

DRAAGON PART III STONE & SPIEL

greene

BY ROBIN FULLER

“We are to be the three survivors, as told of in the Prophecy.”

T

he three sat in stunned silence, staring not at each other, nor at anything in particular, just staring. Jesra finally broke in.

Briefly, she summarized the events of the previous day, when she had found her dragonlet. “His name is Kirian,” she finished dazedly. “You saw him, Tyris. He’s scaled, midnight black, with a silver facial ridge and inner wings. There are ridges all along his back, and his tail has three barbs. He can change colors and sleeps on the water. Sound familiar?” she asked, glancing to the faces on either side of her for reassurance.

“Very, except for the coloration,” Azra replied. “Celestia is a gorgeous deep blue, with a scattering of silver scales, sprinkled like stars all over her body. Her inner wings, facial ridge, and back ridges are all silver, too. Only her tail isn’t triple-barbed because she’s female.”

“Bloodfire’s is!” Tyris exclaimed excitedly, startling them both.

“Bloodfire?” Jesra and Azra echoed in unison, exchanging amused glances. Typical name a boy would give.

Tyris glanced sheepishly at the floor. “Well, he is red and gold.”

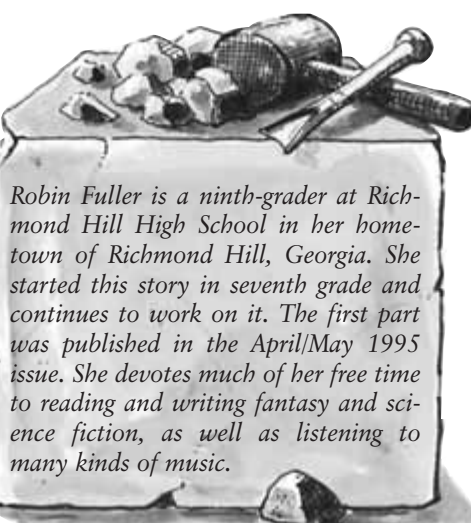
Azra rolled her eyes. “Let’s get to the important stuff! Where did yours come from? How old are they? That kind of thing,” she said, flitting her hand impatiently.

“Well,” Tyris began, “I live in Serpent Keep, which is in a tropical climate. I was exploring the swamp one day, and I heard this sound, like someone crying. As I crept closer to the noise, what do I see but this red and gold dragon mired up to his chest in quicksand! We both kind of freaked out when we saw each other. I found some big, sturdy branches and used them as levers to get him out. That was about a year ago. He’s two now. He stays in the forest while I’m at my Lessons, and then we spend time together when I’m at home,” he concluded.

“How do you like flying on him?” quizzed Azra.

Jesra and Tyris stared at her, totally bewildered. “Flying? You mean, they fly?”

“Oh, yes. I ride Celestia all the time.” Seeing that they were completely stunned, she started her tale. “After my Lessons one day, about two years ago, I was bored, so I started wandering around the Keep and strayed into the woods. Eventually I reached Ridge River. It was really hot and no one was around, so I stripped, climbed down the ridge, and



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dove in.” She grinned as Tyris’s face reddened. “I came up for air—and found this baby dragon looking back at me! Naturally I was shocked, since I thought they were extinct. When I stood up, it took off into the woods. I grabbed my clothes and followed. It scrambled and flitted its little wings all the way up that ridge, until it disappeared into the hillside.

“Turns out there was a cave. I went inside and found an entire dragon family: mother, father, and six dragonlets! I couldn’t believe my eyes! After that, I visited every day after my Lessons, and they told me about the Prophecy. It went unspoken that we were to be Survivors, as told of in the Prophecy, but I think they all knew,” she added.

“Well, what about the flying?” Tyris cried. “How long before they can carry humans? Is it hard? How do you keep from falling—”

“Whoa, slow down!” laughed Azra. “Young dragons can fly at about two weeks, and they can carry humans within about four to six months. It’s not hard, but a flying harness is essential.”

Abruptly, the room filled with the clamor of clattering dishes, loud voices, and shuffling feet. Tyris said, “Secondmeal’s over. I can’t go sit in a stuffy classroom when I could be learning how to fly! Maybe we should just not go back to Lessons . . .” he suggested.

“Oh, that would be real smart, Ty. You know they’d come looking for you and find Bloodfire too! I swear, guys can be so stupid . . .” Jesra teased.

“At least I have the brains not to bring my dragon into the Lessonroom . . .” he retorted.

“Good God and Goddess, you two, you sound like you’re married!” Azra exclaimed, causing both to blush furiously. Nonchalantly she added, “Listen, we need a place to meet after Lessons to talk, and where we can bring our dragons. How about if we meet at the cave where Celestia was born? It would be perfect. Several dragons fit inside, it would be private, and it’s not too far from here.”

The other two nodded.

“OK. Now come on, we’ve got to get back to the Lessonroom. If Jesra’s late again, Yillek might turn into a dragon himself!”

Lessons were over—for today anyway. A jubilant throng of children congested the stone tunnels of the Keep. While Azra and Tyris ran off to tell two gryphon riders to deliver messages to their Keeps that they would be late getting home, Jesra sought out her mother and received permission to go to Ridge River. She dashed eagerly back outside, as fast as Kirian’s little legs could keep up. The other two were waiting impatiently to begin the journey to Dragon Cave.

They darted around the side of the Keep and slipped from the reassuring stone wall into the open farmland between Gryphon Keep and the forest surrounding Ridge River. Jesra skipped along merrily, dashing into the cover of the forest just ahead as the other two followed laughingly behind with Kirian close in pursuit. Jesra told him that he could return to his chromatism. He did this promptly, glad to give up the concentration it required.

“Azra and Tyris, Kirian. Kirian, Azra and Tyris,” she said formally, making appropriate sweeping gestures to accompany the introductions.

Tyris nodded, and Azra commented, “Aw, just look at those cute, tiny tail barbs!”

The dragonlet flicked his tail, uneasy under such scrutiny. “You do not seem surprised to see me,” he noted.

Tyris grinned. “Well, I have one of my own.”

“Me too,” Azra added.

Kirian perked up instantly. “You have dragons? Where? How old are they? What do they look like?”

“Kirian, calm down. You’ll meet them soon enough,” Jesra assured him, amused at his eagerness. “We’re going to a special place

where we can all talk and you dragons can be together. Perhaps they can even teach you to fly.” Looking at Azra, she added, “And perhaps Tyris and I could get a few lessons?”

The girl smiled. “Sure thing . . . in several months. That is, if Tyris is a nice guy and will wait for Jesra’s dragon to mature.” They both turned to look at the boy, who blinked in bewilderment.

Jesra looked away. “Oh, come on, Az. That’s asking too much of him.”

Tyris shook his head to clear it, then gave her a genuine smile. “Hey, it’s a small sacrifice between friends, right?”

Jesra returned the smile, but then quickly looked away. Her face was flushed, and her heart was soaring. Tyris, the very boy she adored, had given up his opportunity to learn to ride a dragon, just to wait for her so they could learn together!

Abruptly a gigantic shadow fell across the four. Jesra stumbled back, and Tyris jerked upright in surprise. Azra just stared at the sky and called, “It’s OK. They know about you. Come on down.”

A deep blue form materialized from thin air, float-

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ing serenely over the treetops. It drifted expertly down through a gap in the foliage. Dipping its long, serpentine neck to the ground gracefully, it studied the quivering black bundle that was Kirian (who had conveniently positioned himself behind Tyris) with an inquisitive, liquid eye, snuffling at him appreciatively. Turning its head, it asked Azra, "Who is this?" in a feminine voice much like Crystal's.

Azra grinned. "This, dearheart, is Kirian, the newest addition to Avne's dragon population, who is with Jesra there. And this is Tyris, another friend, whose dragon, Bloodfire, will be joining us later. This, everyone, is Celestia."

The dragoness bowed her head in acknowledgment. "Most gratified to make your acquaintances. I presume this group makes up the Survivors?"

Azra nodded. "All of us are meeting at your old nest cave, but Bloodfire doesn't know yet. He stays in the tropical forest surrounding Serpent Keep. Sniff him out and bring him there, will you?"

After the grueling climb up the slope, Jesra and her friends collapsed on the cool ledge directly outside the cave's mouth. Suddenly a dazzling flash of red and gold seemed to light up the air before them, and all gasped, scrambling back into the shelter of the cave. A huge dragon made a grand entrance into the capacious cavern, spewing golden fire to the heavens in an impressive display, illuminating the interior. Kirian screeched in alarm, cowering fearfully behind Jesra as the great dragon let out a mighty, bellowing roar. Bloodfire then settled down on the floor, head resting delicately on folded arms, and said calmly in a grating bass rumble, "You called for me?"

"You conceited, moronic show-off!" Celestia, having lit just inside the cave, walked over to Azra and settled down in much the same

Never before
had she felt such
power. It
frightened her.

position as Bloodfire. Bloodfire merely grunted, so she directed her attention to the surroundings. "Aye, I remember this place well," she nodded nostalgically. "I used to sleep floating in the

yonder pool." She gestured at a small expanse of bubbling water in a remote corner of the chamber.

With a squeal of delight, Kirian raced toward the pool and dove in eagerly, splashing about with a flourish. "It is very warm!" he exclaimed. "And the bubbles tickle!"

Bloodfire studied the hatchling with curiosity. "Who is this spirited youth?" he asked finally.

Tyris smiled at his choice of words. "That's Kirian, and this is Jesra, his Partner in Prophecy. That's Azra, who's with Celestia, whom you've already met."

Jesra nodded impatiently. "Can we please get down to business? Namely, flying." She and Tyris turned eager eyes to Azra.

"Well, in a few months, when Kirian is ready, I'll show you both how."

"But Kirian doesn't even know how to fly independently yet!" Jesra pointed out.

"I could teach him," Celestia suggested, "if he stayed in the forest with me daily."

"Oh, that would be great. Then I wouldn't have to worry about any more incidents in the Lesson-room." Jesra grinned. "But he also needs to know other things, like hunting and fire-breathing."

Bloodfire snorted.

"Do not trust any incompetent dragoness with those skills! They cannot even breathe fire, and their hunting ability is quite questionab—"

He gave a sudden yelp of pain as Celestia cracked him across his muzzle with her whiplike tail. "Silence, you impudent, sexist fool! I will have you know, I am a very fine hunter, far superior—"

"OK, OK! Why don't you just *share* the duties?" Jesra interrupted. The dragons eyed each other and then nodded in reluctant agreement. "Fine." Jesra paused, turning to Tyris. "Now, how did you find out about the Prophecy?"

"Bloodfire told me about it. When I saved him from the sinkhole, he realized that we must be Survivors, destined to be partners. The Stone had been passed down through his family to him."

Jesra replied, "Well, let's compare our Stones." Each person's hand immediately went to his or her neck, pulled out identical leather satchels, and undid the drawstrings. As the glimmering jewels were unveiled, the three glanced up . . . and gasped in awe!

A band of vibrant, multicolored light spanned the cavern. Stunned, Jesra looked back down to see that the source of the unearthly radiance was the Stones themselves. While her own was a brilliant sea blue, Azra's was as golden-yellow as the sun itself, and Tyris's was the glimmering crimson of his dragon's coat. A beam of light emanated from each, its color corresponding to that of its Stone, and they projected

Jesra could hardly wait to try flying on her very own dragon!

majestically into the air, merging to form a complete spectrum! A wonderful sensation enveloped the chamber, permeating their every pore, and a breeze of magical energy seemed to sigh around them.

Transfixed, Jesra stared in undisguised fascination at the breathtaking display. Never before had she felt such power. It frightened her. Hastily she jammed the gem back into its satchel. The other two did the same. Though no words were spoken, the feeling was clearly mutual. Whatever this magic was, it was not something to be toyed with or taken lightly. It was best left alone until needed.

They talked of trivial matters until the shadows grew long across the river outside. Azra stood and suggested they meet every Rest Day. Tyris and Jesra watched enviously as Azra then pulled out a harness from her pack, fastened it onto Celestia, expertly mounted the dragon, and took off to soar through the darkening sky.

“I guess we’d better head home,” Tyris said. Bloodfire moved to the cave mouth and lifted off to find his place for the night. Tyris, Jesra, and Kirian made their cautious descent down the steep ridge. They walked in silence for a while, and Jesra was acutely aware of his presence beside her.

She cleared her throat hesitantly. “Listen, I’d just like to thank you,” she murmured. “For putting off learning how to fly, I mean, until Kirian’s ready.”

He glanced at her, then looked away, shrugging. “Hey, it’s no big deal. It would be mean not to.”

“Well, most boys wouldn’t be that nice. At least not to me. To someone like Azra, maybe. She’s smart, pretty, funny . . . but most boys wouldn’t do it for me,” she said quietly.

“Hey, come on. I happen to think you’re all of those things.” Silently, he took her hand in his and continued walking.

Jesra felt her heart singing its happiness. Glancing down at the dragonlet trotting beside them, she saw that even he had a mischievous gleam in his eye. He winked at her, and she smiled back at him.

The week flew by for Jesra as she waited for Rest Day. Not only was the next secret meeting at Dragon Cave scheduled for that day, but she also planned to check her unicorn trap.

Before she knew it, the day had dawned. She rose and dressed, and then made her way to the main doors to let Kirian out. He scampered into the forest for his daily rendezvous with Bloodfire and Celestia.

Jesra exited the Keep and searched for Gellin in the stableyard. He bounded right over to her, tail swishing impatiently as she got a leg-up from a fence



Syntactic Solutions

Answers to Syntactic Conundrum on page 15.

		ELAINE	TRAVIS	ADAM	KAREN
P L A C E	FIRST	X	●	X	X
	SECOND	●	X	X	X
	THIRD	X	X	●	X
	FOURTH	X	X	X	●
C O L O R	RED	X	●	X	X
	PURPLE	X	X	X	●
	BLUE	X	X	●	X
	GREEN	●	X	X	X
T I T L E	NEW	X	●	X	X
	NEW	●	X	X	X
	OLD	X	X	●	X
	OLD	X	X	X	●

rail to mount. She had barely settled herself when he launched gracefully into the air.

They soared majestically through the bright blue sky, gaining altitude as the beasts in the stableyard grew smaller and smaller, and the clouds seemed to come closer in greeting. Flying was such an invigorating experience—Jesra could hardly wait to try it out on her very own full-grown dragon!

The forest was spread like a dazzling patchwork quilt below them, the autumn leaves of the trees displaying a myriad of breathtaking hues. Staring downward in awe, she lingered on the sentimental, nostalgic quality to the air this time of year: the soft, subtly different angle of the Daystarlight; the pungent scent of wood-smoke drifting lazily through the air . . . She sniffed the air in puzzlement and gasped as she sighted smoke spiraling tranquilly up to the sky—from the timbershack roof! Why in the world would there be smoke rising from the abandoned structure?

Instructing Gellin to make a wide circle, she then bade him to sweep down low over the treetops. They made their landing near the shack, concealed in a small glade shrouded by dense foliage. Commanding Gellin to stay put, Jesra crept off through the trees.

Coming upon the cabin from the back, she glimpsed the flicker of firelight within through the two windows, which had apparently been cleansed of their thick coat of filthy grime.

Taking a deep breath, Jesra forced one foot in front of the other, walking around the side of the

building toward the front porch. Ascending the short flight of stairs, she stood warily before the door, heart pounding. Hesitantly she raised a hand and rapped quietly.

When no one answered, Jesra swallowed thickly and pushed the door slowly open, noting that the hinges had been oiled. Peering inside, she gave a tentative “Hello?” and looked around.

There was no reply, only the rustling of a lone scuttlesprout which scurried

“Nothing will survive the Great Cold, except you three and your dragons.”

hastily out the open door. Glancing about, she saw that the shack had been meticulously cleaned: the floor was swept, cobwebs had been removed, the cupboards were polished, and rotting floorboards had been replaced. There were other signs of habitation: fresh burning kindling in the fireplace with an iron kettle hanging over it, a nice pallet of sheets on the bed, a plate and fork on the table. Someone was definitely intending on living here. Hastily she backed away toward the door.

Going somewhere, m’girl?

Gasping, Jesra spun around. Her eyes went wide in shock as she saw the being coming up the porch steps. It was a pegasus! Blood bay it was, with black feathered wings to match its flaxen mane and tail. And it had spoken to her telepathically!

As it entered the small chamber, she stammered, “You’re a pegasus!”

The animal bowed its head nobly. *’Tis the truth you speak. Only . . . was it not a unicorn you sought?* it asked mentally. Abruptly there was a beautiful golden-horned unicorn standing calmly before her, though oddly, it seemed as if there had been no transformation at all!

She blinked, absolutely dumbfounded. “By the God and Goddess, who are you?” she demanded.

The unicorn shrugged in a disconcertingly human manner. *Names are*

unimportant. Merely know that I can be whomever I wish to be. My identity knows no bounds. With that, it mutated into the scuttlesprout she had seen earlier.

Jesra gasped. “You went out the door when I opened it! You . . . you can shape-change!”

Among other things, it added, becoming a flawless replica of Kirian.

Jesra’s eyes widened again, this time in fear. “How did you know about—” She cut herself off, throat clenching in horror. “*Dudling,*” she breathed ominously.

Suddenly she was facing her own form, and she stumbled back in shock as the thing laughed in amusement.

Ah, so you recognize my true nature at last. But why this fear? Is it that you believe the stories the ignorant, close-minded, and jealous have planted in your impressionable mind? Tell me, what is it that they say about my kind? it asked, settling itself in a chair at the table and looking up at her with her own eyes, avidly interested.

She shuddered. “I have been told that you come from the continent of Rallor. Your people descended from the race of intelligent beings who have lived here on Avne since before my people settled here, known to us as the First Ones.”

Swallowing, she uneasily continued, “Well, the First Ones spawned their young from eggs. But at a certain time, there was a sickness in their land, which caused many of the eggs to be infertile. So they took these dud eggs and rolled them down into some little-known cave in the woods, feeling it would be too cruel to the parents to have them publicly destroyed. Somehow, some of the eggs hatched, and a few of the occupants managed to survive. But they developed differently than typical First Ones; they were mangled creatures of the underworld. But the strangest thing was, they seemed to possess some kind of magic abilities: telepathy, precognition, even shape-changing. They realized that they could go out into the daylight disguised as outside creatures. They were rejected by the First Ones, but many stayed above ground anyway because they naturally found it more to their liking. When the humans learned of them, they named them Dudlings,” she concluded.

The Dudling assumed yet another form—that of a person draped in a

dark hooded robe. *I note that you fail to mention that humans think of us as evil demons and freaks who twist people to their will,* it said sardonically. *Is this what you also believe?*

“No, but you obviously possess some strange power,” she pointed out. *Strange perhaps, but not harmful.*

You have recently had quite a few experiences with magic. I would think you would be accustomed to it by now.

“But that magic isn’t evil.”

What proof have you that mine is? I only wish to help. The figure gestured at the seat opposite itself at the table. *Have a seat. I have no wish to harm you.* Reluctantly she did as she was told. *Whether or not you trust me is your decision. I am here because of the Prophecy, for two reasons. One, I am fated to help you on your path as one of the Three Survivors.*

“How did you know about that?” she interrupted.

She thought she detected a sly smile beneath the shadow of the hood. *My kind has its ways. But the second reason is a factor of the Prophecy: the Great Cold. You recall learning about the Great Heat on Runz, when all its inhabitants had to evacuate and come here?* She nodded, thinking of Tyris. At this, the Dudling smiled once again, but went on. *That was part of the Prophecy as well. And now the same is coming to Avne, although in the opposite form. Instead of a catastrophic heat that kills everything on the planet, it will be a deathly cold. Nothing will survive . . . except you Three and your dragons.*

The Prophecy brought me here indirectly: the Great Cold has already begun and has my native land locked firmly in its icy grip as we speak. I fled on my own and came to this continent. It was surely not coincidence that I came to dwell in your homeland, it finished, sitting in silence, expectantly awaiting her reaction.

She shook her head slowly, bewildered. “Rallor, uninhabitable because of extreme cold? Impossible! It’s on the other side of the planet. It’s spring already there!”

You have a hard time accepting it because you don’t want to accept it. But I am telling the truth. We Rallorians thought that the persistent cold was merely left over from the winter, but then it worsened. We soon realized that it could hardly be a natural occurrence. Only a few of us who made use

of our prophetic talents were ready and left swiftly.

Jesra ran a hand through her long golden-red hair distractedly, sighing. "Why me? Why now?"

It is pointless to dwell on such thoughts, as you will never obtain the answers, it told her practically.

She rolled her eyes. "Well, you can't blame me, after hearing all this cheery news lately," she muttered sarcastically.

At least you believe me now.

"I didn't say that, did I?"

Now it sighed in minor irritation. *What does it take to convince you humans?*

She shrugged. "I guess we're the gotta-see-it-to-believe-it type."

It was silent for a moment. *There is a way.* The Dudling rose and motioned for her to do the same. Hesitantly she followed it over to the small stone fireplace. It hefted the iron kettle and set it on the floor. Then it turned to her. *Jesra, it asked, have you ever attempted scrying?*

Taken aback, she shook her head wordlessly.

You will now, only to aid your belief. You will not be scrying the future, but the present on Rallor. I promise you that I shall not tamper with this vision in any way. If you succeed, it will be the truth that you see. Kneel here, beside the cauldron.

Unsure, she did as she was told, watching the hypnotic steam still rising from the water's surface within the cauldron. Her wary gaze peered down into its inky depths.

Relax, the Dudling, standing slightly behind her, instructed. Clear your mind. Focus solely on the water. Bathe your gaze in its tranquil appearance. Breathe deeply of the air. Do you feel the charge? It is enchantment at work. It dwells within all life. It is the life force that sustains us all, and you are suffused with it. Its voice was soothing, like waves of sound on the beach of the senses. Mystified, she stared at the smoky water, unable to tear her eyes away. She felt the shivery tingle of magical energy all around, and her muscles seemed to melt as she became transfixed by the glassy pool.

Concentrate on Rallor. Picture it in its natural state. Project a beam of thought out into the forest, over the fields, across the sea and ocean to that distant land. Attune your energies with the energies of the land there.

Spellbound, Jesra caught her breath

as she felt a rush of energy swirling about her. Then she was flying! Her spirit seemed to soar with the winds, into the forest, over the fields, across the sea and ocean. But something was wrong. She saw no green, tropical foliage, no warm spring sun . . . Puzzled, she looked down and saw a fine gray mist. Her frown of concentration deepened, and she narrowed her eyes . . .

Screaming in horror, she leapt backward. She collapsed in an exhausted heap on the floor, engulfed in racking sobs, drained of all energy.

The Dudling quickly propped her in an upright position against the wall. *It is always a strain trying something so advanced on your first time. You simply overexerted yourself; there was no damage. Such powerful results, judging by your reaction, surprise me for one who is untrained. The magic must be very strong in you.*

Taking a deep breath, Jesra steadied herself. "It was just so awful. First it was just this white blur, until all of a sudden I was hit by a blast of intense cold. Then the landscape became visible, and I saw just endless miles of snow, trees crystallized in ice . . . And there were all these . . . bodies . . ." She choked on her words, still frightened by the memory. "They were everywhere, just strewn about, completely frozen! The expressions on their faces . . ." She shuddered and buried her own face in her hands.

A grim silence followed. "I am scared, Jesra."

The Dudling sighed. *Visions can be very cruel things. They are very unselective when it comes to what you are shown. But surely you believe me now?*

The girl fiercely bit her lip, trying to fight back another onslaught of weeping. It couldn't be true! Everything and everyone she loved was here; it couldn't all just be wiped out. She wailed, "What about my family?"

He shook his head mournfully. *There is nothing to be done for us, but*

you Survivors shall live on. Do you know where it is that you are to go?

Jesra shook her head dejectedly. "Crystal told me that we would know before the time comes."

I suppose this means that part of your magical challenge is to discover this refuge yourself, he mused. But it is also fated for me to help you on your quest in some way. Perhaps I can assist you by telling you where to look. It walked over to a shelf and rummaged around before producing a large, elegantly carved crystal bowl. *I will require a liquid, solid, and gas from you. A bit of saliva, a few strands of hair, and your breath will suffice nicely.*

Jesra made a face, and it smiled, prompting her to comply. *Now, three of the sacred elements—Air, Water, and Earth—are in the bowl. Only Fire is missing.* From the same shelf it took a box of grayish powder and a match, and sprinkled the powder generously over the bowl's contents. Then it handed her the match and a striking board. She struck it and dropped it in the bowl. The powder flared up and took only a moment to burn out, leaving a small clump of ash.

The Dudling nodded in approval, taking a vial of some unknown liquid and a bottle of some sort of glittery dust and adding large quantities of both. It then seated itself at the table, concentrating intently on the strange mixture. Humming under its breath, it sloshed the contents around and around, observing the patterns they formed. Abruptly the motion halted, and it told her tonelessly, *The patterns signify something involving education. You receive schooling of some kind? The answer is there.*

Frowning in confusion, she asked, "We Three are supposed to hole up in the Lessonroom?"

It shrugged. *Pattern-reading is always vague. I only know that you should pay particular attention to your Lessons from now on if you want to learn the solution. Take care, it replied warmly, and do not be pulled down by the future. Live life the best you can while you can. Fond partings, m'girl.*

"And that's the whole story," Jesra concluded. "It happened not more than a few hours ago."

"It just hasn't sunk in for me yet. I mean, my whole family is going to die soon!" Azra (continued on page 30)



Reviews & Retrospects



Jane Eyre By Charlotte Brontë 1994, Tor Books

Jane Eyre is a book that is often passed over for other, more familiar books. Through no fault of its own, this book has been cast aside by today's readers. It's a romance novel, but not in the contemporary interpretation. There are love and betrayal that make your heart drop and tears well in your eyes, but, unlike what we call "romance novels" today, the characters don't hop into bed or behind the bushes in every other chapter. There are suspense and horror to strengthen the plot, but not from a serial killer stalking a couple. Rather, this book describes a real-world horror, the kind that is often more frightening because it could happen to anyone.

Two years ago I found the book and, urged by my mother, I read it. To be perfectly honest, I almost didn't make it through the first two chapters. Like most nineteenth-century novels, it moves slowly in the beginning, but once you read the opening chapters, you find yourself captivated by the plot and heroine.

It is quite a simple plot, actually, with no guns or chase scenes. Sorry! It is about a plain English girl named Jane Eyre, who was orphaned and lives with her aunt. As Jane narrates, you find yourself shrinking as she

braces for a slap or a sharp rebuke from her unkind aunt and cousins. You cry with her when her best friend dies at Lowood School, where her aunt has sent Jane to be rid of her. You understand her thoughts and feelings as she takes a position as governess to escape the school. You wonder with her about her future when she falls in love with her employer, who is twenty years her senior, and becomes engaged to him.

Finally, when you least expect it, the bomb is dropped. At the altar with Edward Rochester, she finds out he has a mad wife whom he has kept hidden in his attic. How Jane reacts is so true to human nature you wonder if Charlotte Brontë experienced that embarrassment herself, as she so capably captures our human tendencies. Jane runs away and for a time is destitute until she finds cousins who didn't know she existed. One day she returns and finds Rochester blinded from a devastating fire that his wife set and died in. The path Jane follows abruptly changes, and so does her life.

It is amazing how Brontë captures their entire love, never once resorting to syrupy words that would be hollow and meaningless. She observes all angles of human nature to form her characters so there really is no "bad guy." Even with these wonderful characters, I offer a warning to readers looking for dashing excitement: There is none. But, if you read it patiently, you'll be engrossed by Jane and her life. The sheer reality of it all can't be rivaled by the colorful lives that some fictional characters lead. Read this book if you're a romanticist and can willingly let your heart be torn to shreds and swell with love. Read it if you can imagine a time and place where propriety governed daily life. But don't read this book if you can't abandon the present for a different era.

—Elizabeth Chasin,
Eighth grade, Gaithersburg Middle
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Dragon, Stone, and Spell: Part III

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stated. Celestia moved closer to her, nuzzling her with reassuring affection.

Jesra nodded. "We can't tell anyone, either, because they wouldn't believe us. I say we just ignore it for the time being as best we can, and take the Dudling's advice. Live life to the fullest while there's still time." Her eyes briefly sought Tyris's, who returned the meaningful gaze. She smiled slightly, and he did the same.

Azra merely stared down at the stone cave floor. "Tell us about the Great Heat, Tyris," she murmured finally.

Blinking in mild surprise at the request, Tyris looked out the cave's mouth at the dazzling afternoon sky, almost as if he half expected to see Runz suspended there like a cloud, millions of miles away. His eyes took on a faraway look. "I was only about three years old," he began softly, his gaze unshifting. "The scientists could never explain it; they only knew that the whole interior of the planet got real hot, real fast, and the first sign was the leakage of strange gases. That's what made us albinos.

"Then all the eruptions started. Old volcanoes became active again. The lava leaked into the seas, which, in turn, spilled into the rivers. All the water everywhere became boiling hot. The air became scorching, unbearably hot, and smoke from the volcanoes formed a thick atmosphere that just trapped in the heat. No one was even allowed outside for fear of poisoning from the smoke, gases, and fumes. We lived in special cooled shelters until we came to Avne."

"So the Great Cold will be like that, only with cold instead of heat?" Azra asked.

Tyris looked at her and shrugged. "I guess."

A grim silence followed. Kirian sidled closer to Jesra, pressing up against her. "I am scared, Jesra," he confided softly.

Sighing as she fought back tears, she encircled her arms about his neck and cradled his head tenderly. "Me too, little one, me too." ★

[Part IV will appear in an upcoming issue.]