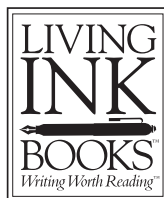


Oracles
of Fire 

Enoch's Ghost

Bryan Davis



Enoch's Ghost

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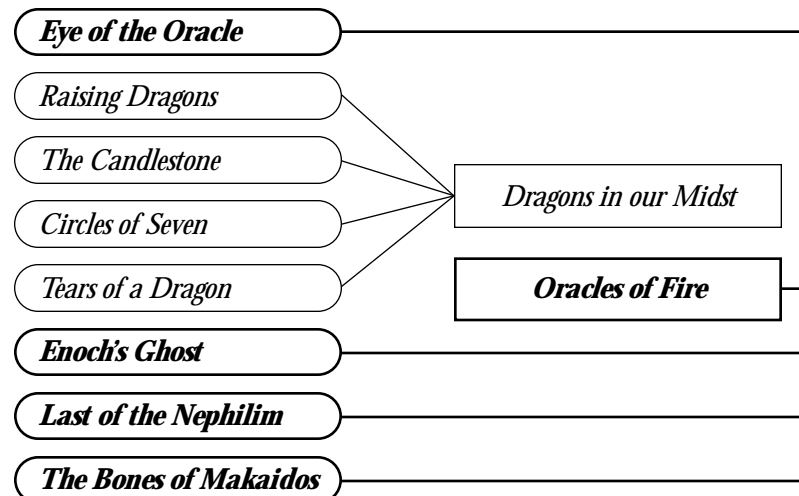
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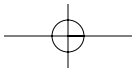
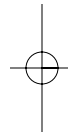
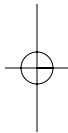
Enoch's Ghost is the second book in the ***Oracles of Fire*** series. It is a sequel to the ***Dragons in our Midst*** (DIOM) series and picks up the story where *Eye of the Oracle* and *Tears of a Dragon* ended.

Here is how the stories line up in chronological order. The *Oracles of Fire* series is boldfaced.



Readers who have not delved into *Dragons in our Midst* or *Eye of the Oracle* will have no trouble understanding and enjoying *Enoch's Ghost* if they read the recap at the end of this book first. This story extends earlier adventures that will lead readers into a multidimensional land, a fascinating journey guided by the *Oracles of Fire*.





ENOCH'S ORACLE

When fathers, sons, and daughters part,
When hearts are cut and hewn,
No solace can replace the love
No song can bind the wound.

For blood that spills from shredded hearts
Can never be restored
When love is lost, when trust is torn,
When shattered faith is poured.

Will pride forever break the bond
Of love that spawned a birth?
Will memories of death be lost
When life sprouts new from earth?

O what will soothe betrayal's pain
And what will smooth the scar?
Can sacrificial blood rain down
The healing from afar?

A witness goes to spy the land
With nine more flaunting pride,
But giants seize their quaking hearts,
And faith is cast aside.

Yet two bear witness to the truth;
They trust in God afresh
To catch their souls and take them home
Should giants slay their flesh.

These giants born of demons' seed
Will cast a net to snare
The holy city high above
And snatch it from the air.



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O who will stand within the gap,
And who will sacrifice?
O who will bleed for love alone,
And who will pay the price?

A widow lays her copper coins,
Two mites, her treasure store,
While hypocrites parade their gifts,
Mere sweepings from their floor.

The humble gift restores anew
The hope when life began,
When fathers, sons, and daughters clasp
Their hands of love again.

But will the daughters take the gift
Of coppers from the king,
The wounds that pour his saving blood
To heal the family ring?





PROLOGUE

The great dragon's eyes glowed with bloodred luminescence, and his voice rumbled like distant thunder. "Mardon, the time is short. When will the giants awaken to bring about our final victory?"

"Soon, very soon." Standing on the edge of a precipice, Mardon held a shining rope of gold, as taut as a harp string and almost as slender. It stretched across a chasm that lay before him, the canyon path of a magma river far below. A mere stone's throw away, a nebulous figure held to the golden line from another precipice, too far to detect any features of form or face. The barest of glows emanated from the slow-moving river, casting reddish light and illuminating the rutted walls and jagged ceiling of their underground cavern.

"Sapphira's latest use of her power," Mardon continued, "has allowed me to draw Earth and Hades so close, only a mere thread of dimensional space separates them. A few more pulls should bind them as one. Even then, I cannot guess how perfectly the two dimensions will combine. The dead souls should eventually



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become as they were when they were alive, but we might have to wait for the merged realms to reach a state of equilibrium before everything settles." He strained against the line again, letting out an almost inaudible grunt. "That's why the synchronization has to be precise. The realms must not touch until the timers are ready to expire and the escape route for our giants is complete."

The dragon beat its wings and joined Mardon at the edge of the chasm. "Leave the escape route to me. The giants will need to loosen their muscles after such a lengthy nap, so I envision a staircase that will lead them to the light."

Mardon pulled the line, drawing the other precipice a few inches closer. With every painstaking inch, the ground trembled, raising the crunching complaint of stone grinding against stone. "An excellent idea," he said. "Many steps to strengthen their resolve ... and their anger."

"And then our next step."

"The greatest step. When I finish creating my tower to draw Heaven down to Earth, my plan will be complete."

"*Your* plan?" The dragon's eyes blazed. "I sowed the seeds of this plan long before you were born, the seeds of Eden that I gave to Samyaza's wench, Lilith. It was she who first cultivated the Nephilim. You merely took her place in my grand scheme."

Mardon averted his eyes and focused on the narrowing chasm. "I see. Morgan never told me where the seedlings came from."

"Giving credit to others was not in her nature."

"True enough." Mardon turned back to the dragon. "I am therefore pleased to give you credit. When Heaven meets Earth, and I am installed as the mediator of the final covenant, you will be a chief prince."

The dragon flashed an odd smile, toothy enough to be menacing, yet it carried a hint of amusement. "Beware of overconfidence. There are forces, human forces, that can stop us."



P R O L O G U E

Mardon shook his head. "Sapphira's power is insufficient without her sister, and no one has seen Acacia in years."

"Do not underestimate an Oracle of Fire. You consider Sapphira a mere seedling who has outgrown her pot, but she is far more powerful. She has already meddled in too many of my affairs for my liking."

"Trying to kill Sapphira is dangerous," Mardon said. "It means death to any who shed her blood."

"We need not kill her as long as she remains ignorant." The dragon raised his head and looked into the cavern's dim upper recesses. "Yet, there is another who could ruin our plans. She is capable of discerning the meaning of your need for building a vortex connection between Heaven and Earth."

"Thigocia's child?" Mardon laid a hand on his head. "I have forgotten her name."

"Ashley Stalworth. If she alerts her mother, then all is lost."

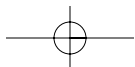
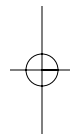
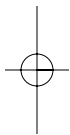
Mardon pulled again. The rope vibrated, shaking off golden sparks that floated into the chasm. "Do you have a remedy?"

"Divide and conquer. While you build your tower, I will deal with Thigocia."

"And what of Ashley?"

The dragon's eyes flashed once more, this time with a glow of triumph. "For now, she is under my control. Fear has kept her from the light, and I intend to keep it that way."







CHAPTER

RETURN OF THE DRAGON

Dragon riding isn't all it's cracked up to be," Ashley grumbled. As she retied her hood, a thick cloud bank enveloped her in white mist, dampening her coat sleeves and drawing a shiver from her chilled arms. She clutched Thigocia's protruding spine with a gloved hand and slid forward, ducking under the streaming fog as she reseated herself. Wearing long underwear and thick denim jeans turned out to be a lifesaver. After over a thousand miles of flying, dragon scales felt like broken concrete under her backside.

She lifted the GPS locator in her palm and brushed a layer of mist from the display with her thumb. On the playing-card-sized monitor, a red dot pulsed in the middle of a blue splotch on the map. Each beat of Thigocia's enormous wings jostled the screen, but she managed to hold the unit steady enough to figure out their ground position as they flew a few thousand feet above Montana's highlands.

She swung her head around to the pair of teenaged passengers seated behind her and shouted through the whistling wind, "I think we're right over Flathead Lake!"



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Thigocia dropped suddenly through an air pocket.

"Whoa!" Ashley yelled, squeezing her legs tightly around the dragon's neck.

Finally, Thigocia caught stable air with her powerful wings. "Sorry about that!"

"No problem," Karen shouted. "I lost my breakfast an hour ago!"

Walter pulled down the bill of his baseball cap and regripped the spine between him and Ashley. Scrunching his thick, wet eyebrows, he peered down into the blanket of clouds. "Any sign of attack jets coming to greet us?"

"No worries." Ashley rubbed the dragon's thick hide, still yelling to overcome the roar. "Thigocia's scales would skew the radar echoes. She probably looks like a wandering albatross on the screen."

Karen, sitting behind Walter, the wind whipping her dampened red hair around her freckled face, pulled on his sleeve. "We're more likely to see gawking bird watchers than attack jets."

"Too bad. I was kind of hoping to get a jet to follow us." Walter leaned to the side and pointed past Thigocia's swinging tail. "Can you imagine how a pilot's eyes would bug out if he came up behind us and—"

"Hey! Not so far!" Karen grabbed Walter's back scabbard and pulled him upright. "I only have you to hold onto."

Ashley pressed the GPS unit against her chest. "Walter! Don't scare us like that!"

"Sorry." Walter's blue eyes sparkled, and a wide grin spread across his boyish face. "I guess I'm not cut out to be an albatross."

Rolling her eyes, Ashley turned her attention back to the locator. After flying so far mostly in the middle of the night, and having to endure Walter's never-ending jokes and Karen's constant fretting over his safety, it was time to get their feet back on the ground for good. Yet, even at ground level, life had been a pain—drinking water from streams, eating berries and nuts as



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well as wild game Thigocia would capture and cook, and wearing the same clothes for days on end. Everyone was ready for a change.

Walter sighed. "So how far is it to the mountain?"

"We're coming up from the south on this path," Ashley said, tracing a line on the grid with her finger, "so, if we don't have to take a detour to stay in the clouds, we'll probably get there in about ten minutes."

Walter leaned into the beating wind. "All I heard was 'ten minutes.'"

"Right!" Ashley said, raising her voice to compete with the strengthening gale. "Give or take a minute!"

"Good!" Karen blew a strand of hair from her brow. "I'm getting soaked."

Bending her long, scaly neck, Thigocia brought her head close to her riders. Thin strings of smoke swirled away from her flared nostrils. "When we get there, I will give you the Sahara treatment. You will be warm and dry in no time."

"Unless it's raining," Walter added.

Karen shivered and slid closer to Walter. "Or snowing."

Ashley tapped her jaw with her fingers and spoke into the breeze. "Larry, what's the weather forecast for the Flathead Lake area in Montana?"

A computerized voice hummed through Ashley's tooth-embedded transmitter. "Cloudy and cool today, high in the fifties. Rain changing to freezing rain tonight, low in the thirties."

"Not good." Ashley pulled a soaked tissue from her jacket and wiped her nose. "I hope we can find shelter, or we'll all die of pneumonia."

"An excellent suggestion, O daughter of a dragon. The official forecast calls for a sixty percent chance of precipitation, but that seems low to me. Based on



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the satellite presentation, I calculate a sixty-three-point-seven percent probability. On a scale—

“No!” Ashley shouted. “Not another dragon scale joke!”

“Your mind-reading capabilities are working perfectly, O maiden of the mailed membrane. On a scale of one to ten, your mental perception rates a nine point two.”

“I don't read minds!” Ashley moaned.

Walter laughed. “Good one, Larry. You slipped in your scale joke anyway.”

Ashley swung her head toward Walter. “You heard him?”

“Barely. It sounds like a buzz coming from your ears, like the highest note in a bumblebee choir's scale.”

“Cool!” Karen chirped. “Another scale joke!”

“Walter! Cut it out!” Ashley scowled at the GPS unit. “It's a good thing we're almost there. Another night of this craziness and I'd be ready to check into Arlo's mental hospital.”

Karen reached over Walter and patted Ashley on the back. “Well, they do have a vacancy now that we sprang Arlo, but you probably wouldn't get any treatment. Thigocia scared the workers so bad with that blast of flames, I don't think they'll ever come back.”

“Yeah,” Walter agreed. “I guess you could say Thigocia fired them!”

Walter and Karen gave each other a high five, while Ashley just shook her head and groaned. When Walter and Karen finally stopped laughing, Ashley called out to Thigocia. “Mother! Get ready to descend!”

Thigocia curled her neck back again. “Ashley, I am not a dog to be commanded. A bit of courtesy is always appropriate when addressing your elders.”

Walter whispered into Ashley's ear. “And your mom is about as elder as you can get.”



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“Speaking of courtesy . . . ,” Ashley whispered back, glaring at Walter. She rubbed the dragon’s neck scales and sighed. “I’m sorry, Mother. It’s just that five days of flying with these characters has made me crawl right to the edge of sanity.”

“I fell over the edge,” Karen said.

“I jumped,” Walter added. “And I can’t seem to climb back up.”

Thigocia’s scaly brow wrinkled sympathetically. “We are all tired, but we will soon be able to rest without fear of being discovered. The mountain site is remote enough for us to remain in hiding, but we will have to descend quickly in order to keep our approach a secret.”

“Bring it on!” Walter pushed his cap tightly over his head. “Riding a dragon roller coaster in the daylight sure beats all the slow night flying we’ve been doing.”

He grabbed the spine with both hands, and Karen wrapped her arms around him. For the moment, except for the whistling wind and slow flapping of dragon wings, all was silent, allowing Ashley to concentrate on the map. When the blinking dot glided across the border of the blue expanse and into a green region, she raised her hand. “Okay, Mother, we should be right over it. Time to make your dive.”

A low growl rumbled from the dragon’s throat. “Ashley?”

She winced and leaned forward. “*Please* make your dive?”

Thigocia began folding in her wings. “Hang on!” As she angled downward, her scarlet laser eyes pierced the clouds below.

Ashley hugged the spine and lowered her head. Suddenly, it seemed that the whole world fell out from under her. Her body floated upward. Her stomach squeezed the breath out of her lungs. With streams of cloudy vapor whipping by, she tightened her grasp, forced in a chest full of air, and shouted into the gale. “You two okay back there?”

“Yeah!” Walter choked out. “Except I lost my cap, and Karen’s strangling me!”



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Ashley ducked lower. "Just hold tight!"

When they broke through the clouds, Thigocia pulled up and banked to one side. "I sense a hint of danger," she said as she coasted into a circular descent.

"Where?" Ashley yelled through the swirling breeze. "How far?"

"It is difficult to measure. The intensity is low, and the location seems vague."

Ashley peered at the mountainous terrain below—wooded peaks, plunging slopes, and two river valleys nestled between high, uneven ridges. Autumn had stripped many trees to a few stubborn brown leaves, while bushy firs and ponderosa pines infused the mountain with lush greenery. "Should we land?"

"Yes. We must fulfill our reason for coming, and if a battle ensues, I cannot fight with three untrained riders. Besides, our warrior needs firm footing if we expect him to use his weapon."

Ashley glanced back at Walter. His expression had hardened. His eyes flashing, he reached over his shoulder and grabbed Excalibur's hilt. He slid it out partway, as if checking its readiness, then returned his grip to the dragon's spine.

As Thigocia approached a mountaintop, her eyebeams sliced into the shadowy, forested slopes. The blanket of clouds hovered low as she drew up her wings to angle sharply toward a small grass-covered clearing at the very top of the rounded peak.

Holding her breath, Ashley leaned into the dragon's dive, trying to duck under the torrent of fog-soaked air. Seconds later, Thigocia thumped against the ground, making a loud squishing noise as she skidded through a carpet of wet grass.

Walter slid down her damp scales, avoiding her beating wings, and landed feetfirst. He whipped Excalibur from his back scabbard and pivoted slowly, firmly gripping the hilt of the sword with both hands. Although no sunlight penetrated the low cloud bank, the blade shimmered, emanating an aura that coated the silvery metal.



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Thigocia lowered her head to the ground, making her neck into a stairway. Ashley grabbed a duffel bag strap from her mother's spine and clambered down the scaly ladder, followed closely by Karen. They rushed to Walter's side, turning with him as he scanned the encircling line of denuded trees and tall conifers that lay only a stone's throw away in every direction. Although a hint of wood smoke tinged the air, no sign of fire arose from the thousands of acres of forest that spread across the distant hills.

"I don't see anyone," he said, twisting back toward the dragon. "Do you still sense danger?"

Thigocia's ears rotated, like satellite receivers searching for a signal. "Something sinister ... not close at hand ... perhaps among the trees, but I saw nothing in the forest as we descended."

"Something invisible?" Karen asked. "Maybe a demon of some kind?"

"We destroyed the Watchers." Thigocia snorted twin plumes of smoke into the air. "I doubt that any other demons would be foolish enough to seek a confrontation."

"As long as the danger stays on the sidelines," Walter said, lowering Excalibur's point to the ground, "let's get started on what we came here to do."

"But first ..." Thigocia blew a hot dry breeze toward the three humans.

Walter spread out his arms, letting the desert-like wind flap his wet sleeves. "Ahhh! The Sahara treatment!"

Ashley and Karen stripped off their coats and basked in the drying flow.

"Can't beat this with a stick," Karen said, squeezing her eyes closed. "Ashley, I'm glad your mom is so full of hot air."

"Good one." Walter pointed at Karen and winked. "And it's a good thing she doesn't need a breath mint."

As Walter and Karen continued trading jokes about hot air and halitosis, Ashley rotated her body slowly and basked in the



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luxurious breeze. She winced now and then at the heat and the inane jokes as she watched Walter playfully jabbing Karen. Would he ever grow out of his childish ways? He was a valiant warrior, but at times he seemed like such a kid. Still, it would be fun to join in, kind of let loose and laugh with them. She closed her eyes and shook her head. No. Someone had to be serious around here, so it might as well be her.

After a few minutes, the girls put their coats back on, now warm and dry. Walter patted Thigocia on her side. "You're better than a thousand hair dryers, and we didn't have to worry about popping a circuit!"

"Time to get to work!" Picking up her bag, Ashley strode through lush, calf-high grass until she reached a thinner section with only a short carpet of greenery. Something underneath had obviously stunted the growth. She scuffed her shoe across the soil, exposing a solid foundation. "There's a slab here," she said, looking back at her mother. "Was this our home site?"

"It has to be." Thigocia flicked her tail toward a tall oak. "That tree was next to your grandfather's bedroom window."

Ashley walked under the oak's dripping branches and ran her hand along the trunk's rough bark. Her fingers traced a deep furrow until they came across the outline of a heart. Stooping, she gazed at the initials carved in the center but could only make out the first letter of each pair—T and H.

"Timothy and Hannah," she whispered.

A trickle of memories seeped into her mind, a lanky man lifting her into the tree's lowest bough. As his brown eyes gleamed, a smile radiated from his noble face, but as thin veils darkened the scene, he backed away, his body fading as he withdrew. With her little bare toes wiggling in front of her, she reached out a pair of chubby hands, and a childlike voice squeaked out.

"Daddy!" Ashley said softly, tears welling as she dug a fingernail into the bark. "Daddy, come back!"



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Her mind's eye still watching from the tree, a window came into view, white drapes drawn closed on the inside. Her thoughts drew her into the bedroom, and, against the adjacent wall, she found a single bed covered with a blue downy comforter. Another man, an older man this time, sat on the edge and gestured for her to come to his lap.

Ashley whispered the nickname she gave to the man after her father died. "Daddy!" He had become a replacement daddy, a kind but sickly old man who assuaged the pain in a little girl's heart. After a few seconds, the image of her departed grandfather also faded away in darkening shadows.

New memories flowed. As a two-year-old girl, she leaped into her grandfather's outstretched arms, a book tightly clutched to her frilly nightgown. He took the huge volume and opened to the first page, squinting at the opening lines. "Are you sure you want to read this? It's really dark and scary."

She ran her finger across a sketch of a solitary man walking in the midst of a gloomy forest. The black-and-white drawing seemed so real, she could almost hear his feet shuffling through the path's tangled weeds. "I already read it to myself, but I didn't understand all of it."

Her grandfather slid his hand over the drawing. "So you want me to explain it?"

Little Ashley nodded. "Especially the scary parts. They gave me goosey bumps."

Withdrawing a pair of reading glasses from his pocket, he sighed. "Okay, let's see what this says ..."

Midway in the journey of our life,
I came to myself in a dark wood,
For the straight way was lost.
Ah, how hard it is to tell
The nature of that wood, savage, dense and harsh.



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The very thought of it renews my fear!
 It is so bitter death is hardly more so.
 But to set forth the good I found
 I will recount the other things I saw.
 How I came there I cannot really tell,
 I was so full of sleep
 When I forsook the one true way.

Ashley nodded slowly, recognizing the words being replayed in her mind. “Dante’s *Inferno*,” she said out loud. That story had haunted her dreams for years, a plunge into the depths of hell where she witnessed the torments of the damned—souls who would suffer for eternity. With every succeeding circle of punishment, she pictured herself in the place of the tortured, stripped naked and pummeled by demons century after century without hope of rescue. Even her cries for mercy would be echoed by the mocking curses of Satan’s henchmen—prayers answered by obscenities.

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She shook the thoughts away, and her flow of memories jumped to another scene—the same bedroom, but this time her grandfather was rushing her across the room, carrying her in the crook of his arm. With his free hand, he thrust open the window and threw a duffle bag outside. Then, after lifting her over the sill, he whispered, “Wait at the tree!”

Toddling in pink slippers, she hurried to the oak and peeked out from behind the trunk. Her grandfather scrambled through the window, snatched up the duffle bag, and caught her into his arm as he passed by, barely slowing down at all. Seconds later, they were standing at the edge of the forest. As little Ashley watched the house, puffs of white coloring her excited breaths, her grandfather pulled a cap, two boots, and a pair of mittens from the bag. “It could be a long hike,” he said, “but we have to get to a phone to warn your parents.”

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He pushed one of the mittens over her stiff, frigid hand, and nodded toward a path in the woods where a matrix of spindly shadows crisscrossed a leaf-strewn trail. Her grandfather's breathing grew labored as he stretched the ski cap over her ears, his own breaths puffing streams of white. "We'll follow it ... until we get ... to the creek bed ... but we have to throw them off the trail ... by walking through the water."

Ashley laid a hand on his chest. "Is your heart hurting again, Dada?"

He took a deep breath and covered her hand with his own. "It was, but it's getting better now."

As her grandfather replaced her slippers with boots, Ashley looked back at the house. One of the men came out and pulled a gasoline can from a car, then went back inside. "If those men catch us," she said, gazing at her grandfather again, "would they kill us?"

Raising a finger to his lips, he whispered, "I think they would. That's why we're hiding."

"If they find us, and kill us ..." Her lips puckered, and a tear rolled down her cheek. "Would I go to Heaven?"

He moved the clasped hands from his chest to hers. "I told you about how to get to Heaven. I've sung you to sleep with 'Amazing Grace' a hundred times, but you wouldn't believe me."

She wiped the tear, and her voice pitched higher. "I'll believe whatever you say. I just don't want to go to Hell."

"Of course you don't, and you won't." He brushed away another tear with his thumb. "Just listen for God's voice and always follow the light, and he will lead you to Heaven." He kissed her forehead tenderly. "Can you do that?"

Sniffing, she gave him a slow, uneasy nod. "I think so."

He patted her on the head and inhaled deeply. "I think my heart is strong enough now." Picking up the bag, he took her hand, and the two hustled down the leafy slope. The forest darkened with every step—downward, always downward. Fear gripped



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her heart as visions of Dante's demons haunted every shadow along the way.

Ashley's memories jumped again, this time resurrecting a dense forest, a dark starless sky, and the sound of her grandfather sloshing through a shallow brook. With her cheek on his shoulder, her gaze stayed locked on the bouncing trees behind them, each one seeming to draw a sword, just as those two intruders had drawn theirs, the two men who had invaded her home and chased her and her grandfather away.

Suddenly, a loud explosion rumbled through the woods. She jerked her head toward the sound just in time to see a huge fireball billow into the sky and then disperse in a million orange and yellow sparks. Glowing cinders flew in all directions and twinkled like copper-colored stars.

Her grandfather covered her eyes with one of his big, soft hands. "It's going to be okay," he whispered. "It's going to be okay." But the despair in his voice said otherwise. It wasn't going to be okay, and even at her young age, she knew her life was going to change forever.

"Earth to Ashley!"

Ashley blinked.

"Come in, Ashley!" Walter waved his hand in front of her eyes. "Are you okay?"

Ashley gave him a brief nod. Walter's voice sounded like her grandfather's, an echo of love traveling across thousands of lonely nights, bringing comfort, yet drawing tears. *Are you okay?* the voice repeated, tugging at her heart as the memories streamed away from her mind. She firmed her chin. It was a terrible time to cry. She had to stay strong.

"You zoned out," Walter continued. "What's rattling up there in that souped-up brain of yours?"

She brushed away a tear. "I finally remember the night when the slayers killed my parents."



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“Really? Any clues that’ll help us find your father?”

She shook her head. “Not yet. Maybe searching around will trigger another memory.”

“There’s not much here to search through,” Walter said, kicking a brick fragment. “Someone really cleaned this place up—no broken drywall, no plumbing, not even the kitchen sink, but your mother found where the fireplace used to be. She says that’s important.”

With Karen standing at her side, Thigocia pawed the dirt at a raised portion of earth on the opposite side of the foundation. “We hid the keepsake box under the hearth. If it is still here, it should be under one of the bricks.”

Ashley pulled the bag strap higher on her shoulder and hustled with Walter to the site. While Walter traced the edges of the brick layer with a pocket knife, Ashley stroked her mother’s neck. “Seeing this place brought back a lot of memories, including what happened the night you died.” She pulled out her tissue and dabbed her nose. “I was in the woods when our house exploded.”

Thigocia’s ears twitched, and her eyes darted between the foundation and the forest. “When we finish here, I will tell you more about that night, but I dare not lose my concentration while I am monitoring the danger. It seems to be slowly increasing.”

“I got it!” Walter called. He pried up the edge of a loose brick and began tossing fragments to the side. When the opening was about six inches square, he plunged his hand into a hole and withdrew a black metal case about the size of a music box, bent on the top and rusted along every edge. Rising to his feet, he handed it to Ashley. “I guess you should do the honors.”

Ashley glanced at her mother and slowly opened the box. Inside, there were four compartments. One held a folded piece of paper; the second, a gold ring with a mounted red gem; and the third, three coins—a dime and two pennies. The fourth compartment was empty.

“Is that a rubellite?” Karen asked, pointing at the gem.



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“That was my ring.” Thigocia lifted her clawed hand. “I stopped wearing it when I realized that Devin was still alive and stalking me.”

A breeze lifted the folded paper, but Karen pinched the edge and kept it in place.

Thigocia touched Ashley's back with her wing. “The paper is the telegram Gabriel sent to congratulate us on your birth.”

Walter pushed the lid farther open, and it broke free from its rusty hinges. “Ooops! Sorry!” He set the lid carefully on the ground. “I was trying to get a better look at the coins. Why were you saving them?”

“When we left the hospital after Ashley was born, Timothy bought a newspaper and coffee from an elderly street vendor. When the man gave Timothy those coins in change, he closed Timothy's fingers around them, and I will never forget what he said. “The dime represents the ten spies who quaked at the sight of giants in the Promised Land. They are chaff in the wind, a dime a dozen. But the pennies represent the two faithful witnesses who believed God would conquer the Nephilim. They are the widow's mites—copper coins, yet rare gems—a gift that Jesus declared far more valuable than the treasure of kings. Keep these coins and never forget God's promises.”

Ashley plucked the dime from the box. “What should we do with them? We can't bury them now.”

“Put them in your pocket,” Thigocia said. “The box is worthless, so there is no sense taking it along. We can store the telegram and the ring in your bag's waterproof pouch.”

After sliding the coins into her jeans pocket, Ashley handed the box to Walter, withdrew the telegram, and unfolded it. Holding the worn edges carefully, she read out loud. “Congratulations on the birth of your daughter. May she live in peace and learn the secret behind the Oracles of Fire. Signed, Gabriel.”

As she scanned the logo and address at the top of the page, she tapped her jaw. “Larry, I need you to contact the Western Union



RETURN OF THE DRAGON

office on Stephens Avenue in Missoula. Find out the data source of the request for the telegram Gabriel sent to my birth hospital on the day I was born. It says it came from Glasgow, but I have my doubts. If they won't give the source to you, go ahead and snoop in their database if you can. It could be a matter of life or death."

"Consider it done."

"What? No witty reply?"

"On a scale of one to ten, your tone of voice registers a nine point six on the 'I'm-totally-stressed-out' meter. It is not safe for man or machine to test your limits at this time."

"Good choice," Ashley said. "Give me your report as soon as you can."

Walter nudged Karen. "Larry sneaked in a scale joke again."

"Hush!" Ashley elbowed his ribs, but she couldn't keep a smile from breaking out. "Or feel my fire-breathing wrath!" She held back a grimace. Walter didn't laugh. Was that joke too lame? Shaking her head at her lousy timing, she propped the telegram in front of Thigocia's nose, but not close enough to risk singeing the page. "Does it make sense to you that Gabriel would reveal his location like this? Glasgow is huge, but why even give a hint?"

"It would not make sense at all. Makaidos ... I mean, Timothy and I asked that very question."

"Could it be a clue to where he really was?" Walter asked. "Some kind of family code? You know, maybe Glasgow means some other city."

"There was no code." Thigocia's red eyes seemed to darken as she recalled her story. "We left Gabriel near Glasgow with one of the Circle of Knights who took him to Patrick where he stayed for a time. We hoped he would be safe while we led the slayers to the States to get them off track. Patrick later told us that Gabriel disappeared, and before this telegram came, no one had heard from him for forty years."



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Karen pointed at the note. "So what's that stuff Gabriel wrote about Oracles of Fire?"

Thigocia's draconic lips turned upward, revealing a gentle smile. "While he was in Dragons' Rest, Timothy met a girl named Sapphira who told him she was an Oracle of Fire, but he only knew that these oracles would bring about an end to Dragons' Rest. He never saw her again, but we know that Dragons' Rest was destroyed, so this girl might have had something to do with it. Maybe finding her is the key to finding Gabriel."

Ashley refolded the telegram. "Or maybe even finding my father." After sliding the paper into an inner pocket in her bag, she carefully lifted the ring from the box and laid it in her palm. "Mother," she said, arching her brow, "I already have a rubellite ring, but may I wear yours?"

"I would be honored. I would have eventually given it to you anyway."

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Ashley slid the band over her right ring finger, but it wouldn't pass her knuckle, so she moved it to her pinky. As she closed her fist, the rubellite seemed to glow with a deeper, more vibrant red. "Very strange," she said, passing it in front of her eyes. "It's almost like it changed when I put it on."

Karen pointed at Ashley's left hand. "Are you going to keep that one?"

"My other ring?" Ashley pulled it off and laid it in Karen's palm. "You can have it."

As Karen slid the ring on her finger, her face beamed. "I'll take good care of it. I promise."

Thigocia's ears jerked around. Her eyes flamed as she growled, "I sense an increase in danger. Our safety could well be in jeopardy."

Walter dropped the box and jerked out Excalibur. "Which direction?"

"There!" Thigocia blew a dart of fire, scorching the grass a mere ten feet away. "Where my living room used to be!"

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Walter waved the sword back and forth. "I don't see anything!"

Ashley pulled up her bag, withdrew a photometer, and pointed it in the direction her mother had attacked. Tapping her jaw, she called out, "Larry, are you reading this? I estimate a distance of ten feet."

Larry's familiar voice buzzed through Ashley's mouth. "To quote an oft-quoted movie, 'There is a disturbance in the force.' The wave frequency resembles what we have seen in the wake of a cross-dimensional rift."

"The wake? You mean something just left this dimension?"

"Or is about to enter it. The strength of the field increases for point seven seconds, then lessens for the same amount of time before going back toward its peak—a sine wave."

Ashley clicked a dial on the photometer and frowned at the flashing digits on its tiny screen. "If it's sinusoidal, then the dimensional barrier is probably stable, at least for now."

"Affirmative. Stability, however, does not mean the barrier has not been breached. Something has triggered the dragon's sensitivity."

"You're right." Ashley laid a hand on Thigocia's neck. "Mother must be detecting danger from the other dimension. Something's getting through."

Walter raised the sword high. A brilliant beam of light blazed from the tip and pierced the low clouds. "I set Excalibur on deep fat fry, but I can't cook what I can't see."

As Thigocia sniffed the air, her eyes brightened again to fiery scarlet. "It feels strange—powerful ... crafty ... sinister."

Larry's buzzing voice spiked. "The curve pattern has shifted. The peak energy is growing rapidly, and the entire field is destabilizing."

"I see that!" Although her hand shook, Ashley kept the meter pointed at the same spot. "It's going nuts!"



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Walter set his feet in a battle stance as he waved the sword's beam across the field. An explosion of light energy erupted from the ground. Streams of sparks spewed in arching tentacles that seemed to reach out for Ashley and company before falling to the wet grass in a sizzling shower.

As fountains of energy continued to shoot upward, Walter drew the sword back, ready to strike. A mass of blackness appeared in the center of the fountain, eclipsing the brilliant light. Ribbons of smoke arose from the falling sparks and created stringy black columns that masked the growing shadow.

An acrid film coated Ashley's tongue. She coughed and spat. "Get back!" she shouted, pulling Karen's elbow. "Those fumes could be deadly!"

The three humans backpedaled into clearer air. Thigocia beat her wings, fanning the poisonous stench toward the erupting sparks. The smoke seemed to attach to the central swelling mass, like black papier-mâché plastered on an inflating balloon. As it grew, limbs emerged—four legs, a wing, then another wing, and finally a long, spine-covered tail.

