


OVER 600,000 BOOKS SOLD IN THE SERIES

BRYAN DAVIS



TEARS
OF A
DRAGON

DRAGONS IN OUR MIDST

BOOK FOUR

PRAISE FOR THE DRAGONS IN OUR MIDST SERIES

As parents of boys who are avid readers, my wife and I struggled to find reading material that fed their appetite while reinforcing the virtues we value. Bryan Davis is a good man and a great storyteller. And this series is an all-time favorite my sons still speak of, even now into their college years!

MARK T. HANCOCK, husband and father, CEO of Trail Life USA

One of the best blends of contemporary fantasy and allegory that I have read, *Dragons in our Midst* will have you hurting and rooting for Billy and Bonnie. If you love fantasy, King Arthur, and hopeful adventures, this is the story for you.

SCOTT APPLETON, author of the *Sword of the Dragon* series and the *Neverqueen* saga

It all started with a boy who could breathe fire and a girl who had wings. *Dragons in Our Midst* invites readers to lift up their swords and join Billy Bannister and Bonnie Silver as they battle dragon slayers, uncover ancient legends, and—of course—come face to face with dragons. Bryan Davis delivers a clean, complex series that challenges and uplifts its readers. When I was a teenager, Billy and Bonnie's story captured my own heart and imagination. And today, its poignant messages of faith, sacrifice, and courage endure and stand ready to inspire the next generation of young readers.

JESSICA SLY, author of *The Promise of Deception*

WHAT READERS ARE SAYING

Raising Dragons is an excellent start to a thrilling, inspiring, and faith-building series. Bryan Davis's unique meshing of legends, myths, and truth is incredibly creative. Together with his strong storytelling and thought-provoking themes it makes for an unforgettable ride. Bryan Davis's books exceed any others in the genre for thematic depth and yet are just as gripping and exciting story-wise as other books of the genre (or even more so). Bryan Davis is my favorite author, and I hope he will become yours too when you dive into the fascinating world of dragons and slayers, of light and darkness, and of truth and deception in *Raising Dragons*.

JOSEPH B., age 17

If you love fantasy, you NEED this book! You won't be able to put it down! If you love dragons, you'll love this book! Dragons aren't just portrayed as big bad beasties, as in other books—they're actually heroes! Are you a Christian who wants a deeper relationship with God? This book models that too! Are you seeking God, but always afraid of committing? This book models what true faith looks like and shows that you can love and trust God through everything!

NICK B.

Absolutely brilliant. This is not your typical dungeons and dragons book. Even at 28 I find this book/series addicting. Mr. Davis combines faith and fantasy flawlessly. There are books about King Arthur, Merlin, and dragons aplenty, but to find one whose story line spans centuries and also teaches modern Christian values, that

is rare. Mr. Davis includes many unexpected twists and turns and a story line so unique it simply cannot be rivaled. *Raising Dragons* is guaranteed to pique the interest of readers of all ages.

LORI W., age 28

Bryan Davis tells a terrific tale teeming with perilous predicaments, fascinating fantasy features, and likeable, charismatic characters who grow in their faith. The engaging writing style captivates the mind and the Christian themes captivate the heart. This epic novel is a superb start to a sensational series.

SHANNON, age 24

When I first picked up this book, I didn't know what to expect. By the time I finished the first chapter, I couldn't put it down! I love the way Bryan Davis mixes dragons and faith. It is a very touching experience.

ANNABETH, age 13

Bryan has a natural flow in his writing that make his characters come to life through his in-depth description of each character and the way the narrative evolves. I would heartily recommend this book to any fan of the genre regardless of age as the book has a broad appeal to all ages and all walks of life.

JOHN B., age 59

I recently reread the *Dragons in Our Midst* series and fell in love all over again, probably even more so than the first time. Bryan Davis' writing really makes the story and characters come alive. The *Dragons in Our Midst* series is a fresh take on the fantasy

adventure genre, mixing dragons, knights, and the Arthurian legend with modern day. Even a reread makes you want to keep coming back for more.

MADI T., age 20

Mr. Davis' work *Raising Dragons* and the series that follows are some of the best Christian fantasy I have ever read. They are the perfect example of an author's work that challenges his readers to learn and grow. He also has a great way of leading his readers to Christ and to become more mature Christians. The series is great fun to read, no matter your age.

JEREMY D.

DRAGONS IN OUR MIDST STORY WORLD READING ORDER

Dragons in Our Midst

Raising Dragons

The Candlestone

Circles of Seven

Tears of a Dragon

Oracles of Fire

Eye of the Oracle

Enoch's Ghost

Last of the Nephilim

The Bones of Makaidos

Children of the Bard

Song of the Ovulum

From the Mouth of Elijah

The Seventh Door

Omega Dragon



OTHER BOOKS BY BRYAN DAVIS

The Reapers Trilogy

Reapers
Beyond the Gateway
Reaper Reborn

The Oculus Gate

Heaven Came Down
Invading Hell
My Soul to Take

Time Echoes Trilogy

Time Echoes
Interfinit
Fatal Convergence

Wanted: Superheroes

*Wanted: A Superhero
to Save the World*
Hertz to Be a Hero
Antigravity Heroes

Dragons of Starlight

Starlighter
Warrior
Diviner
Liberator

Standalone Novel

Let the Ghosts Speak

Tales of Starlight

Masters & Slayers
Third Starlighter
Exodus Rising



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Tears of a Dragon

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Tears of a Dragon is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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RECAP OF RAISING DRAGONS, THE CANDLESTONE, AND CIRCLES OF SEVEN

As the group huddled around the campfire, Bonnie opened a notebook on her lap and withdrew a Papermate from its coil binding. She and Professor Hamilton would soon be leaving for Baltimore, so she had a few minutes to add to her journal. The professor had suggested that she write something for Sir Barlow to read in the hospital, maybe something about their adventures since he probably didn't know all the details.

Bonnie decided to write a letter to fill him in. She kicked a marshmallow-roasting stick away from the fire. Where should she start? Ah! She lifted a finger in the air. With the dragons!

TO MY FRIEND AND BRAVE KNIGHT, SIR BARLOW,

Back in the sixth century, as you know, hundreds of fire-breathing dragons ruled the skies. The people of Camelot feared these beautiful creatures, because many of them would steal from humans and burn their houses down. A few even consumed the humans themselves, a crime that prompted King Arthur and his noble knights to try to eliminate dragons from the kingdom.

So King Arthur told Sir Devin and the other dragon slayers to kill all the dragons, but the king was unaware that some of the dragons did not take part in the murder or thievery. Merlin, therefore, prayed for the good dragons to be transformed into humans, shielding them from the slayers. Since the dragon-humans retained a genetic predisposition toward long life, they were able to live for centuries. A few of them gave birth to children and passed dragon traits to them. For example, Billy Bannister is able to breathe fire, and I, Bonnie Silver, have dragon wings.

Sir Devin survived through the centuries using the healing photoreceptors in dragon blood in combination with a candlestone, a gem that absorbs light. It weakens a dragon but provides power for Devin, who killed all the known dragon-humans except for one, Billy's father, Jared, who was known as Clefspeare. After Devin supposedly killed my mother, Irene, who was called Hartanna as a dragon, I escaped Montana and found Billy in West Virginia. Then Devin, disguised as our school's principal, found out that Billy had a dragon father and tried to kill both Billy and me.

Billy's father transformed back into a dragon, and we all escaped Devin when I disintegrated him with Excalibur. Then my father found me and claimed my mother was still alive, so I went home with him to Montana.

When Walter, Professor Hamilton, and Billy followed us, they found Excalibur, but it took awhile for Billy to learn to use its laser beam to transluminate people, a process that changes matter into light energy, which disperses if it isn't trapped in a candlestone or something else that can hold it in place.

Speaking of the candlestone, my father told me that he transluminated my mother and stored her in the candlestone

until he could find a way to heal her, so I had to go in and get her out. That's where Ashley, my father's lab assistant, comes in. She invented the machinery to transform me into light energy so I could dive into the candlestone and pull my mother out. Then my mother and I were supposed to travel into a restoration dome, a tall glass cylinder that would transform us back to our physical forms.

When I dove into the candlestone, I discovered that Devin was really trapped there instead of my mother, and I got trapped myself. It turns out that my father had been experimenting with dragon blood, trying to make people live longer, and he needed the candlestone empty to make it work. He adopted some runaways—Karen, Rebecca, Stacey, and Pebbles—and used them in his experiments. Eventually, the girls escaped and were taken in by Billy's mother. Ashley, who is a super genius because she's also a daughter of a dragon, calls those girls her sisters.

Finally, Billy came into the candlestone to rescue me, and he found some knights from King Arthur's time. (One of them, of course, was you, Sir Barlow, and I still laugh when I remember you thinking I was an ape!) Well, Billy was able to get everyone out, including, unfortunately, Devin, who became a half-restored, energy monster and killed my father. Billy slashed through Devin with Excalibur's beam and turned him into a formless spirit that escaped to his mistress, the dark sorceress, Morgan Le Faye. Morgan had been in charge of the dragon slayers all along. She wanted to kill all the dragons so she could set free the most powerful demons in the world, the Watchers, from the lowest pit of Hades.

I'm sorry, Sir Barlow. I'm getting ahead of myself. Regarding the trip to Hades, Billy first went to England with the professor, because they found out that Billy is an heir to King Arthur. In

order for him to be initiated as the rightful king, Sir Patrick said he had to go into a place called the circles of seven to rescue prisoners. It turned out that this place was actually Hades, and Morgan had trapped Patrick's daughter, Shiloh, there.

The other prisoners in that place were the spirits of the dragons turned humans that the slayers had murdered over the centuries. Morgan's henchmen were able to get Billy's father, Clefspeare, to enter the circles, but once there, the spirit of Devin took over the dragon's body, and Clefspeare's spirit was cast into the abyss with the Watchers. Billy revived the dragon prisoners and got them and Shiloh out, but in the process, he also released the Watchers.

The dragons escaped from Hades through a portal in Glastonbury, England. They were real, fire-breathing dragons, and the media covered the whole event, including getting pictures of me with my dragon wings. And since the demons escaped as well, the entire world was suddenly plunged into peril. Because of the danger and the media exposure, we all had to escape and camp out here in the middle of nowhere in West Virginia.

But even now we're in danger. The Watchers are fallen angels with tremendous power who could probably find us easily. They fear only dragons, the creatures who defeated them millennia ago. Morgan knows she has to defeat the dragons before she can use the Watchers to dominate the world. The greatest mystery for us is what happened to the spirit of Billy's father. We have one clue. Shiloh had a pendant with a centrally mounted rubellite, the gem of dragons. When she emerged from the circles of seven, the gem pulsed with a red light. We don't know what it means, but Billy has it now, and we're trying to figure out the puzzle.

Professor Hamilton rose to his feet. “Miss Silver. Are you ready to go?”

Bonnie lifted a finger again. “One second.” She scribbled her ending.

I have to go now, Sir Barlow. I'll be delivering this letter, and some blood for your healing, in a little while. May God speed your recovery.

LOVE,
BONNIE SILVER

Bonnie pushed her pen back into the coils. “I think I got it all, Professor, but it’s a long story. I think someone could write a whole book series about what’s happened to us.”

“Maybe someone will,” the professor said, helping her to her feet. “Maybe someone will.”

A boy dreams with a sword in his hand.
A girl gives him reason to draw it from
its scabbard, and she infuses him with
the power to charge into battle.
This book is for every boy, even those
who are now wrinkled and gray, who
feels his heart race and his spine
tingle every time a sword is drawn to
conquer an enemy. Although many
of us often feel weak, when our
women and children are in danger,
we transform into mighty warriors.
This book is for every girl, even those
who have given birth to boys and girls
of their own, who feels her heart swell
when she mends up her wounded
man and sends him back out, fully
charged and ready to battle for the
sake of righteousness. Without you,
our swords would rust in their scabbards.



MERLIN'S PROMISE

*When dragons flew in days of old
With flashing scales and flame,
They soared in scarlet droves of fear
With hearts no man could tame.*

*The Watchers sang a siren's chant,
Seducing tickled ears,
Ensnaring girls with heads laid bare
And dragons far and near.*

*While most fell prey to Satan's song,
A few held fast their birth
And worshipped God's created realm,
Religion of the earth.*

*Content to suffer wrapped in chains,
A dragon leaves the skies.
Content to bleed for souls unknown,
A dragon bows and dies.*

*But can such faith repel the wrath
When evil is reborn?
Can sacrifice alone endure
When scaly hearts are torn?*

*A warrior comes with sword and shield,
With truth and faith in hand,
Exposing lies and cutting through
The darkness in the land.*

*Has eye not seen, has ear not heard,
The love that sets men free?
From scales to flesh he softens hearts;
From red to white he bleeds.*

*And when the warrior rests his blade,
With virgin bride he kneels.
The dragons fade from scales to dust
And bless the golden seal.*



CHAPTER ONE

FAMA
REGIS

Bonnie leaned against the bedrail and clutched Sir Barlow's burly hand. "I'm glad you're feeling better."

Barlow smiled, lifting his mustache. His dark eyes sparkled. "Yes, Miss. Thanks to an infusion of your blood, I am as fit as a fiddle." The knight's brow furrowed under thick strands of unkempt hair. "That is the correct idiom, isn't it?"

Bonnie tightened her grip on Barlow's hand and laughed. "That's the perfect idiom for a true gentleman!"

Barlow's smile broadened, revealing a chipped front tooth among a half-dozen yellowed incisors.

A new voice filled the room, strong and cheerful. "Indeed it is the correct idiom. A fine violin well played is fit for heaven itself."

Bonnie spun toward the sound. Professor Hamilton, her teacher

and friend, ambled into the hospital room, unbuttoning his black trench coat. She glanced at a clock on the wall. "Did you run into trouble somewhere?"

"Only minor annoyances." The professor clipped a cell phone to his belt and leaned a wet umbrella against the wall. "I'm afraid the foul weather has caused the entire populace to forget customary manners. There seems to be a general uneasiness, an underlying anxiety weighing down every man, woman, and child." He pulled a wrapped sandwich from his coat pocket and handed it to Bonnie. "The restaurant queue seemed interminable, and several pushy fellows insisted on . . . ahem . . . butting into the line." The professor nodded at Barlow. "I could have used the services of a battle-trained warrior." He withdrew another sandwich from his opposite pocket. "This is for you, but Dr. Kaplan said you must maintain the hospital diet until tonight, so I'll save it. Was your noontime meal sufficient?"

Barlow mumbled something unintelligible under his breath, then added in a louder voice, "A ghost couldn't survive eating the paltry servings here."

Bonnie put her sandwich in the side pocket of her backpack. "I'll go outside to eat this later. No use torturing our good knight." She hitched up her pack to make her hidden dragon wings more comfortable. "Did Sir Patrick have any news?"

"Quite a bit." The professor ran his hand through his unruly white hair. "It seems that the Great Key, as he calls it, is now in William's possession. Apparently Shiloh gave it to him last night at the campfire."

Bonnie caressed a colorful string of beads around her neck. "The pendant with the rubellite? How is that a key?"

"Patrick says he will tell us more when he comes." The professor squinted at the intravenous tube stretching from a dangling plastic

bag to Barlow's arm, then pulled a pair of spectacles from his shirt pocket. "He did tell me that Merlin called it the Great Key in a prophecy, indicating that it would be crucial should the Watchers ever emerge from their prison." He slipped the glasses on and read the label on the IV bag. "Patrick confirmed our thoughts, that we should locate the king's chronicles. The book will help us unlock the mystery of the key." He lowered his head and sighed.

Bonnie tried to make eye contact with the professor. "Is something wrong with Sir Barlow's IV?"

The professor's gentle smile quivered. "No, no. That's not it at all." He slid his hands into his pockets. "It just reminded me of days long past when I spent many hours coaxing instruments like these to work just a little bit better." Drooping his head, he pushed an electrical cord under the bed with his foot. "Those were times of shadows, the darkest days of my life."

Bonnie took a step closer. "Do you mind telling me what happened?"

"Oh, no. Not at all." The professor pulled a wallet from his back pocket and fished out a locket-sized photo from inside. He bent over and showed it to her.

Bonnie studied the photo, a black-and-white picture of a man in a tuxedo and a woman in a wedding gown. She felt the joy of the smiling faces and the oneness of the clasped hands. "She's beautiful, Professor. You look very happy."

"Yes, we both were." He returned the photo to his wallet and straightened. "It has been more than twenty years since she passed away."

"I knew she died, but I didn't know when." She took the professor's hand in hers, trying again to catch his faraway gaze. "It must have been very sad for you."

The professor finally looked down at her and smiled, but it was a sad smile. “Indeed. She was the light of my life. We were as close as two people can be, one mind, one spirit. Our daughter, Elizabeth, was about to be married, and the evening before the wedding, we attended the rehearsal dinner, a beautiful affair at a posh restaurant—white tablecloths, crystal, silver, fine china—all the trimmings of an elegant feast. Later that night, my wife became deathly ill—food poisoning of some sort—and she had to go to the hospital. She insisted that the wedding go on as planned, and since one of my students, Carl Foley, whom you know, of course, as Walter’s father, volunteered to stay with her, we decided to set up a live video feed to the room so she could attend the ceremony from her hospital bed.”

“Then she got to see the wedding?”

“Yes, but by the time I returned to her side, she had worsened. The doctors had no explanation, but it was as if she were drifting away; her mind was leaving her body. She would cry out, ‘Help me! I’m falling!’ though she lay securely in bed. As you can imagine, I was beside myself, but God did not answer my prayers according to my desires.” He straightened the intravenous tube, his bottom lip quivering as his voice began to crack. “She . . .” He swallowed and wiped a tear. “She passed away that very night.”

Bonnie slid her hand around his elbow and leaned her head against his arm. “I’m so sorry, Professor.”

He leaned over and kissed Bonnie gently on the top of her head. “As were many others, little angel. It was such a lovely funeral with hundreds of gracious mourners. And so many people brought flowers! We both loved our flower garden, so I made sure I flooded the funeral home with her favorite, the carnation, and I added Easter lilies, of course, but the guests brought dozens and dozens of bouquets and laid them against the casket. And, strangely enough, people also

brought dresses and skirts my wife had made for their daughters.” He laughed under his breath, his eyes glistening. “She couldn’t bear to make pants for them. She believed young ladies should look like young ladies. In any case, the visitors expressed their thankfulness for my wife’s skill and generosity in sharing her love with so many friends and neighbors. It was as if the story of Dorcas in the book of Acts were being replayed at the funeral.” A new tear made its way down the sage’s wrinkled cheek, and his voice pitched up ever so slightly. “But there was no apostle Peter to come and awaken my precious one from sleep.” The professor raised his hand and bit his knuckle, closing his eyes as his body heaved with stifled sobs.

Bonnie wrapped her arms around his waist and held him close. She glanced at Sir Barlow. Tears streamed down the knight’s face, too.

After a long pause, the professor spoke again, his voice now much stronger. “So I will have to go to her when I finish my course here on earth, and I look forward to that day with great anticipation.”

Bonnie gave him a strong hug. “I know you miss her, but I hope your course isn’t finished for a long time.” She pulled away, looking up at the professor with the brightest smile she could muster. “So she was a seamstress? What a wonderful gift!”

“Yes. What she could do with a needle and thread!” He sighed again, his lips tightening. “But that is in the past, and there are new dark days to deal with, I’m afraid.” He strolled to the window, sliding his hands into his pockets again as he gazed at the wet landscape through the foggy glass. Raindrops pelted the windowpane, sounding like a hundred soft fingers tapping for permission to enter. “I am concerned for Patrick. He seems weak . . . exhausted.” He withdrew one hand and sketched a square on the condensation. “He is many centuries old, even older than I knew. And now, being fully human, he will certainly die. I fear his days are coming to a close.”

He wiped away the condensation with his sleeve. “And Patrick informed me that this is no ordinary weather event. These monsoon conditions are spreading over the entire North American continent, and a similar phenomenon is beginning in Europe. While I was walking in the downpour, it seemed that each drop emitted a popping noise as it struck the sidewalk, much like the sputter of a droplet on a hot fryer, yet so faint that I doubt I would have noticed if I had not leaned over to pluck a quarter from the walk. With thousands of droplets popping, it reminded me of Rice Krispies in a bowl of milk.”

“Do you think that’s what’s making people so irritable and jumpy?” Bonnie asked.

“Very possibly. If this is demonic work, stirring fear in the hearts of people would certainly fit their *modus operandi*, but there may be more substance to this rain than simple fear mongering.”

Barlow sat up in bed and threw off his sheets. “There is no time to lose.” He stripped the tape that held his IV tube in place. “Those scoundrels from the abyss are a step ahead of us. We must summon my knights to battle!”

Bonnie wrapped her fingers around Barlow’s wrist. “Wait! The nurse will do that.”

The professor jumped to the bedside and grasped Barlow’s shoulder. “Patience, my good fellow. Dr. Kaplan has already ordered your discharge. We will get you out of here as soon as possible.”

Barlow laid his hand over Bonnie’s, an apologetic look on his face. “I’m sorry for my outburst, Miss, but I’m anxious to lead my men into battle against the demons.”

Bonnie gently fastened the tape back on Barlow’s arm. “It won’t be long now. If we can get you out of here soon enough, we can all go and get Sir Patrick and your knights at the airport.”

“That reminds me,” the professor said. “We couldn’t possibly carry everyone in my car, so I called Marilyn this morning and asked her to fly here and ferry some of us back to West Virginia.”

Bonnie straightened the IV tube and draped it around the bed. “Did you ask Billy to search for King Arthur’s book?”

The professor patted her on the shoulder. “Yes. He said he would search for it right away.”

“Right away? In this downpour?”

“Yes. With the Watchers on the move, we must act quickly. If they are able to manipulate the weather, the magnitude of the disasters they can wreak is incalculable.” He ran his finger along the IV tube and sighed, his eyes wet with new tears. “Are you ready to face more danger, Miss Silver?”

Warmth surged through Bonnie’s body, as if an oven-heated blanket wrapped around her and chased away the autumn chill. She gazed at her teacher. If only there were some way she could give him a glimpse of all the wonder she had seen in heaven after dying in the sixth circle. What earthly words could possibly express the joy of perfect bliss? “Professor, I have been in the arms of my Lord in heaven, and I saw a reflection of my face in his laughing eyes.” She felt her own tears welling up as she folded her hands at her waist. “I’ve never been more ready in all my life.”

* * *

Billy tiptoed across the rocky cave floor, guiding Excalibur with both hands. The sword’s energy pierced the darkness and spread out into a glowing sphere, surrounding him in a wash of alabaster light. As he glided under the bright shroud, the cave’s shifting air penetrated his skin like the grip of a life-devouring phantom.

The professor’s call had already delivered a numbing bite to his

senses. “Locate *Fama Regis*,” he had said. “And guard the pendant well. The fate of the entire world could hang in the balance.”

Billy shivered hard. His journey to the dragon’s den had begun under gloomy skies that quickly deteriorated into a torrential downpour. Now, in the cave’s cool draft, his wet clothes sapped his body heat. He freed one hand and blew a stream of superheated breath on his fingers, making them toasty warm in seconds.

As he advanced deeper into the expansive cavity, a hint of danger pricked his mind, prompting him to creep more slowly, one gentle step after another. A trickle of water echoed nearby. That was new. Clefspeare’s cave had always been perfectly dry before. But now a steady plink, plink, plink troubled the silence, slowly escalating in frequency. The sound racked his nerves. He couldn’t see any water yet, but those drips had to collect somewhere, and that meant trouble. If a growing pool reached the ancient book . . .

He stopped and sniffed the damp air. After his experiences with scentsers in the circles of seven, he vowed never to let one of those mind-altering odors sneak up on him again. This was no time to get waylaid by sleepiness or anger, or even worse, fits of laughter. The needle on his danger meter pushed toward the yellow-alert zone, but he had no way to tell who, or what, might be lurking in the shadows. It was time for silence.

He dimmed the sword’s glow and crept forward again, mentally shushing the crunching pebbles under his hiking boots. At the back of the cave, the walls came together in a crease. A collection of marble-sized stones lay in a pile where the corner met the floor. Billy crouched, picked up one of the stones, and brought it close to the sword. Its polished facets shimmered red, sending streaks of crimson across his fingers. A laser-like beam shot toward an octagonal pendant dangling from a chain around his neck. The gem in the pendant’s

center seemed to answer the stone's red aura, pulsing vibrantly with its own shade of crimson like the heart of a ready warrior.

"Yo! Billy!"

Billy dropped the gem and jumped to his feet. He extended Excalibur and brightened its glow. "Walter? Is that you?"

"Who else?" Walter stepped into the sword's corona. "Thanks for the light. It would've been hard to find you without that overgrown mosquito zapper." He extended a dripping umbrella. "It's pouring out there. I thought you might want this." He pulled down the hood of his olive drab rain slicker. "Something wrong?"

Billy tucked the pendant under his shirt and took the umbrella. "My danger alarm's working overtime, so you kind of spooked me. But it couldn't be you setting it off; you're not dangerous."

"Who says so?" Walter unbuttoned the front of his raincoat. "I'll bet Devin thinks I'm dangerous by now, sitting in that candlestone with nothing to do but twiddle his claws."

Billy poked his friend's lean belly with the umbrella and grinned. "You're only dangerous at the buffet line." He propped the sword against his shoulder and tilted his head upward. "I hear water dripping, and it's getting louder."

"No wonder. It's raining so hard out there I had to ask directions from a fish." Walter glanced all around the dim chamber. "The cave probably has a leak somewhere."

"Yeah, could be." Billy tapped the floor with the umbrella, shaking out a spray of droplets. "I thought you were staying with the womenfolk. That's more important than keeping me dry."

"Your mom decided there was enough room for everyone to head for Baltimore." Walter began counting on his fingers. "Prof will drive back with Barlow, Fiske, Standish, and Woodrow, and your mom will fly back with Bonnie, Ashley, Karen, Shiloh, Patrick, Newman,

and Edmund.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Sounded like a boring trip, and besides, Karen stays glued to me like old chewing gum, so I decided to hike up here where the action is.”

“It’s dull as dirt here,” Billy said. “I was hoping the dragons would fly in. That’ll stir things up.”

“Yeah. Ashley said they could get here today if they hurried. I told her we’d go dragon riding as soon as they finish off the Watchers, but who knows how long that’ll take.” Walter bent down and kicked some loose gravel. “Any luck finding the book?”

Billy pushed the top of the pile of stones with the umbrella tip. “Not yet. I thought Dad would’ve hidden it in his cave, but all I’ve found is this pile of gems.”

“Gems? Cool!” Walter held up a black square of leather. “If you cash those in, I guess you won’t be needing this.”

“My wallet?” Billy took it and stuffed it in his back pocket.

“Yeah. Your mom put some money in there in case you needed it.” Walter shoved the pile of gems with his shoe, then knelt and leaned close. “Well, Sherlock, I guess you didn’t look right under your nose.”

Billy lowered the sword, lighting up the stones. An old leather binding protruded from the toppled pile. “I didn’t have a chance,” he said, dropping the umbrella and grabbing the book. “You sneaked up on me before I could.” He blew a coat of sand from the cover.

Walter stood again and craned his neck to read the raised script. “What does *Fama Regis* mean?”

“The acts of the king, or something like that. It was written by Arthur’s scribe.” Billy opened the heavy cover. “Believe it or not, the scribe was Palin for a while.” He flipped through several pages of thick parchment. “And he drew some awesome pictures. Take a look.” He gave the book to Walter and held Excalibur close. In a drawing, a knight draped in chain mail raised his sword and shield against

a lunging dragon. The dragon blasted the shield with a tsunami of flames, its wings fully extended in battle. A young lady dressed in silky white stood close by, her delicate hands covering her ivory cheeks.

Billy tapped on the parchment. "Let's get this to camp. Maybe when Prof gets back we'll find some clues and—" He spun around, pointing Excalibur toward the cave entrance.

Walter slapped the book closed and whispered. "What's up? Danger getting close?"

"Big time." He lit up Excalibur like a blazing torch and nodded toward the entrance. "Come on. I'm tired of waiting for danger to sneak up on me. Let's give our visitor a greeting he'll never forget."

Billy charged ahead, Excalibur's beacon leading the way. As they neared the entrance, muted daylight mixed into the darkness, brightening with every step. Billy halted at the archway and glanced all around, sniffing, listening. Walter skidded to a stop at his side. A curtain of rainwater cascaded from the top of the entry arch, pelting the ground and streaming down the slope, away from the cave. Billy whispered, "You smell something?"

Walter wrinkled his nose. "Yeah. Smells like a wet dog."

A twangy voice rose in the distance. "Now, Hambone, ain't nut-hin' to be skeered of in that cave. Do you want to get colder 'n a nekkid rat in Alaska?" A skinny, long-legged man pushed through a thicket, a shotgun poised on his shoulder and an old hound trailing behind on a leash.

Billy laughed. "It's just Arlo Hatfield!"

Walter tucked *Fama Regis* under his coat and fastened the buttons. "Cool! I've been wanting to meet him."

"Danger's still close," Billy whispered, "but I don't want to explain Excalibur to Arlo." He thrust the sword into his back scabbard and waved at the old hillbilly. "Pssst! Arlo! Get in here, quick!"

Arlo tightened his grip on his gun for a second, but when his gaze found its way to the cave entrance, he relaxed. He spat out a stream of tobacco juice and stepped up his pace. “C’mon, Hambone. Looks like we’ll have comp’ny.”

The blue tick hound hesitated, prompting Arlo to pull him along. “What’s wrong with you today? Ain’t you got a lick o’ sense? You remember Billy, donchoo? The boy what lost his pa?”

Arlo jerked Hambone’s leash, nearly dragging him forward. He gawked at Billy, water streaming from the bill of his baseball cap. “Whatchoo doin’ here?”

Billy gestured for Arlo to come inside. He stooped and petted Hambone, still whispering. “I was looking for something that belonged to my . . . uh . . . my pa.” As he stroked the dog’s ears, his pendant fell outside his shirt again and dangled on its chain. “Why are you here?”

“Hambone and me were out huntin’ squirrels near the crick when the rain commenced to gettin’ mighty fierce. I remembered the cave up here, so we came lookin’ fer it. But Hambone’s actin’ awful queer, like he’s skeered of somethin’.”

Billy stood again. “Maybe the weather has him spooked. I haven’t seen it rain like this in . . . in a coon’s age.”

Arlo scratched his head through his cap. “Could be. But I don’t rightly know how long a coon lives.” He reached out and slipped his fingers behind Billy’s pendant. “Now here’s a purty thang. It’s flashin’ like a radio tower light. Where’d you git it?”

Billy’s danger sensation suddenly jumped to red alert, a thousand needles pricking his skin. The pendant’s glow washed over the hillbilly’s face like a pulsing laser. His wrinkled skin seemed to melt, rivulets of flesh pouring down like bloody sweat until a new face appeared, a shining, ghostly visage with cruel red eyes.

Billy jumped back and yanked out Excalibur. Walter leaped at Arlo and twisted the shotgun from his grip, giving the hillbilly a hefty shove as it pulled away. Arlo stumbled back into the down-pour, leaving Hambone in the cave. As water splashed on his head, the hillbilly's face reappeared as if painted on his skin by the wind-swept rain.

Excalibur's beam shot out from the tip and waved over Arlo's head. "I don't know who or what you are," Billy shouted, "but if you take one step, I'll zap you to kingdom come."

A glowing foot stepped forward, leaving Arlo's foot behind. Then, an entire body emerged from the hillbilly, a nine-foot-tall goliath of a man dressed in brilliant silver mail. Arlo's body collapsed behind him, motionless.

"Go ahead and strike!" the man shouted. "I've already been to kingdom come."

Billy tightened his grip and whispered to Walter, "I hate it when someone dares me to strike. It usually means it won't work."

Walter broke open the shotgun barrel and peered inside. "No shells." He tossed the gun on the ground. "You got any fire-breathing ammo?"

"Yep. It's been brewing in my belly for a while."

"Then let's fry this pig and start makin' bacon."

Billy dimmed his sword and launched a torrent of fire at the creature, splattering his shining body with biting orange flames. The man swelled in size, growing to at least twelve feet tall. Plumes of steam shot into the air as sheets of rain cooled the inferno.

Walter grabbed Hambone's leash and backed away. "So much for that idea."

"No! Wait!" Billy pointed with Excalibur. "Something's up!"

The humanoid creature stumbled on shaky legs, smoke rising

from his scorched torso. He dropped to his knees and spread his arms wide. He shouted, "Be closed!"

A rolling wave of darkness flew from the creature's hands. It splashed against the cave entrance and spread out, laying a sooty coat over the archway.

Billy lit up Excalibur again and swiped the beam against the black curtain. It tore across the expanse, and sparks of light ate away the darkness like buzzing termites.

"He doesn't like the fire!" Walter shouted. "Hit him again!"

Billy launched another fiery salvo, but it bounced off the entrance and shot just past his head toward the inner recesses of the cave. Hambone whined a mournful lament.

Walter hovered his hand over the archway. "A force field?" He kicked at the base of the field, sending out a splash of sparks. "Owww!" he yelled, jumping on one foot. "These things are such a pain!"

The shining creature stood and laughed. "That should keep you in there long enough."

"Long enough for what?" Billy yelled.

"You'll soon find out." An evil smile grew on his face. He opened his enormous palm to the sky, allowing the rain to pool and drip over the sides. "These waters are courtesy of my lord, the prince of the power of the air. He sends his greetings, young king, and hopes you will enjoy a refreshing swim."

Walter slung a baseball-sized rock at the force field, but it ricocheted harmlessly back. "You're a big talker for someone who's scared of a couple of kids and a hound dog!"

A pair of wings sprouted from the back of the creature. "We are wise enough to know our weaknesses. Why battle against your strengths?" He laughed and launched into the air, disappearing from sight.

“Coward!” Walter shouted. “Come back and fight like a . . .” His voice trailed off to a whisper. “Like a man . . . I guess.”

Billy gazed at the hillbilly’s body on the ground outside. Rain poured over the still form without mercy. “I sure hope Arlo’s okay.” He touched the field with Excalibur’s tip. The contact point sizzled and threw the blade back. “The blade won’t pierce it.” He summoned the beam and let it slowly approach the field. As soon as it brushed the surface, the beam angled away as if bouncing off a mirror. He doused the light. “It must not be like the portals in the circles. The beam doesn’t faze it either.”

“It’s not soundproof,” Walter noted. “We heard that ghost creature, and I still hear the storm.”

Billy turned slowly toward the back of the cave. “I hear something else.”

“The dripping sound again?”

“More like gushing now.”

Hambone let out a howl. A stream of shallow water had pooled all around, lapping against the dog’s paws. It flowed to the cave entrance and stopped at the force field, unable to drain through the exit.

“We’d better think fast!” Walter shouted. “Can that beam of yours go through rocks?”

“It only transluminates organic stuff!” Billy lit up Excalibur again. “But it’s worth a try.”

The beam drilled into the ceiling as if trying to bore a hole through the solid stone above their heads. Steam poured from the contact point, masking his efforts.

Walter grimaced as sparkling light rained on his head. “Is it working?”

Billy moved the beam, dimming it slightly. The steam dispersed,

revealing solid rock, clean and shiny, as if polished by a buffing brush. “No. Not even a dent.”

“And the floor’s hard as concrete, so we can’t dig under the field.” Walter marched in place, sloshing in the calf-deep water. “I’m running out of ideas. You got any?”

Billy grabbed Hambone’s leash from Walter, yelling to compete with the sound of rushing water. “Just keep *Fama Regis* dry.” He waded toward the back of the cave. “Hambone and I will try to find the source. Maybe we can block it up somehow. See if you can find a big, loose rock.”

“I’m right behind you.” Walter dragged his feet through the knee-deep water. “Maybe I can kick up a rock while I’m walking.”

Lifting his legs high, Billy trudged into the darkness, lighting his way with Excalibur. When he reached the rear wall, cold mist sprayed his face. Water rose past his thighs, and Hambone paddled frantically to keep his head above the surface.

Walter shouted over the din. “Sounds like it’s coming from the ceiling.” He lifted a rock the size of two fists. “This is the best I could do.”

Billy raised his sword, guiding the glow upward. Torrents of water gushed from a back corner and plunged into the flood. “I can’t hold the sword and try to plug it at the same time.”

Walter handed *Fama Regis* to Billy. “Don’t worry. I can handle it.” He clambered up the wall, clutching stony projections with his free hand. As he pushed the rock into the gaping hole, the fountain split into dozens of fingers and splashed across his face. The stream slowed for a second, then spat out the rock like a shot from a rifle. “There’s no way!” he shouted. “It’s too fast!”

Walter jumped, splashing down into waist-deep water. He took *Fama Regis* back and held it high. “I say we try the entrance again!”

“Yeah. We’re not doing any good back here.” Billy scooped up Hambone under one arm. “C’mon, boy. You’re getting tired.”

They forged ahead into the more illuminated part of the cave, reaching the archway once again. Billy lifted Hambone over a wall protrusion and set him down on a ledge just above the flood. The water now crested at the bottom of the pendant as it dangled over Billy’s chest. “I’m going to try Excalibur,” he yelled, “and a blast of fire at the same time.”

Walter balled one hand into a fist. “Give it all you’ve got!” He rested the book on top of his head. “Even a little hole might keep the water from rising.”

Billy charged up the sword’s energy, making it so bright he couldn’t keep his eyes on the blade. He slashed the beam against the entry and launched a ferocious salvo of fire. The flames bombarded the field, spreading out over the entry space, making ripples of orange along the plane. The laser beam bounced off the field again and struck the water, lighting up the surface with dancing sparks of white.

“Turn it off!” Walter yelled. “The water’s like electrified ice!”

Billy shut down the sword and stopped the flames. The force field shimmered like a disturbed pool, then turned crystal clear again. With water rising to his armpits, he resheathed Excalibur and lifted his elbows over the dying sparks. “Got any new ideas?”

“Just one.” Walter placed the book on Billy’s head, and Billy instinctively grabbed it. Walter stepped toward the force field, took a deep breath, and leaped into it. A tremendous explosion of sparks sent him flying back through the water, like a torpedo shooting through the depths. When he stopped, he lay floating on the surface, facedown and motionless.

Billy lunged for him and screamed. “Walter!”

