

AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLING SERIES DRAGONS IN OUR MIDST

BRYAN DAVIS

THE
PORTAL
PUZZLES

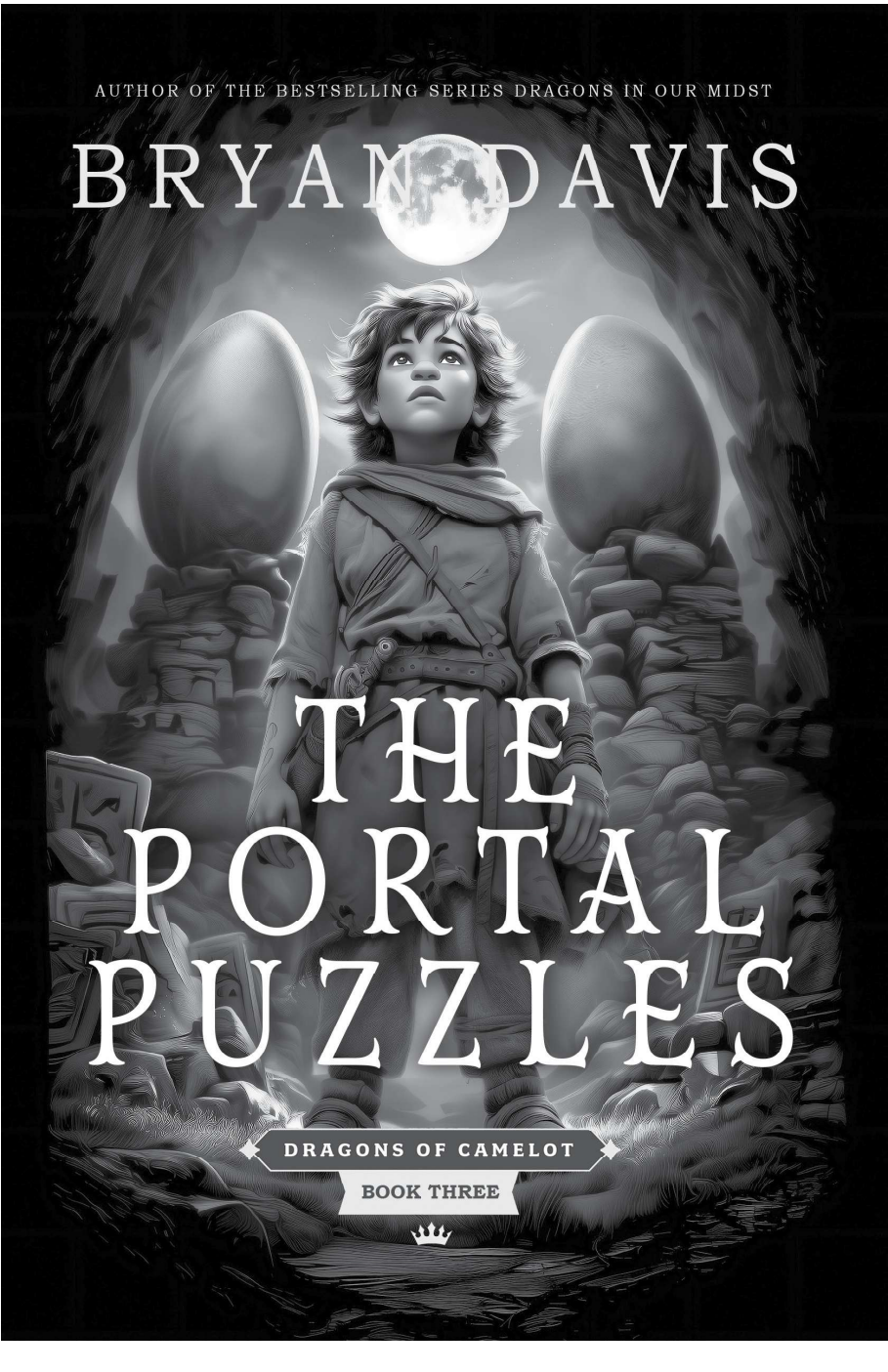
DRAGONS OF CAMELOT

BOOK THREE



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The Portal Puzzles

Book #3 in Dragons of Camelot

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CHAPTER 1

A STRANGE DISCOVERY

Hawk and Sabina rode on Clefspeare's back as the great red dragon flew toward Goliath's cave. Hawk extended his arms to both sides and flapped them, feeling like a soaring bird. Since the evil dragon Goliath lay dead inside his cave, this mission that Merlin had given them seemed like a fun outing instead of their usually dangerous assignments.

Hawk let out a whoop. "Look, Sabina! I'm a dragon!"

Sabina, sitting behind him, laughed. "Be careful, or you will—"

A gust slammed into them, shoving Hawk off-balance. "Help!"

Sabina grabbed his arm and pulled him upright. "As I was about to say . . ."

Hawk regripped Clefspeare's protruding spine. "Don't say it."

"As you wish." She concealed a grin. "I will maintain silence about your carelessness."

Hawk swiveled toward her, smiling at her words. Having learned her huge vocabulary from a dragon, she always spoke in the same formal way with no contractions. But she was never stuffy about it.

Another gust blew her hair in disarray, blending the white strands with her brown locks. For some reason, the white streak seemed wider than usual, as if it might be expanding, but that could be his imagination. "We've never flown so high before," he said, "at

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least not while I was riding in front. Thanks for offering this seat to me. It's great!"

"You are welcome, Hawk. I have had the opportunity many times before when riding on Legossi, so it is a thrill to see you enjoy it."

With the wind whipping, Sabina tucked her tunic into her trousers. It was an unusual outfit for a girl, but since she was only eleven, the same age as Hawk, no one had ever mentioned anything about it, at least not that he'd heard.

Clefspeare curled his neck and faced them. "The reason we are flying so high is because of the danger. With so many citizens in Camelot still suffering from the effects of the tainted water, they are insanely fearful of dragons. So we need to stay out of sight the best that we can. This journey is designed to secure Goliath's cave—nothing more, nothing less. I am not flying high to amuse you."

Hawk bowed his head. "Sorry, Clefspeare."

When Clefspeare turned away and faced forward again, Sabina pressed close to Hawk and whispered, "Do not be alarmed at Clefspeare's words. He is still suffering from the effects of that spear that Sir Devin shoved into his belly. Pain has made him rather short-tempered of late."

"Or maybe," Hawk whispered in return, "he's thinking about that secret he and Merlin have been keeping."

"The secret he calls the Final Flames?" Sabina asked. "To protect the good dragons?"

Hawk nodded. "Whatever it is, Clefspeare definitely hopes it never happens. Maybe it's closer to coming true than we know about."

"Maybe." Sabina patted Hawk on the back. "No matter what the reason for Clefspeare's surly mood, do not take it personally. I am certain that he has a lot on his mind."

“You’re probably right.” Hawk looked down at the forest far below, barely visible through a thin layer of clouds. Clefspeare had taken an indirect route to keep from being followed, but they had to be getting close to Goliath’s cave by now.

Clefspeare curled his neck and faced them again. “Prepare for a rapid descent. We want to limit the possibility of being seen.”

Sabina wrapped her arms around Hawk’s waist. “I fastened myself to the spine behind me using a strap from a saddlebag. Bend over and stay low to decrease wind resistance. I will not let go of you.”

“Got it.”

As he bent forward, Sabina’s grip tightened. She shouted, “We are ready, Clefspeare!”

Clefspeare folded his wings and dropped through the clouds. Hawk’s stomach surged upward, feeling like it might push into his throat. He swallowed hard and held his breath. Fortunately, the rush probably wouldn’t last very long.

After a few seconds, Clefspeare fanned his wings and slowed the plunge, reversing the sensation in Hawk’s gut. As planned, Clefspeare landed on a flat area in front of Goliath’s cave. Sabina unfastened herself from the spine and slung the saddlebag’s strap over her shoulder. Since these bags were designed for horses and not for dragons, it was often easier to carry them than to attach them to a dragon’s back. “That was exhilarating.”

His heart thumping, Hawk inhaled deeply to settle himself. “I’m not used to it, but I loved it.”

While Hawk and Sabina climbed down Clefspeare’s spiny back, Clefspeare looked around with his eyebeams on. “I sense no danger, and with the memory mirror nowhere nearby to blunt my sensing power, we should be safe. Still, we must be wary. The situation could change in mere seconds. Remember our purpose is

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to see if the gems are still in the cave and move them to a nearby location where treasure hunters, who might get word that Goliath is dead, will not be able to find them. We will do that as quickly as possible and leave.”

Sabina half closed an eye. “I never heard why Master Merlin is so concerned about the gems.”

“Because,” Hawk said, “Master Merlin wants to figure out where Goliath got the gems and return them to their rightful owners. And if he can’t find the owners, he’ll use the gems to create a charity for the street children in Camelot.”

“That would be wonderful.”

Clefspeare growled, his ears flattening. “Something is greatly amiss at the cave.”

Sabina took a few steps toward the cave’s arched entrance and looked it over. “I see. The opening has been repaired.”

“That’s strange.” Hawk stepped to her side and studied the entry. Small gaps separated the stones that made up the arch, as if they had been fitted together haphazardly. “It looks like it might collapse with the slightest shake, a lot less than the earthquake that made it collapse last time.”

Clefspeare shuffled closer and joined them. “If it *was* an earthquake. I am not convinced. Since Morgan has the explosive powder in her possession, she might have been testing it on the cave, knowing Goliath was already dead. Perhaps she arranged for the repair but could not completely restore the cave to its original form. It would not be unusual for Morgan to plot something sinister. That witch always has something evil brewing in her kettle.”

Sabina took another step toward the cave and squinted. “But how could she do it at all? She is not strong enough to lift any of those stones, is she?”

“Maybe by using witchcraft?” Hawk asked.

“Perhaps.” Clefspeare drew close to the arch and studied the stones. “No. This is dragon work. I see claw marks.”

Hawk joined Clefspeare under the arch and looked up at the stones. “Why would a dragon repair the cave?”

“My first thought,” Clefspeare said, “was that Maven intended to use the cave herself, taking the role of queen of the corrupt dragons. But now, seeing the condition of the finished work, I think it more likely that Morgan asked Maven to repair it, for Morgan’s own purposes. I am not sure this rebuilt cave is strong enough for any dragon to dwell within. Simply moving about inside could cause another collapse.”

Sabina sniffed. “I smell something foul. Is the odor from Goliath’s carcass?”

Clefspeare inhaled through his snout. “That is not the odor of rotting dragon flesh. It is a decaying animal of a different species, perhaps a deer. Since Goliath went through regeneracy shortly before his death, his cells are deteriorating slowly, so his carcass might not smell bad for quite some time.”

Hawk furrowed his brow. “But there wasn’t a dead deer in his cave when we were here last time, and Goliath was already dead. Why would there be one now? A snack for Maven?”

“I will investigate. You two stay here.” Clefspeare ventured farther into the cave, moving slowly, probably to prevent a potential collapse. After a couple of minutes, he returned, his eyes pulsing red. “There is a deer carcass next to Goliath, and his body has also begun early stages of decay, but the presence of the deer makes his odor difficult to detect. In any case, I found something much more interesting and quite alarming.”

“What?” Hawk and Sabina asked at the same time.

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“A large egg. It was sitting inside a recessed compartment at the back of the cave on a rocky shelf, as if it had been placed there on purpose. It is too large for any species of bird in our region or even any non-draconic reptile.”

Hawk blinked. “Dragons don’t lay eggs, right?”

“Correct. Dragons give live birth. At least all of the dragons *I* know about.”

“Then what could the egg be from?” Sabina asked.

Clefspeare shifted his head toward her. “Since you have superior vision, I was hoping you could tell me. I was able to touch the egg and rock it gently back and forth, so I am certain that it is not heavy. I decided that my claws are too clumsy to carry it out here safely, so I left it where I found it.” He nodded toward the interior. “You two may go inside together and bring the egg out into better light. Since I touched it without harm, I assume you also will not be harmed by it.”

Sabina looked up at the arch. “Since you went in and out without making the cave collapse, I assume it is safe for us as well.”

“For now. Just step lightly and avoid touching the walls.”

“Good advice.” Sabina took Hawk’s hand, and the two of them padded softly into the cave, light from outside allowing them to see within.

As they passed between the dead dragon and the dead deer, Hawk looked the deer over. Some of the flesh had been torn away, as if a dragon had used its sharp teeth to take a massive bite, evidence that the Maven-snack theory might be accurate. The stink wasn’t too bad, but it seemed impossible to detect Goliath’s separate odor. Clefspeare’s sense of smell was probably better than his own.

Hawk studied the hoard of gems, partially covered by Goliath’s corpse. Many gleamed like a cluster of twinkling stars—reds, blues,

and greens. Goliath's recent regeneracy had left some of the gems still energized, though their light would probably fade away over time.

He picked up a gold medallion with a green gem embedded in its face and a chain attached. It, as well as a few others scattered among the pile, would be easy for their owners to identify. The other gems, which were likely not identifiable, were numerous enough to pay for the well-being of every street child in Camelot and beyond. It would be amazing to give them plenty of food, warm beds, and better clothing.

When they arrived at the back wall, Hawk tried to scan the wall's surface, but dimness veiled every detail, and the sparkling glow from the gems added a confusing array of colorful lights. "I don't see a shelf, but that's no surprise. I don't have Clefspeare's eyebeams."

"Nor do I," Sabina said, "but I do hear something. It sounds like music."

"I don't hear anything."

"Let me see if I can follow the sound to find its source." As she searched, she hummed, as if giving voice to the tune she was hearing.

"Maybe you could take off your rubellite ring. Your glowing skin would help us see."

"Good idea." She pulled the ring from her finger. Instantly, a white glow emanated from her skin and cast a soft light across the wall.

Hawk shivered—a good shiver. Sabina had several traits that she inherited because of her underborn genetics, but her glowing skin was probably the most breathtaking.

She crouched and pointed. "Here it is."

Hawk stared at the spot. An egg the size of a small gourd sat on a low rocky shelf, maybe six inches deep in a recess. A pile of

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dirt and pebbles sat on the floor in front of the opening, and dust coated the surface of the egg. “I see it. Looks like it was covered by the wall until recently.”

“Right. Maybe the earthquake exposed it.” Sabina put her ring back on. In her glow’s fading light, she put the saddlebag down, reached into the recess in the wall, and withdrew the egg. As if ignited by her touch, the egg brightened and cast a white glow through the dust and into the cave. Sabina brushed the dust away from the egg’s surface, making it transparent, almost invisible. “Do you see anything else on that shelf?”

Hawk crouched and looked. “No. It’s empty now.”

“That is so strange.”

He rose and squinted at her, her face now awash in white. “Why?”

“Obviously someone hid this egg here on purpose.”

“Goliath?”

“Not likely. The recess it was in looks like it was carefully carved by a tool.”

“Good point. Claws couldn’t do that. Pretty mysterious.”

“Another mystery is the purpose.” The glow made her eyes sparkle. “If the egg is dangerous, maybe someone was trying to bury it here forever, but if it is beneficial, then the person hiding it should want the finder to know what to do with it. Right?”

“Right. But if it’s beneficial, then why hide it? Why hasn’t the owner come back for it?”

“Those are good questions.” Sabina scrunched her brow. “As you know, I have a gift, the ability to find things, and I sense a broken connection in this place. We are missing something.”

“Like another shelf?”

“Perhaps.”

“I’ll feel around for one.” Hawk ran a hand along the wall until he touched loose dirt. He pushed his fingers into the wall and pulled dirt out until he had cleared a new shelf. A small book lay upon it, sealed in red wax. “Found something.” He drew it out and showed it to Sabina. “The instructions?”

Clefspeare called from the cave entrance. “Is something delaying you?”

“Yes,” Sabina replied, “but nothing dangerous. We will be out in a moment.”

“Do you feel like anything else is missing?” Hawk asked.

Sabina shook her head. “The connection is complete.” She put the egg into the satchel, slung the strap over her shoulder, and walked toward the exit. Hawk trailed close behind, the book in hand. When they rejoined Clefspeare, Sabina opened the bag and explained what they had found.

When she finished, Clefspeare eyed the book and the egg carefully. “Now that I see how the egg glows, I think I might know what it is. King Makaidos, my grandfather, mentioned an object called an *ovulum*. The plural is *ovula*. I think there were seven or eight ovula, each able to emit a specific color as well as a sound that those with gifted hearing could detect.”

“What are the ovula used for?” Hawk asked.

“They have a protective quality. The sound they emit is holy, and those who have evil intent are repelled and confused by it. The red ovulum protected Noah’s ark from those who wanted to destroy it, including the Watchers. They were fallen angels who corrupted the people in those days. Makaidos did not speak much more about it in my presence.”

Hawk held the book up. “Maybe this will explain.”

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“Most likely,” Clefspeare said, “but I think we should ask Merlin to examine it first to see if there is a special way to open it. Otherwise, the book could sustain damage.”

“Right. But what about the gems? We’re supposed to hide them somewhere.”

“We need the saddlebag to protect the ovulum for its journey to Merlin. While you confer with him about the book and ovulum, I will return here with a large sack to collect the gems. Since the cave has been repaired, I will not need assistance to move debris from the collapse.”

Sabina raised a finger. “I have one concern. Could Morgan have placed the ovulum where we would find it? Could this be a trap of some kind?”

“You are wise to consider that,” Clefspeare said, “but since the book was still hidden, and since there was no way to find it other than with your gifted insight, I doubt that Morgan put either object in the cave. A well-designed trap would have more obvious bait.”

“But,” Hawk said, “Morgan knows about Sabina’s gifted insight. Even a hidden bait is not hard for her to find.”

Clefspeare bobbed his head. “You are right, but one factor is missing. I sense no danger, and, as I mentioned earlier, there seems to be no memory mirror present to diminish my sensitivity. I think we should credit this discovery to the leading of the Maker while still being wary about the slight possibility that it is a trap set by Morgan.”

Hawk and Sabina both nodded. “I agree,” Sabina said. “We should consult Merlin at once.”