



Dragons of starlight

# diviner

BRYAN DAVIS

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## one

**K**oren stood at the brink of a precipice and stared into the darkness below. Only inches in front of her black boots, a stairway descended sharply into the seemingly endless void. The rocky steps appeared to be hundreds of years old—narrow, crumbling, without rails or even walls—the bare, sculpted stone jutting downward into the chasm before being swallowed by the eerie darkness.

Floating a few feet above the stairs, globules of vaporous light streamed toward her, each one stretching out like a comet—a shining head of shimmering radiance followed by a glowing tail. Wiggling like tadpoles, they seemed to swim in the air, and as the first one passed by, it orbited her face, brushing her skin with a tickly buzz.

A soft voice emanated from the tadpole's radiant head, like a whisper from afar. "Has Exodus caused our pain? Will it ever return?" Then, after a final brush against her cheek, the stream flew toward the wall behind her, a sliding barrier that someone had left open, as if anticipating her arrival at the Northlands castle.

The parade of elongated globules flowed through the opening, some pausing at Koren's spot at the top of the stairway before joining the escaping herd. The rush sounded like a crowd of people hurrying by, with only snippets of their private conversations reaching her ears as they passed.

"If the genetics are pure, we can force the recessive to survive."

"I will take the eggs to Darksphere. The children will have a dragon for a father."

"Find the escapees. No one will leave Starlight alive."

Clutching the stardrop she had taken from Cassabrie's sanctum, Koren raised the hood of her Starlighter vestment, shielding her ears from the barrage of splintered sentences. She stepped down and shifted her weight forward. Although the stony material crackled under her boot, the stair held firm. Then, fanning out her cloak, she walked slowly down the stairwell. Ahead lay the darkness of the unknown, a dizzying descent into a river of visible voices.

Koren pressed on. She had no choice. Somewhere in the castle lay the fallen star, Exodus, and Taushin, the new dragon king, had compelled her to locate it—without detection. He waited outside, leaving her to pass through the empty foyer and explore the castle as if she were a burglar.

Her mind's eye drifted beyond Taushin, across the Northlands' snow-covered landscape, southward to the lush, fertile valley where she had left Jason Masters, her new friend from the world of humans, a young man her own age who had tried to rescue her. So much had happened since she had allowed herself to be captured in order to save him from Taushin's sorceress, Zena, and her pack of

wolves. Where was he now? Dead? Captured? Had he returned to his own planet and forgotten all about her?

Koren heaved a deep sigh. She had to push away these dark thoughts. Jason was a warrior. Somehow he would have found a way to survive, to continue his quest to free the slaves, even if he had to retreat to the south. One way or the other, he didn't appear to be anywhere in the Northlands vicinity.

As light from the world outside faded behind her, Koren slowed her pace. The never-ending streams of light illuminated the area just enough to allow a view of the dangers—a deep plunge into nothingness on each side and crumbling, narrow steps ahead, seemingly more fragile in the dimness. The slightest misstep could send her tumbling into a bone-breaking crash or hurtling over the precipice.

The stairs went on and on. Doubt stirred with each careful step. How could a star have burrowed into a castle's cellar? Yet the whispering streams had to come from somewhere, making the chasm a likely place to search, if not the safest. The whispers continued, quieter now but still audible in spite of her hood.

“The Starlighter is alone and forsaken. She wants to die.”

“Fear not the loss of life. Fear the loss of the eternal. For life can be restored. Once lost, the eternal can never be found again.”

Koren kept her stare on the steps in front of her, marching to the beat of an inner rhythm. The fleeting statements seemed to beg to be put together, like puzzle pieces or perhaps threads in a mysterious mosaic. If she concentrated, maybe she could weave them into a coherent story, but so far the big picture seemed elusive.

Her tired feet plodded on and on. With each stair she passed, another appeared in the distance, creating a hypnotizing monotony, darkness giving way to light only to reveal yet another obstacle for her trembling muscles to overcome. Finally, a solid foundation came into view, an expanse that looked like the floor of a cave. A few paces in front of the final stair, a solid wall blocked forward progress. The chamber appeared to be wide open to the left, but it was too dark in that direction to see what might lie in wait. To the right, the whispering streams flowed from a cave opening in another wall.

Koren smacked her lips. Bitterness laced the air and coated her tongue with an acrid film. Taking a deep breath, she strode to the right, her gaze fixed on the cave. The pulsing lights funneled through the entrance, thick and frenzied, like radiant bats fleeing their daytime abode. She lowered her head and pushed through the barrage, trying to ignore the flurry of chaotic whispers.

Light appeared, growing brighter and brighter until she reached a massive chamber where a glowing sphere hovered a foot or so above the floor. As she crossed the threshold, the whispers stopped. All was quiet. Ahead, about twice the span of outstretched dragon wings, the nearly transparent ball of light trembled as if shaking in fear.

A flow of radiance erupted from a point on the surface and shaped into new streams before swimming into the tunnel behind her. At the sphere's lower extremity, liquid dripped to the floor, sizzling on contact. Vapor rose briefly before being sucked into narrow crevices zigzagging across the stone surface.

Koren eyed the vapor-producing liquid seeping into the ground. Pheterone. The

miners back home found it in veins that likely originated from this spot.

She peered through the star's curved wall. Inside, a smaller ball of light, about half the size of the entrance to a dragon's cave, floated at eye level. Images flashed on the surface, changing every second—a red dragon, a cattle child, a stone worker with a cart. Each image acted as a layer on the sphere that peeled off in a pulse of light before shooting out as one of the vapors.

Koren touched the edge of the streams' exit point, a jagged hole nearly as big as her hand. As a new stream poured out, the flow warmed her skin. The light filtered through the gaps between her fingers and gathered behind her into yet another tadpole-like projectile.

Mentally, she ran over what little she knew about this star that wasn't a star. Taushin had called it "a celestial angel," referring to the sphere as a guide given to this planet by the Creator. Unbidden, his words rose in her mind. *The citizens of the planet labeled it a star, even though they knew that the twinkling dots in the heavens were very different. Although it was somewhat hot centuries ago, Exodus sustained a wound in its outer membrane, and it lost its heat.*

As another trickle of warmth leaked from the wound, Koren uncurled the fingers of her other hand, revealing the stardrop. The size of a large knuckle, the sphere glowed with white light.

Her mission was to enter Exodus through the hole and tell Starlight's stories from within. The light energy from her tales should cause Exodus to inflate and rise again. It would then release pheterone, infusing the atmosphere with the gas the dragons required to survive, thereby eliminating the need for human slaves. Her people could finally shake off their chains and return to their home world, Jason's world.

She stared at the pulsing stardrop in her hand. One problem spoiled this scenario. If the hole remained in Exodus, it would eventually sink as it did before, and what they had gained would be lost. Only one alternative seemed to be foolproof — she could enter the star and use the stardrop to seal the hole from the inside. She would become the guiding angel of Starlight—her destiny as a Starlighter, according to Taushin.

Again his words returned to her mind: *You may take your place as a star in the sky, a watchful angel who forever tells the Creator's stories to every soul in the world, dragon and human alike ... if they will listen.*

*If.* And if they did not, her sacrifice would be for nothing. For there would be no way out ... ever.

As if waging war in her mind, Taushin's counterargument reverberated.

*Why sacrifice? Why risk harm to yourself when it is possible to gain what you long for without it? With your power, I am sure you can keep the star aloft long enough for me to get the slaves out. To be eternally trapped while your liberated friends celebrate their freedom without you would be the greatest of tortures. Yes, you would feel some joy ... temporarily. But what about after a hundred years? A thousand years? Ten thousand? After every rejoicing slave is dead, you will be hovering over a thankless land, forever and ever. Your sorrow will never end.*

Koren shook her head, trying to sling the competing thoughts away. No matter what she decided to do later, she could do nothing from outside the star. Maybe

when she entered, a new secret would be revealed that would make her decision an easier one.

She pushed the edge of the hole to one side. It stretched easily. As if in response, a low wail sounded from the inner sphere. She pulled again, stretching the gap and pushing her head and torso inside. Another wail, longer and louder, echoed throughout the sphere's inner cavity.

She slid all the way in and allowed the pliable membrane to ease back into place, leaving a slightly larger hole than before. This time a gentle sigh drifted from wall to wall.

Koren stood on the curved floor, angling her body to keep her balance. "Is someone in here?" she called.

Her own words bounced back at her, repeating her question several times before fading.

A voice emanated from the small inner sphere. "Who are you?"

Koren let her boots slide down to the bottom of the floor. As she approached the source of the voice, she spoke in a soothing tone. "My name is Koren."

"Koren?" The images on the sphere's surface stopped, freezing at a portrait of Koren pulling a cart filled with honeycombs. "Koren, the Starlighter who works for Arxad?"

"Yes." She reached a hand toward the sphere, feeling the energy flowing from the speaking ball. "What is your name?"

The flow diminished. Then, as if deflating, the sphere contracted, growing taller in proportion to its width. It formed into the shape of a girl, and the colors in the portrait spread across her body—red into her flowing hair, green into her eyes, and blue into a cloak that matched Koren's. Only her dress remained white. Finally, every detail crystallized. She seemed as human as any young woman on Starlight. It was like looking at a mirror ... with one exception.

Koren looked down at her own clothes. Although she wore the Starlighter's cloak, the black dress Zena had forced upon her covered her body from neck to knees, and the equally black boots adorned her feet, tied at the back to mid-calf.

The girl stared, her expression curious, yet sad. With her hood raised, she tilted her head to the side and spoke softly. "Why are you here, Koren?"

Koren glanced back at the hole. The question felt like a challenge, a rebuke. It would be easy to retreat and slide out, run away from this responsibility ... too easy. "I'm here to try to resurrect Exodus."

"It is impossible," the girl said with an ache in her voice. "I have tried for many years, but the star will not rise. No matter how many tales I tell, Exodus remains here, trapped in the grasp of Starlight itself."

Koren swallowed. Whoever this girl was, she had obviously suffered greatly. "What's your name?"

Blinking, the girl tilted her head to the other side. "My name?"

"Yes. I'm Koren, and you're ..." She nodded, hoping to prompt the girl for an answer.

The girl averted her eyes and stared blankly at the wound in the sphere's surface. Her cheeks changed hue, though not with normal red tones. It seemed that the colors from the flashing images bled into the surface of her skin. "My

name,” she repeated in a whisper. “That is a thought that has not entered my mind in a very long time.”

“You mean, you don’t remember your own name?”

“A name from long ago is returning. I know not whether it is mine or another’s.” She returned her gaze to Koren, her face still infused with multicolored splotches. “Does Brinella suit me?”

“Brinella,” Koren repeated. “It’s lovely.”

“Good. Then I will—” Brinella stiffened. Her eyes shot wide open. As if seized by convulsions, her body heaved. Words poured from her mouth, a river of competing voices, yet none matching her own.

“I am from another world. I have come to request help against the forces of corruption.”

“But you’re a dragon. You captured our people and enslaved them.”

“Don’t worry. He’s with us.”

“But how can you trust one of them?”

As the words continued to spew, they became garbled, unintelligible. They collected into streams and shot out the hole, and once outside, they formed into glowing whisperers and swam through the tunnel.

After nearly a minute of disgorging, Brinella finally stopped. Holding a hand against her stomach, she looked at Koren, her face now pale. “I apologize for that outburst. When the tales of Starlight fill me, they must eventually come out.”

“It’s all right. Feel free to ... uh ... empty yourself whenever you need to.” Koren suppressed a grimace. Brinella’s role as a guiding angel of Starlight surely had many drawbacks. She nodded toward the wound in the surface. “Have you tried to escape through that hole?”

“I cannot escape, Koren. Exodus must have a Starlighter dwelling within, or it will collapse and no longer feed the air with sustenance. Because of my love for this world and our Creator, I made a vow to stay here. If I were to leave my post untended and break my vow, I would become a disembodied spirit, trapped between the worlds of the living and the dead. I would have no path to paradise. My best hope is to die here. Since I am bound to Exodus, its destruction by the hand of another will bring about my death. Then I will fly to the Creator and live with him forever.”

“But no one would want to destroy Exodus. It’s the only hope for dragons and humans.”

“I know,” Brinella said. “If I could make Exodus fly and once again fill the atmosphere with life-giving sustenance, I would. But I cannot.”

Koren slanted her head upward. Directly above, a channel at least as wide as Exodus led to a faraway light, apparently an exit to the outside, perhaps at the top of one of the mountains that rose behind the castle. “I don’t understand. The dragon king said I could inflate Exodus and make it rise again.”

Brinella looked away. “If the dragon king said so, then you are able.”

“Really?” Koren slid to the side to catch her gaze again. As she studied Brinella, more of Taushin’s instructions came to mind. *I alone know how a Starlighter can resurrect the star, and now I reveal the secret, a prophecy hidden from other dragons, even Tamminy. Once your will is set to raise Exodus, a crown*



*of light will appear within the star. Take it. Wear it. Only then will you have the ability you need to accomplish this task. It is the crown that gives you the ability to hear Starlight's tales, a spiritual receiver that collects the planet's joys and woes.*

Yet Brinella wore no visible crown. "If I am able, then why aren't you?"

Brinella pushed her cloak to the side, revealing a gap in her dress just under her rib cage. The length of a hand, the rip in the material appeared to be stained red. "Like Exodus, I am wounded. Because a spear pierced its skin, it also pierced me. I have not the power that I possessed before. I am still able to collect and tell Starlight's tales, but I do so now without providing the wisdom that follows the words."

"Oh, yes. A guiding angel. You provided lessons behind the stories."

Brinella nodded. "For a long time, many enjoyed my tales and my commentary, but as humankind grew wicked, they also became intolerant. In fact, it seemed that they no longer even heard me. They merely felt heat and did not comprehend the infusion of wisdom. What was meant to provide discernment and a light to their paths became to them nothing more than an irritant. A few still heard my tales, but even they questioned my purpose. Some demanded that I come down from the sky and speak to them as a friend, to not be so self-righteous, but, of course, I could not."

"Because you couldn't get out of the star?"

"Because of dire warnings to keep Exodus out of reach of the people. The star is holy, and humans with impure hearts endanger their lives if they draw too near. Close interaction with humans is likely to be disastrous."

Koren imagined the sight, a flaming sphere descending toward a group of people who either fled or cast stones to send it away. "So they tried to get rid of you."

Nodding again, Brinella pulled the cloak back in place, hiding the gash. "I want to die. If this world cares not for a guiding light, then it would be better for Exodus to be destroyed, but I cannot do this myself and still keep my vow. It is true that if someone dared to do this deed, Starlight would become another Darksphere, but that would matter little. The light our planet once had fled long ago. The people make a show of honoring the Code. The words flow like poetry from their lips, but they rarely let the wisdom penetrate their hearts. This is darkness, indeed."

Koren pointed at herself. "What would happen to you if *I* were to resurrect Exodus?"

Brinella's eyes seemed to brighten. "I dared not mention that option. It would be selfish of me to suggest it." "Go on. I'm listening."

"If another Starlighter were to take my place, I would no longer be bound to Exodus. I could go to my Lord without the star's destruction." Brinella shook her head sadly. "But I could never ask you to do that. The world would lash out against you as it did me, and you could easily face the same fate, either centuries trapped beneath a ceiling of rock or, should you escape the star's embrace, an eternity of lonely wandering."

Koren gazed into Brinella's weary eyes. The poor girl was so sad, so tired. She

just wanted to go home to her Creator. She knew nothing about Taushin's alternative idea, to temporarily resurrect Exodus without sealing the hole. What would happen to Brinella then?

Reaching out, Koren took Brinella's hand. A buzz ran up Koren's arm, warming her skin. "Are you sure there aren't any other possibilities? Could you sit against the hole and block it with your body?"

"I have tried, but Starlight's tales don't come to me unless I am at the center."

Koren tapped her chin. "Then maybe I could block it while you tell tales from the center. Then it would rise, wouldn't it?"

"With both of us weighing it down?" Brinella shook her head. "I doubt it."

"Maybe I can find the king of the Northlands. He can tell us if Exodus can carry that much weight."

"Find him?" Brinella asked. "You said the king of the dragons told you to inflate Exodus and make it rise."

"Yes. That was Taushin, king of the dragons in the south."

Brinella's tone sharpened. "There is only one king of the dragons, and his name is Alaph, the lord of this castle."

"Alaph?" Koren repeated. "I don't know that name."

"How is it that a Starlighter does not know the white dragon's name?" Brinella squinted. "Are you sure you are a Starlighter?"

Koren withdrew her hand. "I ... I'm pretty sure. When I tell stories, they come to life around me. Everyone can see them."

"Do your listeners lose their focus on the world?"

Koren nodded. "It's like they're hypnotized. I have used their loss of senses to escape from danger more than once."

"You left them in that state?" Brinella backed away a step, new color filling her cheeks. "I think I am beginning to understand."

Koren tried to close the gap with a step of her own, but Brinella slid farther away. "What's wrong?" Koren asked.

"You wear the vestments of a sorceress. You do not know Alaph. When your listeners are prepared to hear your teaching, you leave without filling their minds with wisdom. Under your influence, they are open, vulnerable, easily enslaved. A Starlighter must never leave her listeners in that state. If they come out of a trance on their own, they are susceptible to any influence that enters their minds. The Starlighter must command her visions to flee so her hearers can return to normal and decide whether or not to accept the wisdom she has provided. Otherwise, they are nothing more than—" Spasms rocked Brinella's body. As before, a barrage of words surged from her mouth in a series of altered voices.

"You cannot understand her words, because you are dull of hearing."

"What a fool you are! There are no sounds. It is merely a star."

"She provides wisdom. She warns of disaster. The star is a gift from the Creator."

"The star is a curse. The sooner we are rid of it, the better."

The flood of words ceased. Panting, Brinella backed farther away, waving a hand as she spoke in halting gasps. "Leave me now ... You cannot replace me ... You have the power ... the power of a Starlighter ... but you lack the spirit or the

wisdom of one.”

Koren stepped closer again, displaying the stardrop in her palm. “Do you want this? You can seal the hole and —”

“I want nothing from your hand!” Brinella thrust a finger toward the wound. “Leave me! It is better that I suffer alone than allow a pretender to take my place!”

A wave of heat flashed across Koren’s skin, and tears welled in her eyes. Brinella’s pain-twisted expression tore a hole in her heart. As she slid her boots backwards, she closed her fingers around the stardrop. “I’ll find the white dragon and ask him what to do to get you out of here. I won’t forsake you.”

“As you did not forsake those you hypnotized?” Brinella turned her back. “Speak to Alaph if you wish. If you search the castle, you might be able to find him. But leave my presence. I will not be deceived by a sorceress in a Starlighter’s body.”

Brinella’s head sank into her torso, and her legs drew upward. Seconds later, only a floating ball remained, again covered with an array of images and again emitting streams of multicolored light.

The streams zoomed toward Koren, pelting her body with their buzzing impulses, though they carried no momentum and left no mark. As if driven back, she turned toward the star’s wound and scaled the slick incline, her boots providing traction. After glancing at Brinella once more, she stretched the hole and slid through. A new cry of pain sounded from within, but it quickly silenced.

Now on the outside, Koren clenched her fists. Her ears flamed. A pretender? A sorceress? How could Brinella say such things?

Glaring at her clothes, Koren pinched a sleeve. This black dress wasn’t really hers. Zena forced her to wear it. It wasn’t fair to be judged based on what she did under compulsion. And how could she have learned the white dragon’s name? How could she have known she shouldn’t leave people hypnotized? There was nothing in the Code about how to be a Starlighter.

She turned toward the tunnel leading to the long stairway. The answers to her questions lay elsewhere. Taushin waited outside the castle, and the white dragon abided somewhere within. Since Taushin was able to see through her eyes due to the connection he’d forged with her, he had likely watched everything that happened within the star, but without the transmission of sound, he couldn’t know what Brinella had said. Still, he probably had read the girl’s facial expressions and figured out that something went wrong. Yet, no matter what Taushin thought about Koren’s actions, he couldn’t do anything to stop her, at least not right now.

Koren turned back to the sphere and, keeping the stardrop in her grip, pulled the sides of the wound together. Brinella moaned. Koren flinched. This would be like performing surgery without anesthesia. She squeezed the stardrop, then opened her hand. The once spherical shape had flattened and spread out. Pinching the gap closed with one hand, she pressed the stardrop against the wound with the other and rubbed it across the narrow opening as if applying a salve.

While Brinella continued whimpering softly, the glowing material drizzled over the gap but dripped to the floor. It didn’t appear to be sticking at all. Even as she rubbed, fresh material from the star’s membrane gathered in her palm. Her

hand acted like a scoop, digging out stardroplike radiance without leaving a divot in the surface.

She spread out her fingers and looked at the handful of radiance. Taushin had said she could seal the wound from inside, so maybe she should give it a try. After releasing her pinching hold, she reached through the wound and applied her newly gathered salve on the inner wall. The top of the wound sealed instantly, but, of course, with her arm in the way, she couldn't possibly seal the rest of it.

She withdrew her arm and scooped out another handful. Then, after compressing it into a new stardrop, she pushed it through the hole and rolled it toward Brinella.

"You can use this to seal the wound and rise again," she called. "It's up to you."

As the stardrop rolled toward the center of Exodus, two eyes appeared in Brinella's floating ball, blinking. Her voice returned, weak and lamenting. "If you think Exodus's rising is up to me, Koren, you have much to learn."

The stardrop rested near Brinella's hovering sphere, but she seemed to pay it no further mind. The eyes vanished, and the flashing images continued—more tales to be communicated, stories of Starlight emanating from the bosom of the planet for the sake of anyone who cared to listen.

Heaving a sigh, Koren walked into the tunnel, her legs wobbly. The swimming lights streamed from behind, breezing by without pausing to deliver their whispered messages.

Koren shuffled her feet. There was no need to hurry. The climb would take a long time anyway. When she reached the stairs, she looked beyond them and scanned the path leading in the opposite direction from the one that had taken her to Exodus. A glowing whisperer broke off from the stream and swam that way.

After glancing at the stairs, Koren followed the floating voice. It swam slowly into a new tunnel, allowing her to catch up. Its glow illuminated the area, making a spherical halo large enough to envelop her body as she walked at its pace.

Soon the tunnel opened into another chamber, and the glow, wiggling as it floated, continued. Koren stopped and slid her foot along the floor. It seemed solid. In fact, it felt smooth, more like marble than unfinished stone. A few objects lay scattered about, books and stacks of papers, but with the whisperer's light farther away now, shadows kept their details hidden.

At the far side of the chamber, maybe five steps away, the elongated orb stopped at a wall of rock. It turned to the left and inched along the barrier, as if searching for a hole that would let it escape.

Glancing down at the floor to avoid stacks of books, Koren caught up with the whisperer and listened as its voice grew clear.

"Store them, Arxad. The research and relics might be useful later."

Then, as the globule of light continued its slow, futile crawl, it repeated the sentence again and again.

Koren picked up a hefty book and blew a coat of dust from the cover. In bold handwritten letters, the title read *Disease Progression—Observation Book #3*. She opened to the first page, but the small handwriting prevented her from reading anything beyond the title at the top. *Day Seventeen—Account Recorded by Orson*

of *Masters Lake University*.

“Orson,” Koren whispered. “How odd.” Her father was named Orson, but there wasn’t any place on Starlight called Masters Lake University. Yet Jason’s last name was Masters, so two familiar names in the same old book had to be more than mere coincidence.

She laid the book on top of its stack. Since she couldn’t possibly haul one of these all the way up the stairs, the mystery would have to remain a mystery, at least for now.

Koren shifted her attention back to the whisperer. It lit up the wall’s gray, stony surface all the way to the floor, where a wooden pole lay a few inches in front of her boots. She stooped and looked it over. About twice the width of a broom handle, it appeared to be as long as she was tall.

She grasped it and slowly lifted. It was heavier than she expected, more so to one side than the other. She raised it closer to the floating spheroid and examined the heavier end. There the wood changed over to metal and widened to the barbed point of a spear, similar to the weapon the hunter dragons used at times. A leather band encircled the spear’s neck, securing a cylinder wrapped in paper. The cylinder appeared to be as big around as her forearm and about half as long.

She squinted at a series of letters printed on the side—*DANGER. EXPLOSIVE*. Easing the spear away, she leaned it against the wall and studied it from two steps back. She set a hand on her hip and let *explosive* roll around in her thoughts. The miners had created explosive devices from effervescent minerals, allowing the gasses in a sealed compartment to build up until they exploded, but the force was great enough only to dislodge small, stubborn rocks they couldn’t reach with a hammer and chisel. Surely it couldn’t be considered dangerous or be used as an enhancement to a weapon. What could a small pop like that do to an enemy that the point of a spear couldn’t?

Koren grasped the spear again and drew it close to her nose. The odor was unfamiliar, nothing like the minerals the miners used. It smelled like sulfur, charcoal, and ... and something else.

She touched the paper. It seemed fully intact. If this device was meant to explode, it obviously failed or perhaps was never used.

After taking a step to the left to move back into the glow, she drew the spear close again and studied the words. The lettering was perfectly straight without a hint of change in width or darkness. Who could have written this message so flawlessly, and why? Someone stored it here for a reason—a relic that might be useful someday. But what was its purpose?

Her thoughts snapped back to Exodus and its hole. This spear could have easily ripped a gash that size. But with an explosive attached, someone meant to do more damage than merely deflate the star. Whoever threw that spear meant to destroy Exodus and the guiding angel within.

The whisperer passed by a wooden slat nailed into the rock. More slats ran up the wall until they disappeared in the darkness. Just like in the Exodus chamber, a tiny light shone far above, another opening to the outside, though this one seemed even farther away.

Koren touched the closest slat. Together, these slats could act as a ladder,

another way to leave the castle's underground, but it would take hours to scale, and the danger would be even greater than climbing the staircase.

She looked at the floor again. More oddities met her gaze, but—except for papers and books—nothing looked familiar. It would be fascinating to sit here and search through everything, deciphering what the objects might be.

As her eyes followed the globule's path, one item caught her attention, a black rectangular box no bigger than her hand. She picked it up and studied a series of white letters near the edge of one surface. Printed next to a raised circle, they spelled out an unfamiliar word — *DETONATE*.

She formed the word silently with her mouth, then, shrugging, she laid the box back where she had found it. More mysteries. More unanswered questions.

The whisperer finally reached the entry tunnel and, breaking away from the wall, headed back to the staircase, taking the halo of light with it. Koren let her shoulders sag. Learning about the other relics here would have to wait, but at least she could take the spear into brighter light and get a better look at it.

After following the whisperer back to the stream, she stopped at the bottom of the stairs and studied the spear again. The off-white paper had charred edges, and a sooty smear underlined the word *DANGER*. Why would a spear have been exposed to fire and then only partially burned?

Koren gazed up the stairs. Taking this to Taushin would be foolhardy. Though he had likely already seen it through her eyes, she couldn't allow him to use it for evil purposes.

With great care, she laid the spear on the floor near the base of the wall opposite the bottom step. Then she walked into the flow of whispering lights and began climbing the stairs, listening to the disjointed murmurings. It might take an hour to get to the top, but trying to piece together the jumbled sentences would keep her mind occupied.

When she reached the top, she would find the white dragon, as she had promised Brinella she would. Taushin might protest in any number of ways, but she had to learn the truth, and if the white dragon could be found, she would find him.

## two

Jason stood in the midst of the forest and listened to the eerie quiet. No birds flitted. The leaves gave no hint of a breeze. His father, Edison Masters, waited close behind, only a heartbeat away, breathing not a word.

His sword drawn, Jason scanned the dark sky through an opening in the canopy. A moon peeked between cloud-banks: Pariah, the smallest of the trio that rose and set together. Until now, lack of light proved to be a benefit. After leaving the abandoned dragon village, he and his father had been able to cross miles of open land without detection, even though two dragons had flown overhead during the journey. Now deep in a thick forest, they had reached a concealed area, but it seemed that the real danger lurked here rather than out in the open.

A breeze passed through the branches and filtered down to their level. Jason took in the sensation, searching the wind for telltale odors and gaps that might indicate a close presence. About twenty paces to his left, something stood between two trees.

Edison leaned close and whispered, "I smell a familiar odor, but I can't place it."

Nodding, Jason pointed with his sword at the suspected hiding place. His father's sense of smell was keen, and something familiar could mean good news. Recognizable odors would likely originate from Major Four, so the lurker might well be human, but whoever it was could be combative. Coming upon two strangers in a dark forest had to be a frightening experience, especially for a runaway slave.

When Jason drew in a breath, hoping to call with a reassuring word, a sharp voice broke in.

"It's you!" The undergrowth rustled, and a human form burst into the open. As it closed in, Jason lifted his sword, but when the form took on a feminine shape, he lowered it again. She leaped, wrapping her arms around him. "Oh, Jason! You're alive! Praise the Creator!"

Jason pushed her back gently and sheathed his sword. "Elyssa?"

Dim moonlight illuminated her smiling face. "Of course it's me! Who else on this planet would hug you like that?"

"Uh ..." He glanced at her waist. A sword belt hung loosely at her hips, and the hilt protruded from a scabbard at her side. "You look ... different."

She touched her sword. "You didn't expect a girl to wander around here without a weapon, did you?" Reaching out, she lifted his necklace chain, pulling a pendant from under his shirt and letting it dangle from her fingers. "You found it!"

“Yeah. It’s been a good reminder. That’s why I’m here, actually. I was searching for you.”

Her smile wavering, she kept her gaze on the pendant. “What happened to Koren?”

“Exchange stories later,” Edison said. “I detect another odor. This one isn’t human.”

Jason pulled away from Elyssa and moved to his father’s side. A new rustling disturbed the silence, maybe fifty paces away. This creature didn’t seem to care to hide its presence.

Elyssa touched Jason’s back and whispered into his ear. “It’s intelligent. It’s searching for something. I sense determination ... and malice.”

Drawing his sword, Jason waved for Elyssa to move back. She stayed put, withdrawing her own sword. Now all three stood in the dark with weapons brandished, Edison a step or two in front. The rustling grew closer and closer. Thirty paces. Twenty paces. A snuffling sound blended in, then a growl.

Barely visible in the moonlight, Edison glanced between Elyssa and the source of the noise. He raised a hand and whispered sternly, “Son, stay here with Elyssa. That’s an order.” Then, starting with a quick leap, he hustled toward the creature.

“No!” Jason took a hard step but halted. Father gave an order. How could he disobey?

A draconic scream erupted from the darkness. Elyssa charged. Jason leaped to catch her but missed. He dashed after her, following the sounds—crunching footfalls, splintering wood, and horrific squeals and growls. He stopped at a gap in the forest. Elyssa stood there, her sword drooping at her side as she looked up at the sky. Pariah shone through, giving light to the battlefield. With broken branches strewn about, a second sword lay at her feet.

Her body quaking, Elyssa’s quiet voice shook. “A dragon took him.”

“Took him?” Jason picked up the sword, Father’s sword, wet with blood. His head swimming, he scanned the sky. A dragon flew across the purple canopy carrying a limp body in its claws. Pain stabbed Jason’s gut. Bile rose in his throat, bitter and burning, and a bare whisper leaked out. “Father!”

“Oh, Jason!” Elyssa dropped her sword and embraced him. “I’m so sorry! It’s all my fault. If I hadn’t come, your father wouldn’t have tried to face the dragon alone.”

Jason blinked. His arms felt like stiff logs. He couldn’t lift them even to return the embrace. A tragedy. As his mind threatened to become numb as well, one of his father’s teachings broke though. *Allow for grief, but a warrior must not give in to despair.*

He pushed her back. “We have to follow that dragon.”

“We can’t possibly keep up with a flying —”

“We have to try.” Jason shoved his sword back into its sheath. “Let’s go. Stay as close behind me as you can.”

He jogged through the forest, ducking under branches that seemed to reach out just as he approached. Twice he stumbled over tree roots before regaining his balance. Elyssa kept pace without a mishap, taking advantage of his trail blazing or maybe her Diviner’s gift. He glanced at the sky as often as he dared. The



dragon shrank in the distance and finally dropped out of view.

“He’s going to the dragon village,” Elyssa said from behind.

Jason kept his focus straight ahead, speaking in short bursts as he marched on. “I see that ... I was there a few hours ago ... The place was deserted.”

After several minutes, he stepped into the open. To his right, the ground sloped upward into a range of mountains. To his left, a plateau stretched out for miles, leading north to the dragon village. A few lights glimmered in that direction, probably lanterns. Maybe dragons and humans had returned to the streets.

Elyssa joined him, taking in deep breaths. “It’s a long way.”

“I know. Father and I just crossed this area.” Jason took in a deep breath of his own and let it out slowly. Every muscle ached. It seemed that energy drained from his body and spilled into the ground, as if stopping had caused his determination to spring a leak. Everything he carried seemed to double its weight — his sword, his scabbard, even the pouch in which he transported the stardrop, still attached to his belt.

He touched the dangling pouch with a finger. He and his father had come to find Elyssa. Job number one was complete. Now he had to get the stardrop to Koren. For some reason, she needed to swallow it. At least that’s what Petra had indicated before he and his father had left Alaph’s castle. Yet now with his father in danger, how could he go on with job number two?

“You must be exhausted,” Elyssa said. “I know I am.”

“I have to go!” Jason bit his lip. That came out far too harshly. Taking another breath, he reached his hand toward hers and softened his tone. “If you can come, that would be great. Your gifts would be helpful. If not, I think you’ll be safe hiding in the forest. But no matter what you decide, I have to go. You understand that, right?”

“Of course I do.” She took his hand. “And I am coming with you. I don’t want to let you out of my sight again. It was hard enough finding you this time.”

He looked into her eyes, more visible now that they stood in the open. They were tired but determined. With her sword again in hand, her body straight, and her legs firmly set, she was the portrait of the ready warrior.

Giving her a smile, he nodded. “I was hoping you’d come,” was all he could manage. He turned and marched toward the distant lanterns. With so little light to guide their way, and with his leg muscles threatening to lock in spasms, he had to keep a slower pace than his passion demanded. Father was out there, probably badly wounded, maybe dead. Getting to him as quickly as possible was all that mattered.

Standing in the cave’s kitchen area, Constance turned the mill’s arm-length handle one last time. There. The final bone had gone through. That was one hard job finished, one of many chores Koren used to do. When she and the other two girls were around to help, getting to bed at a reasonable hour was commonplace, but not tonight. The list of things to do would last well past midnight.

Bracing one hand on the kitchen’s central oak table, she mopped her brow with the fringe of her apron. It took a lot of strength to grind sheep bones, but Arxad always insisted on wasting nothing. Of course, he and his family crunched the

larger bones with their powerful jaws, but the lower legs often splintered, and thus were saved for grinding. According to Arxad, the powder made an excellent flavoring for his morning brew of cactus tea.

She pulled the catch bin from the bottom of the grinder, using both hands to slide the wooden bowl to the edge of the table. With light from a wall lantern flickering behind her, her head cast a shadow over the bowl, making it difficult to tell how finely the mill had ground the bones. She could always use a sifter to —

“Hello? Madam Orley? Are you in there?”

Constance wiped her hands on her apron. “Yeager? Is that you?”

“Yes, Madam. May I come in?”

“You may. Do you have your ... uh ... valuables with you?”

“Of course.” Yeager, a tall man with a muscular build, dark curly hair, and at least a three-day’s beard, ambled into the lantern light, holding a chain that led into the darkness behind him. “And they are valuable, indeed. I heard you need help, so I brought what little I have available.”

He stopped and rattled the chain. A boy wearing a leather collar limped into the light, using a walking stick to compensate for a missing lower leg. Another boy followed, his collar linked to the other boy’s by the chain. He held a withered forearm close to his waist. Finally, a girl joined them. The chain ended at a hook attached to her collar.

Constance stepped out of the lantern’s way. The flickering light danced on the boys’ clean bare chests and illuminated their glassy eyes. Standing no taller than her own five feet and two inches and wearing only short trousers, they appeared to be about twelve years old. The girl was slightly taller, but her sunken cheeks and eyes spoke of severe malnutrition. If not for her clean tunic and skirt, anyone would have thought her to be a cattle child.

“Where did you get them?” Constance asked. “The cattle camp is empty.”

“I took these and a few others from the camp before the escape. I cleaned them up a bit. Gave the girl some clothes.”

“But we’re in lockdown. Why are you trading at all?”

“I asked the Separators for an exception. I can’t afford to feed my inventory, so they said I could sell them to whoever would take them. Actually, it was easy to place them. When there is short supply, there are willing buyers.”

Constance pointed at the closer boy. “But you had no buyers for these.”

His eyes shifted, blinking, then a confident smile emerged. “I saved them for you. I heard that Koren, Natalla, and Petra are all missing, so I guessed you would need at least one new servant.”

“This is true. I suppose everyone knows about that by now.” She studied the eyes of each child in turn, all glazed and faraway. Yeager had obviously drugged them. “What are their names?”

Yeager stared at her for a moment, then coughed. “Well, as you can imagine, I don’t ask them their names. A man in my line of work can’t afford to get emotionally attached.”

“Yes, I can imagine.” Constance glared at him. If greed could walk and talk, his name would be Yeager. “The reality is that you brought these three because you couldn’t place them anywhere else.”

“Nonsense. As I said, I saved them for—”

“Do you think me a fool?” She touched the first boy’s shoulder. “They’re handicapped. They need to work with the accountant or with the nursery maid.”

“Those positions have been filled.” He nodded toward the kitchen table. “I understand your dilemma. With household labors you need boys with strong arms and legs.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to care for these boys, it’s just that there is hard work —”

“Say no more. I said I understand.” Yeager touched the girl’s head. “This one is not handicapped. She is malnourished, to be sure, but that is easily remedied. Everyone knows Arxad feeds his servants well.”

Constance took off her apron and folded it, keeping her eyes on her hands. “I would gladly take her, but Arxad is not here. Nor is Fellina. I cannot get authorization.”

“When will they return?”

“Neither gave me word.” She laid the apron on the table and smoothed it with both hands. “Arxad has been known to leave for days or even weeks. When he is gone, Fellina sometimes leaves for quite a while as well. They trust me to keep their home in order.”

“Then surely they would trust you to acquire new help.”

“You know as well as I do that only a dragon can approve a placement. Even Arxad would get angry over such a breach in protocol.”

Yeager stroked his chin. “The Separators said I have to place them today. Since the girl is obviously too malnourished, the breeders didn’t want her. You know what will happen to them tomorrow.”

Constance glanced at the grinding mill on the table, then lowered her head, unable to look the girl in the eyes.

“Yes, I know.”

“Then take her,” Yeager said. “Hide her. Feed her. Have some compassion.”

“Compassion? How dare you speak to me about compassion!” Constance aimed a shaking finger at him, her voice rising. “You’re the one who drags these poor children from place to place, drugging them out of their minds and auctioning them off like property.”

“They *are* property. Every cattle child belongs to Magnar, or rather Taushin, I suppose. I get to keep the bare scrapings of the purchase price, and the rest goes to whoever sits his scaly backside on the Basilica throne.” He pointed a finger of his own. “You are property, too. Arxad’s property. Even though you wear no chain or collar, you are every bit as shackled as these children are. You just refuse to admit it. You were born a slave, and you will die a slave.”

She lowered her finger and cooled her tone. “I know. I have said the same myself, but I am beginning to doubt it.”

“What is there to doubt? Do you doubt the cattle camp? The barrier wall?”

Constance shook her head. “Those are undeniable. I doubt only that I came from my mother’s womb in chains. Slaves are made, not born. Dragons keep me here against my will. The barrier wall is proof enough that every one of us would run to freedom if not for the wall and the guardians who patrol it. If I had wings, I

would fly to the Northlands and be with my daughter.”

Yeager laughed. “Do you still believe that story? There is no king of the Northlands. Promoted slaves are eaten by Magnar and his closest friends.”

“You are the one who believes the myths.” She reached into her tunic pocket and withdrew a folded parchment. “My daughter wrote to me from the Northlands. I recognize her handwriting.”

Closing his eyes, Yeager took in a deep breath. Then, leaning close, he whispered, “I risk my life in telling you this, but I do so for the sake of this little girl and for pity’s sake, pity for your loss of a husband and a daughter within the span of three years.” He glanced around the kitchen. “I have witnessed part of a Promotion myself. Do you remember when the dragons extended the barrier wall on the western boundary?”

“I remember. They had men chiseling stone night and day.”

Yeager nodded. “During those months, I worked with the stone movers. When that Assignment ended, the Separators were trying to decide whether or not to return me to slave trading. I was in the Basilica — drugged, of course—but they didn’t give me enough, so it wore off early. Arxad brought your daughter in to Magnar. He said, ‘I chose this one for promotion from my own household. She is proficient in medicine.’ Then Magnar said, ‘Are you certain her medical background is your primary motivation?’

“Arxad put on a show of surprise, but even I could see through it. He said, ‘What other reason would I have?’ So Magnar gave him a scowl and said, ‘A pretext to obtain the redhead from the cattle camp. You should forget her. It would be better for us all if she dies there.’ After they argued for a while, Magnar finally gave in.”

Constance felt her mouth drop open. With her throat tightening, she couldn’t utter a word. Koren had replaced her daughter in Arxad’s household. Everyone knew that. But who could have guessed that Arxad had planned the exchange all along?

“Then,” Yeager continued, “Magnar asked if Arxad had completed the preparations.” He tapped a finger on the parchment in Constance’s hand. “That’s when Arxad showed him this very letter.”

She rattled the parchment at him. “I don’t believe a word of it! How could you know it’s the same letter?”

“Because Arxad read the first part out loud, and they both got a good laugh out of it. Then Magnar led her away. I assume he intended to eat her, because he said something about preparing a banquet.”

Constance shook her head hard. “Arxad would never laugh at our pain. He is good to us. Everyone knows that.”

Yeager snatched the parchment from her hand and, leaving it folded, set it close to her eyes. “Do you need to open it to see what it says? I don’t.” He looked in the opposite direction. “Dear Mother, I am happy in the Northlands with the great dragon king. Arxad told me I would learn more about medicine here, so I am looking forward to that. Papa will be proud of me when—”

“Stop!” Constance grabbed the letter and spun away. As she pressed it against her lips, spasms rocked her body. “Leave now. Just leave.”