

AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLING SERIES DRAGONS IN OUR MIDST

BRYAN DAVIS

THE BONES OF MAKAI DOS  
PART TWO

FROM THE  
ASHES

ORACLES OF FIRE

BOOK FIVE

# PRAISE FOR THE BONES OF MAKAI DOS

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It is fitting for the last book in the Oracles of Fire series to be the best. *The Bones of Makaidos* captured me from the very beginning. Bryan Davis's ability to vividly depict scenes is at its best in the final installment of his bestselling fantasy series. You will not be able to put the book down!

**GRANT MILLER**

Beloved characters, both new and old, grace the pages of this tale and beckon you to enter their world one last time as they fight against the growing darkness around them. The tapestry masterfully woven is finally complete. But is it really the end?

**ANNE K. RILEY**

After reading the rest of the Oracles of Fire and Dragons in our Midst books, I find *The Bones of Makaidos* to be a smashing ending. It's so nice to find not one, but two book series that are so enthralling, adventure-packed, inspiring, and God honoring.

**REBECCA VATH**

I laughed; I cried; I shared with each character's joy and suffering. I could not put this book down, even to go to bed. *The Bones of Makaidos* pulled me in from cover to cover. Bryan Davis has saved the best for last! This book is definitely one you don't want to miss.

**SARAH PRATT**

This book is absolutely amazing. It's thrilling to join in with all of these characters' adventures once again! I can't keep my hands away from the book. It's sad to know that this will be the last one, but it's great anyway! A must-read for sure!

**DANIELLE DIEZ**

Bryan Davis has done it again! I knew Mr. Davis was an excellent author, but I was amazed to find myself double-taking and rereading pages as my jaw dropped. You will be up late into the night reading *The Bones of Makaidos* telling yourself, “just one more chapter” over and over again. Possibly Mr. Davis’s best yet!

**JACOB EGGERT**

*The Bones of Makaidos* is, in my opinion, the best book that Mr. Davis has written yet! The events in this book left me bewildered, and they completely change your outlook on this entire series. It’s a work of art!

**ANNA BJELLA**

In *The Bones of Makaidos*, action will spike your adrenaline; suspense will urge you to read on; sacrifice and salvation will bring you to tears, and the characters will encourage you to trust in God more than ever before.

**REGAN HICKMAN**

I’ve cried more in this book than the other seven put together—some were tears of sadness, but most have been tears of joy. Each time you read it, it’ll be just as powerful as the first time, if not more. All loose ends will be tied, and when you read the last page, you’ll be left with a sense of peace that’s hard to describe.

**CONNIE WOLTERS**

If you don’t think the Oracles of Fire series can get any better, then think again. This book outdoes the rest! Prophecies are fulfilled, and any questions from the last seven books are answered. *The Bones of Makaidos* is my favorite of Mr. Davis’s books, and I know it will be yours too.

**TAYLOR WARD**

*The Bones of Makaidos* is a fitting end to the best series of books I have ever read! In the ultimate battle of good versus evil, I felt joy at surprise reunions and sadness over the loss of loved ones. In the end I was left with a happiness that can only come from experiencing God at work in this world of ours.

**RACHEL TETTLETON**

*The Bones of Makaidos* is a tale of love, courage, sacrifice, and redemption; a wonderful end to an awesome series. All I can say is: What a ride!

**T. McCARVILLE**

“I want you to win my heart. I want you to fight for me, sweat for me, bleed for me. . . .” *The Bones of Makaidos* captures the hearts of readers, brings them into the lives of all the characters, and shows that God is always there, and if you have faith, he will reward you.

**KENDRA WILLIAMSON**

In *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, King Theoden said, “If this is to be our end, then I would have them make such an end, as to be worthy of remembrance.” Mr. Davis has accomplished this and then some.

**HAYLEY COX**

*The Bones of Makaidos* is an epic adventure that brings the wonderful elements of the series together into an ultimate climax. Well done, Mr. Davis!

**KENNY DONOVAN**

*The Bones of Makaidos* is my favorite book. There’s adventure, excitement, and romance all mingled together. At times I feel like all the characters are real, like I’m going right along with them in their adventures. Most of all, these books have strengthened my faith. Thank you, Mr. Davis!

**JENN MORGAN**

Throughout the first seven books, Billy, Bonnie, Walter, Ashley, Sapphira, and Elam have grown closer to each other and stronger in their faith in Elohim. Now, together with the rest of the Oracles of Fire, they face their final battle, the fiercest challenge, preceding the ultimate reward.

**BRYCE McLEMORE**

In this rousing conclusion, Bryan Davis has penned a tale of betrayal and endurance, of faith, hope, and love. Of humor. Of other worlds and of a majestic people in whom the lights of chivalry and honor have not gone out. Indeed, *The Bones of Makaidos* is a masterpiece of Christian literature.

**HOLLI HERDEG**



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An imprint of  
Tyndale House  
Publishers

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*From the Ashes: The Bones of Makaidos, Part 2*

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Previously published in 2009 by Scrub Jay Journeys under ISBN 978-1-946253-78-1 as *The Bones of Makaidos*. First printing by Tyndale House Publishers in 2026.

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Designed by Jennifer L. Phelps

Published in association with Cyle Young of C.Y.L.E. Agency, LLC.

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For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at [csresponse@tyndale.com](mailto:csresponse@tyndale.com), or call 1-855-277-9400.

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 979-8-4005-1382-4

Printed in the United States of America

32	31	30	29	28	27	26
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

# CAST OF CHARACTERS

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- Abbadon**—a powerful angel of the Abyss who takes the form of a dragon
- Abigail**—the human name of dragon Roxil; previously called Jasmine as a human
- Abraham**—the human name of dragon Arramos; reborn in Second Eden as the Prophet (not to be confused with the physical dragon form of Arramos later possessed by the devil)
- Acacia**—an Oracle of Fire; twin to Mara (Sapphira Adi)
- Adam Lark**—a teenage friend of the Bannisters
- Albatross**—a dragon of Second Eden
- Alithia**—a dragon; as a human goes by the name Kaylee
- Angel**—formerly the wife of Dragon; widowed mother of Candle and Listener
- Arramos**—a dragon; mate of Shachar; father of Makaidos; grandfather of Thigocia; died in the flood but his body is possessed by the devil while his soul was reborn as Abraham, a human in Second Eden
- Ashley Stalworth**—daughter of Timothy and Hannah (Makaidos and Thigocia)
- Billy Bannister**—son of Jared (Clefspeare) and Marilyn

- Bonnie Silver**—daughter of Irene (Hartanna); previously known as Bonnie Conner
- Brogan**—the human name of dragon Hilidan
- Candle**—son of Dragon and Angel
- Carboni**—a dragon; as a human goes by the name Elise
- Carl Foley**—a friend of the Bannisters; husband of Catherine; father of Walter and Shelly
- Carly Masters**—a friend of Bonnie's
- Catherine Foley**—a friend of the Bannisters; wife of Carl; father of Walter and Shelly
- Charles Hamilton**—a former teacher of Billy, Bonnie, and Walter
- Chazaq**—a giant; Mardon's commander
- Clefspeare**—a dragon; son of Goliath and Roxil; as a human goes by the name Jared
- Cliffside**—a guard of the birthing garden in Second Eden
- Cornelius**—leader of the unicorns
- Dallas**—the human name of dragon Firedda; mother of Mariel
- Dikaios**—a talking horse
- Dorian**—the human name of dragon Yellinia
- Dragon**—the husband of Angel; father of Candle and Listener; the human form of Goliath in Second Eden
- Elam**—son of Shem; grandson of Noah; went by the name of Markus for a time
- Elise**—the human name of dragon Carboni
- Ember**—a mare in Second Eden
- Emerald**—a widow in Second Eden
- Enoch**—a prophet
- Firedda**—a dragon; as a human goes by the name Dallas
- Flint**—Abraham's rebel apprentice
- Gabriel**—son of Timothy and Hannah (Makaidos and Thigocia)
- Glewlwyd**—the gatekeeper of the Bridgelands
- Goliath**—a dragon; son of Makaidos and Thigocia; mate of Roxil; goes by the name Dragon as a human in Second Eden
- Grackle**—a dragon of Second Eden

- Hartanna**—a dragon; daughter of Makaidos and Thigocia; as a human goes by the name Irene
- Hunter**—a false name for Mardon
- Irene Connor/Irene Silver**—the human name of dragon Hartanna; wife of Dr. Matthew Connor, mother of Bonnie
- Jared Bannister**—the human name of dragon Clefspeare; husband of Marilyn; father of Billy
- Jordan**—the human name of dragon Martinesse
- Joseph of Arimathea**—a guide for lost souls
- Karen**—adopted sister of Ashley; died in battle
- Karrick**—a dragon; son of Goliath and Roxil
- Kaylee Saunders**—the human name of dragon Alithia; mother of Thomas
- King Arthur**—king of Camelot
- King Nimrod**—an ancient king; father of Mardon
- Larry**—Ashley’s supercomputer
- Legossi**—a dragon; as a human goes by the name Rebekah
- Listener**—daughter of Dragon and Angel in Second Eden; birth daughter of Tamara; adopted by Mantika after Dragon’s and Angel’s deaths
- Makaidos**—king of the dragons; son of Arramos and Shachar; mate of Thigocia; as a human goes by the name Timothy
- Mantika**—a lowlander; wife of Greevelow; mother of Windor and adoptive mother of Listener and Candle
- Mardon**—an ancient scientist; son of King Nimrod and Semiramis; master of the Nephilim; disguises himself using the name Hunter
- Mariel**—daughter of Dallas
- Marilyn Bannister**—wife of Jared; mother of Billy
- Markus**—a name used by Elam for a time
- Martinesse**—a dragon; as a human goes by the name Jordan
- Matthew Connor**—husband of Irene; father of Bonnie
- Monique Bannister**—adopted daughter of Jared and Marilyn
- Morgan**—a witch; sister of Naamah
- Naamah**—a witch; sister of Morgan

- Noah**—a patriarch who built an ark to save humans and animals from the great flood
- Paili**—an underborn; wife of Patrick; sometimes known as Ruth
- Palin**—Sir Devin’s scribe and squire
- Patrick**—the human name of dragon Valcor; husband of Paili
- Pearl**—wife of Steadfast; a medical worker in Second Eden
- Rebekah**—the human name of dragon Legossi; mother of Angel
- Roxil**—a dragon; daughter of Makaidos and Thigocia; mate of Goliath; mother of Clefspeare; as a human goes by the name Abigail
- Ruth**—an underborn; wife of Patrick; sometimes known as Paili
- Sapphira Adi**—an Oracle of Fire; twin to Acacia; previously known as Mara
- Semiramis**—mother of Mardon (Hunter)
- Shelly Foley**—daughter of Carl and Catherine; sister of Walter
- Shem**—son of Noah; father of Elam
- Shiloh**—daughter of Patrick (Valcor) and Ruth (Paili)
- Sir Devin**—a knight; a slayer of dragons
- Sir Winston Barlow**—a knight of Camelot
- Sorentine**—a dragon; mate of Gartrand; as a human goes by the name Tamara
- Stacey**—adopted daughter of Jared and Marilyn
- Steadfast**—husband of Pearl; a medical worker in Second Eden
- Stout**—a villager in Second Eden
- Tamara**—the human name of dragon Sorentine; mother of Listener before she was sent to Second Eden
- The Maid**—a fiery teenage girl who lives in the Valley of Souls
- Thigocia**—a dragon; mate of Makaidos; granddaughter of Arramos and Shachar; as a human goes by the name Hannah
- Thomas**—son of Kaylee
- Timothy**—the human name of dragon Makaidos, husband of Hannah; father of Gabriel and Ashley; also called Captain Autarkeia
- Valcor**—a dragon; son of Makaidos and Thigocia; brother of Hartanna; as a human goes by the name Patrick
- Valiant**—a village leader in Second Eden

FROM THE ASHES

**Walter Foley**—a friend of Billy's; son of Carl and Catherine; in the line of King Arthur

**Windor**—son of Mantika

**Yellinia**—a dragon; as a human goes by the name Dorian

**Yereq**—a giant; one of the Nephilim

**Zane**—a shadow person who was banished

# AN ORACLE'S CALL

*A tender heart that burns with fire,  
A contradicting blend;  
With words of heat, I scald the soul,  
And with my words I mend.*

*An Oracle of Fire born  
To sacrifice and bleed,  
For hungry souls, I spend my life  
To meet their every need.*

*Yet, Oracles of Fire burn;  
They pierce, they scald, they sear  
Corrupted souls in dark abodes  
Who cower there in fear.*

*The light has come! Begone, you shades,  
Who hide in blackest mire!  
I free the captives, loose their chains,  
And give them holy fire.*

*While some will carry vibrant light,  
The fearful drop the torch;  
Courageous souls absorb the fire,  
While others fear the scorch.*

*Yet, flames from God must pierce your breast  
To purge the dross of sin  
And make your silver wholly pure  
And light the flame within.*

*A bridge awaits, a risky path,  
The cross of Christ displayed  
A broken body, blood, and tears;  
A tomb for us inlaid.*

*I call you now to cross the bridge,  
To take the scarlet key.  
To gain the burning, tender heart,  
And walk the path with me.*





## CHAPTER 1

---

# TONGUES OF FIRE

Billy crouched behind a bushy tree, Walter on one side, Ashley on the other, and Elam guarding their backs with a drawn sword. As twilight faded into darkness, they huddled without a sound. It was finally time to make the boldest move yet. It had taken months of preparation, and tonight, with neither Pegasus nor Phoenix rising to reveal their presence, they would launch their plan.

After being dropped off by Clefspeare, Hartanna, and Thigocia, they had hiked a mile to get to this point. Although the enemy stayed behind a wall of fire, it was impossible to know if they could see anything beyond the flames. If they could perceive the shadow of a dragon, they would likely be on the alert for any activity near the wall, and that might ruin everything.

For now, the dragons had to stay back and meet them later at the southern rendezvous point, the river's exit from the flaming wall. Even there, they would need dragons for passenger transport only if their plans didn't work out. Candle was supposed to fly Merlin, the Bannisters'

airplane, to the rendezvous and park it nearby for Billy's use when they arrived, and Ashley brought a transmitter for calling either the airplane or the base radio station in case they needed help.

So, with their powerful winged friends absent, it was time for Billy and company to be quiet and wait for the cover of darkness. That would be their greatest ally.

Billy peeked between the velvety green leaves. This "ghost lily tree," as the locals called it, reminded him of the rhododendrons he once hid behind in West Virginia while trying to stay out of the dragon slayer's sight. Ahead, just ten paces separated them from the towering wall of flames near the northern boundary of the Valley of Shadows. To their right, Twin Falls River, maybe fifty paces away, flowed under the fire and rushed toward the valley for about a quarter mile before plunging from a height of several hundred feet into the land of the shadow people.

Now that the sound of thundering water crashed into his ears, he couldn't help but shiver. Although he had grown accustomed to the never-ending frigid weather and frequent snowfalls, the thought of taking that plunge into the domain of shadowy fiends brought an icy chill.

He reached to his back scabbard and fingered Excalibur's hilt. It was still there. Why wouldn't it be? Checking it every few minutes served no reasonable purpose. Yet, somehow touching it settled the goose bumps.

Ashley whispered, "They know we're here."

"They?" Billy asked, also whispering. "The shadow people?"

"No. Abraham and Angel."

Billy looked at the wall of flames. Of course, it was more than flames. Ever since Abraham had marched around enemy territory four years ago, his and Angel's life energies had fueled this barrier, a living wall with two embedded souls. "Are they communicating with you?" he asked.

"In a way. I don't sense words, only impressions. They are weaker than when I first sensed them. Their energy will soon be spent."

Elam joined them in the low bushes. "Do they approve of our mission?"

“I’m not sure.” The fire billowed upward in Ashley’s wide eyes. “I don’t sense *dis*approval. It’s more like a contented sigh. They are at peace and happy to see us.”

“Will they help us?”

“They will do what they can, but I’m not sure how. I get the feeling that they aren’t able to make a hole in the wall without falling apart completely.”

“At least we’ll have fired-up cheerleaders,” Walter said. “Can’t hurt.”

Elam straightened, picked up a shoulder bag, and motioned for the others to join him. Raising his hood over his bushy hair, he said, “I think it’s dark enough. Let’s go.”

After raising their own hoods, Billy and Walter each hoisted a hefty pack while Ashley picked up two smaller ones, more like leather briefcases than the canvas haversacks the others toted. All four carried swords, either in a belt or in a back scabbard, though none had brought along shields. They already had as much as they could handle.

With Elam leading the way, they marched over packed snow that marked a deer trail they had scouted out earlier, perfect for a silent approach. Under the cover of trees, some just dry woody skeletons from the perpetual winter and others still green and vibrant, they followed the river’s call.

Soon, they broke through the forest edge, and, hunched over and jogging, they hurried to a point near the intersection of the flaming wall and the river. A guard on the other side of the river stood next to a weak torch sticking up from the beach sand. He stared but said nothing. He knew the plan. No words. No gestures that might signal a guard on the valley side that something unusual was taking place.

Billy quietly set down his pack. Walter, Elam, and Ashley did the same with their loads. When Elam’s bag clinked, everyone froze. The metal-on-metal sound had plagued their trial runs, but it couldn’t be helped. Although the snowboards were merely part of a backup plan in case the raft failed, they had decided to bring them. No matter how confident they were in Plan A, it didn’t make sense to forsake Plan B,

even with the risk of the telltale sounds. They had hoped the river's noise would mask them. Now the theory would meet the test.

They stared through the flames. No shadows moved. Yet, since plumes of vapor shot up at the river's entry point, it seemed impossible to know if any guards on the other side had noticed their presence.

Elam waved his hand, the signal to continue. Billy untied his bag, withdrew a large raft, and unfolded it on the beach. Inflating it would be the first step. Ashley had installed a tiny motorized fan that would draw in surrounding air. Since they couldn't risk a loud sucking noise, she opted for a quieter, slower fan energized by a battery she had fashioned from local metals.

Billy flipped the switch and listened to the low whir as the raft inflated. It would take quite a while, but at least it was quiet.

Walter tied a rope to a hook on the left side of the raft's front, one of the guidelines for the parachute. There would be three other ropes, one on the opposite side of the front and two in the back. During their tests, mastering a directed fall had taken longer than any other step, but after so many successful trials, everyone seemed confident. Still, the swirling winds in the valley's sheltered bowl could be far less predictable than at their test range. This wouldn't be easy.

Elam laid four snowboards and eight ski poles in the raft, careful to keep the poles' sharp tips away from the sides. The metal points had been wrapped with a blanket just to be safe. One hole would end their mission before it began.

Ashley attached the transmitter to the back of the raft. As she adjusted the eight-inch antenna with one hand, she looked at a signal meter in her other hand, the flames from the wall giving her enough light to see. She flashed an okay sign. The transmitter was working.

When Walter tied the last guideline in place, the foursome unfolded an oblong parachute, laid it over the raft, and attached it to the lines. It had taken weeks to design the canopy's shape to allow for precise guidance, and their low-level trial jumps had cost the test pilots a few bumps and bruises, but with each new design, they were able to launch

from higher elevations until all four had mastered the skill from the necessary height.

Elam raised three fingers—three minutes until the raft would be fully inflated. After thousands of years of life, his internal clock had become flawless. With Walter and Elam at the front and Billy and Ashley at the rear, they carried the raft to the river and set it in the water.

All four waded into the icy flow. While the men held the raft in place against the swift current, Ashley threw back a rear corner of the parachute and stowed their packs. The men's bags were nearly empty now, while Ashley's still carried the gadgets they would need later. She then crawled under the parachute and stationed herself at the raft's right rear corner.

Elam entered next, followed by Walter. With the raft now barely buoyant under the added weight, Billy shoved it toward the center of the river, pushed an anchor into the sandy bed, and jumped in. In the darkness, he had to squirm as he slid under the parachute as quietly as possible. For a moment, Excalibur caught the canopy, but Ashley pried it free and guided him the rest of the way in.

When he finally settled in his corner, he pulled the parachute over his head and waited in silence with the others. With the wall's firelight radiating through the protective covering, he could see each taut face. Elam had planned this pause, a time for everyone to slow down and collect themselves.

He held up a pair of fingers—two minutes. Again, this precision-minded warrior chief would run this mission like clockwork. Yet, the next sequence of events would require guesswork. Five seconds till they hit the fire, a minute and a half to the waterfall, and thirty seconds till they floated safely to the river again. They hoped.

Safety through the flames, however, was certain. The parachute's retardant chemicals worked. The first few tests using volunteers who braved the wall with chemically coated cloaks had been painful failures, but Ashley's newer formulas proved extremely effective. The tests had also drawn Flint's troops to their attempted penetration points on the

south side of Adam's Marsh. With Valiant and Candle making another attempt an hour ago, they hoped even the shadow people might have migrated from the valley to help guard that region.

With the current pushing heavily and chunks of ice bumping the rear, the raft rocked back and forth. Elam paid no attention. His head bowed and his eyes closed, he seemed to be praying.

Billy nodded. Elam had never failed to begin every trial run with prayer. He wasn't about to take the real plunge without it.

Reaching over, Billy took Ashley's hand. She gripped it tightly and tapped Walter's. Soon, all four joined hands.

Taking in a deep breath, Billy prayed silently—for their dangerous mission; for his mother, whom he hadn't seen in four years; for Bonnie, wherever she was, that God would watch over her and bring them together someday; and even for Flint, that somehow he would realize how his actions had brought them to the brink of all-out war, that he would have a change of heart, and when the wall of fire faded, that he would come out with an olive branch instead of a spear.

Soon, Elam pulled his hands back and pointed at Billy. That was the signal. It was time to fly.

Billy untied the anchor. The raft shot forward. Elam splayed his hands and counted down the seconds.

Four fingers. The light inside the raft grew brighter.

Three. The raft jerked and kicked.

Two. The temperature shot up.

One. A sizzle erupted—water striking fire.

Elam closed his fist. Ashley squeezed Billy's hand. A whoosh sounded. Crackles, pops, and sizzles beat against their ears as steam warmed the floor of the raft and lifted them into the air. The wall was thick here, an impossible scenario to duplicate in tests. They would just have to ride it out.

Sweat dampened Billy's armpits and trickled down his back. Soon he would be soaked, and facing the frigid wind during their upcoming plunge would be torture. Yet, they had trained for that as well by

spending several weeks sleeping outdoors with minimal clothing and covering.

Finally, they dropped back to the river with a splash. Their raft bounced twice before settling into a gentle rocking motion. Staring through the parachute's material, Billy listened. Had anyone out there heard the commotion? During their planning, no one had talked about the steam's elevating surge. But now it was too late to worry about it. They would just have to ride it out.

As they rushed away from the wall, the light faded. The sizzles died away. Coolness filtered in. For the next minute or so, they would wait in silence. It would do no good to peek out and watch for the upcoming drop. It was just too dark. And this section was uncharted. No one knew the exact distance between the boundary and the waterfall. Only a brief sense of flying and a sudden drop would signal their arrival.

During their tests in complete darkness, Billy had tried to use his danger sensing gift to guess when the fall would come. But it seemed that darkness and constant danger somehow blunted his ability to sense a coming peak. Knowing exactly when the moment would arrive seemed impossible.

Billy slipped out of Ashley's grasp and reached for the left rear guideline. She, Walter, and Elam held their lines, as well. They had practiced this in the dark before. They could do it again, four parasailing pilots flying an overloaded raft into a valley of death. No problem.

Every bump felt like "the" bump. Every sudden jerk made them flinch. Finally, it seemed that the river fell away. Then, they dropped.

Elam and Walter threw their lines out first. The parachute flew upward, billowed out, and grabbed the air. Billy and Ashley cast out theirs. The entire canopy beat above them, sounding like a dragon trying to hover in place.

As their descent slowed, falling water splashed in from behind. Gusts of wind blew the spray all around. Without a visible target, they had to use dead reckoning, listening to the roar of water and constantly adjusting to stay at the center of it while gliding away from the waterfall itself.

At this point, they had decided that necessary commands could be given. The background noise would have to drown them out.

“Left five degrees,” Elam grunted. “There. Keep it there.”

“Tilting right,” Ashley called. “Billy. A few inches slack. . . . Perfect.”

Soon, they slid back into the river with a barely perceptible splash. Billy gave Ashley a silent high five, almost missing her hand in the darkness.

As the chute began to droop behind them, Billy and Ashley reeled it in and folded it into a wad at the center of the raft. With the masking noise dying away, it was time for silence again.

Darkness enveloped them like a heavy blanket. Billy searched for Ashley’s eyes. Nothing. Total darkness.

Her hand touched his. He slid his fingers under her palm and rubbed her knuckles with his thumb. The touch felt good. Reassurance. Comfort. In spite of the darkness, they were all in this together.

Billy kept his ears trained on the water’s flow. It had died down to a consistent, low-level rush. Now he had to listen for another rise in volume, their only signal that the next waterfall, the exit from the Valley of Shadows, was fast approaching.

He pulled Excalibur from his back scabbard, taking care not to make it glow. Because of his four years of training and physical maturing, he had become one of the best, if not *the* best swordsman in their army. So, taking into account Billy’s expertise with Excalibur, Elam appointed him the mission’s strong-arm man. Everyone else would work while he stood guard.

After a few minutes, the water’s percussion began to increase. Elam tapped Billy’s knee. Billy tapped Ashley’s. He tried to watch Ashley pass the signal to Walter and Walter back to Elam, completing the cycle, but it was too dark. Of course, there was no doubt. They passed it along, and now everyone knew the first water-ride phase was coming to an end.

Seconds later, the front side of the raft lifted. Elam had slid into the river, as planned. The raft turned to the left, lifted again, and, with a sliding noise at its floor, came to a stop.

Billy lifted his leg over the side and felt for solid ground—beach sand. Although the valley had likely received as much snow as any other place, the rise and fall of the river probably scoured any snow from its beach.

When he had steadied himself, he helped Ashley step out. As they had practiced many times in the darkness, Walter handed the packs to Elam and Ashley while Billy walked a few steps away from the river, listening.

No unusual noises. In order to prepare his ears, the younger villagers had tried to imitate the sounds the shadow people made. Candle had sent a chunk of ice sliding across a table, but he admitted that the shadow people were quieter. In reality, the dark creatures crawled along the ground with more of a hush. Windor poured oil on the table and tried again. That was closer, they decided, but still too loud.

Finally, Valiant offered a hint that all agreed was the best. “Hear them?” he had said. “Yes, you can hear them, but once you do, that will be too late. By the time the first breath reaches your ears, they will have you in their clutches. You *feel* them first. The hair on the back of your neck rises, and a tingle on your skin tells you that a dark hand is stretching out to drag you into their swarm of devouring black oil.”

Billy shook off a shiver. It was time to concentrate. He reached out with his danger-sensing “radar” and tried to feel for the signals. After a few seconds, he shook his head. Nothing. And no sound, either. Even the expected noises of his fellow spies didn’t rise over the river’s din. Maybe the shadow people had no clue that intruders were present, and the months of training had paid off. But maybe their silence wouldn’t be enough. Valiant had said that those creatures could smell a human a mile away.

Billy sniffed the air. Wood smoke. Something burned somewhere close by. Maybe that would mask their presence, too.

As he let his thumb rub across a gemstone embedded in Excalibur’s hilt, a memory rose in his mind, the event that birthed the plans for this mission in the first place. Stout had found this rubellite on a tiny raft

floating through the southern wall boundary. It had been tied down by wire, and a resin-coated note had been attached, obviously prepared by someone who wanted to keep it safe through the fire.

In an almost illegible scrawl, the note read, "Found in valley cave. Roxil."

A note on the other side, written in beautifully familiar penmanship, said, "Billy, if by some miracle you get this, here is an update. We have finally rebuilt Apollo. We found a portal near the mines that, according to Larry, emits signals that are not of our world. I attached his note to the missing stone from Excalibur's hilt. If it goes through the portal, we will begin working on strengthening Apollo to the point where we can make a hole big enough for Gabriel to go through. Then, if he is successful in finding Second Eden, we will send the other dragons. We are praying for you. Please tell your father that I love him."

Billy imagined Roxil tying the gem and note to the little raft. If only he could have replied! But now, months later, his mother had no idea that they had received it. He couldn't tell her that they had worked every waking minute since that time to get safely to the cave. And did anything happen in the meantime? Did she manage to open a bigger hole? Did Gabriel try to come through? If so, he would have been trapped. With no way out of enemy territory, he would have been taken prisoner . . . or worse.

Yet, most of the note's news had brightened their outlook. Mom was working hard to get the dragons into Second Eden, and putting the rubellite in its proper place had given Excalibur more power than ever before.

A hand touched his shoulder. Billy jumped but quickly settled down when Walter whispered, "We're ready."

Billy raised his arms and allowed Walter to tie a rope around his waist. The others would hang on to the lead rope and tag along with Elam at the back, guiding the raft along the shallows, as planned. He had to let it drag a bit on the sand to keep it from taking off in the current, but the noise wasn't discernible above the water's constant rush.

Billy drew a map in the darkness in front of him. Candle and Listener had created a nearly life-sized copy of the cave's surroundings, including a man-made stream with precise bends; rocks that protruded from each side of the river, signaling the exit waterfall; and the most important landmark, a head-high boulder embedded in the beach sand. Once they reached it, they would be even with the cave. They would then turn left, walk through the forest about fifty paces, and search for the opening in the mountain face.

Unfortunately, the boulder sat an unknown distance away from the river's edge, so they had to fan out, Billy on the left, then Walter and Ashley, and Elam on the right. Depending on the river's current level, it could be anywhere from one to ten paces from the edge.

Billy crept along, keeping his left hand out in front as he tried to feel for anything solid. At the same time, he kept his danger radar going. Using every sense but sight had been hard to learn, but the training was paying off again.

Finally, he touched a rock. With a quick tug on the rope, he brought everyone to a halt. He groped higher until his hand moved over the top. Yes, it was just about head high.

After giving Elam a moment to pull the raft fully on shore, he led the way toward the forest. With every step, he lowered his boot carefully. The terrain underneath would provide important clues that might reveal his location. The beach sand ended abruptly, giving way to soft turf of some kind. After tugging the rope again, he stooped and felt the ground. A thin layer of snow covered long, stiff leaves that crumbled as he pinched them.

Billy brought a sample to his nose and sniffed. Musky. Candle had said that the callow ferns couldn't have survived the weather. They always died back during the season of death, and with this season lasting four years, they would all be dead. He also warned that walking on them would raise a crackling racket as well as a musky odor that would alert the shadow people to their presence. Their only hope would be a deep enough layer of snow to mask both.

The river, however, had kept this section relatively free of a protective snow layer. Deeper snow, and safer ground, likely lay farther away, but how far?

Billy gave the rope two more tugs, letting everyone know that it was time for Ashley's magic. As soon as he returned Excalibur to his scabbard, he felt her hand touch his. She put Walter's MP3 player in one hand and a spray bottle in the other. Only days ago, she had captured the river's distinctive rush using the airplane's radio transmitter, which she had modified into a digital recorder. Now, they hoped, replaying the recording at this point would wash away the crackling noise.

After turning on the player and setting it on the snow, Billy began spraying the bottle's contents on the ground as he walked gingerly forward. The liquid emitted a strangely sweet fragrance that quickly vanished. Since the same species of ferns once grew near the village, Ashley had been able to formulate a counter odor that would, as Walter loved to put it, "mask the musk." Fortunately, no one had to reinvent an Earth spray bottle. They had found a bottle of window cleaner in the airplane.

When he reached deeper snow, Billy stopped spraying and passed the bottle back through the line. He withdrew Excalibur again and marched on. The snow under his feet made almost no sound at all, but he still had to be careful. With trees ahead, protruding roots could trip him up, and their mission would be over.

Keeping the sword in front, he waved the blade back and forth in a wide arc. Soon, it brushed against something. A low branch? Probably.

He signaled with another yank on the rope. They had arrived at the forest. Since Candle had reported that most of the trees were not evergreens, they likely had no leaves and had allowed the snow to fall through. The march could continue in silence.

A slight tingle crawled along Billy's skin. It wasn't much, but it was very real, definitely danger. The shadow people were in the forest, but where? Since they couldn't live in sunlight, wouldn't they take refuge in the evergreens where the boughs would give them shelter?

Billy drew in a long breath through his nose. The smell of pine was

pretty strong. If it got any stronger, they would have to find a new path. After another minute or so of dodging roots, evergreen scents, and danger signals, the blade touched something solid that felt like stone.

Pulling the rope, he gathered the other three into a huddle. “We veered right,” he whispered. Then, setting his hand on the cliff, he turned left and followed the mountain’s stony face, his fingers feeling the crags for any hint of a recess.

The scent of pine grew stronger. The danger alarm heightened, but now was no time to find another route. He had to go on. Should he allow just a bit of glow? He could slice a few attacking shadow people with Excalibur’s newly restored beam, but could he handle the storm of darkness that thousands of those creatures would bring? It wasn’t worth the risk, at least not yet.

After a few seconds, the cliff fell away from his guide hand. He leaned and reached farther. Still nothing. This had to be the cave. Now it was time to plunge into the depths of another mysterious darkness.