

Circles of Seven

Book 3

Dragons in our Midst

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Bryan Davis

Living Ink Books
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Recap of *Raising Dragons* and *The Candlestone*

If you haven't read the first two books in the series, you'll need a briefing before you read this one. My name is Professor Charles Hamilton, former Oxford professor and now a private tutor for the children in this story. Since I am intimately acquainted with their amazing adventures, I have been asked to relate them to you.

During the sixth century, most dragons were evil, giving dragon slayers reason to kill them. Merlin, of King Arthur fame, used a miracle to transform the good dragons into humans, thereby protecting them. These anthrozils, as they were called, retained dragon genetics, and a few married into the human race and produced children. Among these were Billy Bannister (whom I always call "William"), who is able to breathe fire, and Bonnie Silver, who has dragon wings.

One slayer, Devin, survived through the centuries, using the healing photoreceptors in dragon blood in combination with a gem called a candlestone. This stone is able to absorb energy from a dragon, thus weakening it and providing power for the slayer. Devin killed all the anthrozils except for one, William's father, Jared, who was known as Clefspeare when he was a dragon. After Devin slew Bonnie's mother, Irene (Hartanna as a dragon), Bonnie fled Montana and located William in West Virginia. Devin, taking the guise of William's school principal, discovered William's dragon past and tried to kill both him and Bonnie.

Through many harrowing adventures and narrow escapes in the wilderness, including a miraculous use of Excalibur, William and Bonnie survived (with substantial help from myself and William's friend, Walter Foley). During the escape ordeal, William's father transformed back into a dragon, and we found a strange book, Merlin's ancient diary.

Later, Bonnie's father, Dr. Conner, located her and claimed that her mother had only been severely wounded and was still alive, so Bonnie went home with him to Montana. When I uncovered his deceit, we—William, William's mother, Walter, and I—flew to Montana to find them. Strangely enough, Merlin's diary helped us. Cryptic words

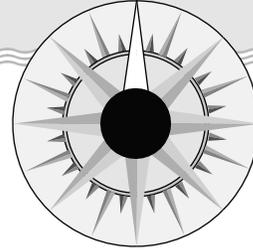
appeared in poetic verse, a guiding light of sorts. We also found Excalibur, which Bonnie had used to dispose of Devin in the climax of her battle in the wilderness, but she later dropped it while flying to safety. The sword is able, in the right hands, to create a beam that transforms people into light energy, a process called translumination. If that energy is not immediately confined in a structure such as the candlestone, it disperses, killing the unfortunate victim.

Dr. Conner told Bonnie that he transluminated her mother and stored her in the candlestone until he could find a way to heal her. It was up to Bonnie to dive into the stone and retrieve her. This retrieval process was the brainchild of a young genius, Ashley Stalworth, whom Bonnie befriended, along with several orphan girls who lived in Dr. Conner's underground laboratory. When Bonnie dove into the candlestone in the form of light energy, she discovered that Devin was actually trapped there instead of her mother, and she became trapped herself.

When we arrived in Montana, Palin, Devin's henchman, kidnapped William and took him to the laboratory. Once there, William escaped, and, with Ashley's help, ventured into the candlestone to rescue Bonnie. After finding several others in the stone, knights from ages past, including a splendid chap named Sir Barlow, William helped everyone escape in the midst of a ferocious tumult—earthquakes, sword battles, and the collapse of a mountain overhead.

My part in this effort, after being transluminated myself, was to escort the escapees into a restoration chamber. I pulled William out, but he was unconscious, his brain addled by the process. When I placed Excalibur in his hands, however, he suddenly revived, receiving an amazing infusion of light energy from above when he finally learned the secret behind Excalibur's power.

Devin also escaped the candlestone, becoming an enormous, lightning-spewing monster. William battled him in a titanic struggle, finally defeating him with Excalibur's unbridled energy. When all had settled, I revealed to William that he was Arthur's heir and that he must come with me to England to fulfill his destiny, to battle the ultimate evil in the Circles of Seven.



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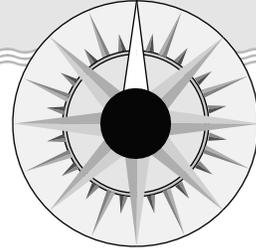
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All hail the true “Once and Future King,”
the ever-present light we follow, whose blood is our ally
in the great battle. As we rescue the enemy’s prisoners in
our circles, show us the light that will lead us safely home.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my faithful wife and best friend, Susie—without you, I would not know the meaning of “Welcome Home.”

To my AMG family—Dan Penwell, Warren Baker, Rick Steele, Dale Anderson, Trevor Overcash, Joe Suter, and all the staff—thank you for daring to be different. Your desire for excellence is unmatched.

To my editor, Becky Miller, thank you for hanging in there with me. Thank you for listening to the voice of the King.

A special thank you to Dr. Spiros Zodhiates for teaching me the meaning of *autarkeia*. (1 Timothy 6:6)

MERLIN'S SONG



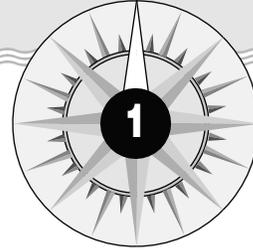
*With sword and stone, the holy knight,
Darkness as his bane,
Will gather warriors in the light
Cast in heaven's flame.*

*He comes to save a remnant band,
Searching with his maid,
But in a sea of sadness finds
His warriors lying splayed.*

*A valley deep, a valley long
Lay angels dry and dead;
Now who can wake their cold, stone hearts
Their bones on table spread?*

*Like wine that flows in skins made new
The spirit pours out fresh;
Can hymns of love bring forth the dead
And give them hearts of flesh?*

*O will you learn from words of faith
That sing in psalms from heaven
To valley floors where terrors lurk
In circles numbering seven?*



THE MONOGRAM

Danger!

Billy's internal alarm blared. Something evil approached, creeping up slowly through one of the hallways of the huge English mansion. Sitting back in an easy chair, he closed his book and flicked off the floor lamp at his side. He waited, allowing his eyes to adjust to the dimness of the unfamiliar bedroom. Only a ray of moonlight seeped in from the window on the opposite wall, its yellowish-white glow casting odd shadows across the oak floor.

He slowly rose to his feet, cringing at the sound of the creaking boards under his heels. He tiptoed to the door and pushed it silently closed, carefully releasing the knob and begging the latch not to click.

Icy dread crawled along his skin. The sense of danger grew in intensity with each creak from the bowels of the centuries-old house. Not able to sleep, he had decided to read a book of King Arthur lore borrowed from his teacher, Professor Hamilton. As he



sat in the corner, he had thought the post-midnight noises were simply trees brushing the windows or maybe his host pattering around on the first floor. Now, as the clock on the wall ticked past 3:00 a.m., he knew better.

He glided across the room with long, quiet strides and snatched Excalibur's scabbard from a belt hanging around the bedpost. Grasping the hilt, he slowly drew out the blade. The sound of metal sliding on metal drilled courage into his heart, and the sword's illuminating glow chased the shadows from the room.

Holding the sword with his arms extended, he planted his feet and kept his body perfectly still . . . waiting . . . listening. The clock marked the seconds—tick . . . tick . . . tick. Cold sweat seeped through his pores, dampening his oversized T-shirt and raising goose bumps on his arms. The air in the bedroom felt heavy . . . suffocating, creating a sense of desperation, like being stuck in an underground cavern with a dying flashlight.

2



A stuttering creak sounded from the hallway. Was it a floorboard bending under a skulking footstep? The door hinges grating, ready to fly open at any second?

Billy's eyes riveted on the door. The creaking stopped, but a spine-tingling alarm kept blaring in his mind. What could be lurking out there? Professor Hamilton was supposed to be sleeping in the next room. Had the approaching menace already paid him a deadly visit? With a dozen bedrooms lining the hall on this second-story wing, maybe it—whatever it was—had passed the professor by.

Billy licked his lips. Should I call Prof? Should I go check on him?

The door creaked again. He regripped Excalibur's hilt and tensed his arms. In the dimness, he could see no movement, only shifting light as the sword vibrated in his trembling hands. He didn't feel scared—not much, anyway—mostly just cold in the

spacious, drafty bedroom. His sweatpants and damp T-shirt weren't enough to ward off the chill.

As he watched for a hint of movement, an unusual scent drifted past his nose, a sweet blossom of some kind, not pungent like perfume, more like the soft fragrance of gardenias or jasmine. It was pleasant, soothing, even peaceful.

Billy yawned. His eyelids drooped. His brain felt light . . . tired . . . sleepy. He backed up a few steps and bumped into his bedframe. It was the middle of the night, so why not just go to bed? That noise wasn't really anything. This spooky old mansion probably creaked all the time.

A vague sense of danger still lurked in the back of his mind, but he shooed it away, yawning again. It was nothing; there was no danger. He sat down on the bed and breathed in the wonderful aroma, sweet flowers . . . so peaceful . . . so relaxing. He imagined lying in a bed of soft rose petals on a sunny day, a cool breeze caressing him to sleep. Was he really lying down now?

Yes, I must be. It's so soft, so comfortable.

Consciousness began slipping away.

There's that creaking noise again. But it's nothing . . . just the wind blowing through this old house.

His sense of danger faded, vanishing in a whirlpool of images—his friends, Bonnie and Walter; the dragon Cleftspear; his mother—all mixing into a confused dream.

More creaking? Footsteps? Mom, is that you?

He felt a cool hand softly touch his neck. He smiled. *Okay, Mom. I'll get up. I just have to—*

A wild shout pierced his senses. "William!"

Billy shot upward, but a strong grip shoved him back to the bed, iron fingers squeezing his throat. He couldn't breathe. A hooded form, a shadow in the dimness, pressed close to his face, almost eye-to-eye, as he straddled Billy's body, choking his life away.



The dark figure suddenly lurched back, releasing its strangling grip. Wearing a long, black robe, his attacker looked like a specter flying away from his bed. Loud bumps erupted from the floor, and the professor's voice shouted, "William! . . . I require . . . your assistance . . . immediately!"

Billy sat up, caressing his throat and blinking away the mind fog. The professor and the dark intruder rolled on the floor, their arms and legs intertwined, the professor's white hair tossing wildly. Billy's senses came roaring back, and he threw himself into the mix, punching the assailant with both fists, then gouging his hooded face with his fingers. It was no use. He seemed impenetrable.

The man pulled the professor into a bear hug, and his muscular arms squeezed the elderly teacher's chest. The professor grunted. "The sword. . . . Use . . . the sword!"

4



Billy jumped up and searched for Excalibur. Where had he put it? He threw back the covers on the bed. *Ah! There it is!*

He grabbed the hilt and summoned Excalibur's transluminating beam, a laser-like shaft of radiance shooting out of the tip. Although he had practiced using it countless times, he wasn't sure he could strike the intruder with the disintegrating ray without hurting the professor. One touch would send this dark burglar into oblivion, making him nothing but a holiday sparkler, but he didn't want the professor to become part of the fireworks.

With a savage thrust of his bare foot, Billy kicked the hooded man in the ribs.

"Arrgh!" The man arched his back. The professor pulled free and rolled away like a log on a steep hill. Rising to his knees the teacher called out, "Now, William! Now!"

Billy swung the sword's beam, slamming it against the intruder's torso. The shaft of light sizzled across his body, and sparks popped like water droplets on a hot frying pan. The man's

black robe absorbed the fiery light, framing his shadowy form with a flashing halo.

The intruder sprang to his feet and kicked the professor in the head with a heavy boot, sending him sprawling to the ground. The black hood slowly turned. Two eye slots rotated to the front with a hate-filled glare blazing through.

Billy stepped back, stunned. Blood oozed from the side of the professor's head as he lay crumpled on the floor. Was he breathing? A hard lump grew in Billy's throat. He couldn't swallow it away.

The hooded man snorted. "Not so brave when your ultimate weapon fails, are you, Dragon Boy?" He blew on his hand with a mocking puff and laughed. "How about your fire breathing? Doesn't it work? Why don't you give it a try?"

Billy felt a good blast of fire growing in his belly. But should he use it? Excalibur's beam didn't work on this creep, and his challenge probably meant that fire wouldn't faze him either. But what could it hurt?

He took a deep breath and hurled a stream of fire from his mouth. The orange tongue of flame splattered against the intruder, but he just spread his arms as though he were basking in sunshine, allowing the blaze to caress his black suit, making it glow like a heated stovetop coil. As the color faded to a dull orange, he crossed his arms and laughed. "I guess the mongrel's bark is worse than his bite."

Billy raised Excalibur to an attack position and bared his teeth. "I have not yet begun to bite."

"Oh, that's a good one," the intruder scoffed. He pulled a sword from under his cloak. "Let's see if your blade is as sharp as your wit."

Billy pulled his sword back and charged. With a hard, two-handed sweep he lunged at the intruder's neck. The man parried, blocking the swipe with his own silver blade. With a turn on his



heel, Billy threw his body into a three-sixty spin, ducked low, and hacked at his opponent's ankles. The man hopped deftly over the blade and chopped downward at Billy's neck.

Billy lurched to the side and rolled away. The attacking blade sliced into the wood floor, wedging tightly.

As the intruder tugged on his hilt, Billy jumped to his feet and swung Excalibur like a baseball bat, aiming for the man's waist. Still hanging onto his sword, the man slid his feet forward, facing upward and ducking under the deadly swing. After Excalibur swiped harmlessly above his face, the intruder sprang back to his feet with the help of his recoiling sword. He finally yanked the blade out of the floor and straightened his body, his feet set and arms flexed.

With sweat dripping from his hair, Billy stepped back and stared at his opponent's fierce eyes, his chest heaving and his arms trembling. He gripped Excalibur tightly with both hands. Even if the beam wouldn't disintegrate the intruder, he knew Excalibur had to give him an advantage. It was more than just a sword; it was a holy saber, generating its magnificent light energy only for certain people. It must have been guided by a greater power, an intelligence above and beyond his own.

The hooded man charged, his sword swinging. Billy blocked it with Excalibur, and when the two blades met, Excalibur's glow burst into a glorious blaze, so bright he had to squint.

The intruder held out his hand to block the brilliant light. Fear and agony flooded his eyes. With a wild, one-handed swipe, he waved his sword high. Billy ducked just in time, feeling the blade swish above his head. The intruder dropped to his knees and swung again, this time aiming low. Billy jumped, and the razor edge passed under his bare feet like a chilling wind. The intruder slumped, his cloaked head drooping. He seemed drained, exhausted.



Billy leaped at the chance. He slammed Excalibur's flat side against the man's skull. A burst of electrostatic energy covered the intruder's hood and ran across his black suit like a swarm of lightning bugs, buzzing and flashing in chaotic twinkles. His arms stiffened, and he toppled to the side, his head smacking the floor with a sickening thud. The black mass of body, cloak, and hood lay motionless at Billy's feet.

The twinkling died away. Billy, his eyes wide, lowered Excalibur, letting its point rest on the floor. The sword's light diminished, yet still retained enough radiance to illuminate much of the room.

He dashed to the professor's side and dropped to his knees. He placed a cool hand on the old man's wrinkled face and across his lips. The teacher's shallow breaths warmed his fingers. *He's alive!*

Billy set Excalibur on the floor and gently patted the professor's cheek. "Professor!" he called in a loud whisper. "Wake up!"

"Nonsense!" the professor replied, his eyes still closed. "There are no gardenias in these gardens. Roses and daffodils, yes, but no gardenias."

Billy shook his teacher's shoulder. "Professor. It's me, Billy. You're dreaming. Wake up."

The professor's eyelids fluttered open. "William!" His eyes darted around the room. "The assailant. Where is he?"

Billy gestured with his head. "On the floor over by the door. I think I knocked him out cold."

The professor struggled to his feet and retied the sash on his gray terrycloth bathrobe. When he lifted his head, he seemed to be in a daze, and his body swayed.

Billy grabbed the professor's forearm and steadied him. "That guy really gave you a hard lick with his boot." He stepped into the bathroom, snatched a hand towel off the rod, and gave it to his teacher. "But it looks like the bleeding's slowed down."



The professor dabbed the wound gingerly and examined the splotch of red on the otherwise white towel. "Yes, William. I don't believe I will require stitches."

A bump sounded from somewhere in the house, then padded footsteps and whispered commands. The professor waved his arm at a dresser next to the door. "Block the entry! Hurry!"

Billy dashed to the door and pushed it closed. Then, with a quiet grunt, he shoved the waist-high dresser under the knob and pressed his ear against the door panel. "I hear noises, like people running on tiptoes."

The professor knelt next to the intruder's sprawled body and slid his hood off, revealing a young man with a wispy brown moustache and goatee. He pressed two fingers against the man's neck, then looked up, his brow wrinkling. "He appears to be dead, William."

8



"Dead? But I only hit him with the flat side! I didn't even draw blood!"

The professor felt the intruder's wrist and pressed his ear against his draped chest. He raised his head again. "Flat side or no, he is certainly dead."

Billy picked up Excalibur and rushed to the professor's side. "Have you ever seen him before?"

"No." The professor lifted one of the intruder's black-sleeved arms. "We must hurry. Help me get this cloak off."

The professor rolled the burglar to one side while Billy tugged at a cloak sleeve with his free hand, pulling it off the assailant's arm. Repeating the motions, they slipped off the other sleeve and carefully slid the cloak out from under the man's body.

When the professor rolled the intruder to his back, he paused and stared at the newly exposed forearm. He reached for Billy's wrist and pulled his hand, sword and all, toward the corpse. The sword's light cast an iridescent glow across the man's skin, changing

Billy thrust Excalibur into its scabbard and fastened the belt to his waist. "That cloak may get you out of here, Prof, but I'll stick out like a mouse at a cat party."

The professor snatched up the intruder's fallen sword, then raised a finger to his lips. "Wait here while I fetch my keys." He slipped out the door and disappeared into the hallway shadows.

Billy waited in darkness, the ticking clock providing the only sound in the room. A dead body lay near his feet. Was he an advance scout of some kind? How many more of them were searching through the house?

A door slammed. Footsteps pounded in the hallway, louder and louder.

Billy shivered. They were getting closer. Would they catch the professor? He slid Excalibur from its scabbard. The sword trembled in his hand. Should he try to make a run for it? Should he obey the professor and wait? He took a deep breath and pulled the door open a crack.

10



A new voice sounded from the hallway, barely audible. "Did you find the boy?"

"Yes," another voice replied, whispering. "All is in hand."

Billy tried to peer through the crack. *That sounds like Prof!*

"Is Foraker dead?" the first voice asked. "Do they have his cloak?"

"Yes and yes."

"Good. Exactly as planned." The first man's voice lowered to an even quieter whisper. "Let them out of the room, then chase them to the front door. We'll kill the old man and dump the kid at Patrick's doorstep. Remember, just scare them out. Morgan wants the Bannister boy deposited unharmed with the cloak."

The conversation ended. Billy moved away from the door and waited. Seconds later, the door swung open, and a black-cloaked figure stepped inside and jerked his hood off, revealing

the professor's familiar face. His skin had turned ashen, and his wild white hair stood almost on end.

The professor closed the door and pressed his back against it, holding his hand on his chest and breathing heavily. "I fooled him . . . for now . . . but we must escape . . . by a way other than the front door."

"Yeah. I heard." Billy returned the sword to its sheath. "How long till we're supposed to meet Bonnie and the dragons?"

The professor took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "About two hours. Five-thirty to be precise. We have plenty of time."

"Maybe, but if my dad's still like he was before he turned back into a dragon, he'll be early." Billy pointed at the window on the opposite side of the room. "Feel up to walking on the roof?"

The professor lifted his foot, displaying a mid-top hiking boot. "I managed to get my trousers and shoes on, and I collected my gloves, so I suppose I'm properly equipped." He squatted and began tying the laces. "But I have a splitting headache, which may indicate a concussion. I'm not sure what will happen if I exert myself."

Billy opened the window and leaned out into the misty darkness, turning his head from side to side. He left the window up and hustled back to the professor, a cool breeze following in his wake. "Looks like it's all clear in the backyard."

The professor stood up, holding his hand over his head. "Then perhaps we'll make it if I can move slowly enough."

Billy zipped up his jacket and stuffed his gloves into one of the pockets. "It's a cinch. I've done it at my house a hundred times." He bounded to the window and vaulted onto the sill. "Come on," he said, waving his arm. "The roof's flat enough." He crawled onto the shingles and helped the professor squeeze through the window.

"Now to find a downspout or a trellis." Billy bent over and skulked to the edge of the roof, careful to keep Excalibur from



dragging. He dropped to his knees and planted his palms on the gritty surface, then leaned over the side. The professor scooted on his knees, nearing the edge while Billy scanned the ground level. Directly underneath, two black-hooded figures stood next to a car, one with his hand on the hood.

Billy whispered. "Two more goons right below us."

"Two that we can see," the professor whispered back. "There may be more."

"Is that your rental car?"

"Yes. Don't you remember it?"

"No." Billy lowered his voice even further. "I was tired when I got in, and I slept all the way from the airport."

The professor's voice matched Billy's. "It's a Vauxhall Vectra Elite, a fine British motor car."

"Well, it might as well be a unicycle without pedals. It's down there, and we're up here." Billy reached back and grabbed Excalibur's hilt. "Getting to it would be easy if I could just transilluminate them. I wonder what went wrong."

The professor rubbed his fingers across his black cloak. "Very strange. It feels like a network of wires on the surface, as fine as silk thread, a metallic mesh of some fashion. And it's warm to the touch."

Billy passed his hand across one of the long sleeves. "Maybe the wires protected that guy. Excalibur's beam didn't faze him, and when I blasted him with fire it just made the wires light up like some kind of heating grid."

The professor stroked the mesh again. "Remarkable. It seems to carry a faint residue." He rubbed his finger and thumb together and brought them close to his eyes. After sniffing the fine powder, he brushed it away with his other hand. "I believe it could be rust."

"Rust? You mean like from iron?"

"Yes. Hydrated ferrous oxide of some sort."



THE MONOGRAM

Billy straightened his back, keeping his knees firmly on the shingles. “So if I can’t zap these guys, what’re we going to do? If we try to climb down, they’ll see us for sure.”

The professor sat up on his haunches with his hand on his chin. “Then we will conquer them with a tried and true, surreptitious approach.”

“Sir Who?”

The professor rose to his full height and helped Billy to his feet. “I’ll take the one on the left,” he said. “Are you ready?”

“Ready? Ready for what?”

“Jump!” The professor leaped off the roof, pulling Billy with him, and they plummeted toward the two men in black.

