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Opening extract from

# Pendragon The Merchant of Death

Written by

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*For Evander*

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JOURNAL #1

# DENDURON

I hope you're reading this, Mark.

Heck, I hope *anybody's* reading this because the only thing that's keeping me from going totally off my nut right now is getting this all down on paper so that some day, when it's all over, it'll help prove that I'm not a total whack job. You see, two things happened yesterday that changed my life forever.

The first was that I finally kissed Courtney Chetwynde. Yes, *the* Courtney Chetwynde of the bites-her-lower-lip-when-she's-thinking, stares-right-into-your-heart-with-her-deep-grey-eyes, looks-unbelievable-in-her-volleyball-uniform, and always-smells-a-little-like-roses fame. Yeah, I kissed her. It was a long time coming and it finally happened. Woo-hoo!

The second thing was that I was launched through a wormhole called a "flume" and got jacked across the universe to a medieval planet called "Denduron" that's in the middle of a violent civil war.

But back to Courtney.

This wasn't your average "nice to see you" peck on the cheek. Oh no. This was a full-on, eyes closed, starting with

tight lips but eventually morphing into a mutual open-mouth probe thing that lasted for a good thirty-second lifetime. And we were close, too. Like *real* close. I was holding her so tight I could feel her heart beating against my chest. Or maybe it was my heart. Or maybe our hearts were bouncing off each other. I have no idea. All I know is that it was pretty cool. I hope I get the chance to do it again, but right now it's not looking so good.

I guess it's kind of dumb to be fixating on the glorious Courtney Chetwynde when the real problem is that I'm afraid I'm going to die. Maybe that's why I can't get her out of my head. The memory of that kiss is the only thing that feels real to me right now. I'm afraid that if I lose that memory I'm going to lose everything, and if that happens then . . . well, I don't know what will happen then because I don't understand *anything* that's been happening to me. Maybe by writing it all down, it'll start to make some sense.

Let me try to piece together the events that led to my writing this. Up until yesterday I was living large. At least as large as any normal fourteen-year-old guy can live. School came pretty easy; I kicked ass in sports; my parents were way cool; I didn't hate my little sister, Shannon, usually. I had excellent friends, with you sitting right on top of the list, Mark. I lived in this major house where I had my own private space to play music or whatever and nobody bugged me. My dog, Marley, was the coolest golden retriever there ever was; and I had recently macked with Courtney Chetwynde. (Did I mention that?) How much more goin' on can you get?

The thing is, I also had an Uncle Press.

You remember him? He was the guy who always showed up at my birthday parties with some special surprise. He

wouldn't just bring a pony, he'd bring a *truckload* of ponies for a minirodeo. He's the guy who turned my house into that laser-maze game. Was that great or what? He's the one who was throwing the pizzas at my party last year. Remember that guy? Every once in a while he'd show up, out of the blue, and do something amazing like take me flying in a private plane. Yeah, he was a pilot. Another time he gave me this computer that was so advanced, it wasn't even in stores yet. You know the calculator I have that you input numbers by talking to it? That was from Uncle Press. I gotta tell you, he was the coolio uncle everybody wished they had.

But there was always something a little mysterious about Uncle Press. He was my mum's brother, but she didn't say much about him. It was almost like she felt weird talking about him. Whenever I asked, she'd shrug and say something like, "Oh, you know him, he's his own man. How was school today?" Basically, she'd dodge the question.

I don't know what he did for a living, but he always had boatloads of money. I figured he probably had some top-level government job, like doing research for NASA or something and it was all hush-hush. So I didn't ask too many questions. He wasn't married, but sometimes he'd show up at the house with some odd character. One time he brought this lady over who never said a word. He said she was his "friend", but I got the feeling she was more like his "girlfriend". I think she was African or something because she was real dark-skinned. And beautiful. But it was strange because she'd just stare at me and smile. I wasn't scared or anything because she had soft eyes. And maybe she didn't talk because she didn't know English, but still it was kind of creepy.

I'd have to say that my Uncle Press was the coolest guy I'd ever met. That is, until yesterday.

The county semifinal basketball game was last night. You know how important I am to that team. I'm the highest scoring point guard in Stony Brook Junior High history. I'm not bragging; that's just the way it is. So for me to miss that game would have been like Kobe Bryant missing a Lakers playoff game. Okay, maybe I'm not *that* important, but it would not have been cool for me to bail on that game. Mum and Dad had already left for the gym with Shannon. I had a ton of homework and I knew I'd be fried afterwards, so I had to get it done before leaving. I had just enough time to scarf down a banana and some Pop-Tarts, feed Marley, jump on my bike, and blast over to school. At least that was the plan. I can't help but think that if I had done my homework just a little bit faster, or decided not to throw the tennis ball with Marley, or even waited till I got to school to take a leak, none of this would have happened. But it did.

I grabbed my pack, headed for the front door, threw it open and came face to face with . . . Courtney Chetwynde.

I froze. She froze. It was like somebody hit the pause button on two lives. Except there was nothing static about what was racing through my brain. The crush I had on her dated back to when we were in grade school. She was always so . . . perfect. But not in that unattainable she's too good for everybody way. She was beautiful and smart and great at sports and she laughed and told jokes. I think that was the key. The fact that she told jokes. Maybe that sounds stupid, but if you tell jokes it shows you're willing to look stupid. And if you've got the whole package going on and are still willing to let people laugh at you then, man, what *else* do you want?

Of course I wasn't the only one who felt this way about Courtney. I was one in a long line of admirers. But she was

standing at *my* front door. Instantly, every synapse in my brain started firing to try and find the perfect, spontaneous thing to say. The first words out of your mouth in a time of crisis can colour someone's opinion of you forever. It either shows that you're totally in charge and ready to handle any situation with composure and wit, or that you're a blundering idiot whose mind will freeze at the first sign of pressure. This all flashed through my brain in the few nanoseconds while we were on "pause". Now it was my move. She came to the house, it was my turn to respond. So I hitched my pack up on my shoulder, leaned casually against the doorjamb, gave her a little smile and said: "Yo."

Yo??? That's not even a real word! Nobody says "Yo" unless they're impersonating Sylvester Stallone, which I was definitely *not* doing. I was all set for the smile to drop off her face in crushing disappointment as she turned and left without saying a word. Instead, she bit her lower lip (which meant she was thinking) and said:

"Hi."

That was good. "Hi" isn't much higher up on the cool scale than "Yo". I was back in the game. It was time to start playing.

"What's up?" I said.

Okay, maybe I wasn't ready to play just yet. It was easier to lob the ball back into her court. It was then that I noticed something weird. Courtney looked nervous. Not out of her mind scared or anything, but a little bit uncomfortable. My confidence soared. She was just as tense as I was. That was good.

"I know you've got to get to the game and all, I don't want to make you late," she said with a little embarrassed smile.

What game? Oh, right, the county semifinal. Somehow it had slipped my mind.

"I've got plenty of time," I lied casually. "C'mon in."

I was recovering nicely. As she walked past me to come inside I got that faint hint of rose fragrance. It took every ounce of willpower not to do a huge-old sucking inhale to try and grab every ounce of that wonderful smell. That would have been dumb and this was definitely not the time to do something dumb because Courtney was now inside my home. She was on my turf. I closed the door behind her and we were alone.

I had no idea what to do next. Courtney turned to me and I made contact with those amazing grey eyes. My knees went soft. I prayed she didn't notice.

"I wasn't sure if I should come here," she said tentatively.

"I'm glad you did," I shot back with perfect timing. I kept the ball in her court, yet still managed to make her feel at ease. I was on fire.

"I'm not really sure why I picked now to come. Maybe it was to wish you good luck in the game. But I think it's more than that."

"Really?" Perfect comeback.

"I'm not exactly sure how to say this, Bobby, but since we were kids, I've had this . . . feeling about you."

Feeling? Feeling is good, unless she feels like I'm an axe murderer or something.

"Oh?" I shot back. Noncommittal, nonaggressive, perfect.

"Man, I feel like such a geek saying this." She broke eye contact. I was losing her. I didn't want her to chicken out so the best thing I could do was throw her a bone.

"Courtney, there are a lot of words that come to mind when I think of you, but 'geek' is definitely not one of them."

She looked back to me and smiled. We were back on track.

"I'm not really sure how to say this, so I'll just say it. There's something about you, Bobby. I know you're a brain

and a jock and popular and all, but it's more than that. You've got this, like, I don't know, this aura thing going on. People trust you. They like you. And it's not like you're trying to show off or anything. Maybe that's part of it. You don't act like you think you're better than everybody else. You're just this really good guy–" she paused before going on, then the bombshell – "who I've had this incredible crush on since fourth grade."

Nothing in my wildest fantasy could have prepared me for that. I was speechless. I hoped my mouth wasn't hanging open in stupefied shock.

"I'm not really sure why I'm telling you this now," she went on. "But I have this weird feeling that if I didn't, I might never get the chance again. And I wanted to tell you how I felt . . . and do this."

That's when it happened. The kiss. She stepped forward, hesitated a second to see if I'd stop her (yeah right, like there was danger of *that* happening) and we kissed. I won't rehash the details, but suffice it to say I was a happy guy. It was the most amazing thirty seconds of my life.

It was the thirty-first second when it all came crashing down.

My eyes were closed, but I could see a whole future full of Courtney and Courtney's kisses. I don't know if it's possible to kiss and smile at the same time, but if it is, I did. And then I opened my eyes, and it was over.

"Hi, Bobby."

Uncle Press was standing there! Where did *he* come from? I pulled away from Courtney so fast that she still had her eyes closed. Actually, she looked kind of goofy for a second like she was kissing air, but she recovered fast and believe me, I didn't laugh.

"Uncle Press! Hi!" I probably should have said, "Yo!" that's how stupid I felt. I'm not sure why, either. We weren't doing anything wrong. We were just kissing. Granted, it was the big-league kiss of all time, but it was still just a kiss. Once Courtney realised what was happening, she went from zero to full-tilt embarrassed. She wanted to be anywhere but there, and I wanted to be there with her. She backed towards the door.

"I . . . uh . . . I'd better go," she stammered.

"No, don't go." I didn't want to take the heat alone, but Uncle Press had other things on his mind.

"Yes. You should go." Short, blunt, simple as that. Something about the way he said it made a red flag go up in my head. This didn't sound like Uncle Press. Normally he's the kind of guy who would think catching his nephew macking was pretty funny. In fact, that's exactly what happened when he caught me making out with Nancy Kilgore on the back porch. He just laughed. I was embarrassed as hell, but he got a real charge out of it. He'd bring it up every once in a while, just to jazz me. But not in front of anybody else, which made it okay. This time was different though. This time he wasn't laughing.

"Good luck tonight. I'll be cheering," said Courtney as she took a step . . . and walked square into the door. Ouch. Uncle Press leaned over and opened it for her. She gave him a quick, embarrassed nod of thanks, then shot me a look with the slightest hint of a sly smile. Then she was gone. Uncle Press closed the door and looked at me.

"I'm sorry, Bobby, but I need your help. I want you to come with me."

Again, this didn't sound like Uncle Press. He was a loose kind of guy. My guess was he was in his fifties, but he didn't

act like a geezer. He was always goofing around, never seemed to take things all that seriously. But tonight, he was dead serious. In fact, it almost seemed as if he looked a little . . . scared.

"But, I got a game. County semis. I'm already late."

"You didn't seem too concerned about that a few seconds ago," he shot back.

Good point. But I really was late, and it was a big game.

"Mum and Dad are already there with Shannon. If I don't show up – "

"They'll understand. I wouldn't ask you to do this if I didn't think it was more important than a basketball game . . . or kissing that beautiful girl who just left."

I was prepared to argue on that last point, but man, he was acting pretty intense. It was weird. Then, as if he were reading my mind he said, "Bobby, you've known me all your life. Have you ever seen me like this?"

I didn't need to answer. Something was definitely up.

"Then you know how serious this is," he said with absolute finality.

I didn't know what to do. At that very minute there was a team waiting for me to help them win a county title. Not to mention a family, friends, and an almost-girlfriend who would be expecting me to trot out on to the court. But standing in front of me was a guy who was my own flesh and blood who needed my help. Uncle Press did a lot for me as I was growing up and never asked for a single thing in return. Until now. How could I turn him down?

"You promise to explain things to my coach, Mum and Dad, and Courtney Chetwynde?"

Uncle Press actually gave a small smile, just like he used to, and said, "They'll understand."

I tried to think of any other reason why I shouldn't go with

him, but came up empty. So with a sigh I said, "All right then, let's go."

Instantly Uncle Press opened the front door. I shrugged and started out.

"You won't need that bag," he said, referring to my pack. I'm not sure why, but that sounded strange, and a touch ominous.

"What's this all about, Uncle Press?"

If he had answered the question truthfully, I would have run upstairs to my room and hid under the bed. But he didn't. All he said was, "You'll find out."

He was my uncle. I trusted the guy. So I let my pack fall to the floor and headed for the door. Uncle Press didn't follow right away. I looked back and saw that he was looking around the house. Maybe I imagined this, but he seemed a little sad, as if this was the last time he was going to be here. After a few seconds he said, "You love this place, don't you? And your family?"

"Well . . . yeah. Of course," I answered. What a dumb question.

He took one more wistful look around, then turned to face me. The sad look was gone. In its place was the determined look of a guy who had business elsewhere.

"Let's go," he said.

He walked past me and headed down the front path to the street. Uncle Press always dressed the same way, in jeans, boots, and a dark brown work shirt. Over this he wore a long, tan, leather coat that reached down to his knees. It flapped in the wind as he walked. I'd seen that look many times before, but for some reason, this time it gave him the air of someone for whom time has stood still. In another time and place he could have been a dusty cowboy striding into town, or a

military emissary carrying vital documents. Uncle Press was indeed a unique character.

Parked in front of my house was the sweetest looking motorcycle I ever saw. It looked like one of those multi-coloured Matchbox racers that I had played with not too long ago. But this bike was very big and very real. Uncle Press always did things in style. He grabbed the extra helmet from the seat and tossed it to me. I buckled up and he did the same. He then gunned the engine and I was surprised to hear that it wasn't very loud. I was expecting some growling, gut-churning hog sound. But this bike was almost quiet. It sounded like, well, a rocket that's about to ignite. I hopped on the seat behind him and he glanced back to me.

"Ready?" he asked.

"No," I replied honestly.

"Good. I'd be surprised if you were," he shot back. He then kicked the bike into gear, hit the accelerator, and the two of us flew down the quiet, suburban street that had been my home for fourteen years.

I hope I'll see it again some day.

# SECOND EARTH

***. . . I hope I'll see it again some day.***

Mark Dimond looked up from the stack of parchment papers in his hand and took a deep breath. His heart was racing. The words on the pages before him seemed as if they were written by his best friend, Bobby Pendragon, but the story they contained was impossible. Yet there it was. He glanced at the pages again. What he saw was frantic writing. Bobby's writing in smudged black ink on some kind of old-fashioned yellow parchment. It looked real, it felt real, but so much of the story these pages contained felt about as close to reality as a fevered dream.

Mark sat safely locked in the second stall from the door of the third floor boys' bathroom at Stony Brook Junior High. It was a rarely used bathroom because it was at the far end of the building, near the art department, way off the beaten track. He'd often come here to think. Occasionally he even used the toilet for its intended purpose, but mostly he came here to get away. At his feet were a pile of carrot ends. He'd been nervously gnawing on them as he scanned the pages. Mark had read somewhere that carrots improved your vision. But after months of almost constant

carrot intake, he still had to wear glasses and only had a mouthful of yellow teeth to show for his efforts.

Mark knew he wasn't a full-on nerd, but he wasn't running with the cool kids, either. His only contact with the world of "the accepted" was Bobby. They grew up together and were about as tight as two friends could be. As Bobby started to grow up and become popular, Mark kept one foot firmly planted in kid-world. He still read comics; he still kept action figures on his desk. He didn't really know popular music, and his clothes were, well, functional. But that didn't matter to Bobby. Mark made him laugh. And Mark made him think. The two would spend hours debating issues as diverse as First Amendment rights and the relative merits of Pamela Anderson before and after cosmetic surgery.

A lot of Bobby's jock friends would dump on Mark, but never in front of Bobby. They knew better. Mess with Mark and you'd be messing with Bobby, and nobody messed with Bobby. But now, somebody was indeed messing with Bobby. Mark held the proof right there in his hands. He didn't want to believe what the pages told him. Under normal circumstances he would have thought it was some goofy joke that Bobby thought up. But some things had happened that made Mark think this might not be a joke. He leaned back against the cool tile wall and his thoughts brought him back to something that had happened the night before.

Mark always slept with a night-light. He was afraid of the dark. This was his secret. Even Bobby didn't know. Though sometimes Mark thought the night-light was worse than no light at all, because a night-light made shadows. Like the dark jacket hanging on the back of a door that looked like the Grim Reaper. That nasty vision happened more than once. It didn't help that without his glasses, Mark could barely see things clearly beyond the end of his bed. Still, the occasional rude awakening was much better than sleeping in the dark.

The night before, it had happened again. Mark was lying in bed, drifting in and out of sleep. He opened one groggy eye and in his stupor he thought he saw someone standing at the foot of his bed. His mind tried to tell him it was just the shadow cast by a passing car, but his gut told him to wake up. Fast. A surge of adrenalin shot through him and his brain went on full alert. He tried to focus his nearsighted eyes on the interloper to confirm it was just his backpack. No go. He couldn't tell what it was. So he groped his bedside table, knocked over a mug full of pens and his Game Boy, but managed to grab his glasses. When he finally jammed them on to his nose, he looked to the end of his bed . . . and froze in fear.

Standing there, lit by soft moonlight streaming in through the window, was a woman. She was tall and dark-skinned. She wore a colourful wrap that draped off one shoulder, revealing an incredibly taut, muscular arm. She looked to Mark to be a beautiful African queen. Mark dug his heels in and pushed his back against the wall behind his bed in the futile hope that he'd crash through and escape out the other side.

The woman simply raised a finger to her lips and gave a soft "shhh" sound. Mark froze in absolute, paralysing fear. He looked into the woman's eyes and something strange happened. He grew calm. As he thought back on this moment, he wasn't sure if she was hypnotising him or casting some kind of spell because, oddly, his fear slipped away. The woman had soft, friendly eyes that told Mark he had nothing to be afraid of.

"Shaaa zaa shuu saaa," she said softly. Her voice sounded like warm wind through the trees. It was pleasant and soothing, but it made no sense. The woman then walked around the bed and sat next to Mark. Mark didn't jump away because, for some reason, this all felt . . . right. A leather pouch hung from a cord around her neck. She reached into it and pulled out a ring. It looked to Mark

like one of those school rings you see on college kids. It was silver with a slate-coloured stone mounted in the centre. There was some sort of inscription engraved around the stone, but it was written in no language Mark had ever seen before.

"This is from Bobby," she said softly.

Bobby? Bobby Pendragon? Mark had no idea what was happening, but the last thing he expected was to hear that this strange woman who appeared in his bedroom in the middle of the night had something to do with his best friend.

"Who are you? How do you know Bobby?"

She gently picked up Mark's right hand and slipped the ring on to his finger. It fitted perfectly. Mark looked at the strange ring, then back at the woman.

"Why? What's this?" he asked.

The woman touched a gentle finger to Mark's lips to quieten him. Mark immediately felt his eyes grow heavy. A second before he had been about as wide awake as anyone can be, but now he felt weary enough to fall asleep on the spot. He felt the world slipping away. In an instant, he was out.

The next morning Mark woke up at the usual 6:15 with the alarm clock blaring. His first thought was that he hated alarm clocks. His second thought was that he had had the strangest dream. He chuckled to himself, thinking he should cut down on the raw vegetables before bedtime. He then reached over to hit the snooze button . . . and saw it.

There, on his finger was the ring the woman had given him. Mark sat up in bed quickly and stared at it with its grey stone and strange inscriptions. It was real. He could feel it. It had weight. It wasn't a dream. What was going on?

He dressed quickly and left the house without telling his parents what had happened. There was only one person who could explain this to him. Bobby Pendragon. But something had already

happened with Bobby that gave him a queasy feeling. Last night was the county semifinal basketball game . . . and Bobby hadn't shown up. His parents were there, his sister was there, but not Bobby. After the first half he went over to ask the Pendragons where Bobby was, but they had already left. Very strange.

And Stony Brook lost. Badly. Everybody at the game was buzzing, wanting to know what had happened to their star. Nobody knew. When Mark got home he called Bobby's house, but there was no answer. He figured he'd see him in school the next day and get the story. Then he went to sleep and had his strange night visitor. Now Mark wanted to know a lot more from Bobby than why he hadn't shown for a basketball game.

When Mark got into the school building, the number one topic of conversation was The Game.

"Hey Dimond? Where's your superstar pal?"

"He blew it!"

"This better be good, Dimond!"

"What's the story?"

Everyone was yelling at him about Bobby. That could only mean one thing. Bobby hadn't got there yet. Of course, Mark didn't have any answers, so he shrugged and kept walking. He went to Bobby's locker, but Bobby wasn't there. Instead there were more angry kids waiting to ambush him.

"He chickened out, didn't he?"

"Couldn't take the heat!"

Mark dodged them and went to Bobby's homeroom. Bobby wasn't there, either. Where was he? Something was definitely wrong.

And then it happened. It started as a twitch at first, but quickly grew. It was the ring. It was moving. It felt like it was squeezing and releasing, squeezing and releasing.

"Dimond! Hey, Dimond! Where is he?" More kids were closing

in. This was not a good time. Mark didn't know what to do, so he grabbed the ring with his other hand and ran. He blasted through kids, bumping into more than he dodged. A couple of older guys pushed him back, nearly sending him sprawling, but Mark somehow stayed on his feet. The bell rang and everyone headed for homeroom, but Mark didn't stop until he reached his own personal Fortress of Solitude – the boys' bathroom on the third floor.

He ran to the centre of the room and held his hand out as if it didn't belong to him. The ring was still moving, squeezing and releasing like a heartbeat. Then the grey stone started to sparkle. An instant before it had been a solid grey mass; now it sprang to life like a brilliant diamond. Beams of light shot from the ring and filled the room.

Mark couldn't take it any more. He yanked off the strange ring and threw it. It hit the tiled wall and bounced to a stop in the centre of the bathroom. The beams of light continued to shoot from the stone and dance across the ceiling and the walls, making the room look as if it were alive with beautiful, dazzling stars.

Then Mark watched in awe as the circular band started to grow larger. It slowly got bigger and bigger until it was about the size of a Frisbee, and in the centre of the now impossibly large band was a black hole where the floor should have been. The ring had opened up a dark portal to . . . somewhere. From deep within this portal, Mark could hear the faint sound of musical notes. It wasn't a melody; it was a jumble of sweet sounding tones that grew louder and louder.

Mark backed away from the strange ring, not sure if he should turn and run or stay and watch the show. He was fascinated and terrified at the same time. The musical notes coming from the portal got so loud that Mark had to cover his ears. Whatever was happening, he didn't want any part of it any more. So he turned and ran for the door. He was just about to throw it open when . . .

Everything stopped. The musical notes ended so abruptly it was like somebody threw a switch to cut the power. The dazzling light show ended also. The only thing that didn't stop was Mark's pounding heart. Whatever had just happened, it was over now and Mark tried to calm down. He took his hand away from the door and looked back into the bathroom. What he saw was the ring on the floor, right where he had thrown it. It was back to its normal size and the stone had returned to its original solid grey colour.

But something else was there too. Lying on the floor next to the ring was a scroll of paper. It was yellow parchment that had been tightly rolled and tied with a thin leather strap. Whatever the event had been with the ring, the result was that it had deposited this scroll here on the bathroom floor.

Mark approached the scroll cautiously, bent down, and picked it up with a sweaty hand. It was indeed rolled paper. Nothing scary about it. Just odd. Mark tugged on the leather cord that kept it together and gently unrolled the paper. There were four sheets, all filled with writing. Mark looked at the first line of the first page, and what he read hit him like an electric charge. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't think. This strange parchment was a letter . . . to him.

It began: *I hope you're reading this, Mark.*