which she had witnessed it. Her body lay motionless near the stardrop disks. Jason's tear-streaked face was visible at the side, close, as if he were holding the person viewing the sanctuary. Arxad stood with his foreclaw pinning Shrillet to the floor while she wriggled beneath his weight.

Cassabrie froze the scene and looked at Arxad's underbelly. No crystalline peg was lodged there, but one of the scales bordering his vulnerable spot reflected the light in a strange way. With a wave of her hand, she brought the image closer. When she stared at the scale, her own face looked back at her. It wasn't a scale at all; it was a circular mirror.

Keeping the image motionless, Cassabrie searched the archives of her mind for an answer. In days past, dragons sometimes exchanged belly scales with each other as a covenant, a sign of trust to seal a promise. Apparently Arxad had made such an exchange with someone who reciprocated with the only workable object he or she had.

Cassabrie waved the scene back into motion. Randall burst into the room and pushed the point of his sword against Shrillet's underbelly. "I'll watch this one," he said to Arxad. "You better find Deference. Fellina needs her." Arxad leaped toward the stardrop disk embedded in the floor, dipped a claw through the broken glass, and used another claw to scoop up something from a pile of shards at the side.

Cassabrie focused on the second item. It was the peg. Arxad *did* grab it.

Keeping her eyes closed, she lifted a hand. "Give me another moment. I have to find Arxad." She concentrated on the entry to Arxad's cave, where he was probably nursing Fellina back to health. Within seconds, an animated image came to mind, Arxad flying from the

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