Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

opening extract from

Dragon Orb: Aurora

written by

Mark Robson

published by

Simon & Schuster Ltd

All text is copyright of the author/ illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk



Chapter One

The Orb of Vision

Life after death from death before life,
Enter the new age, through deadly strife.
Greatest of orbs is – dragon's device.
Gifted for ever: life's sacrifice.

'Why do you let the night dragon suffer?' the voice whispered in Aurora's mind. *'Are you so cruel that you will not heal her?'*

'Heal her? I have no ability to heal. I am a dawn dragon, not a day dragon,' Aurora responded indignantly. *'Who is it that accuses me of letting a fellow dragon suffer? Show yourself.'*

Aurora slowly scanned the great chamber with her huge, amber eyes. Nothing moved. She and the night dragon, Shadow, were still alone in the hall of mirrors. Since becoming separated from the rest of

the party, Aurora and Shadow had waited while the others had moved deeper into the Castle of Shadows searching for the third of four orbs they required to complete their quest. Aurora had lost contact with Firestorm and Longfang, the two dragons sealed on the other side of the deadly mirror along with the four dragonriders, including her own rider, Elian. Where were they now that she could not reach them? Were they separated by distance, or by something more sinister? The mirror that separated the two dragons from their friends looked fragile, but Aurora knew better than to try to break it because it was coated with dragonsbane, rendering it impossible for the dragons to break through without risking a horrible death.

The hallway was still and silent. Her companion, the night dragon, Shadow, was curled in a circle, dozing.

It was a strange coincidence that the dragons should be split into their current pairings. This was not the first time that she and Shadow had become separated from Fire and Fang. They had last been forced apart a week ago after being chased by Segun and the senior night dragonriders and now, having only been reunited a few hours ago, already they were separated again. It felt almost as if fate were trying to keep the pairings away from each other.

Their journey from the Oracle's cave to this desolate sea fortress in the north of Orupee had been harrowing. Dragonhunters had hounded them the entire way. Aurora and Shadow bore multiple wounds from the hunters' spears and were weary through lack of rest. Shadow had suffered most. A nasty injury to one of her main wing muscles had made torture of every wingbeat. The day dragon, Firestorm, had healed Aurora's injuries earlier, but he could not heal Shadow. A day dragon's healing fire did not work on night dragons.

'I was a dragon once, a long time ago,' the voice continued in Aurora's mind. *'A dusk dragon – the leader of my enclave for many years. Is it true that dawn dragons can no longer heal? I find that hard to believe. You were ever the most gifted ones, blessed with the abilities of day and night dragons, yet also having special powers unique to your kind. We dusk dragons have never burned with the fire of the sun. Nor can we harness the silence of the night. Ours was ever the shadow gift. But you – you glow with inner fire. Why do you not use it to heal your companion? I sense she is in much pain.'*

'Even if I could breathe healing fire, why should my efforts be any more effective than those of a day dragon?' Aurora asked. *'Besides which, I have no reason to trust you. This place appears nothing more than a gigantic*

trap, designed to kill dragons and their riders. Show yourself and I shall be better placed to decide if I should trust you.'

There was a slight pause. Aurora sensed the owner of the whispering voice considering her request.

'I cannot come to you now,' the voice replied. *'It is too late. Your friends have nearly reached their goal. I must await them here in my chamber if I am to fulfil my destiny. I have waited a very long time for my final release. You will have to trust me. You cannot breathe healing fire – of course you can't! But the fire is within you.'*

Aurora snorted with indignation. If she had fire burning inside her, she would know it. The idea that she could somehow not feel the heat of fire inside her body was nonsense. But the voice did not stop. Its whispering words continued.

'You glow with the fire constantly,' it said. *'Your powers draw from both day and night, and are aligned to both. Unfortunately, we dusk dragons were not similarly blessed. Day and night dragons are polar opposites. Their abilities have never been compatible. Your powers, however, can be used on both. The only dragon your healing cannot touch is a dusk dragon, for we are your polar opposites.'*

Aurora thought about this. What the voice was saying made a bizarre sort of sense, but still she was no wiser as to how she could help Shadow.

'What must I do to use this healing power you say I have?' she asked.

'I can't say exactly,' the voice admitted. *'I only witnessed a dawn dragon healing once, and it looked as though she concentrated her inner fire on the point of physical contact she had made with the other dragon. I must go. Your friends are here. My time has come.'*

The voice faded. Aurora did not know what to think. Did she dare to try healing Shadow? What if it was another trap and her efforts added further hurt to the night dragon? She reached out with her mind once more, straining to reach her rider, Elian. It was no use. He was beyond her range. Fang and Firestorm also failed to respond. If they were in the same place as the owner of the voice, how had he spoken to her when she could not reach her friends? So many questions and so few answers – what should she do?

Shadow twitched and shifted her body position. Aurora watched the night dragon struggle to minimise her discomfort as she sought to rest. She was in awe of Shadow's resilience. Despite the obvious agony of her wounds, the night dragon had persevered without complaint. Aurora had never met another dragon with such strength of mind and body.

Moving closer to the huge black dragon, Aurora closed her eyes and began to concentrate.

'What are you doing?' Shadow sounded irritated. *'I want to sleep.'*

'Relax,' Aurora told her. *'I want to try something that might help you rest more effectively. It should only take a moment.'*

Rather than risk messing with Shadow's most painful wound, Aurora decided to try her experiment on one of her lesser injuries. The oldest was a deep cut to the night dragon's shoulder that Firestorm had cauterised with his hottest fire to prevent Shadow from bleeding to death. The resulting burn had left an ugly mess of distorted and bubbled scales around the original injury. Aurora doubted it would ever heal properly on its own. Leaning close, she moved her neck around until it made gentle contact against the wound. Drawing her inner light, she tried to focus on the point of contact.

Shadow flinched away from her touch as if burned.

'What are you doing, Aurora?' Shadow asked again, her voice suddenly suspicious and more alert.

'I'm sorry,' Aurora replied. *'Did I hurt you? I didn't mean to.'*

'No, you did not hurt me, but the sensation was strange.' Shadow paused a moment. *'My shoulder feels cooler. It has been burning with the heat of Firestorm's*

breath since we left the Valley of the Griffins. What did you do?'

'I'm not quite sure. I may have the key to healing your wounds, but I need to experiment a little more. May I try again?'

'Where are the dragonhunters?' Pell demanded. 'What are they doing?'

Pell's voice was like the irritating buzz of a fly in Kira's ear as her vision soared out from the chamber, high up into the air above the Castle of Shadows. Despite many dangers and traps, she and her three fellow questors, Elian, Nolita and Pell, had won through to the innermost chamber of the castle and gained possession of the third of the four dragon orbs – the Orb of Vision. The ghostly dusk dragon that had guarded the special plinth on which the third orb had formed had vanished now, leaving the four riders and two of their four dragons with the dilemma of how to escape from the castle and carry the orb to the Oracle.

Kira found that, with concentration, she could control the Orb of Vision and, by channelling its power, she could now see outside the castle. Using it made her feel as if she were staring through a window, except the window opened into the world wherever she willed it, and could be moved with a

single thought. It was bizarre, yet the sense of power it gave sent thrills of pleasure through her.

She pressed her fingers harder against the orb, splaying them around its smooth, glowing surface to gain maximum contact. Energy surged into her and her mouth curved instinctively into a smile.

'Let's see what this thing can do,' she breathed.

'Be careful, Kira.' Elian's voice was distant, but his urgent warning somehow penetrated the trance-like state that the orb created. 'Remember what the ghost dragon told us. The orb might betray us.'

Kira's mind froze, poised to hurl her vision across Areth to her home village in the Racafian savannah. Elian was right. She needed to exercise caution. Try something easier first. She had already seen Segun, the power-hungry night dragon leader, flying away from the castle. Spying on him would be a useful test of her control. Relaxing slightly she sent her newfound power of vision whizzing across the sky until she located him still flying south and west on his dragon, Widewing. Zooming in closer, she circled them.

Segun's face was set in hard lines. His dark brows were knitted into a frown and his eyes stared with icy fury into the distance. She could almost feel the intensity of his thoughts. It was clear he did not intend to return to the Castle of Shadows, yet

was resolved to prevent the four questors from completing their task to restore the Oracle.

A sudden change in Segun's expression made Kira withdraw. She flashed away, soaring high and fast back towards the castle. Somehow he had become aware of her. A shudder ran down her spine. It was eerie. One moment Segun had been staring straight ahead, the next his focus had shifted and he had looked right at her.

What had he seen? She thought the orb allowed her to travel in a totally disembodied state, but now it appeared this was not the case. Segun had definitely seen something, though Kira had no idea what. Elian had been right to urge caution. Had the night dragonrider seen enough to deduce the four questors had gained the third orb?

Swearing, she mentally berated herself for gifting him with this information. She paused high above the treetops and looked down. The great forest spread below her, a vast textured carpet across the land, and she watched as the tiny distant figure of Widewing flew in the direction of central Orupee and the Oracle's cave. Any thoughts Kira had enjoyed of spying on the night dragons at will were gone. It appeared likely that Segun knew what to look out for now and he would warn his men.

Deciding to be more careful, Kira zipped back

across the sky towards the Castle of Shadows. Diving down until her vision was skimming the treetops, she slowed as she approached the edge of the forest. She could see the dragonhunters gathered outside the great castle gates. She lowered her viewpoint down amongst the branches and then eased forwards again until she was peeping out from between the leaves at the open ground in front of the enormous sea fortress. The hunters were some distance away. They had split into two groups – one to either side of the main gates. It appeared they were preparing an ambush.

Wrenching her fingertips from the surface of the orb, Kira staggered backwards. As soon as her contact with the orb was broken, she began to see through her own eyes again. The chamber seemed to spin under her feet. After the amazing perfect vision she had just experienced, her own sense of sight felt very limited. Also, the disorientation she had felt when Longfang, her dragon, sacrificed his left eye to form the orb, returned. The sensation was hard to define, but the dragon's loss of perception echoed through their bond making her feel dizzy.

'Are you all right?' asked Elian. 'What did you see?'

It took a moment for Kira to regain her composure. 'Segun's not coming back,' she confirmed.

'I followed him a little way. He's heading southwest towards the Oracle's cave. The hunters, however, have laid a trap for us directly outside the castle gates.'

'That's not good,' Pell observed. 'We can't take off from inside the walls. There's not enough room for a take-off run and those shadow demons in the main courtyard will rip us to shreds if we make any sudden movements.'

'Do you think the hunters know about the shadow demons?' Elian asked thoughtfully. 'If their lead hunter is a Joining, possessed by a demonic creature, would he be aware of the shadow demons inside the castle?'

The four riders each looked around at one another. No one had an answer.

'What do you think, Fang?' Kira asked, keeping the tone of her thought curt. She was still angry with him for sacrificing his eye to form the third orb. Fang had solved the Oracle's riddle before they had reached the inner chamber, but had kept the information from her to prevent her getting upset.

'I don't know,' he replied. *'Demons, as you call them, are not from this world. I do not know the extent of their powers. They may be aware of one another, but I don't even know if the creatures that join with humans come from the same world as the shadow demons. The Joining*

does seem to have a sense unlike that of any human or dragon. He has tracked us and anticipated our moves with uncanny accuracy. Anything is possible.'

'Fang doesn't know,' Kira said aloud.

'Neither does Firestorm,' Nolita added softly.

'I wonder . . .' Elian began thoughtfully. Pacing back and forth next to the metal plinth, he hooked his right thumb under his chin and curled his index finger across his face between his top lip and his nose.

'What, Elian?' Kira asked. 'What do you wonder?'

'I was just thinking that perhaps we could set a trap of our own,' he said. 'But first we need to get out of this chamber and find our way back to Aurora and Shadow. Something is stalking the maze of mirrors. I'd rather not go back that way if we can avoid it. Let's concentrate on getting out of the castle. I'll tell you my idea once we're in a position to act.'



Chapter Two

Surprise Attack

Tembo felt tension building inside his body as he watched Husam, leader of the dragonhunters, directing the other hunters into position on either side of the castle gateway. It was a sensation that had become all too common over the past two weeks. What was Husam thinking? It would not matter where the men were placed. It was too open here in front of the fortress. Had he not learned from their foolhardy attempt to finish off the two dragons on the ridge five days ago?

The open attack up the ridge had ended in disaster when the two dragonriders had used their position of strength on the high ground to great advantage. One of the dragons had rolled entire tree trunks down at the hunters, whilst the riders had hurled a deadly barrage of rocks. Tembo eyed the battlements

on the walls high above them. If the dragonriders became aware of the hunters again, the walls of the fortress could be used to give a similar advantage.

Assuming the dragons could not take off from within the walls, however, the gateway would funnel the dragons when they left, allowing the hunters to launch a targeted attack. But as the ground in front of the castle was so devoid of cover, the hunters would be as exposed and as vulnerable as the dragons.

A bitter wind swirled around Tembo, increasing his tension. He flexed his legs. His muscles were stiffening. They had chased the dragons for more than a hundred leagues over the past week, and his body was not used to being still for any length of time. The men would not want to be out here for long. There was something else, though. He could not shake the nagging feeling that they were missing something.

Barely an hour ago, a particularly large night dragon and his rider had launched from the treeline less than five hundred paces away from them. Husam had been as unaware of the dragon's presence as the rest of the hunters. Given their leader's uncanny instincts and tracking skills, Tembo had been surprised to see Husam caught off guard. It was not the same night dragon they had been tracking. This

one was huge and had flown with no hint of any injury.

The beast was airborne and out of reach before anyone had a chance to react. If the rider had gone for help, Husam and the hunters were as good as dead already. If the entire night dragon enclave turned to tracking them down, then there would be no hiding place on Areth secure enough to guarantee their safety.

Only the strongest and best of their party had dragonbone weapons now. Most of the bone-tipped spears had been lost during previous encounters. Those without dragonbone weapons were reduced to carrying blades and spears tipped with metal, which would be next to useless if things turned nasty. Husam had outlined a bold plan, but it was fraught with danger. He was counting on the dragons being weakened by their wounds and the effects of the long chase. If Tembo had learned anything from these past two weeks, it was that the dragons they had been hunting were full of surprises. Their riders were young, but they were no fools. Husam's plan lacked subtlety. The dragons were sure to see through it.

Tembo shifted uneasily as he crouched, waiting. Apparently satisfied that his men were suitably positioned, Husam turned and strode towards him.

Slim and upright, the hunter moved with a bounce in his step.

'Are you alright?' Husam asked.

'I'm just weary,' Tembo sighed, hoping his friend would not probe further. He could not look Husam in the eyes. No one looked him in the eyes by choice. There was something about Husam's mismatched irises that chilled the marrow from one's bones. Both eyes had been blue, but after the disastrous attack that had resulted in the death of their former leader, Kasau, one had darkened to a colour that was almost purple. The other remained a more normal shade. It was strange, but not as strange as his friend's change in behaviour.

'Don't lie to me, Tembo,' Husam said, his tone dangerous. 'You're thinking my strategy is flawed. We're too exposed. We have limited weaponry. If dragons come from anywhere but through the castle gateway we'll be totally at their mercy. You're right to think these things.'

The admission was a surprise. Tembo looked up at Husam and instantly regretted it. The man's eyes glittered with anger. His gaze seemed to jab into Tembo's head.

'Trust me, my friend,' Husam ordered. 'We will leave this place triumphant today. I *know* we will.'

Tembo had never been argumentative. Despite his

misgivings, he nodded and climbed to his feet. He towered over Husam, but his size meant little in this relationship. Husam had always been the leader.

'I have always trusted you, Husam,' Tembo said slowly, though in his heart he knew that to be a lie, too. 'But this is as far as I go. If we don't kill the dragons today, I'm giving up the hunt. This has to end. There'll be other dragons: dragons without riders; legitimate rogue dragons that need destroying. I'd like to hunt them with you, but I'll go alone if need be.'

Pressure began to build inside Tembo's head. Husam's stare intensified. Pain flared and Tembo clamped his hands over his temples. He could not close his eyes. He could not even blink. Husam's eyes filled his mind. He had no idea what Husam was doing, but he was determined to hold firm to his decision.

The next few moments felt like an eternity, but suddenly Husam broke off his stare. Tembo staggered slightly before regaining his balance.

'Very well, Tembo,' Husam said. 'But you need not fear. It will end today. We have been through a lot together, you and I. It would be a shame if we had to part company now.'

Tembo rubbed at his temples with his fingertips. Kasau had played a similar mind trick when the

hunting party had first latched on to the trail of the dawn dragon. Husam's attempt to persuade him by force of mind had been less subtle than that of Kasau, but it had felt very similar. Husam was not the man Tembo had taken up with in Racafi. He had known it in his heart from the moment his friend's eye had changed colour, but he had so wanted to believe the change in Husam was temporary that he had convinced himself to persevere as if nothing was wrong.

'Husam!'

The hissed whisper from one of the nearby hunters was urgent.

'Husam. The watchman!'

Tembo followed the man's gesticulations and realised the watchman poised by the side of the gate was signalling to them. The dragons were on the move. This was it.

Husam waved a rapid sequence of silent instructions to the men. Tembo watched as the men reacted to the signals. Their response was impressive. The watchman withdrew from the gateway. Everyone was poised within moments, weapons at the ready. He could feel his heart pounding with anticipation and he began counting the beats to help keep a sense of calm. *One hundred . . . one hundred and fifty.* Where were the dragons? Had the watchman been mistaken?