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THE GRYPHON CHRONICLES, BOOK NINE:

THE DEVIL'S LAIR



The Gryphon Chronicles, Book Nine: The Devil's Lair (Excerpt)
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CHAPTER ONE

Day of the Dead

Sand, pale and dry as powdered bones, hissed past Jake's boots as he marched through the desert with a grim, relentless stride. Sword in hand, his Gryphon prowling beside him, Jake kept his stare fixed on the line of tall sand dunes a thousand feet ahead.

Beyond the ridge, the dark sky glowed orange, and he could see the twisty towers of the warlocks' castle, blacker than the night: his destination.

The spires of the Black Fortress pierced the star-sewn sky like the horns of some great devil rising from a pit. Jake gripped his bluish-glowing sword even harder at the sight.

But his fear of what he had come here to do had hardened into ominous resolve, for the brightwield shone in his hand at full force now.

It meant that he was ready. And he was.

Well, he amended, ready as any thirteen-year-old could be who'd come to kill the sorcerer-king and stop his evil dreams of launching Armageddon—currently underway elsewhere as Wyvern's locust army spread across the globe.

No matter. He would not be deterred. Like it or not, Jake knew this was his destiny. His entire life had been leading up to this night—from the moment he'd been torn out of his mother's arms as a baby to the wild battle he and his friends had just finished fighting against Wyvern's hideous bug men at Merlin Hall, and now, here, in this very moment.

Enough was enough. His friends could've been killed in that fight. Jake shuddered at the prospect. No, the chaos would not end until somebody stopped the sorcerer-king, and that someone was him.

The Dark Druids' own prophecy said as much, and the soft glow of the celestial blade in his grasp now confirmed it.

Even if he died in the attempt, as he well might, Jake had made up his mind that he was not leaving this place—wherever it was—until he'd killed the sorcerer-king and rescued his parents, if they were indeed still alive down there in the bowels of the Black Fortress.

Somehow, he would free all the other captive Lightriders while he was at it, too. Then maybe one of them might be able to tell him *where* on the planet this godforsaken desert actually was.

For his part, Jake had no idea. He and Red had been dumped out here twenty minutes ago by the fiery portal they'd taken from Merlin Hall.

What a weird journey that was. Jake shook his head. The hellish portal still hung open behind him, hovering in place some four feet above the desert floor.

Thankfully, the stench of sulfur and the constant chorus of tormented shrieks and groans pouring out of the thing faded with every step he and Red took toward the sinuous ridge of dunes ahead.

Good riddance. He glanced over his shoulder at the red portal and marched on, eyeing the stark landscape around him.

Wherever it was, the desert had an eerie, otherworldly beauty. Wind-sculpted rock formations twisted like dancers frozen mid-motion, while the lavish crop of stars overhead refused to be drowned out even by the garish full moon of Hallowe'en.

No, Jake remembered then. It was well past midnight by now, approaching two o'clock in the morning, he'd guess.

Which meant that the longest, scariest Hallowe'en of his entire life was finally over.

At last, the warlocks' dark holiday of Samhain—their night of greatest power, and Lord Wyvern's coronation as the new sorcerer-king—had come to its blessed end.

Relief started through Jake until he abruptly remembered that some countries called November first the Day of the Dead. *Hmm,* perhaps it wasn't wise to celebrate just yet.

Especially since he didn't even have a plan. Nor could he make one until he saw whatever lay on the other side of those giant sand dunes.

Aye, there was no telling what the new day might deliver, considering All Hallows' Eve had brought the nightmare of a worldwide locust army invasion—Wyvern's furious reply to the Order's army attacking his coronation feast.

The great battle was still in progress even now in the Balefire Mountains, where the Order's army of giants, Guardians, centaurs, wizards, wood elves, dwarves, shapeshifters, and even a few Djin, along with the human fighters, were presently clashing with the Dark Druid forces of dark elves, monsters, and more.

Jake would've been taking part in the battle himself right now if Sir Peter hadn't caught him trying to sneak off with the army.

Disguised in a combat uniform he'd nicked from his American friend, Brian, Jake had been doing his best to blend in with Maddox's Guardian platoon. He'd almost gotten away with it,

too.

But somehow, the scholarly Chancellor of Merlin Hall had sniffed him out at the last minute. The normally cheery wizard had given him quite a wiggling for disobeying Derek's direct order to stay back with the civilians. Then he'd magicked Jake off to stay locked in his room.

Jake had been outraged, of course, but in hindsight, he owed Sir Peter his thanks. If the wizard had not foiled his plan to sneak off with the army, Jake would not have been there at the palace to protect his friends and his best girl, Dani, when the bug men had invaded Merlin Hall.

Together, Jake and his friends had defeated the monsters, but their hard-won victory had been too close.

And afterwards, Jake had privately realized that *his* work, at least, wasn't done for the night. He'd eyed the creepy warlock portal through which the bug men had arrived and saw what he had to do.

Without giving himself a chance to overthink it, he had swung up onto Red's back, taken to the skies, and flown his Gryphon straight into the wicked thing, leaving Merlin Hall without breathing a word of his intentions to his friends.

He couldn't bear to say goodbye, didn't dare give them a chance to talk him out of it. He'd just gone.

Jake wondered if they'd absorbed the shock yet.

Probably not.

But his friends could have no part in this, he vowed. *He* was the unlucky subject of the prophecy. This was his problem, not theirs. Whatever happened, he was determined to protect the people he cared about the most.

And so, he and his trusty Gryphon had come alone.

Presently, they arrived at the base of a massive, hundred-foot dune. They paused there for a second, gazing up the steep, moon-silvered slope.

The powdery surface seemed to ripple and shimmer in the light breeze, forming shallow, twisting grooves, as though a thousand snakes had recently slithered across its façade, leaving trails.

Jake took a deep breath. "Righty-ho," he muttered after a moment. But before he started climbing, he slid the brightwield into the scabbard on his hip. It would only get in the way and attract unwanted attention in the dark desert night.

Then he began the arduous climb up the mountain of sand. From the first step, his foot plunged into the deep bed of pale powder and continued to sink, first up to his ankle, and then mid-boot.

"Blimey." It was hard to get a firm base from which to push off for the next step. He'd never

climbed a sand dune before—he'd never even been to a desert until tonight—but he soon found it was much like trying to climb a huge snowdrift.

You had to work twice as hard just to go half as far. With each step forward, his boot slid backwards half the length of his previous stride.

It was infuriating, especially when a chap was in a bloody hurry to stop the world from ending. Plus, he was already dog-tired from battling four-armed, knife-wielding, antennae-wagging, thoroughly nasty bug men.

Not to mention it was the wee hours of the morning and he should've been in bed.

Jake fumed as the mountain of sand mocked his efforts to climb it. He was in good condition from all his training with his former head of security, Guardian Derek Stone, now the Order's top general. Nevertheless, within minutes, his breathing was labored, his boots were full of sand, and he was beyond frustrated.

Blast it, he had to get over this hill and somehow slip inside the Black Fortress before the warlocks' castle-ship jumped away again to some new location, as it was wont to do. This massive dune seemed determined to stop him before his mission had even started.

Jake had only gone about twenty feet when he gave up and turned to the Gryphon. "Er, Red?" Panting, he glanced over at his pet, who was also laboring up the slope on his big lion paws. "Mind givin' us a lift?"

"Becaw!" Red replied, which Jake took to mean, *I thought you'd never ask!*

Snorting sand away from the small oval nostrils at the top of his golden beak, the scarlet-feathered Gryphon turned awkwardly on the angled ground so Jake could climb onto his back.

Jake mumbled a heartfelt thanks as he settled into place, wiping the sweat off his brow.

Of course, without firm ground to push off from, the Gryphon's takeoff from the slippery hillside was uncharacteristically awkward.

Red leaped off the side of the dune as best he could. His powerful lion body dropped through the empty air, retracing ten feet of the same ground they'd just covered.

Jake clutched the beast's collar as his stomach flopped. But within a few frantic flaps, the Gryphon's twelve-foot wingspan mastered the cool currents of air.

Red righted himself with a low squawk of annoyance, then looped around smoothly to get a better angle up the dune.

Jake held on tight, leaning over the beast's feathery neck like a jockey as Red began his seemingly effortless ascent. "Stay beneath the ridgeline, boy. We mustn't let them see us."

The Gryphon nodded his proud eagle head. Banking to the left, Red carried Jake swiftly and

silently up the slope, keeping low with some very impressive precision flying, skimming his lion claws along the angled ground.

Even before Red landed several feet below the dune's crest, Jake smelled smoke on the air, acrid and sharp.

Worse—much worse—he began to hear a fateful buzzing. A droning, undulating resonance that made him shudder in the chill of the desert night.

The sound of more, hungry, locust men.

Jake clung fast to his courage. His friends weren't here this time to fight by his side. He gave a small gulp, but there was no turning back now.

Then the Gryphon alighted on the sand near the top of the dune, and Jake slid off his back into a stealthy crouch and began moving as lightly as possible toward the summit.

Tiny avalanches of sand skittered out behind his ankles and tumbled down the huge slope behind him. Together, he and Red crept up to assess the situation, Jake drawing on all his sneaking skills as a former thief, Red creeping along on his belly like a lion hiding in tall grass, closing in on its prey.

When they reached the crest of the mighty dune, Jake stretched out flat on his stomach atop the cool, soft sand. At last, he was able to peer down onto the other side of the ridge.

But gazing down upon the view, he heard Red grunt in surprise, and went very still with shock, himself.

Nothing could've prepared Jake for what he saw below.

The busy landscape sprawling out before him was the most bizarre panorama he'd ever beheld. He gave a mental curse of pure confusion, his gaze darting about swiftly as he strove to take it all in.

The wall of dunes plunged a hundred feet down to the flat desert floor, where a huge burning crater yawned in the night, girded on all sides by a narrow plateau.

Weirder still, in the sky above and all around the crater, countless red portals pockmarked the night. Streams of locust troops buzzed between them, coming and going from all the destinations that Wyvern had targeted in his worldwide, simultaneous invasion.

To Jake's dismay, many more of the hideous insectoids were crawling out of the sand even now, disoriented, clumsy, and no doubt hungry.

The ones he and his friends had killed had been ravenous.

But then his stomach tightened, for there—about five hundred feet to Jake's right—the Black Fortress perched at the eastern rim of the crater (judging by the position of the North Star).

The massive drawbridge was closed, but movement on the ramparts drew his eye.

The Fortress was a great ebony cube of polished black granite, about ten stories tall and equally as wide, except for its four spiky towers on the corners.

Jake remembered all too well how bright currents of lightning had raced and crackled among the spires, generating some strange, pulsing, magical charge of energy before the warlocks' moveable castle had vanished somehow, leaping away through the ethers, to slam down who-knew-where at its next destination.

There was no way to track the thing, but Jake had a hunch that it came here often. This certainly looked like the sort of spot a half-demon warlock might choose as his refuge, far from the bustling human race that he hated so much.

Jake shook his head, dazed with shock at the prospect before him. Red and he exchanged an uneasy glance.

"Becaw," said the Gryphon, rather plaintively.

Jake gave him a reassuring pat, comforted in turn by the feel of the soft, warm fur under his fingers. He supposed it was difficult for Red to see the place of his captivity again.

Wyvern had held the Gryphon hostage for a time, his obvious effort to lure Jake into his clutches by using his beloved pet as bait.

It hadn't worked, though.

Janos had rescued the Gryphon, and others. Jake rather wished his fearless vampire friend were here now to help him figure out how to get into that horrid castle again...

Doing his best, in any case, to absorb the high strangeness of it all, Jake continued spying over the edge of the dune. *Right*, he told himself a moment later, forcing a businesslike attitude.

Time to get his bearings. He needed specifics.

With another glance at the North Star, Jake confirmed that his position atop the dune lay at the southern end of the scene before him. He hadn't smelled the smoke from the burning crater sooner because the wind was coming from behind him, wafting the billows toward the north.

Likewise, he hadn't heard the locust men until he was nearly upon them, for the mounds of sand rimming the Dark Druids' area of operations muffled the swarm's rolling cadence. The soft, giant walls around the site insulated the sound.

The Dark Druids had chosen their hiding place well, Jake supposed. As for the Fortress itself, the spiky castle sat on the flat rim of desert, about thirty feet back from the eastern edge of the burning crater.

Burning crater? Jake mused, shaking his head again, still mystified. He'd never heard of such a

thing. Perhaps it was magical?

Whatever the case, the crater looked about nine hundred feet in diameter. Jake's current location atop the dune put him roughly halfway along its length.

He squinted as he studied the great pit; the angry light of its white and orange flames stabbed his eyes, which had grown accustomed to the dark.

He could not tell how deep the crater was from this angle. Where the walls sloped down, flames danced among the boulders. Rocks glowed like lava here and there.

Watching them entranced him for a moment.

As someone who had lately acquired the gift of pyrokinesis, Jake had developed a certain fondness for fire, but the giant, continuous inferno raging at the bottom of the pit unsettled even him.

It filled the indigo sky with a noxious orange glow and steady billows of coal-black smoke.

Jake stretched his neck, trying to peer down to the bottom of the crater. Frankly, he wasn't sure if he was looking down into Hades itself, or if there was some logical explanation for this bizarre landscape feature—something his genius cousin, Archie, might've been able to explain if he were here.

Of course, Jake was very glad he wasn't. His friends were brave, but he didn't want them anywhere near this godforsaken place. A good chunk of the reason he'd come here, himself, was to protect them.

Especially Dani O'Dell.

When another stray thought of her angry tears tugged at his conscience, he put the redheaded lass out of his mind as best he could. Thinking about her made his heart hurt.

They'd fought so dreadfully earlier tonight, and he had to focus. Plus, he missed her. He could always be brave when he was acting tough for Dani's sake. But deep down, he was nowhere near as fearless as Dani thought he was. No, *she* was the brave one, charging into the fray with no magical powers to speak of beyond her own gutsy, loyal nature. Tonight, Jake mused, he would prove himself worthy of her affection.

With that, Jake steeled himself and homed in on the ramparts of the Black Fortress, where movement drew his eye. He squinted to make it out better, then tensed.

There, by the light of the burning crater, he spotted the tall, imposing figure of Lord Wyvern himself. Dressed in black-and-white formal attire with a simple iron circlet across his broad forehead, the new sorcerer-king was pacing the rampart walk atop the castle walls.

He seemed angry, agitated.

Wyvern did not go all the way around the ramparts, but kept to the front wall of the castle, overlooking the crater.

Every now and then, he paused to stare out over the crenellated battlements, keeping watch on his locust army. He wasn't alone, exchanging words with a few of his top henchmen nearby.

Jake narrowed his eyes, wishing he possessed the keen eyesight of a Guardian, or at least had thought to bring a spyglass.

No such luck.

Yet even from this distance, he easily recognized two of Wyvern's top helpers. The voluptuous, sable-haired lady in the dark-blue gown was none other than Jake's old nemesis, Fionnula Coralbroom.

He scowled to have to face the annoying sea-witch again. He couldn't believe Wyvern intended to marry that scheming female.

The siren enchantress might look pretty enough in her human form as the opera diva, star of the London stage, but Jake remembered the *real* Fionnula all too well: a conniving, warty old sea-hag with squidgy tentacles. (Which wasn't even her nastiest shape. She had once turned into a giant kraken and tried to eat him and Red.)

The Gryphon growled on cue at the sight of Fionnula.

To be sure, Red had good reason to despise the sea-witch after all she'd done to him, locking him in a dungeon for eleven years so she could steal his magical red feathers.

Back when she had been Uncle Waldrick's ladylove, the sea-witch had used the power in Red's feathers to transform into her fancy-lady shape on a regular basis.

Presently, Fionnula was standing at a long, narrow table that Jake could see set up on the back wall of the front-facing rampart. The table was lined with large bowls.

Seeing bowls, Jake figured. Witches of all sorts did seem to find them handy. Then his gaze moved on to the other figures on the ramparts.

The second woman attending Wyvern had jet-black hair and very white skin. She wore a scarlet gown with a high lace collar that framed the back of her head in the Renaissance style.

Jake recognized her as the Red Queen, Viola Sangray. Oh, he'd dealt with that one before, in Parliament Square. But it had been daytime then, so the royal vampiress had been vulnerable. Now that it was night, Viola would be at her strongest.

All too familiar with the many deadly talents of vampires, thanks to his friend Janos, Jake made a mental note to be extremely careful of her.

A bit more worried, he scanned on.

Aside from the two powerful Dark Druidesses, there was a man in a shiny gold suit leaning casually against the battlements and sipping champagne.

Jake had never seen him before and had no idea what sort of supernatural powers the chap might possess. But perhaps it had something to do with wealth, dressed, as he was, like King Midas in that ridiculous gold outfit. The man did not look particularly threatening, but you never knew.

Hmm.

Other than King Midas up there, Wyvern's two deadly henchwomen, and the Nephilim warlock himself, there were half a dozen white-coated men milling about, as well.

Jake snorted at the sight of them. Aye, he had dealt with the Dark Druids' team of mad scientists before. One of those barmy mumpers had even tried to chloroform him when he'd stumbled upon the strange, cave-like laboratory in the basement of the Black Fortress, where all the captive Lightriders were being held, unconscious in their glass coffins.

It still shocked Jake that the warlocks could even *find* educated men willing to carry out their twisted experiments for them. But at least the scientists would be easier enemies to deal with than the three powerful dark mages up on the ramparts.

A shudder ran through him as he pondered the deadly trio's abilities. The vampire queen could probably snap his neck as easily as drain his blood; Fionnula could drown him with a conjured wave of seawater or catch him up in a small, controlled tornado and hurl him into the crater if she pleased.

Wyvern was capable of devastating spells. He had withered Jake's arm with a wave of his wand the last time they'd met. Fortunately, he'd put it back to normal. After all, the Nephilim warlock had a use for him; he'd actually told Jake that he hoped they'd get along.

Hmph! As if that would ever happen.

Suddenly, Red whipped his head around and stared behind them, motionless—as though alerted to some distant sound.

Jake glanced at the beast in surprise, then followed his gaze as his heart began to thump. *He* hadn't heard anything, but by now, he'd come to trust the Gryphon's instincts.

“What is it, Red?” Jake whispered, his hand automatically reaching for the sword on his hip. “Is someone coming?”

Blimey, with all the trouble ahead, he hadn't counted on danger sneaking up from behind them, as well. Then he turned and followed Red's gaze...

CHAPTER TWO

Company!

Jake waited, but the Gryphon didn't respond, just stared into the distance with an eagle's intensity, his golden eyes gleaming fiercely in the dark.

Pulse pounding, Jake slid down a few feet from the crest of the dune, turned onto his backside, and sat up. He followed Red's piercing gaze back to the fiery tunnel through which they'd arrived.

At that moment, a distant yelp reached him, and then, suddenly, a tousle-haired boy in a brown jacket came shooting out of the tunnel and sprawled atop the sand—much as Jake himself had done a short while ago.

Jake squinted, studying the new arrival by the portal's orange glow.

“Scofield?” he whispered, stunned...but on second thought, perhaps not shocked.

After all, his American mate was a Guardian-in-training, born, as all Guardians were, with impressive strength, extra-keen senses, and an instinct for tracking people who needed their protection, not to mention a knack for arriving just in time.

“Becaw,” Red said with a happy nod, his tension easing at once. The Gryphon was particularly fond of the Guardian lad, who was, by all accounts, a good egg.

A rueful smile twisted Jake's lips as he watched the sheltered Indiana farm boy lay inert on the sand, groaning where he'd landed, no doubt queasy and still dazed by his journey through the warlock tunnel.

Traversing that thing was no fun.

Jake gave a soft harrumph. He wanted to be cross at his friend for putting himself in danger, but he could not deny his first reaction was relief.

Aye, and if the Yank had brought along the rest of his Guardian classmates who'd joined them in their battle against the locust men at Merlin Hall, Jake decided he wouldn't object.

Huang was a fine fighter, with all his dazzling kicks and precision martial arts. Tall, muscular Tyra was a force to be reckoned with; she'd fought with a longsword and a flail in their battle

against the bug men. *Impressive.*

Even the self-important centaur girl, Phinney, was bloody fast at a gallop and a keen shot with her bow and arrow. The half-horse was also irritatingly nosy, but that was another story.

Jake shook his head to recall Phinney trotting right into the middle of his and Dani's first kiss.

Now that the redhead despised him, Jake was fairly sure it'd be their last, too.

Ah well. He should've never dragged Dani into his whole sneaking-off-with-the-army debacle. Because she, too, had been sharply reprimanded by Sir Peter when Jake had got caught at his mischief. Now Dani was petrified that she'd be kicked out of the Lightrider training program as a result.

In any case, seeing Brian still flopped on the sand where he'd landed, Jake nudged the Gryphon in amusement. "C'mon, boy, we'd better get down there and pull him out of the way before the next one arrives. I wager he's brought his Guardian classmates, and nobody wants a centaur hoof in the face.

"Besides," he added, "we've got to warn whoever's coming next to stay quiet, considering the Dark Druids are right over that hill. Huang gets pretty noisy with all his boasting, and we don't want the Red Queen hearing us with her sharp vampire senses."

Red nodded, turning all business. Jake hurriedly mounted up, and in the next moment, the Gryphon was gliding down smoothly toward the desert floor.

Keeping low to the ground, Red backtracked toward the portal, swooping across the span of desert with Brian in his sights. But before his paws even alighted on the sand, the next traveler shot out of the fiery portal and landed in a heap atop the Yank.

To Jake's surprise, however, it was not one of Brian's rough-and-tumble warrior classmates, but young super-witch Nixie Valentine, who'd become one of Jake's closest friends.

Her broom sailed out handle-first after her and flew through the night like a spear, stabbing down into the sand yards beyond where the pair still lay, nauseated, beneath the tunnel's mouth.

As Red closed the distance, Jake furrowed his brow, concerned.

Nixie was an excellent ally to have in a fight with her steely nerves and cunning magic. She had many tricks up her sleeves and wasn't overly scrupulous about using them, when necessary, unlike Jake's beloved but frightfully honorable cousins, the Bradfords. Nix was more of a pragmatist, like him.

But the reason Jake was so concerned to see her here was that the petite, raven-haired girl had been unconscious barely thirty minutes ago.

Wand in hand, the tough little witch had fought like a hero in their battle against the bug men.

But the moment it was over, she had dropped like a sack of grain, passed out cold from overusing her magical gifts.

Jake had nearly done the same himself—not that this altogether surprised him. Archie *had* warned him, after all, that having three supernatural powers coursing through his body now instead of just two would take a harsher toll on his system.

Because of that strain, Jake’s abilities could blast out with unexpected strength, but it also meant they’d drain away faster.

When he got into battle mode, it was all too easy to overuse his powers, burning through his magical strength too fast. That weak, woozy, awful feeling that meant he’d pushed himself too hard tended to sneak up on him, leaving him sick to his stomach, reeling with headaches and nosebleeds, and vulnerable to enemy attack.

No matter, Jake assured himself. He’d be careful not to overdo it.

And besides, if his supernatural gifts ran out tonight before he’d managed to finish off Wyvern, he still had the brightwield.

Jake glanced down at the weapon. He was no sword master, but he wasn’t half bad, thanks to all his training lately with his grumpy friend Maddox, the seventeen-year-old Guardian apprentice.

Still, Jake realized he’d have to balance his abilities carefully in the quest ahead. If he ran out of steam too soon, he’d be easy prey. That had almost happened to him during the bug battle, but somehow, he’d managed to stay conscious.

Nixie hadn’t been so lucky.

It was only one of Red’s healing feathers that had revived her. The little cynic had given them quite a scare. She really shouldn’t be here, and he intended to tell her so at once.

But as the Gryphon closed the distance to the portal, the next traveler arrived.

And if Jake had been worried to see Nixie in this place, he gasped with horror when his delicate cousin Isabelle came shooting out of the portal and sprawled on top of the pile.

Jake stared at the pretty empath in disbelief. The thought of Izzy anywhere near this desert shocked him back to his senses.

What was he thinking? None of his friends should be here—not even Brian! The Yank wasn’t ready for a battle of this magnitude, having just been recruited to the Guardian apprentice program.

This wasn’t their fight! It was his. His alone. His duty to kill Wyvern and end the Dark Druids. The cult’s own prophecy said so.

The instant Red pounced down onto the sand, Jake jumped off the beast’s back and marched

angrily toward the new arrivals.

All three lay groaning with the aftereffects of their breakneck journey through the tunnel.

Jake gave no cordial greeting. “What are you doing here?” he demanded, his tone blunt. He set his hands on his hips and glared down at them, determined to chase them off.

His friends made a few “ugh” type noises but ignored him, still struggling to recover.

“Could everyone get off of me?” Brian mumbled from the bottom of the heap.

“Sorry,” Izzy croaked, then flopped indecorously off the pile onto the sand, her golden curls askew. Her porcelain skin looked especially pale in the moonlight after that sickening journey.

Jake noted that his cousin had changed into one of her black mourning gowns after the pale walking dress she’d been wearing earlier had ended up covered in bug guts. To be sure, the dainty debutante had shocked them all, beating one of the monsters to death when it had tried to drag Archie away and eat him.

Sweet she might be, but no one had better mess with Izzy’s little brother.

“Blech,” said Nixie in the meanwhile. “That was fun.”

She rolled off Brian, and the Yank finally managed to sit up. He shook his head vigorously as if to clear it, sand flying out of his dark tousled hair.

Jake harrumphed at his friends, then glowered into the red portal. Nobody else had better come through there who wasn’t at least a Guardian.

The two girls shouldn’t be anywhere near here, especially Isabelle. For heaven’s sake, she was a Unicorn Keeper! The exact sort of sacrificial victim the Dark Druids prized the most as a gift to the demon they served, the unspeakable Shemrazul, Lord of the Ninth Pit.

It was dangerous for anyone to be here, but Izzy most of all.

Blast it, if Archie came flying out next, Jake was going to have a fit. Hands on hips, he scowled at the trio, loving them for their loyalty, but tempted to wring their necks.

More sickly moans and shudders followed.

Fuming, Jake folded his arms across his chest and waited impatiently for them to recover enough for him to set them straight. He knew they meant well, but if they expected his thanks, sorry, they weren’t going to get it.

Their arrival here defeated the whole point of his quest! Which was protecting the people he cared about by making the world safe from Wyvern—no matter the cost.

At length, Jake bent down and glowered in their faces, determined to scare them away. “You lot shouldn’t be here.”

All three looked up blearily at him from where they sat strewn around the sand.

“The second you feel better,” he continued sternly, “you can turn yourselves around and go right back to Merlin Hall. I’ll toss you back into that tunnel myself if I have to.”

“Not leaving,” Brian managed, climbing unsteadily to his feet, still wobbly but resolute.

Jake frowned at the fiery portal. “What about Archie? Should I expect him, too?”

Nobody answered. For a moment, the only sound was the echo of doomed souls emanating from the portal.

Then Jake sucked in his breath as an even more alarming possibility struck him. “At least tell me Dani’s got the sense to stay away!”

The two girls exchanged an awkward glance, both still kneeling.

“Uh...” Brian tilted his head tactfully.

Jake threw up his hands in exasperation, pivoted away from them, and uttered a very bad word.

Of course Dani O’Dell would not be left behind.

He should’ve known. She might be cross at him at the moment, but that maddening redhead had been following him around since he was nine.

Yet his own heart was treacherous, for Jake could not deny that a small part of him was secretly delighted to hear that she still cared enough about him to risk her own safety, coming here.

The rest of him was thoroughly terrified, however. He didn’t want *any* of his friends within the Dark Druids’ striking distance, especially not his best girl.

Problem was, Daniela Catherine O’Dell was the stubbornest soul he knew. She hardly listened to anyone except her own conscience.

It was one of her most endearing traits, but blimey, it sometimes made the rookery lass hard to deal with.

Jake scowled into the fiery portal, torn between devotion and dread. Maybe she’d chicken out? he thought hopefully, then snorted.

As if that would ever happen.

Judging by the apologetic look on the others’ faces, Jake saw that she would be here any moment. He heaved a sigh, flipped his forelock out of his eyes, and resigned himself to wait for Dani to arrive.

CHAPTER THREE

Redhead

Dani O'Dell stood alone on a flat stretch of the palace roof, scanning the moonlit grounds of Merlin Hall, and waiting for her turn to go through the horrid warlock portal.

She wrapped her arms around herself, warding off the night's chill. Her breath misted. It was eerily quiet now that the swarm's awful, buzzing cadence had stopped.

From this high vantage point, Dani could see the dead locust monsters scattered across the vast lawns, especially behind the huge Baroque palace, where she and her friends had battled the swarm.

After Jake had beheaded the disgusting locust leader (Dani would never forget the moment the ugly thing had nearly killed her), Nixie had quickly conjured a poisonous Witch's Feast to lure the rest of the hungry creatures away from them.

By now, the tainted food had done its dark work. The ravenous locust men had gorged themselves, devouring the lavish spread. As a result, they presently lay lifeless, stacked high around the long dining table.

It was a very unpleasant sight; Dani wrinkled her nose. But at least she and all her friends had survived.

So far, she amended with a slight shiver. Whether they would continue to do so on the next leg of their adventure remained to be seen.

Then a sudden yawn struck her, making her eyes water.

Oh, she was so, so tired. Muscles she didn't even know she possessed were growing sore from the fight. Her fingers ached from gripping her crossbow for too long in sheer terror. It was *far* past any almost-twelve-year-old girl's bedtime, and Dani half wished someone would do an oubliette spell on her. Wipe this horrible night out of her memories.

Unfortunately, it was only getting started.

At last, reluctantly, Dani turned to face the Dark Druids' sinister red portal, waiting for her nearby. Daring her.

Taunting her.

The truth was, she didn't even want to look at the thing, let alone go in there.

It hovered just a few feet off the edge of the southeast corner of the huge roof.

Brian, Nixie, and Isabelle had leaped into it ahead of her, for the Lightrider always went last to make sure everyone had got through all right, and to shut the portal afterwards, of course.

That was the Order's protocol, just as the Guardian always went first to make sure the landing point was safe for everyone and clear of danger.

Dani had insisted on doing it properly, even though there was nothing normal about this journey or this bizarre, dark-magic portal. She just hoped wherever it led, her friends were still alive on the other end, especially that madman, Jake.

She harrumphed under her breath at the thought of her beau.

Ex-beau! she corrected herself. As of tonight.

She could not keep going through the chaos that was Jake.

One last adventure because she had promised, and then she was done with him, if this was how he was going to behave.

She scowled into the flame-rimmed black hole that had swallowed him. How could he do this—to her, to himself, to all of them? Just go flying off on his Gryphon into the Dark Druid portal and leave them all behind without a word?

No warning, no explanation.

After all they had been through, how could he leave without even saying goodbye? Her heart stung. *Selfish as ever, Jakey-boy.* She shook her head, still fuming. *Stupid mumper.* Maybe he'd make a fine Black Prince for Lord Wyvern, after all.

The boy had always been a barbarian, to be sure, going all the way back to his pickpocket days. She should know. She had been there.

The Jake she knew was always getting into trouble unless somebody took him by the ear and made the rogue behave. This had been Dani's role for some years now, in fact, and if he thought he had escaped her, the lad was in for a shock.

She couldn't wait to give him what-for when she arrived wherever he'd gone. Why, she was tempted to punch the blue-eyed heathen right in his handsome nose when she saw him—provided he was alive.

He deserved it for scaring the daylights out of his closest friends. And making her cry like she had never cried before. Because Dani had watched him fly into the portal, helpless to stop him,

screaming for him to come back, not to do it.

He'd done it anyway.

Seeing that, she had quite fallen to pieces, certain that, this time, he wasn't coming back. That he would die.

As Isabelle had realized with her empath skills, Jake had gone to sacrifice himself for the greater good. He meant to kill Wyvern even if it cost him his own life, which it probably would.

Dani couldn't bear it. She had to go after him. Thankfully, the others agreed. Archie had put his big brain to use making a plan, while the rest of them panicked—and now it was time to go.

She stared resolutely at the warlock portal, trying not to be unnerved by the chorus of shrill cries, distant screams, and tormented moans pouring out of it.

Not for any other person on the planet would she even consider jumping into this thing.

This portal was evil, she knew. Everything that had come out of it earlier tonight had been evil, and it no doubt led to an evil place. But refusing to go wasn't an option, and cowering was not in her nature.

She glared into its soulless depths, doing her best to shore up her courage.

Rimmed in smokeless fire, the Dark Druid portal waited to devour her like a cruel red mouth. Its shimmering ring of dark flames churned like serrated teeth all around the tunnel's rim. The center, where Jake and her friends had gone, was beyond black, obsidian, lightless as the grave.

Dani peered in, hating the thing. As a Lightrider-in-training, its very existence offended her. How could the Dark Druids do this to Mother Earth?

Proper Lightriders were chosen by the heart of Gaia herself, granted special permission to open good, *authorized* portals and conduct traveling parties through the Grid of planetary ley-lines.

But this? This monstrosity was a violation of Nature itself. Poor Gaia had rebelled with violent earthquakes when the Dark Druid portals had blasted open all around the world.

And if deliberately hurting Mother Earth weren't bad enough, Dani knew the warlocks were using captured Lightriders to produce this unholy phenomenon.

Like Jake's parents.

Which was why she had to go, despite swearing less than twelve hours ago that she was done, through, finished following that boy around like a blasted puppy dog.

This time, Dani had no choice.

She had given her word that when the time came for Jake to fulfill his destiny and destroy the Dark Druids, she would do whatever she could to help him.

It was a promise Jake had thrown in her face earlier tonight, when they had fallen into the worst quarrel they'd ever had, either as friends or as sweethearts.

Dani knew she had said some terrible things to him, words she wished that she could call back. But with Wyvern's apocalypse at hand, this was no time for some big drippy conversation.

Actions spoke louder than words, and Jake's sharp reminder of her promise had snapped her back to herself. For when Dani O'Dell gave her word on a thing, not even a falling-out could cancel it.

A promise was a promise—and it was time to go.

Dani squared her shoulders, tucked her hair behind her ear, and smoothed the navy-blue skirts of her Lightrider uniform. Walking slowly and deliberately, she backed up across the wide, breezy roof in order to get a running start.

She lined herself up across from the groaning, moaning monstrosity, her heart banging against her ribcage. Dry-mouthed, she paused and went down on one knee, then to the other, tightening the laces on her brown, shin-high boots.

If she *tripped* off the edge of the roof, that would be the end of her adventures, all right. There was no telekinetic Jake here to catch her if she fell.

Satisfied her boots were tied, Dani straightened up and checked the crossbow slung across her back, as well as her restocked quiver of nasty, dart-like arrows.

Both were secure.

Finally, (perhaps procrastinating), she fiddled with the brown leather training gauntlet on her left forearm. Affectionately known as a Bud of Life, it was the junior version of the official Flower of Life devices that adult Lightriders had surgically implanted in their forearms at the culmination of their training.

Earlier tonight, when she had gotten into trouble for trying to help Jake sneak off with the army, Sir Peter had deactivated her Bud's ability to open Lightrider portals. But the little round communication piece on her wrist—the ansible—still worked, and that was what mattered.

It would be vital in carrying out the plan that Archie had dreamed up for the rest of them to help Jake save the world from Wyvern.

Having verified that all her equipment was in order, Dani could no longer justify any more delay. *Get on with it!* she scolded, then blessed herself with a quick sign of the cross, and planted a foot behind her, crouching down like a runner before a footrace.

Eyeing up her route across the roof ahead, she was caught off guard by a brief pang of missing her wee dog, Teddy. It nearly brought tears to her eyes. How she wished she had the furry little rascal in her arms right now.

Ah well. At least if she died tonight, she could R.I.P. knowing that Gladwin and the other royal garden fairies would take good care of her wee doggy for her.

The fairies were especially fond of her for some reason, so as a personal favor to Dani, they had been babysitting Teddy for her at Buckingham Palace, which was the safest place in all of England right now.

It was a relief not to have to worry about the pup. Still, Dani hoped with all her heart she'd get to hug him again soon. Whatever happened, she knew her tiny Norwich terrier would be as brave and stout-hearted as any German Shepherd—and so must she.

Hmph. With a snort of determination, Dani glared into the warlocks' fiery tunnel.

It waited, leering at her like a huge, sinister eye.

"I'm not afraid of you," she whispered with a slight tremble.

Blocking out all its hellish groans, Dani took a deep breath, counted *one, two, three*—then suddenly bolted forward before she lost her nerve.

Sprinting across the flat stretch of the palace roof, she ran, ran, ran, concentrating on every stride. *Don't miss!* she warned herself, closing the distance.

Then the edge of the palace roof loomed ahead; in her peripheral vision, the ground dropped away before her, the grass a sickening distance below.

Dani refused to look down but sprang up, planting one foot on the decorative cornice; she leaped with all of her strength off the edge of the building, launching herself into the nightmarish tunnel.

It seemed to grab her and drag her in with a deep devil's laugh, hurling her at breakneck speed through its dark, snaking course.

Unnatural fire that did not burn her lined its uneven walls. The Dark Druid tunnel tossed and tumbled her—like a terrifying roll down a steep hill, crashing and falling, out of control.

Terrified, Dani couldn't help screaming. She gasped with fright when she looked down and glimpsed the territory through which the thing traveled.

What is this place? On the canyon-cut desert far beneath the tunnel, huge, horned silhouettes moved in a bleak, volcanic landscape.

Oh Lord, don't forget me! Hurling on she knew-not-where, Dani squeezed her eyes shut and started saying prayers over and over in her mind.

The tunnel stretched on and on. Time lost all meaning. She longed with all her heart for this bizarre ride to be over—and then, suddenly, it was!

She shot out the other end with a shriek and splashed down onto her belly on a cool cushion of

sand. *Poof!* It puffed up all around her sprawled body.

Enveloped by darkness, Dani lay there motionless for a moment, panting and dizzy. Afraid to look for fear of finding herself surrounded by Dark Druids, she peeked with one eye...and saw feet around her.

She recognized, first, the black lace hem of Izzy's mourning gown and side-buttoned half-boots, then, Nixie's orange and green-striped Hallowe'en stockings above her pointy black witch's boots.

Next, she saw two pairs of rugged, brown, Guardian work-boots and four tawny Gryphon paws.

The feet stepped back to give her room, and Dani opened the other eye.

She looked up slowly to find Jake scowling at her, his cobalt stare bright in the dark.

Hands planted on his thighs, he'd bent down and was waiting for her to catch her breath. He looked seriously peeved, but behind his golden-blond head stretched the starriest sky Dani had ever seen.

Then he spoke, his voice chillingly calm. "What are you doing here?"

Coming This Fall...

THE GRYPHON CHRONICLES, BOOK NINE:
THE DEVIL'S LAIR

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* * *

The Gryphon Chronicles

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Book 3 – THE DARK PORTAL

Book 3.5 – THE GINGERBREAD WARS

Book 4 – RISE OF ALLIES

Book 5 – SECRETS OF THE DEEP

Book 6 – THE BLACK FORTRESS

Book 7 – THE DRAGON LORD

Book 8 – THE SORCERER'S ARMY

Book 9 – THE DEVIL'S LAIR

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

E.G. FOLEY is the pen name for a husband-and-wife writing team who live in Pennsylvania. They've been finishing each other's sentences since they were teens, so it was only a matter of time till they were writing together, too.

Like his kid readers, "E" (Eric) can't sit still for too long! A bit of a renaissance man, he's picked up hobbies from kenpo to carpentry to classical guitar over the years, and holds multiple degrees in math, science, and education. He treated patients as a chiropractor for nearly a decade, then switched careers to venture into the wild-and-woolly world of teaching middle school, where he was often voted favorite teacher. His students helped inspire him to start dreaming up great stories for kids, until he recently switched gears again and left teaching to become a full-time writer and author entrepreneur.

By contrast, "G" (Gael, aka Gaelen Foley) has had *one* dream all her life and has pursued it with maniacal intensity since the age of seventeen: writing fiction! After earning her Lit degree at SUNY Fredonia, she waited tables at night for nearly six years as a "starving artist" to keep her days free for honing her craft, until she finally got The Call in 1997. Today, with millions of her twenty-plus romances from Ballantine and HarperCollins sold in many languages worldwide, she's been hitting bestseller lists regularly since 2001. Although she loves all her readers, young and old, she admits there's just something magical about writing for children.

You can find the Foleys on Facebook/EGFoleyAuthor or visit their website at EGFoley.com. They are hard at work on their next book.