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opening extract from

Dragon Orb: Shadow

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Chapter One

‘Imagine You’re a Bird.’

Release the dark orb – death brings me life.
Take brave ones’ counsel, ’ware ye the knife.
Exercise caution, stay pure and heed,
Yield unto justice: truth will succeed.

‘They should’ve listened to me,’ Pell muttered as he powered away from the campsite on Shadow’s back. ‘Kira can twist my words all she likes, but I should be the leader of this quest.’

As he considered his three companions, it took a moment for Pell to realise he was grinding his teeth in frustration. In his heart he felt the Oracle’s Great Quest to seek out the fabled dragon orbs and return them to the Dragon Spirit in the heart of Orupee’s highest mountain range was a task worthy of heroes. Why then had the Oracle chosen these others to go with him? Kira, rider of the dusk dragon, Longfang, was perhaps the most irritating. Of the three she showed the most promise, but she was stubborn and would not listen to reason.

‘*Don’t fret, dragonrider,*’ his night dragon, Shadow, whispered in his mind, her silky voice caressing. ‘*They’ll see things differently when we return with the night orb.*’

Pell had always marvelled at Shadow’s voice, so totally at odds with her fearsome exterior. If he closed his eyes and listened to that voice in his head, it was easy to imagine Shadow as a beautiful maiden, dark and mysterious. And she *was* beautiful – it just took a certain perspective to see past the vicious horns and teeth of the enormous night dragon.

‘*They need our strength,*’ Shadow continued. ‘*Firestorm and Nolita are hopeless. I’ve never seen such an unlikely partner for a day dragon. Given their weaknesses, it is hard to see why the others want to seek the day orb ?rst.*’

Shadow was right. How Elian, rider of a dawn dragon, could describe Nolita as ‘brave’ was beyond him. The boy was so naïve! The blond girl was the most craven person Pell had ever met. Nolita was pretty enough, with her delicate features and her ?ne blond hair, but her cringing and weeping was repulsive. Kira, on the other hand, was annoying – but at least there was some ?re in her personality. The Raca?an tribal girl went

out of her way to appear ?erce, with her face paint and her weapons. Given the right set of circumstances, Pell would have found her interesting. In reality, however, he knew they would likely clash over most issues.

‘I’m better off working alone,’ he breathed.

‘*You’ll never be alone,*’ Shadow purred in his mind.

‘Of course not, Shadow,’ he replied, quickly. ‘Sorry. I phrased that badly. I didn’t mean to exclude you. I should have said, “We’re better off working independently.” We make a fantastic team, you and I, and we’re destined for greatness. Why else were we chosen for the Great Quest? There won’t be any dull peace talks or boring guard duties in our future. We’ll do deeds that will be the talk of generations.’

The soothing rhythm of Shadow’s wingbeats and the exhilaration he felt as they climbed between the mountains calmed Pell’s thoughts. Higher and higher they went, until even the highest peaks fell away beneath them. Looking down from such a lofty height, it was easy to imagine himself as king of the world. How could anyone in Areth who did not ride a dragon believe they were lord over anything? To soar above the highest mountains was an experience reserved for the elite. No walls were high enough to deny him entry. The world was his playground. Who would argue with the rider of a dragon like Shadow? None but a fool – a fool with a death wish.

The Oracle’s riddling words might be twisted beyond comprehension, but Pell could see the path they paved in his mind’s eye. It glittered as if -studded with diamonds. Glory awaited him. He could feel it in his heart as surely as the sun would set.

Silently he urged Shadow on. For two season rotations he had longed for the acceptance and respect of his fellow night dragon riders. Until now, they had treated him as a boy, because he had not yet visited the Oracle. This time it would be different, he thought, satisfaction warming his stomach with a burning sensation that was pure pleasure. His was a special destiny – the night dragon rider entrusted with the fate of the Oracle. By his actions the Dragon Spirit would live or die. It was an awesome responsibility and one with which he would prove his worth.

The air was bitterly cold as they cruised across the mountain range. While the wind at ground level had dropped to nothing, here, thousands of spans up into the sky, a steady westerly breeze aided their journey. Pell let go of the pommel and clapped his mitts together a few times in an effort to trigger more blood ?ow. His ?ngers, toes, cheeks, ears and the tip of his nose were numb, but he was reluctant to ask Shadow to descend. He was eager to cover as much ground as possible before they took a break. It

took a lot of effort and energy for Shadow to get up this high, so they should make the most of it.

The sun marched steadily across the sky as they pressed eastwards, but although it blazed golden in the clear blue heavens, Pell felt none of its warmth. By the time the ?nal majestic peaks slipped past slowly beneath them, he knew he had to descend, or risk frostbite. He had seen other riders with missing ?ngers and toes. The cold was a subtle and sadistic enemy.

'*Let's go down, Shadow,*' he projected. He doubted that his lips could form the words even if he wished to speak aloud. '*I need to warm up and I'm sure you would welcome a short break.*'

'*Your endurance does you credit,*' Shadow replied. '*Not many riders show your resilience. We have already ?own far today. With our combined strength we will reach the enclave faster than many would believe - possible.*'

Pell wanted to smile at her praise, but the muscles in his face were too cold to respond. He loved it when Shadow talked like this. It made him feel warm inside. He had known from the instant they had met that they were perfectly matched. They were both competitive and strong. They both wanted power and recognition. Perhaps more importantly, however, they both recognised the potential their joining offered. A strong dragon with a strong rider could do great things.

Shadow eased gently into a shallow dive. As they accelerated, the wind-rush began to build and Pell bent low over the pommel of his saddle in an effort to reduce the biting chill of the bitter air?ow. In order to crouch so low, he had to lean to one side or the other of the great ridge of dragon horn in front of the saddle. He chose to lean to the left. Initially this was ?ne, but as their speed continued to increase Pell suddenly realised that the force of the air was dragging him further left and out of the saddle.

He tried to pull himself back up straight, but his body refused to respond. Panic ?ashed through him. His hands had no strength to grip. His legs were numb with cold against the dragon's back. He could not tell if his feet were still in the stirrups. There was nothing he could do. Without a miracle, he was going to fall.

'*Shadow!*' he called through the bond. He was unsure if he had managed to mouth the name aloud, or if the call was purely mental. '*I'm slipping!*'

'*Try to hold on, Pell. I've never been very good at catching,*' she replied, trying to slow down without making Pell's predicament worse. It was not easy. The slightest force might prove fatal, so her delicate efforts had little immediate effect.

‘*I’m too cold,*’ he admitted, a growing sense of horror building fast. ‘*All my strength has gone.*’

It was awful. He had never felt so weak. Hearing Shadow’s admission made it worse. If he fell and she could not catch him, he would die. To survive a fall from this height was unthinkable. In the two rotations they had been together he had only felt close to falling once before, and that had been momentary. This was different. He had got himself into this situation through foolishly pushing on in the extreme cold.

His body slid a little further. He tried with all his might to pull himself back up into the saddle, but he had passed the point of no return. Little by little his ?ngers slipped from their precarious hold on the pommel. He could feel his heart tightening with horror. Suddenly he lost his grip altogether.

‘*Pell!*’ Shadow’s mental voice was full of panic as she felt him slip from the saddle.

A heartbeat later Pell was hanging upside down by his left foot, which was caught in the stirrup. He bounced against Shadow’s side, the air?ow ?inging him around with invisible hands.

‘*I’m still with you,*’ he replied, grunting as his body thumped repeatedly against the dragon’s body. ‘*But I’m not sure for how long.*’

He looked up at where his foot was trapped, then down at the long, long drop to the ground, thousands of spans below. His boot was ?rmly wedged, but the foot inside the boot was not. He had always preferred his boots to be a slightly looser ?t than was fashionable. A horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach told him this was a preference he was about to regret.

With gritted teeth he twisted his body and reached up towards the stirrup. Trembling with the effort he forced his mitts closer and closer, but the more he tried to reach towards his trapped foot, the more savagely the wind ?ailed him against Shadow’s side until a particularly violent impact left him seeing stars and forced him to straighten.

Pell was strong. It was one of his de?ning characteristics. Under any other circumstance he would have grabbed the stirrup with ease, but the cold had robbed him of his ?exibility and strength. It was so frustrating he wanted to scream, but he resisted the temptation. Ignoring all sensations of disorientation and discomfort, he tried again. Fighting the wind and the stiffness in his body with every ounce of muscle power he could muster, he forced his hands up towards the stirrup again. Little by little his hands stretched closer and closer.

‘Aaarrrrrghhhh!’ The growling roar ripped from his throat as somehow he found the ?nal ounce of strength he needed. His right hand grabbed hold of the stirrup at the precise moment that his foot slipped free of his boot.

For a moment he hung there, scrabbling to reach the stirrup with his other hand to strengthen his hold, but his weight and the pull of the wind was too much for his numb ?ngers. Despite his very best effort, his grip failed and he fell.

'*Shadow!*' His call was instinctive and instant.

'*Pell!*'

Shadow tipped into a steep spiral dive, but held off folding her wings completely until she was positioned perfectly above him.

'*Spread your arms and legs,*' she ordered him. '*Try to imagine you are a bird.*'

'*Imagine I'm a bird? I don't have wings, damn it!*'

'*No,*' Shadow agreed, her mental voice returning to her normal soft tones. '*But if you want me to catch you, then you must calm yourself and do as I say. Try to stabilise your body so that you are falling ?at on your stomach, with your arms and legs stretched out. That way you will fall more slowly. It will make it easier for me to catch up with you.*'

The calm tones of Shadow's voice in his head were a tonic. The unfamiliar feeling of fear had spiked through Pell's mind and a metallic taste formed at the back of his mouth. The dragon's soft voice of reason, giving him clear directions, helped him regain a measure of control as he struggled to do what she asked of him. Initially he stabilised himself on his back, but with a little experimentation, he managed to ?ip over onto his stomach and stay ?at, with his arms outstretched and his hands cupped. He did not feel as if he was falling any slower. If anything, he felt as if he was falling faster than ever.

'*That's good, Pell. Just hold that position. I'll be with you shortly.*'

He was falling blind. He tried cracking open his eyelids the tiniest sliver to see how far he was from the ground, but it was no use. The wind was too strong. It prevented him from seeing anything. How long had he been falling? It felt like for ever, but that was most likely his imagination. Where was Shadow? Surely if she was going to catch him, she would do it soon?

A sudden swirling bump of air sent him tumbling out of control again. Pell panicked. His heart was thumping so hard in his chest that it felt as if it might burst free.

'*Shadow!*'

'*Sorry about that,*' Shadow said softly in his mind. '*My closure speed was too high. If I'd grabbed you, I might have killed you with the impact. Stay calm. Get back into the position you were in before. I'll try again in a moment.*'

'*We must be running out of height—*'

‘*Let me worry about that,*’ Shadow said quickly. ‘*Get back on your stomach. I can’t catch you if you keep tumbling.*’

Pell did as he was told. It took a heartbeat or two, but he managed to settle into a face-down position again. How long had he got? He could not get the thought out of his mind. It could not be long now. Was there really time for another attempt? He could feel Shadow’s concentration through the bond. She would do everything in her power to save him. The surety in that thought was an incredible source of comfort. Her focus gave him such hope that little by little he began to feel himself relax.

‘Oof!’

The talons crashed hard into his back and legs, but he cared nothing for the pain as they closed around him. He was safe, he realised. Shadow had done it. She had caught him. The relief and the pain, combined with the sudden crushing force that took his breath away as they pulled out of their headlong dive, were all too much. In the blink of an eye, Pell spiralled swiftly into the sweet oblivion of unconsciousness.