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Opening extract from

Dragon Orb: Longfang

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Chapter One

Out of the Valley

Ever protected, the dusk orb lies
Behind the cover, yet no disguise.
Afterlife image, unreal yet real,
Lives in the shadows, waits to reveal.

Pell clutched at his left shoulder as the searing pain took his breath away. Flare after flare of mind-numbing agony lanced through the telepathic bond he shared with his night dragon, Shadow, and tears welled in his eyes.

The wound to his dragon was serious. She was losing blood fast. It was a tough decision, but he knew that to escape the Valley of the Griffins with the dark orb intact, his best chance was to have Shadow's wound seared shut with dragonfire.

It seemed incredible that it was only two weeks

since Pell and his three companions Elian, Kira and Nolita, had met with the Oracle, a spirit creature revered by dragons all over Areth. At the Oracle's command, the Great Quest for the four dragon orbs had begun. Pell was still not totally convinced that Elian, Kira and Nolita were being honest with him. He had set off alone to seek the dark orb of the night dragons while the others went off in pursuit of the day orb. Betrayed and imprisoned by Segun, leader of the night dragon enclave, Pell had almost lost hope of completing his mission. To his embarrassment and relief, the others had come to his rescue. But they told an improbable tale of Nolita gaining the day orb and delivering it to the Oracle. He pretended to accept what they told him, but secretly he had serious doubts about it.

Winning the dark orb had been both difficult and costly. Griffins guarded the valley where the orb was hidden. When Pell arrived there, the senior council of the night dragons, led by Segun, had got there first. The harsh-voiced speaker of the griffins, Karrok, insisted that a champion from each party should compete for the honour of 'revealing' the orb. Each wave of heat that now surged through Pell's shoulder triggered memories of that struggle. Segun had delegated Dirk, an immensely strong dragonrider, to represent the night dragon enclave

and compete against Pell. During the final challenge, Dirk's dragon, Knifetail, had dealt Shadow the slashing blow to her shoulder that had opened the deep wound.

A low, rumbling roar reverberated around the valley basin, as Firestorm, Nolita's day dragon, now breathed his hottest flames in a controlled jet over the gaping gash in Shadow's shoulder. Burning pain flooded across the mental bridge that linked Pell to his dragon, and his own shoulder burned in sympathy. He gripped it and squeezed hard to try to convince his body that it was not his own flesh that was melting. The pain contrasted with the icy stab of defeat he had felt a few minutes earlier, when Dirk had beaten him to the orb. If the griffins had not seen Pell's opponent cheat to win, Segun would have taken possession of the orb and destroyed it. The night dragon leader was willing to do anything to see Pell and his companions fail, thereby ensuring the Oracle's death and freeing him to declare supremacy over all dragonkind.

To complete his part of the Oracle's quest, Pell had to return the dark orb to the Dragon Spirit in the mountains of Orupee. The way things were going the worst might yet be still to come. He had defied Segun, and the leader of the night dragon enclave was not the sort to forgive and forget.

‘This quest had better be worth it,’ Pell groaned through gritted teeth. ‘First outlawed by my dragon enclave. Now this.’

The telepathic link between dragon and rider brought many benefits, but this time Pell wished there was a way of shutting off the flow of thoughts and feelings. The roar of flame stopped, but the pain barely dimmed. He dashed the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand and ran forwards through the snow to inspect Shadow’s wound as Firestorm stepped back. It wasn’t pretty, but it had stopped bleeding.

‘Fire says it’s the best he can do.’ Nolita’s voice at Pell’s shoulder startled him. He had not realised she was there. Nolita did not come close to dragons unless she had to, as they terrified her. The irony that one so scared of large animals should be a dragonrider was not lost on Pell, who felt that her cowardice reflected badly on all dragonriders. As yet, he had seen nothing to change that opinion, but he knew he had to work with her. Her dragon had abilities that were useful to his cause. ‘He’s genuinely sorry that his healing fire won’t work on night dragons,’ Nolita said.

‘I’m sure he is,’ Pell grunted. No sooner had the words left his mouth than he realised how ungrateful they sounded. He turned to face her and

saw the hurt in her eyes. 'Sorry, Nolita, that didn't come out the way I intended. Please pass my thanks to Firestorm. I'm sure he did what he could. We'll be fine. Shadow's strong.'

'Yes,' she said, as her haunted eyes rose to meet those of the huge black dragon. 'She is.'

Nolita backed away slowly, as Shadow proceeded to roll gently onto her side and dip the smoking wound into the deep snow. There was a hiss and a small cloud of steam rose around her shoulder. The sympathetic pain in Pell's shoulder lessened considerably.

Elian and Kira intercepted Nolita before she had moved more than a few paces.

'We need to get out of here while we can,' Kira urged, looking first to where Longfang, her dusk dragon, stood waiting and then up at the dozens of vicious-looking griffins circling overhead. 'The griffins promised to stop Segun and the others from following us until sunset, but that only gives us a couple of hours at best. Segun is furious. Once the griffins let him leave, he'll stop at nothing to destroy the dark orb.'

'The other three night dragons are also out there somewhere,' Elian, the rider of dawn dragon, Aurora, added. 'Ra tells me the weather's on the turn. Things could get rough, but if we can hold out

until dawn, she can get all of us out of this mess.'

'And into another most likely,' Kira muttered.

Pell felt Shadow getting back to her feet behind him. The cold snow must have soothed her pain, as the burning sensation in Pell's shoulder had diminished to a dull throbbing. 'In case you hadn't noticed, things are already rough,' he growled. 'But you're right. We need to go. It's a long way to the Oracle's cave.'

As he spoke, Pell caught sight of Segun. The tall rider wore a sadistic expression of pleasure at the sight of Pell's obvious pain. A sudden urge to race across and wipe the smile from Segun's face made Pell's right hand go instinctively for his knife. Segun's eyes followed Pell's hand and the night dragon leader's cruel smile broadened further. The man was vicious. Pell had watched him kill one of his own lieutenants a few minutes earlier. The leader of the night dragon riders had not shown so much as a flicker of remorse afterwards. Common sense crushed Pell's rash impulse. He whirled round and bounded up Shadow's side, twisting neatly into the saddle and slotting his booted feet into the stirrups.

'*Are you ready to fly again?*' he asked Shadow through their mental link.

'*We have what we came for,*' she replied. '*I am as*

ready as I'm going to be. Let us show Segun that it will take more than a bit of pain to stop us.'

Kira looked around as her dragon, Longfang, turned to face down the valley towards the exit tunnel. The others were mounted and ready to go. She saw Pell give an impudent salute in the direction of Segun and his dragon, Widewing. Frustration and anger boiled inside her. Was the boy a complete fool? Baiting a lion was an act of stupidity that had inevitable consequences. Even the youngest child in her tribe knew that. Taunting Segun was worse. And Pell thought himself to be the natural leader for the quest! Kira ground her teeth as the older boy gave the word to his dragon, Shadow. The huge night dragon sprang forwards into her take-off run.

'*Come on, Fang,*' Kira said, unable to keep her frustration from colouring her tone. '*We'd better follow them before they get themselves into more trouble.*'

As they accelerated it was hard to ignore the huge red area of blood-soaked snow and the lifeless carcass of the night dragon, Knifetail. Her twisted body had been literally torn open by griffins, and her heart now formed the centre of the dark orb tucked deep in Pell's saddlebag. Kira shuddered. The body could so easily have been that of Shadow,

but Dirk, Pell's opponent in the challenge for the dark orb, had cheated and inadvertently brought the fate upon his own dragon. For the briefest moment, the thought crossed Kira's mind that their quest might have stood more chance of success if it *had* been Shadow who had died. Pell and Shadow had done nothing but lead them into trouble by trying to act alone since the quest began.

That's unkind thinking, Kira, she berated herself. Pell is annoying, but the Oracle chose him in the same way it chose me. He and Nolita have won their orbs and both went through painful trials to get them. It's my turn next. What if the dusk orb also requires a dark sacrifice? Will *I* do whatever it takes to see the Oracle survive?

The question hung in her mind, but she could not bring herself to answer it. She had no answer. How could she say without knowing what price she might have to pay?

Let's get the dark orb to the Oracle, she thought. There'll be time to worry about the dusk orb later.

Longfang skipped into the air and Kira was forced to concentrate on the take off. Ahead, she saw Shadow's wings kicking vortices of snow into the air. She glanced across at Fang's wingtips. He too was stirring up mini-whirlwinds that swirled white against the vertical rock walls on either side

of the deep mountain valley. They fizzled out quite quickly, but Kira had never seen anything like them before. They were fascinating.

She realised her focus had slipped again. Why was she getting distracted so easily? This was not like her. If anything, she should be working on practical considerations. She needed to plan their next move. Even with one dragon and his rider dead, Segun still held the advantage of numbers. He and his four remaining lieutenants would undoubtedly mount their night dragons and give chase as soon as the griffins allowed them to leave at sunset, and there were three more riders on night dragons waiting for them somewhere outside the valley. If Segun joined forces with them, he would outnumber the questors by two to one. Not good odds, but Kira knew that if they could hold off the night dragons until dawn, Aurora could open a gateway into the other world, where Segun and his men could not follow them. Despite the strangeness and the horrors of war that awaited them there, Kira felt certain that going through the gateway would solve many of their immediate problems.

The valley narrowed until they reached the sharp right turn into the tunnel that led out of the Valley of the Griffins. The familiar pressure forced her down hard against Fang's back as he tipped into a

steep turn. The rock walls to either side raced past as they rolled back to level flight. Looking ahead, Kira could see the end of the tunnel beyond Shadow and Pell. Spots of white were visible in the air. Snow was beginning to fall.

'Fang, do you see what I see?' she asked.

'Yes, it's snowing,' he replied. *'But don't worry. This could prove to be the best luck we've had all day.'*

'Luck? In what way?'

'Visibility will be limited, but it will be far easier to throw Segun off our trail.'

'Well I'm glad there's something good about it,' Kira said sourly. *'We're going to get extremely cold and wet, and I've had quite enough of the cold. I hope the dusk orb is somewhere warmer.'*

'Shadow will probably welcome the cold and wet after Firestorm sealed her wound with his fire,' Fang pointed out. *'She is strong, but that's a nasty wound she's taken. I know I would not be able to fly far with the pain she is suffering. Keeping the cauterised area cool will help to ease it a little. Night dragons are not easily harmed. Unfortunately, they do not heal easily either. I imagine it will be some years before she'll be free from the pain of that injury.'*

'Years! But that's awful! And Pell will feel her pain all that time?' The part of her that disliked Pell wanted to take sadistic pleasure in that thought, but

she knew what it had felt like when Fang had been injured by dragonhunters.

'Don't worry, Kira,' Fang answered. *'Pell may be annoying, but he is strong. Shadow is strong too. They will recover.'*

The icy breeze as they emerged from the end of the tunnel cut through Kira's protective clothing as if it were made of thin Racafian cloth. Although snow was falling, it was still light, and the visibility along the valley was not too bad. Kira could see the best part of a league in both directions, but a quick glance at the cloud above was enough for her to realise it would not stay this benign for long.

'Shadow is suggesting we head southwards, but stay amongst the peaks until it starts to get dark,' Fang told her. *'In these conditions I'd normally want to get out of the mountains as quickly as possible, but that would leave us vulnerable to attack. Remaining in the network of valleys while it is snowing will bring danger, but it will make it far more difficult for Segun and his men to find us. I think Shadow's plan is probably sensible.'*

They turned right along the valley and on reaching the first fork they turned left. Pell had told them about his final race for the orb. This valley took them away from the race route. More importantly, it took them away from the last place Pell had seen

one of the three night dragons they knew to be lurking in the mountain range.

The mountain peaks slipped past on either side as the dragons did their best to fly at high speed, but they had not gone far when the snowflakes began to get bigger and more numerous. The wind picked up, moaning and howling across rocks and hollows on the steep slopes. Visibility worsened and the air became rough with turbulence as the mountainous slopes twisted its flow, shaping it into swirling vortices and wicked vertical drafts.

'*This is not good. If it gets any worse, I think we might have to land somewhere and try to hide away until dawn.*' Fang's voice in Kira's mind sounded worried. They had hardly gone any distance from the Valley of the Griffins. If the blizzard conditions blew through before dusk, it would leave Segun and his men almost on top of them.

'*I don't like it,*' Kira said. '*We need to get further away.*'

'*I agree that would be ideal, but if this gets any worse it will become impossible to see where we're going. My eyesight is the best amongst the dragons and I'm struggling to see far enough ahead to fly safely. How Shadow is leading the way in this, I don't know.*'

'*Then let's try to get clear of the mountains and fly in the open air to the east of here,*' Kira suggested. '*We*

can parallel the range southwards and then nip back in among the peaks to hide when it becomes necessary.'

'That sounds like a good compromise,' Fang agreed. *'Assuming we can get that far without crashing blindly into a mountainside. I'll put it to Shadow and see what she says.'*

Kira could see very little now. Her eyes were almost shut in an effort to keep out the driving snow. She looked first to one side and then the other, squinting and straining in an effort to see her companions. Every now and then she caught a glimpse of one of them before the falling curtain of white snow swallowed them again. She knew Fang was right. Continuing to fly in these conditions was madness, but if they were to stand a realistic chance of escaping Segun's reach, they had to press on.

Her face began to go numb with cold as the icy flakes leeched the heat from her flesh. Glancing down she found her jacket and the front of her trousers were white with snow. More was accumulating on the front of Fang's ridges and the leading edges of his wings. As the cloud was thickening and the snowfall intensifying, so the light levels were dropping. It felt almost like dusk, though the sun would not set for some time yet.

'I cannot say I'm happy,' Fang reported. *'But the consensus amongst the dragons is to press on and try*

to get clear of the mountains. We must hope for the conditions to improve. It will be less dangerous once we are out of the range. Shadow is going to descend to see if the visibility is better lower down. I've agreed to try climbing. Hold on tight. This is likely to get very uncomfortable.'

Kira did as she was told, leaning as flat as she could against Fang's back in an effort to minimise the biting cold of the wind and snow cutting through her jacket. The temperature would get colder as they climbed and Kira already felt as if the seat of her trousers was frozen to her saddle.

Fang had barely begun his climb when the spine-chilling screech of a night dragon rent the air. For a horrible moment Kira imagined that Shadow had crashed into the ground, but then she realised the sound had not come from below them, but from behind. And it was close. Very close. They were under attack.