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*J*ason 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 river-bank—peaceful and quiet. Now late in the day, Solarus 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

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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 a 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

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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 their 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 closer 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

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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 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

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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?"

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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, I 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

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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. “Now you 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 a 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, they 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

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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

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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.

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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!"

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“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 pinch 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. “Oh, 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 her 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

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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 in 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 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.

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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.”

