

Ch 21: Dolls and Dragons

As soon as the door was shut, the darkness became deep and thick. So deep, they didn't dare move in fear of walking into something unpleasant. They had no idea where they were now, but their past experiences seemed to throw them from one mess into another. Sarah grabbed Aaron tightly and held him close. There was a rumble of thunder and a flash of grey light flooded through the windows, revealing their surroundings for a moment. They were frightened by the surprise of it, but resolved to use the storm to their advantage. With a second flash of lightning, Alex spied a chandelier hanging from overhead, and a candle resting on a nearby table. When things went black again, he fumbled for it and furiously rubbed his fingers next to the wick.

With every burst of lightning, Sarah could see him working. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to make some light."

"How?" He didn't answer, but a tiny spark emerged from the darkness and the candle caught flame. "How did you..." Before she could continue, he was raising the candle upward, and with a slight wave of his hand, the flame spread to the chandelier.

He turned with a smile, apparently pleased with his performance. "A little trick I picked up from my family. I've never done something like that before, but I've learned a lot since we've been here."

"I would say so."

"Cool," Aaron remarked.

"Well," Alex replied. "It's not that hard, really. All you have to do is..." But to his disappointment, the boy wasn't referring to him. The entire room was well lit now and Aaron was fascinated by what he saw, as were his guardians. The room looked as if it had belonged to a child, for it was filled with toys. Dolls, stuffed animals, games, tops, jacks, figurines; all filling the shelves and gathered on the floor against the wall. He ran excitedly to a large, colorful box with a handle. Turning the crank, the lid flew open and the face of a clown emerged with an obnoxious laugh. Aaron shoved it back into the box and closed the lid with a smile.

"I think," said Sarah, inspecting a little ballerina doll. "this is the only place I'm going to like."

"I'm not so sure," Alex replied uneasily. Realizing he could be right, Sarah put the doll down and took Aaron by the hand. "Let's keep moving." They climbed a staircase and came to another room just like the first. This one was filled with toys as well. "I had no idea King Vlad loved toys so much."

"I don't think they're his."

"I don't like this." They turned a corner and walked down a hall that opened into a larger chamber. They came to a railing and looked into the center of the room, and realized it wasn't a room but a tower. There were many, many levels; all surrounding the central tower with railings and stairs; and each one was littered with toys. "I *really* don't like this." In the center of the first floor, just beyond the banister where the three stood,

there was a tremendous carousel. It was painted with bright and exciting colors but there were no lights on or around it anywhere, and so it was covered in darkness. Alex could see the gigantic cobwebs which covered it and could tell that it hadn't seen the light of day in a long, long time.

They continued up to the next level, occasionally glancing over the railing to see the carousel. There was something sinister but intriguing about it. Along the walls were portraits of Mortigan, or a young man with long black hair who looked a great deal like him. The floor was littered with dolls and figures of all sizes and varieties. Sarah spotted a nice looking doll on a cupboard shelf and went over to inspect it. It was very old and had a classic kind of beauty to it; something she enjoyed very much. But Alex and Aaron didn't share her sentiments. Aaron tapped his friend on the arm. "Alex; I don't like this place anymore."

"Neither do I, buddy." He knelt down to look the boy in the face. "We're getting out of here as soon as possible. As soon as *your sister* is ready..." He sarcastically shouted the last part to their pre-occupied companion.

"Oh, shut up," she said. "I'm coming." She observed the multitude of other colorful toys; cowboys and indians, robots and monsters, knights and dragons. Clowns, bears, dogs, bugs, and princesses. Across the room from the cupboard was an old chest that caught her eye. The wood was rotted and the hinges were rusty, so one of the two doors was hanging open just a crack. Its sides were carved with intricate designs that were too fine to be followed from far away, but it gave Sarah an ill feeling. As if there was something inside, watching her through the little opening. She kept her attention on the toys, but she always glanced nervously over her shoulder to the trunk behind her, as if by doing so she could keep the trouble away.

"C'mon, Sarah," Alex repeated, this time in a concerned tone.

"Okay, I'm coming." She didn't feel like lingering anymore; like someone who enjoys eating something until they find out what it is. She quickly put the toys down and joined the others, and together they continued up the next staircase. Every floor of this tower seemed to be nearly the same, if not exactly; and each one was scattered with playthings. "We have to find a way out of here."

"Well, I'm afraid we probably won't be leaving anytime soon. From what I could tell out on the parapets, it seemed like the only link to the next tower was pretty high up. We might be climbing for a while."

"Well there's got to be another way through this stupid castle! Maybe if we just go back the way we came and try to bypass the whole tower! I'm sure we could get higher up if we just keep going across the outer wall!"

"That could work, even though the going won't be much easier that way either."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you remember that knight we saw on our way to the conservatory, riding that big hippogriff? My guess is that he was a general, but it gave me the thought that they probably have aerial sentry keeping watch over the whole upper section of the castle." He looked around again. "But I think anything's better than getting lost in this psychotic playroom." They all agreed and headed back down the tower, but they soon

realized that it was out of the question. They couldn't find the stairs. "The staircase we came up through was right here, wasn't it?"

"I guess so! We hadn't walked very far!" It was too dark to see well enough to be sure, but they were almost certain that the stairs had been just behind them.

"Could they be on the other side?"

"No," Sarah answered in a hopeless voice. "They're gone." And she was right. The stairs had disappeared entirely, and the only path left went up. Suddenly a bizarre laugh, like the one the Jack-in-the-box made before, echoed throughout the tower. But it wasn't just like a sound a toy made. It was more like the laugh of some evil-willed mastermind who had just captured his prey. It continued on and on like a maddening siren until the three wanted nothing more than to strike it from their minds. When it finally ceased, it was replaced by a sound somewhat more frightening. It was music. Music pouring out from the carousel at the bottom of the tower; with lights flashing and blinking, and sending spotlights high into the upper levels, as if the circus had just begun down there.

"We're getting out of here one way or another," Alex said, leaning over the wooden railing. He was about to jump over the side, when Sarah grabbed his arm.

"Are you crazy or something?"

"No. We'll just jump down to the floor below us!" But when he looked again, he saw something moving below them; little shadows shifting back and forth. Then he saw something coming out of the carousel as it rotated and sang its unsettling tune. They were toys! Dolls and robots and animals and puppets marching out of the carousel in scores. He realized, then, that the things he saw moving on the other levels were toys as well. All the toys in the tower were coming to life. "Oh, boy... c'mon!" He grabbed their hands and sprinted for the next staircase, making it their goal to get to the top as quickly as possible, though he didn't hold much faith that they would be able to escape. They didn't look back as they ran, but they could hear tiny footsteps following close behind them and they could see the toys stirring as they reached each new level. Finally they were chased onto a floor formed more like a dark hallway, rather than the large square floors below. They ran into the darkness, hoping naively that they were rushing toward safety. But they were running right into the Hall of Dolls.

They seemed to forget their hurry when they reached the grand hall. Suddenly, they thought it better to turn back, regardless of what terrible things were giving them chase. Because here the walls were full of endless shelves, lined with dolls; each with its own personal section. This was the Hall of Dolls, the pride of Countess Marianne's collection. Marianne was Vlad's niece and a wealthy and beautiful Aralian countess whose love of dolls granted her the finest collection in Elmar. Vlad loved her so that he gave her an entire tower to dwell in when she came to Alinor, as well as to rule as she pleased. Here was the entrance hall to her bedroom; where she was queen, unopposed. The three shaken intruders proceeded slowly, observing the shelves warily as they passed.

For this was the home of the Teacher, the Hair Queen, the Boy with no Memory, and the Flamingo Girl. They all seemed to stare down from their shelves with empty eyes that had no souls or feeling behind them. This was the home of Midas' Daughter, Woe,

Arachne, Nobody, Scarlet Briar, Salome, the Redeemer, the Blockhead, and the Clockwork Prince. The Mirror Girl, the Lion, the Caterpillar, the Bloody Mouth, the Metal Man, the Headless Baron, the Ace of Skulls, the Scarecrow, the Milkmaid, the Eyeball Baby, the Hellspeaker and the Gravewaker. There were hundreds of dolls, all gazing blankly at the three young ones. Before they reached the end, they were stopped by a mysterious voice.

"What are you doing here?" It was the voice of a young woman. They looked about for the speaker, but she kept herself hidden in the dark somewhere. Sarah gripped her brother tightly. "I don't often receive visitors, especially not visitors who send my entire tower into an uproar." The voice was coming from a door at the end of the corridor. "But I must say my children like you. They rarely take a liking to anyone." Alex watched as the dolls on the shelves began to move, and lean out of their cubbies to catch a better look at their new guests. "Please, come in." The door slowly opened by itself and the three entered cautiously. They now found themselves in a pretty bedroom, with a large bed and rich, red curtains. A doll sat upon the bed and there were dolls seated on little chairs and upon the window sills. "How I love toys," the voice said suddenly. They had expected to meet their host here, but still there was no one to be found. "I love their little clothes and their hair and their colors... forgive me. I haven't yet introduced myself. I am Queen Marianne, of the Houses Garbrethil and Agarnen and Darogon."

"Darogon," Sarah asked.

"Indeed. King Valamir is my uncle."

"I didn't know he had a niece."

"He had only one, and he treated her as if she were the only girl in all the world. And then *this* happened..."

"Please, your majesty," Alex said, looking into the air. "We would appreciate it if you would show yourself." There was no answer.

"How rude you are to ignore the presence of a queen."

They still could not figure out where she was until Sarah looked ahead. "No..." She shook her head in disbelief, for she had just noticed how the doll on the bed had been staring at them.

"Yes," the doll answered. "Here I am." She was no more than a foot and a half tall, with long black hair and eyes that were like bottomless wells. Her little black dress bore frills at the ends, and her skin was milky white. Now they could see that, unlike the other dolls, she had a look of life after death after life after death; a look of weary madness in her face and a softness to her porcelain skin. This was not as much a living doll, as it was a tiny woman. A tiny, vengeful, undead, cursed woman whose vampire blood flowed from the House of Orinost itself.

They rose slowly and sought to escape. "What is your hurry, little ones," Marianne inquired with her black lips curled into sinister smile. "We haven't had any time to play at all." She hopped down from the edge of the bed and held her arms outward to Aaron. "Little boy... little Aaron... wouldn't you like to stay here with me and play forever?" He stared horrified at her and quickly shook his head as if he were trying to shake free from a swarm of bees. "But everyone wants to stay little and play

forever... everybody *does!*" With a wave of her hand, the other toys in the bedroom rose from their seats and moved forward.

Alex nudged Sarah and Aaron and together they ran toward an exit. But Marianne lifted her dainty doll hand and the door was suddenly bolted shut. When they turned toward her, they could see how her gentle and beautiful face had quickly turned sour and terrifying. "Do not dare disregard my generosity!" Her eyes were sunken in like the dead; and when her lips parted, they revealed teeth like spearheads. "In the Hall of Dolls, *I* am queen!" A moment later, an arrow had pierced her through the stomach like a javelin and she looked down at her wound and shrieked. The bolts holding the door to the upper tower were undone and Alex led his friends out of the bedroom.

But as they escaped they could hear the ruthless dolls clamoring behind them and Marianne's wicked voice driving them on. They hurried across a metal catwalk that spanned the upper half of a tall circular vault. The walls were broken into many levels and there was an eerie glow splashed all about. As they ran, Sarah looked down toward the bottom and saw a nauseating mass of flesh and eyes sitting in the hole, with tentacles flying all about. The bizarre creature pulsated with evil anger and released torrents of green bile from its mouths.

After fleeing this vault, they ran through a long dark hallway lined with tremendous boxes, each with a symbol painted on its front and a crank on its side. Aaron knew what they were and pushed his guardians to run faster. But even as they hurried, music began to come from the boxes as their cranks slowly turned themselves. It was a symphony of chaotic tunes; each one clashing with the next. Until finally they all fell silent, save the largest box at the far end of the hall. It continued on and on, its pace slowing and speeding up and slowing again. When they reached the end of the corridor, there was a groaning sound as the lid flew back and, like a rising storm, the gruesome head of a demonic clown sprang up from its depths, gripping the edge of the box with its gigantic white hands. Its grinning teeth were filed into razor points, and its red lips looked stained with blood. Its beady little eyes were more horrible than looking at Death itself, and his laugh was a most harrowing sound. Oh, how he laughed. He was called the Laughing Madness, and it was his cackling that echoed through the tower, for terror amused him.

They turned a corner and kept running until they forced themselves into another room, just barely shutting the heavy door behind them. They ran bolts and chains across it to hold it shut while they could hear the sounds of the angry dolls throwing themselves against the other side. It was unnerving but it seemed they were safe for now. But the door had been difficult to get through. It seemed heavily bolted before they managed somehow to open it, as if it were a prison designed to lock something in. Sure enough, this room was filled with toys as well, and they had long been imprisoned here.

Alex panicked and turned toward the door. There was only one way in or out, and if they were to escape, they would have to brave the hordes of other toys that waited for them outside. But Sarah walked further in, toward the crowded shelves and overstuffed barrels of silent, still playthings. Alex watched her lift a doll into her arms and said nothing, because these were nice looking, whereas the others all had menacing oddities

about them. These were honest and quiet, and they didn't move. These were all the toys that Marianne could not control. They did not come to her when she called or attack when she commanded. These were beyond her reach and were locked in here until the day when she could control them.

After a short time, the banging on the door ceased and Sarah, Alex and their young charge rested. Sarah had taken quite a shine to a little doll with rusty red hair and a green gingham dress, and she seemed to be fast asleep with Aaron at her side and the doll in her arms. Alex found it difficult to sleep here, but their lack of rest made it more difficult to resist and he, too fell asleep. A few hours later, Sarah hazily opened her eyes. The doll was not with her and her companions were still asleep, so she dozed off again. The next time she awakened, she could feel someone rousing her. Opening her eyes, she looked to Aaron, who was lying still beside her, sleeping soundly. She turned her gaze to Alex, who was across from her, against the wall. He was also asleep. She was a little confused, but she felt it again and looked down.

The little doll was kneeling on her lap, shaking her arm. She stood up swiftly, knocking the doll to the ground, and made such a racket that Aaron and Alex were shocked out of their slumber. "What is it," Alex yelled, just waking up. Seeing the doll squirming around on the floor, he felt a wave of 'I told you so's making their way to his mouth, but he drew his leg back to kick the thing out of the way, so they could escape.

"Wait," Sarah shouted, holding out her arms to stop him. She looked down at the doll and saw how the little thing was clinging to her leg for protection. It shivered and gazed upward at her with sparkling green eyes that had more life behind them than Marianne's. It was real life and a real soul. Sarah bent downward and lifted the frightened doll into her arms and held it close. Now it smiled and hugged her back. Alex relaxed himself and looked around, only to notice that all the other toys had awakened as well and were moving about. Clyde the Yellow Clown was dancing with his red yarn hair bouncing around. Tank the Armadillo was rocking back and forth on his treads. Sir Aberdeen was a winged knight with an owl's head, who raised his broadsword and bowed to their human guests. There were many toys there that had been locked away because they would not submit to Marianne's rule, but they were more alive than any of her vicious children.

"What's your name," Sarah asked, holding the doll high. She did not answer but removed a pink flower from her hair and held it out, smiling innocently. "What is that, a cherry blossom?" She nodded eagerly. "Is that your name?" She nodded again in excitement. "Hello, Cherry Blossom! I'm Sarah." The doll said nothing, but leaned forward to kiss the girl's face. Sarah then placed her on a countertop and sat down near her. "You can't speak, can you?" The doll put her hands behind her back and shook her head somberly. "But you used to be able to, is that right?" Sadly she nodded, but soon became cheerful again at having met a friend and sat down with her legs stretched out, clicking her little black shoes together.

In many ways she was very like Marianne, in height and structure. The size of her head, the shape of her eyes and lips were very much the same, so that they could have been sister dolls. It was inferred, then, that Cherry Blossom had once been human as

well. They did not know the story of how she and Marianne became dolls, but you may well hear that story one day. Indeed all of the toys here had either once been human or were imbued with mortal spirits to make them live. But where Marianne's toys were bent only to do evil things, Cherry Blossom, Sir Aberdeen, Clyde, Tank, and the rest of their forgotten kin knew right from wrong and would not let themselves become slaves to the wicked Princess of Angrim.

But they had no influence outside of this old vault, and held little hope that anything would be able to change that. Indeed, they had spent a long time deep in sleep since there was seldom anything else they could do. So deep was their sleep that they were unable to wake themselves up. But something about the arrival of their new friends pulled them out of this hibernation, and they would not waste it. While Alex, Sarah and Aaron rested the toys began to plot their breakout and devise a plan of how to fight back against Marianne and give the humans time to escape her tower. Plans were drawn up and all the forgotten toys gathered to do their part. About an hour later, they had gathered up enough strength to make one last resistance effort against the evil dolls; even though it was almost certain that they would all perish before the end.

Cherry Blossom walked to the edge of the counter and gave Sarah's head a gentle tap to rouse her from sleep again. "Hello, what is it?" She grabbed the girl's sleeve and pulled her toward the place where the plans had been written down by Amandique, a doll with a little paintbrush. "What are these? Plans? For what?" Cherry Blossom pointed to the door and made a scarcely audible noise. "You want to get out?" She nodded her head with a grin. Sarah adopted a sad smile. "But Marianne is out there. I don't think you'll get too far." The doll looked down, balling her hands into fists and looking very frustrated; making the same noise as before. "What's wrong?"

After straining herself for a few moments she opened her mouth and said, in just above a whisper, "Not escape..."

"What? Did you..."

"We don't want to... escape," she repeated, struggling but quite clearly. "We want to fight."

Sarah didn't bother to ask how the doll recovered the ability to speak, having had something to do with their being woken up. She was more concerned about Blossom's safety. "But there are so few of you!"

"There are enough. Enough to keep Marianne and her dolls distracted while you and your friends escape. Besides, we do not plan on winning."

"But you'll be *killed!*"

"That isn't a concern of ours. We've spent so long in this prison; always fearing that Marianne would finally decide to destroy us or, worse, force us under her power. She is very powerful. I'm not sure why she didn't destroy me sooner. But my point is that we are tired of half existing here. If we can do something to strike a blow to her, it will be worth all the years we waited. If we can help you, it will be worth it. We were not meant to defeat her."

"But we weren't either."

"Perhaps not, but you were meant to destroy this castle! Isn't that what you are working for? You and your friends will destroy the power of Orinost and her with it! We will be content just to have helped."

Sarah put a finger to the doll's face and began to cry. "But I don't want to lose you. Come with us."

"What kind of friend would I be if I left my brothers and sisters behind to fight? I can't leave them. We have to stay in our own world, and you have to return to yours." She placed a little helmet on her head and gathered her troops. "This is the last night we shall ever have to stay in this awful place."

The toys woke Alex and Aaron and prepared for their escape. Alex took a position by the door and opened it quietly, just a crack, so he could survey the area outside. It was still very dark, but he could discern the shapes of some furniture and the layout of the halls. There was a staircase not far from where the vault was and it went upward, hopefully to the upper battlements. He saw a shape leaning against the leg of an end table; something rather small and soft. He squinted, trying to sharpen his vision, until the two glassy eyes became clear in the darkness, staring at him. It was Marianne. She wasn't moving but rather sat there gazing blankly at him as if she knew his exact plan and stood as an ever-present deterrence.

"Is she still there," Cherry Blossom asked. Alex nodded. "I expected as much. We will still proceed. Are the wooden soldiers ready?" Sir Aberdeen presented the assembly of soldiers and bowed low. "Good." She turned back to Alex. "Whenever you are ready to open the door, we will be ready to charge.

Alex peered out the door again. He avoided looking into Marianne's sinister face as much as he could, and made certain the rest of the area was clear. So far he saw nothing, but much could have been concealed by the dark. He was about to withdraw himself into the chamber again, but took one last look at the end table. She was gone. "Uhhh... guys," was all he could manage before the vicious doll rose up in front of his face with an expression horrific enough to bleed stone. She bore her fangs and reached out for his face, but he swiftly pulled himself back into the vault and slammed the door. She jammed it with a long knife and struggled to push the door open, but all three humans held it fast; and despite her ferocity, she couldn't force her way through.

But Cherry Blossom looked down from the counter with contempt and said, "Let her in..." After a few moments pause, wondering if it was the wisest action, Sarah and Alex agreed and, sending Aaron to safety, released their weight from the door. It swung open like a shot and Marianne stood in the entryway, with her dagger held high and her eyes bulging with rage. But she did not expect to see Cherry Blossom again, nor any of the toys she had locked away. In fact Blossom's fears of being converted were unfounded because Marianne had forgotten about them completely. Seized by fear at the sight of the legions of rebellious toys before her, Marianne leaped back, only to be set upon by Blossom, herself, followed quickly by her siblings.

There was a mass of confusion as Marianne called for her faithful to defend her, and a wave of maddened dolls came to meet the charging toys. Rising above the sounds of conflict came Blossom's voice, "Go! You must go now!" She had Marianne pinned to

the floor, and turned toward Sarah and her companions. "You must get away now!" With nothing more than a gesture to attempt to express her profound gratitude, Sarah led Alex and Aaron out of the chamber, past the fray and up the stairs. They were spotted by The Redeemer, a fearsome doll dressed in a tattered white, bloodstained robe and skeletal face-paint over a black, rotted head. Releasing some twisted form of language from his mouth, the doll summoned some of its fellows and gave chase up the steps.

Onward they ran up the spiraling stairs with the dolls close behind. Alex stopped in a moment of passion and drew out his sword. He was tired of fleeing and met the things head on. The Redeemer came first and tried to use some perverse form of magic to turn their minds to terror. Then his subordinates came on. The baby dolls flew from the carpeted stairs and tried to bite him with their little fangs; the fetishes drew out their blowguns and voodoo dolls to curse him; the marionettes descended from the air to try and strangle him with their strings. But he let the power of the Anaris speak for itself, and sent the dolls flying. More ghastly toys came forward, but he beat them away.

With a cry of anguish, The Redeemer was shot through his little black heart by Sarah's Dragon Fang arrow and the toys drew back in fear. The three turned and fled, suddenly turning down another flight of stairs. From here, they could look upward and see the battle behind them. Sir Aberdeen was winning against many scores of dolls; The Clockwork Prince had been cut in twain and the Hellspeaker was felled. But there was no sign of Clyde the good clown, who had fallen earlier. Many of Marianne's most prized dolls had been sent back to the grave, but she stood tall, with the enchanted dagger (given to her by her husband, the Fetish King) gripped tightly in her hand. Sarah kept looking back as they ran up to the exit door, but there was no sign of Cherry Blossom anywhere. She began to cry as Alex kicked the door open and pulled her through, slamming it shut behind them.

With Marianne's tower and the Hall of Dolls behind them, they looked out over the upper parapets ahead of them. They stood higher than Sarah or Aaron had ever been before (Alex had climbed several mountains in the months before and even looked down on Orinost a couple of times). They stood looking over most of the castle; the Forbidden Citadel like a model city far below them. The sky was dark and the moon was bright, and the wind cold. As they looked around, they could see the towers rising up around them; so many that it would take years to see them all, if that was something a very brave someone desired. Alex and Sarah did not think themselves that brave.

The sky was filled with bridges and walkways; turrets and walls and battlements and steeples; like an ancient city in the clouds. But so much was behind them already; the misty streets of the haunted city; the dark halls of the castle; the dungeons of Belegan; the tragic halls of the ballroom; the black gardens of the conservatory, and now the terrifying Hall of Dolls. But they did not think of all that now. They only looked upward and saw that there was still much above them; the cathedral was ahead, with the clock tower high above that, and the King's Tower looming above everything; so high it pierced the moon like a spear. They knew that this was the final stage of their journey and kept their minds only on what was ahead, just hoping that they could reach the others before Matthias and Morgan could carry out whatever treacherous things they had been planning.

They hurried across the parapets, hastily making their way to the cathedral. The steps were old and the causeways were cracked, so they stepped as lightly as they could, battling fearful heights and blowing winds to get across. Aaron stopped suddenly in the middle of an overpass and looked around.

"What is it?" Sarah asked.

"I heard something," the boy said uneasily.

"Yeah," Alex added. "I heard it too." Their hair was blowing around their faces, especially Sarah's; and she fought it away to speak against the whistling gales.

"It's the wind," she said. "It's really bad up here."

"No, it's something else." A strange noise flew in from the sky, and they all realized that it wasn't the wind. A moment later, a dark shadow had swept over them and a tremendous skeletal dragon bearing a shadowy rider sailed past them and spun around the tower ahead. "Run! Get down!" As Alex shouted, they all leapt off the overpass to the steps below it, huddled together beneath the bridge. They stared into the sky and saw four great dragons, all worn down to their bones, all with gruesome knights at their reins. They circled their prey like vultures, releasing beastly bellows and bays from their fanged mouths; the echoes resonating within their cavernous, open ribs. Their wings were tattered and decayed, like Vashrog the dracolich of Mount Mimchara, but held them aloft just as well as those of any living dragon.

The riders were Morlock's disciples, all necromancers belonging to the Mages' Guild. They kept an ever-vigilant watch over the upper sections of the castle and reported any intruders to their master. But Morlock was now away making misery at the front lines of battle, so freedom was granted to the Dragon Magi to do what they wished with whomever they found. Dolgorric was donned in black armor and wielded a heavy sword with blade envenomed to cause searing pain; he was Morlock's strongest mage. Wethilric was dressed in a shadowy cloak of black velvet and kept his face hidden beneath an enchanted white mask, with a dark scepter clutched in his hand; he was Morlock's cruelest mage. Vildered's rotted skull had an elongated snout like that of an animal, and he always leaned into the wind with his demonic lance held forward like a jousting lance; he was Morlock's swiftest mage. Last was Zaerkel, who wore no hood or helm, but merely a crown resting upon his invisible head; and wore no gloves or gauntlets but held a bow in his invisible hands, with a quiver of venomous arrows on his back; and he was Morlock's most precise and skillful mage.

Like a flock of carrion-hunters they formed a ring in the sky. "Maybe they didn't see us," Sarah said, holding her brother close.

"They definitely saw us," Alex replied with worry-burdened certainty. "Now the trick is getting away someplace where they won't see us." The way he said it, it sounded like he knew full well that would be next to impossible, if not impossible. As they began to slowly rise, suddenly the four dragon riders broke their formation and scattered outward in untraceable patterns; intertwining and passing and spinning like acrobats. With little choice, the three young humans bolted up the steps and sprinted across the battlements; the two older ones running and the boy clutched in Alex's arms. The fiendish hell bats were gliding above and below, weaving in and out of the skeletal architecture;

around tower, under arch, and over palisade; always keeping their devilish eyes fixed on the intruders.

The ghastly howls in the night air were bone chilling and so maddening that Alex and Sarah became confused as to where they were actually running to. It seemed enough to them that they flee from wherever they were. They bolted as swiftly as they could, with little hope of eluding their pursuers. But before they realized what had happened, the team of Dragon Mages had given up their chase and drew back to the vicinity of Marianne's tower. The skies were quiet once again. Alex felt there was no time to waste, and that they should run to safety before the vicious foursome return. But Sarah was staring at something in the distance behind them, and wouldn't move on.

Bounding toward them from the Hall of Dolls, following the same route they had, was little Cherry Blossom. Thankfully, she had survived the battle and was rushing to greet her friends. But she was waving her tiny arms to get their attention, and her face looked troubled. "What's wrong with her?" Alex asked in a worried tone. But Sarah was too filled with joy to care, and held her arms out to welcome the pretty little doll. Blossom was getting closer now, and the look on her face was borderline terrified. She was trying to warn them about something, but they couldn't understand what.

However, before they could react to their diminutive friend's gestures, Marianne rose over the bank of the ledge just in front of them, tightly holding her dagger high above her demonic head. Her eyes were burning with hateful passion and her dress was torn ragged by struggle. It seems she had escaped the battle and took after her unwilling playmates; and Cherry Blossom had pursued her the whole way. She dove forward to stab Sarah, with a gruesome yell, but Blossom grasped her from behind and threw her to the floor of the ledge. The two grappled with one another; Marianne swinging her knife; and Blossom pushing back with her tiny bare hands.

As they rolled this way and that, Alex grabbed Sarah's arm and urged her to run. "No," she shouted with tears in her eyes. "I'm not leaving her again!" She struggled against his grip and ran to help the doll, but she had been thrown aside by the evil little princess. As Sarah approached, the dagger came swinging at her, just barely foiled as Blossom rose again and pulled Marianne away. Now Sarah realized that she couldn't help. Her bow would do little good against someone like Marianne and she wasn't prepared to face something like this. She was genuinely afraid of the Doll Queen and couldn't move any further.

Alex looked up when he saw the shadows descend on the castle wall again. The Dragon Mages had returned and drew their weapons to finish the hunt. "Sarah," he yelled, taking her arm again. "Let's go!" As the beasts circled in the air, the two dolls were still battling, neither one gaining any ground in the fight. All Sarah could do was stare as she watched her little friend fighting for her life. It was criminal to stand by and do nothing. She jumped forward and drew her bow, determined to land a hit before the end. But in a split second, it was all over. Cherry Blossom had wrested the dagger from her enemy's hand and pressed her toward the edge of the wall. Marianne was strong but she was becoming weary, and couldn't fight back any longer. Then with a short wail; far too short to accompany an act of such tragedy; a tremendous dragon descended into the scene and

in a moment's time, both dolls had been swept over the edge and disappeared into the fog.

Sarah was hit with a shock she couldn't bear, and was struck deaf and dumb, never taking her eyes off the ledge her tiny friend fell from. She wouldn't move, but Alex grabbed her and pulled her onward. They ran deliriously with the Mages close behind, but coming to another overpass stretching across a complicated stairway, the fugitives dropped suddenly from the edge of the bridge and tried to lose themselves in the maze-like series of steps and ledges. But there were four hunters trailing them and each of them, as well as their decaying dragon mounts, had keen eyes for picking out their prey. The young ones huddled together silently, hiding beneath a stone ledge. They could hear the great winged beasts sailing overhead, but didn't seem to have been detected. It seemed as if the struggle between the dolls had captured the attention of the dragon riders as well, and momentarily distracted them from their quarry.

They were all saddened by what happened, but their thoughts were suddenly shaken when they heard the sound of the huge talons above them, and the growl of the skeletal beasts as they breathed heavily. They could hear the clinking of the mages' armor and the sounds of their weapons hitting against the dragons' bones. All four of them had landed just above the place where their prey had taken shelter, but remained silent. Alex had his eyes squeezed shut and thought that it would be better if they hurried up and found them. He was sure they knew where they were and were just playing with them now. It was cruel.

But the Dragon Mages were crueler than they had expected. Dolgorric dismounted and drew his saw-toothed sword; ready to thrust when his victims appeared. But he was not the most perceptive of the wizard knights. He paced back and forth on the bridge hoping the children would run from wherever they hid. However, Wethilric placed his cursed hand on Dolgorric's arm and bid him lower his weapon and wait. Then the evil wizard, who's ivory mask always bore a twisted smile, drew open the folds of his cloak, and from the unseen depths of his ribs came hordes of little spiders and worms. They crawled and slithered from the innards of his robes and armor and scattered across the stone floor of the parapets around them, scaling walls and descending into crevices.

Sarah's eyes grew wide as she looked at Alex and saw the things crawling onto his shoulder from the top of the ledge. He saw that they had surrounded her and Aaron, as well, and were now creeping all over the small alcove where they were crowded together. It was difficult for anyone not to scream, but the three remained silent for as long as they could. The things were sickening, even for insects and maggots, and they inspired an overwhelming amount of disgust, so that one could hardly bear it. Alex was finding it very difficult to breathe now. Watching them with their innumerable legs and their biting mandibles, he started to wheeze uncontrollably. He couldn't help himself. But when Dolgorric's serrated blade descended from the crevice above, and slashed at them, they leapt out of the alcove and sprang back up to the bridge where the evil mages waited.

Dolgorric drew his sword from the hole and quickly swung it at the fleeing kids, but they were already out of his reach. Crossly, he leapt back into the saddle of his skeletal dragon and drove it into the air, followed by his comrades. They chased them

over the final stretch of the palisade, because drawing quickly in front of them was the tremendous cathedral tower. The winged beast wheeled around and made grasping passes at them; the glowing sword cut the air near them; the lance was thrust; the poison arrows pierced the floor beside them. Wethilric nearly bashed their heads with his scepter, when Sarah spun around and shot a blazing green arrow into his shoulder, before disappearing and returning to her bow. Alex flailed his shining sword to keep the beasts at bay, but there was little they could do besides slow them down.

As the demonic knights rocketed suddenly into the sky, Alex and Sarah gripped Aaron and bolted for the cathedral. But coming to one final archway before the tower, they realized that the foursome of sky hunters had perched upon the top of the arch and were continuing their attack; Zaerkel resuming his rain of violet arrows. The dragons' huge ugly mouths were launching forward to devour them if they stepped forward. But Alex swung his blade as savagely as he could and struck every skull that came near and moved closer to where they were perched after they stopped attacking. Before long he had frightened the monsters into submission and the three of them bolted beneath the archway as abruptly as they could. Once they were through, the dragons whirled about and fell upon them. They had just made it up the stairs to the upper entrance of the cathedral and leapt through, slamming the doors behind them.