



FIVE NIGHTS TO THE CRIMSON MOON

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— PROLOGUE —
In A Time Most Forgotten

The giant dragon, black as a midnight silhouette, spread its massive wings as it reared up and belched a ball of fire that dissolved into molten streams running down the cave walls.

With blood-red eyes, the creature slowly glared down at the wild-eyed man clutching a **large broken diamond**. At the man's feet, thousands of diamonds lay scattered over the cave floor, sparkling in the glow of the molten streams.

The man screamed and fled into a **narrow tunnel**, the terrifying roars echoing in his ears. Suddenly the dragon's head materialized out of the tunnel wall, snapping its razor-sharp teeth at him. He ducked and stumbled. Now the creature's head shot out from the opposite wall. The man screamed again and lurched towards the cave entrance just ahead.

The terrified man stumbled out into the moonlight and crashed into two small figures wearing hooded robes. He staggered to his feet and ran screaming through the snow. He looked back. The cave entrance had vanished from sight – so had the two figures.

Clutching the broken diamond to his chest, the man now delirious, stumbled his way down the snow-covered forested mountain slopes. Branches whipped at his face and hands and slashed at his clothing.

Three nights later, the near-frozen man staggered into the arms of a surprised fur trapper sitting at his crackling campfire. It was the terror in the eyes of the dying man that scared the fur trapper. In his last moments, the man ranted about terrible fire-breathing, flesh-eating Snow Dragons that chased him from a diamond-filled cave. He had also seen their Keepers, the small creatures who could be seen for only a moment before they vanished into thin air.

Snow Dragons? Keepers? A shiver ran up the fur trapper's spine, and he nervously glanced around the dark forest. But the large broken diamond the delirious man gripped, drove away any fear and greed filled his heart. Just how big would an unbroken diamond be? The trapper knew that size meant wealth. Immense wealth. Wealth that could overpower any terror.

He couldn't pry the diamond from the man's ice-rigid fingers, and running low on supplies, he left the poor soul there, vowing to return and find the diamond cave for himself.

In a tavern of a small village in the lowlands, the fur trapper drunkenly confided his plans to a friend who in turn whispered to others. They did not believe in Keepers or Snow Dragons, but they certainly believed in huge diamonds.

Later that night, in the snow-covered forest overlooking the village, a thick-set man in furs, armed with a sleek laser rifle, stood in the midst of a cluster of fur-clad men holding laser rifles.

"That drunken trapper never remembers anything the next day," the man growled, "so tonight we retrace his steps." He patted his laser rifle, and added sarcastically,

“Those Keepers had better keep their Snow Dragons on a leash.”

The men moved silently up the forested mountain slopes. On the third night they rested in a moonlit clearing, speaking in hushed voices as they huddled in twos and threes. Suddenly the thick-set man was startled. A small figure in a blue hooded robe stood in the shadows. Then another and another. Now they were surrounded by small figures.

“We got company,” he yelled, his laser rifle humming as he took swift aim. The small figure ran. The man fired, his weapon giving a muted ‘whoomp’ and a blue flash. Something thudded into the snow. More figures ran, followed by ‘whoomps’ and blue flashes as the other men opened fire. There were no cries, no dying screams, nothing. Then the firing stopped and a silence settled on the clearing.

The man walked into the shadows and nudged with his boot a small robed body lying face down in the snow.

“Just an ugly mountain dwarf,” the man yelled back to the others. “Dragon Keepers indeed. Hah! And where are their Snow Dragons?”

The men nervously glanced around and some quickly reloaded their weapons.

“That diamond cave must be close by,” the man said. “It’ll be easier to find in daylight. Let’s get some shut-eye.”

An hour later, silhouetted by a crackling campfire, the men were sleeping with laser rifles by their sides. Snores were the only other sounds. Propped up against a log, a sentry yawned, desperate to keep awake, but sleep won.

On the far side of the clearing where the firelight met

the shadows, a small figure wearing a dark-green hooded robe, appeared. It stared at all the small bodies in the snow. Then, as if by magic, the bodies and their robes faded away.

The small figure trembled as a fierce power surged through its body, filling it with so much energy it thought it would burst. Its stomach tightened, shoulders narrowed and fingers bunched into fists. It wanted so desperately to scream the Snow Mountains down. It wanted so desperately to smash everything in sight, to destroy, destroy, destroy. It wanted blood-red revenge.

“Now they sleep with their dream shadows,” it whispered in a deep, raspy male voice as it watched many of the sleepers twitch and jerk. “Come out, I command you.”

It raised both arms and a ghostly green beam of light shot out of outstretched claws, hitting the sleeping sentry in his forehead.

The sleeping sentry moaned, and his head jerked as a dreamlike face emerged from his forehead. It floated there, staring down at him, then it gave a blood-curdling scream. The sentry jolted awake. Terrified, he stumbled into the campfire, sending up a shower of sparks, and ran into the dark forest pursued by the face.

More ghostly green beams shot out, drawing ghostly, screaming apparitions from every sleeping man. They woke in terror, grabbing their laser rifles and shooting wildly. ‘Whoomps’ and blue flashes filled the air, but they only cut themselves down. The ghostly apparitions disappeared in a straight line into the night and the surrounding trees twisted and died with a shrieking noise, their branches reaching desperately into the night sky like skeletal fingers

as their leaves swiftly withered and fell.

The ghostly beams vanished, the hooded figure's claws retracted, and its arms dropped.

A terrible silence filled the air as snow fell. In the moonlight, the shadows of the twisted dead trees crept across the clearing as time passed.

The snow had now stopped falling. The embers of the campfire cast a gentle light that glinted here and there off the laser rifles poking out of the snow.

Another small figure, wearing a light-green hooded robe, was now standing at the figure's side.

An out-of-breath young woman staggered into the clearing. She was tall with dark eyes and short dark hair. An aqua shawl was draped over her shoulders and a wide-awake little boy clung to her back. Just above his left ear, his dark hair had a streak of white.

"Are you the Snow Dragon Keepers?" the woman said. Silence answered her, but she and the small figures then nodded many times, as if holding a conversation.

"It's alright," the woman said to the little boy as she lowered him to the snow, "they mean us no harm." She draped her shawl over the boy's head, shielding him from the sight of the snow-covered men's bodies. Annoyed, he pulled the shawl aside.

She turned to the two figures. "My name is Wilx. My people came seeking only a new start and an honest life. But some have been led astray by the greedy few who believed the diamond cave story." She picked up one of the still-humming laser rifles at her feet. The stock was twisted out of shape. She angrily flung it away. "I've tracked these stupid men for three nights. I'm sorry for their greed and their terrible deeds. The sorrow will remain

for a long time.”

The little boy glanced up to the woman. She continued the odd one-way conversation with the hooded figures.

“Yes. . . yes. . .” said the woman, “you in the peaks, we in the lowlands. Thank you.” Tears ran down her cheeks. The boy, seeing her cry, began sobbing.

Then silver-green tears ran down both the small figures’ leathery white cheeks and fell into the dark-green hooded figure’s cupped hands. Their blended tears solidified into a crystal. Tiny at first, the crystal quickly grew with each falling tear until it was almost three handspans high, jagged and glowing bright like a green diamond. Then the figure shifted its hands to the sides of the crystal.

The light-green hooded figure smoothed the crystal’s front until it gleamed like a polished mirror. An eerie green light flared up from within.

The woman stepped forward, nodding. Each time the dark-green hooded figure raised a finger off the crystal, the woman put a finger on the exact spot, until only she held it.

The woman nodded, agreeing to some silent command. Three times she moved one hand one way, and the other another way. As if by magic, the crystal twisted into another shape around its front panel until it **was unrecognizable** from its created shape.

The front of the crystal rippled with a liquid motion as a tiny, pea-sized orb of silver-gray light emerged, floated through the air and **painlessly entered the woman’s** forehead. Instantly, the irises of her dark eyes changed to silver-gray.

The woman mouthed silent words. Three bursts of silver-gray energy exploded from the crystal, sending

shockwaves rippling through the air.

The woman was startled as millions of pencil-thin ghostly silver-gray beams of light shot from the crystal, and headed in the same direction of the earlier apparitions. Seconds later, millions of ghostly apparitions – more than had fled into the night – were shrieking blurs as they were sucked back by the beams into the crystal’s rippling front. Then the beams vanished and the crystal quietly pulsed with a soft, silver-gray light.

The little boy had seen and heard nothing.

“What has happened this night must never happen again,” the dark-green hooded figure said aloud in a raspy male voice. “From this moment on, we give you, Wilx, the power we held over terrifying dreams. We must not have it anymore. Turning the terrors against the dreamers will send them mad. Control the power well, for in the wrong hands, tonight will occur again.”

The light-green hooded figure spoke in a deep, raspy female voice. “Your bloodline will control this Dreamstone and what lies within, now and into the future. The power of seeing and controlling nightmares will grow with each generation. As will the mind-talking.”

“The stories of diamond caves, Keepers and Snow Dragons must fade away,” said the dark-green hooded figure. “Let them become legends, myths. But above all, you must keep the Dreamstone safe.”

The woman suddenly gasped as she and the little boy looked up to the sky.

A sliver of crimson appeared at the edge of the full moon.

— CHAPTER 1 —
Today: Seventy-Two Years Later

Three days after Corbin's thirteenth birthday, the fist thudded painfully into his back. He swung around. Directly behind, sat the curly-haired Durm, the fourteen-year-old bulging with eighteen-year-old muscles, all-star bullyboy, and self-appointed class dreamboat.

"Do it, Dragon Boy," whispered Durm.

"No," whispered Corbin, a little too loudly.

"Corbin, stand!" ordered Teacher Hardmann from her high-set desk. It was said his history teacher at Gol's Academy of Higher Learning could hear the sound of a falling leaf hitting Guardian Park's lawn three blocks away. If she didn't like the leaf, that is. A whisper from the front row of class was like talking into a loudspeaker. And she had been teaching for an eternity. Parents had been taught by her and there were tales of grandparents being in her classes.

Corbin reluctantly stood, wishing the classroom floor would swallow him.

"Not only do you interrupt this mythology lesson," said Teacher Hardmann, "but there is still no sign of your assignment on 'Legends of the Snow Mountains'."

How could Corbin say, that on his way to school, his homework disc had been accidentally-on-purpose, trampled by Durm's big boots? No-one liked a tattle-tale.

"Sorry, Teacher Hardmann, I'll have it done for

tomorrow.” Behind Corbin came Durm’s stifled giggles.

Teacher Hardmann’s all-powerful outstretched finger ordered Corbin to sit. He sat down at his desk in the first of two levels of student work stations that formed semi-circular rows.

“The word we were seeking, until rudely interrupted, is ‘legendary,’” said Teacher Hardmann to the class. “‘Extinct’ will also suffice.”

Teacher Hardmann’s glare swept the classroom, then softened as her favorite student smiled at her. “Durm, can you give me an example of ‘extinct?’”

“Ah, yeah, Dragonasaurus T-Rex,” said Durm, and cocked a ‘how-was-that?’ eyebrow to the class. The students who knew what was good for them, giggled. Durm’s gang boys guffawed.

Teacher Hardmann smiled. “Very witty, but not quite, Durm.”

Corbin glanced across at Zelda, the pretty blonde girl with large eyes who was smiling at Durm. From the first day of school, Corbin had a crush on her, but not anymore. She liked Durm. In fact, every girl liked Durm. The bully always had the smile for them but they never saw the thudding fists he had for some of the boys.

“You’re not laughing, Dragon Boy,” whispered Durm as he sneakily punched Corbin hard in the back again.

Corbin pretended he didn’t feel the sharp pain.

“Class, enter your answers,” said Teacher Hardmann. “Remember, the examinations are waiting for you in seven weeks.” She paused for effect. “And I’ll be waiting for the failures.” She began to scan already handed-in assignment discs.

Dejected, Corbin inserted a data-stick into his desk

slot. Instantly, today's lesson appeared on his desk screen: 'The - - - - - Snow Dragons of the Snow Mountains.'

Durm stared at his own desk screen. He hated school. After all, in a few years, as his parents kept nagging him, he would be the Senior National Executive Junior Director of the exclusive NC Emporium. A position of power and others would do his typing. But what Durm really wanted to be was a sharply dressed-in-black Gol Guard Commander. That would be a position of real power.

Durm slowly typed in his answer on his inset keyboard: L . . . E . . . J . . . J . . . E . . . N . . . D . . . E . . . R . . . "Aahh, doesn't fit. How do you spell this stupid word?" he muttered, and leaned forward to spy on Corbin who was typing in L-E-G-E-N-D-A-R-Y.

Stupid word, thought Durm. He thumped Corbin in the back again.

"Hey, Dragon Boy," Durm whispered, keeping a wary eye on Teacher Hardmann. "I already told you I've had enough of this dumb class. It's clock time."

"No, I'm not doing it anymore," Corbin whispered back.

"Only your weirdo mind can do it, so do it now." Durm punched Corbin again.

Ouch! Corbin knew the bruises were appearing already. Then anger boiled up. But it was cooled by the sickening feeling of knowing Durm was always bigger.

Corbin sighed and concentrated on the class digital clock. In his mind, the internal electrical circuitry came alive.

The clock's numerals changed from 3:03 to 3:05. Then they sped up - 3:08, 3:18, 3:30.

Down the corridor, a bell rang and the classroom door slid open.

Puzzled, Teacher Hardmann checked her watch.

Corbin stuffed his data-stick into his shoulder bag as Durm led the class stampeding for the open door.

But the clock was out of control – 4:10, 4:38, 5:20, 6:00.

The bell rang again. The door slammed shut in their faces. Durm grabbed Corbin.

“Idiot,” yelled Durm, “you forgot to stop the clock again. The stupid door thinks it’s night time. We’re locked in here with old Ma Hardmann.”

“Old who?” Teacher Hardmann’s bellow reverberated throughout the entire school. Everyone turned to her as she glared at Durm, her foot tapping furiously.

“Better start running, **Dragon Boy**,” Durm whispered into Corbin’s face.

An hour later, in the cold afternoon air, Corbin’s boots pounded Gol’s heated sidewalks and his heart pounded even faster. His black hair, damp with perspiration, clung to his brow as he dashed onto the road, dodging sleek hover cars humming along barely above the street’s surface. Two older teenagers on an **even sleeker hover snow mobile** nearly clipped him as he skidded across the wet road.

“Watch the T-Flyer, moron,” one rider yelled.

Corbin darted into a narrow arcade. The glassed-in heat was stifling. He paused, gulping lungfuls of hot air into his hurting body. **The three gang boys were closing fast.**

“Durm wants you,” yelled the leading boy.

Durm! Just the mention of the bully’s name was

enough to get Corbin running again.

Corbin dashed through the arcade, past startled shoppers, and out the far entrance. He sprinted across the city square into Guardian Park. Bare-branched trees marked the park's perimeter and trimmed shrubbery outlined its paths. The late afternoon sun cast its golden light across the Snow Mountains that towered over the city on three sides.

Pursued by the three boys, Corbin sprinted out of the park, across the road and past wide steps that led to the huge, mirrored doors of a granite domed building.

On its high-set parapets, security cameras tracked the chase.

Corbin sped round the corner at the rear of the building. He skidded on the sidewalk, crashing heavily onto his elbow. No time to feel the pain. Get up. Hurry. Get up. Get up.

Directly ahead stood Durm and two rough-headed cohorts. Now the three boys chasing Corbin, rounded the corner.

Corbin struggled to his feet. He had to escape. But where? They would be on him in seconds.

"Dragon Boy, you're dead meat," bellowed Durm.

Corbin's mouth was sandpaper dry. He couldn't swallow, couldn't move. Suddenly, an inexplicable urge pulled him toward the curbside sewer grate – *hide in the sewer, hide in the sewer.*

The ice-cold metal of the grate stung Corbin's fingers. Ignoring the pain, he wrenched the grate up and plunged feet-first into the narrow hole.

Durm and his gang arrived just as the grate dropped back into position, crushing Corbin's fingers.

“Pull it up,” Durm ordered as he elbowed one boy in the ribs. The boy tried but the grate wouldn’t budge. Durm pushed him aside. “Out of the way. Got to do everything myself.” He effortlessly heaved the grate up, tossed it aside, and dropped into the hole. But being much broader than Corbin, he found himself wedged. “Get me out.” The gang boys pulled hopelessly at Durm’s arms.

“Hey, you kids!” a gruff voice bellowed.

Durm’s gang scattered as two Gol Guards appeared. They wore black helmets and black uniforms with laser rifles slung over their shoulders.

“So, what have we got here?” said the first Gol Guard, looking down at the struggling bully.

“Don’t you know who I am?” demanded Durm.

“Mister Pig-Really-Stuck-in-a-Poke?” joked the second Gol Guard.

“My father owns the NC Emporium and he knows Commander Biss, your boss. So you’d better—”

“Better save you?” the first Gol Guard cut in sarcastically. “Maybe your old man will reward us with an exclusive NC Gold Card.” The Gol Guards laughed and yanked Durm free.

“Look what you’ve done,” Durm yelled, picking at a ripped pants pocket.

The first Gol Guard leaned into Durm’s face, unnerving him. “Well, maybe you should complain to your father. And while you’re at it, you can also explain to him what you were doing around The Dome.”

Gulp. Durm looked up at the granite building – The Dome. He hadn’t noticed where his pursuit of Corbin had taken him. Durm’s cockiness evaporated. Everyone knew that horrible things, like really bad kids, were locked

up inside some sort of crystal in The Dome. Some said that the last Snow Dragon was kept in chains deep in its dungeons, and it screamed at night for the flesh of children. Others said it was just the whistling wind.

Durm gulped again.

“Now get,” ordered the Gol Guard, giving Durm a swift kick in the backside.

Durm’s eyes narrowed in anger as he yelled back at the grate hole. “Now you’re deader than the deadest dead meat, Dragon Boy.” Then, fuming, he disappeared round the building.

The first Gol Guard peered at the grate hole. “Wasn’t there another kid?”

“No, just that rich one,” said the second Gol Guard.

Down in the sewer, Corbin, still gasping for breath, took a few steps back into the shadows as the two Gol Guards clanged the overhead grate back into position. His crushed fingers continued to throb.

Corbin had been ‘Dragon Boy’ since the first day of school when he arrived clutching a winged dragon figurine he had made. He quickly learnt three things:

One, no one brought ‘baby toys’ to school.

Two, it was best to keep out of Durm’s way, which was hard considering they were always in the same class.

Three, it didn’t help to let anyone know you could control the electrical circuitry of gadgets – like the classroom digital clock – just by concentrating hard. Grandfather said Corbin’s family was a bit different from other families. Something weird about mind frequencies. And life was hard enough without thinking about such things.

Fading light from the setting sun filtered through the

overhead grate. The slow plop, plop, plop of dripping water echoed from somewhere behind Corbin and the smell of damp air filled his nostrils. Five thick cables lined the sewer wall, leading into a seemingly endless darkness.

Again he sensed that inexplicable sensation – a sixth sense – pull him gently into that darkness.

Every few steps, his boots splashed into shallow pools of water. Running water softly gurgled somewhere ahead. The throbbing in his fingers eased a little. He ran his hands along the narrowing sewer walls, and met stone and cold slime. Yuck! He wiped them on his pants and shuffled onwards.

Under a dim overhead light, the cables disappeared into a loose round grille covered in spiderwebs. Behind the grille was a drain. Deep inside, a faint sliver of amber light beckoned to him. He brushed the webs away, and eased the grille aside, careful not to damage the cables and electrocute himself.

“It must go right under The Dome. Maybe there’s another way out of here,” he muttered.

He pushed his way into the drain. It sloped downward and its low roof forced him to bend at the waist. Farther along, he came to a dead end where the cables disappeared into a stone wall. The sliver of amber light shone from a loose stone. His breath came faster and that indescribable feeling grew stronger, drawing his hand to the light. He pushed at the stone and it gave a little and the amber light suddenly brightened through the widened crack.

A horrible sensation crawled over his skin and he quickly retreated.

— CHAPTER 2 —

A New Nightmare Is Born

Hours later that night, on a moonlit, windswept outcrop of rock in the Snow Mountains, a long-range laser rifle fitted with a nightscope, took deadly aim at something below.

“Ain’t done a bit of wolf-bagging in a long time. Just don’t move,” the sniper whispered. His finger slowly squeezed the trigger.

A leather-gloved hand came from nowhere and knocked the laser rifle aside.

“Wha—” the sniper exclaimed.

Macor, a short tubby man with a whiskered face ugly from living his forty years in hostile weather, stood over the sniper. Both wore dirty thermo camouflage suits with high collars and patches here and there. Fur hats were pulled down hard over their heads, protecting their ears from the biting cold.

“You wanna tell the whole Snow Mountains where we are, Trigg?” said Macor. “The man said to wait for his signal. And as long as I’m boss ’round here, we don’t make a sound, we don’t make a move. We just wait for the man.”

An onkamite – a white-furred, spider monkey-like creature – leapt onto Macor’s shoulder, its long, slithery tongue flicking at Trigg. Then it farted, giving off a foul stench that only Macor couldn’t smell.

“But, Macor, I saw somethin’ movin’,” Trigg whined. He got to his feet and swatted away the onkamite’s wiggling tongue. Something below caught his eye. “There it is again. Yeah, there, to the left of the clearin’. Gotta be snow wolves.”

Macor snatched the laser rifle and peered through its nightscope. In the crosshairs he caught a fleeting glimpse of two small figures in the dark forest below.

“You dumb Snowlander, snow wolves don’t walk on two legs.” Macor shoved the laser rifle back into Trigg’s arms. “Probably a couple of dead-beat fur traders. They’re way too short for a Gol Guard patrol.”

Too short? Trigg smirked and looked down on Macor.

“Maybe they’re Keepers,” said Macor with a sneer. His eyes narrowed as he stood on tiptoes and glared up at the sniper.

“Keepers?” Trigg whispered in a trembling voice. “Snow Dragon Keepers?” Icy fingers shivered up his spine. His eyes widened with fear and he swallowed hard. For years, tales of those creatures and their terrible fire-breathing, flesh-eating Snow Dragons had been told all over the Snow Mountains.

“Fairy tales,” Macor snapped. “Don’t be so superstitious. Dragons don’t exist here or anywhere. Neither do Keepers. And there’s no lost diamond mines they guard. No nothing. Just nightmare stories to scare dumb people away from these mountains.” Macor stroked his pet. “C’mon, Tongue, me little faithful. Even if you don’t, I needs me beauty sleep.”

Tongue squealed, and flicked out its long tongue at the trembling Trigg. Macor’s boots crunched the snow as he

and Tongue blended into the shadows behind the rocky outcrop.

“Stinkin’ onkamite,” Trigg muttered under his breath.

Snow began falling as more Snowlanders – desperate exiled criminals from all the distant lands of the Snow Mountains – joined Trigg squinting down at the dark forest.

“Mightn’t be snow wolves,” Trigg grumbled, “but they’s sure headin’ for Gol.”

“Gol,” grunted a dirty-faced Snowlander. “Lotsa diamonds in Gol, the man said.”

Like vultures, the Snowlanders stared down the valley to the distant lights of a glowing city.

A high perimeter stone wall formed a protective barricade in front of Gol, the capital of the land. In the middle of the wall, metal double gates bore the city’s symbol: a dragon head. Five thousand people lived in the now-affluent city that had grown swiftly during the Diamond Rush seventy years ago.

Gol’s one and two-storey houses were built of smooth granite and had large windows and snow-capped gabled roofs. Here and there, warm light from front windows spilled out onto tidy heated sidewalks. The city radiated a sense of contentment, a peace that came from contented people.

But at night, even the most contented city could be a little scary.

Tonight, a whispering wind slithered along the near-deserted streets. In one particularly bright moonlit street, stood a row of two-storey terraced houses. Their pale green doors were identical except for the house at the end.

It had a flat, metal dragon head in a triangular frame fixed to its emerald green door.

Inside an upstairs bedroom, silky curtains danced with the wind blowing through a slightly open window. Moonlight fell on a bedside desk illuminating two small, winged dragon figurines and three toy Gol Guards in black uniforms. A miniature television sat next to a digital clock – 9:29. . . 9:30. . .

The reading lamp on the bed head cast a small circle of light on the fully dressed Corbin propped up by pillows. He picked up a tablet PC from the desk and began his school assignment – again.

“This time I’m making a copy of the copy of my history homework,” he mumbled, imagining the circuitry of the tablet PC. He silently read the title of a large, thick book, *Legends of the Snow Mountains*. Instantly, the exact words appeared on the tablet PC’s screen. Corbin opened the book.

“The fur trapper had found the near-frozen man in an unmapped valley deep in the awesome Snow Mountains. The man held a diamond, and in his last moments, raved about a cave filled with huge diamonds that made his skin crawl with fear, and terrible fire-breathing, flesh-eating Snow Dragons that guarded the cave. As he fled, he had also seen their Keepers, the small creatures who could be seen for only a moment before they vanished into thin air.”

Without looking up, Corbin gave an order to the reading lamp. “Left, left. Stop.” The reading lamp moved a little, adjusting its light to his command.

“Talk of Snow Dragons and Keepers were the ravings of a snow nutter, surmised the fur trapper. Not able to pry the diamond from the man’s frozen fingers, and with no supplies, he headed for a lowlands village, vowing to return and find the diamond cave for

himself.

“In a tavern, the fur trapper told his secret plan to a friend who in turn whispered to others. The fur trapper fell drunk, and greedy men set out seeking the diamond cave.

“None were ever seen again.”

“Pity Durm didn’t go searching for diamonds,” Corbin muttered. He continued reading.

“Countless expeditions failed to find the diamond cave, but still Diamond Fever swept the Snow Mountains. People flooded in from the far lands, seeking their fortunes. They ignored the stories of Snow Dragons and Keepers. After all, diamonds were real and everyone knew dragons – of any species – did not exist.”

Corbin’s eyelids were heavy. He yawned and skipped ahead to a chapter titled ‘The Dreamstone’. “Now this sounds a bit more interesting,” he mumbled. He read on in silence. Again the exact words appeared on the tablet PC’s screen.

“Created from the tears falling that fateful night, the Dreamstone quickly filled. . . with the. . . nightmares of. . .”

He yawned again. It had been a long day. He was so exhausted, the book thudding onto his chest didn’t wake him. The book rose and fell rhythmically, matching his quiet breathing. The tablet PC went into ‘sleep’ mode.

He groaned in his sleep as a small dream mist eerily rose out of his forehead. It formed a tiny, ghost-like Durm with pimple-covered skin stretched tightly over a super-muscular body. Nightmare Durm danced over Corbin, silently snapping at him with piranha-like teeth.

“No, Durm, no,” mumbled the sleeping Corbin, “I’m not changing the time again.” Suddenly, he sat bolt upright, his dark eyes wide with terror. The book thudded to the carpet.

In that same nano-second, Nightmare Durm was sucked out of the bedroom, down the stairs, along the hall, and vanished out through the emerald green door.

Nightmare Durm struggled desperately against the invisible power pulling it along the dark streets at breakneck speed. Here and there, other tiny nightmarish figures were swept along too. On and on they went. At the city square, they flew up the wide granite steps, past the two Gol Guards, and disappeared into the huge, mirrored doors of The Dome.

Silence. The Gol Guards, with laser rifles slung over their shoulders, had heard nothing, and had seen nothing. In silent duty they stared directly ahead towards the empty Guardian Park opposite.

Zara, Corbin's mother, had heard something thud, and rushed into his bedroom. Tall and in her late thirties, she had dark eyes and black hair tied back in a tight bun. She wore a stylish long black leather coat with embossed dragon heads on the shoulder pads.

"It's OK, Mom, just a stupid dream," Corbin mumbled, embarrassed. He remembered his nightmare: an ugly, muscle-bound, piranha-toothed Durm and hundreds of digital clocks pursuing him through endless streets. Corbin's legs were heavy and moved in slow motion, as if he were running through deep water. Durm reached for him, getting closer and closer. Thousands of digital numerals flew from the clocks and swirled round him like frenzied bats. Ahead was a green glow. He knew it meant safety but the closer he got, the farther away the glow became.

The memory of his nightmare faded and he flopped back onto the pillows.

Zara sat on the bed, turned off the tablet PC, and picked up the dropped book. “I didn’t know the Academy still had books. Don’t tell me the Knowledge Discs have all corrupted or crashed.”

Corbin shook his head and yawned deeply. “No such luck. Grandfather gave it to me. He said you had it when you were a little girl.”

“So I did,” Zara said, running her hand over the book’s cover.

“Mom,” Corbin whispered, “Grandfather thinks the book is true. The lost diamond cave, the Snow Dragons, the Keepers, the Dream Crystal thing.”

“Dreamstone, not Dream Crystal,” Zara said, correcting him.

Corbin remembered the last chapter he had started to read. “Is the Dreamstone really full of nightmares?”

“What do you think?”

“Can’t be. It says on the cover they’re just legends.” Corbin tapped the book and laughed. “Just because it’s in an old book doesn’t mean it’s real.”

“Maybe Grandfather knows more than he lets on.” Zara smiled and cocked an eyebrow in an ‘I’m-a-grownup-and-I-know-things’ sort of way.

“How was your trip?” said Corbin, changing the subject.

“Successful as usual,” said Zara, placing the book and the tablet PC on the bedside desk. In the last year, she had journeyed more and more into the Snow Mountains. On ‘Official Business’ to the outlying villages and towns as Gol’s representative, she had explained. But each trip

was longer than the last. This time, she had been gone for seven days and had only arrived back this afternoon.

“I am truly sorry for missing your birthday,” Zara said. “We’ll go shopping for a special present tomorrow.”

For a moment, resentment filled Corbin – she hadn’t been home for his special thirteenth birthday – but he quickly pushed it away as she ran her fingers through his thick, dark hair.

“And you could do with a haircut.”

Corbin closed his eyes. The world was a safer place with her sweet warmth and her perfume wafting in the air.

“Everything all right, Zara?” a man’s voice whispered behind her.

“Yes, Father,” Zara replied.

In the doorway stood Quillon – Corbin’s grandfather – a tall, dignified man in his mid-seventies. The white streak in his hair above his left ear had almost blended into the gray, and the irises of his eyes were strangely amber. He wore a black suit with a small insignia – a gold dragon head with emerald eyes – on his upright green collar.

Corbin kept his eyes closed and deliberately breathed a little louder. He always heard a lot more when he pretended to be asleep.

Zara joined Quillon in the doorway. They talked in hushed tones that Corbin could barely hear.

“Shouldn’t he be in the bed and not on it?” Quillon whispered.

“Oh, Father, he’ll get in later,” whispered Zara. “He’s not a little boy anymore.”

Corbin was pleased. Yes, thirteen years and three days. Finally he was no longer a child. He was a real teenager,

virtually a grown-up.

“Incredible,” Quillon whispered, “Corbin’s just turned thirteen yet I know he’s already mind-talking. He’s more advanced than you were at his age. Or I, for that matter.”

Mind-talking? Corbin remembered the playful husky pup in Guardian Park and how he talked to it in a telepathic sort of way. Now he became guarded with his thoughts, trying to lock them deep in his mind. He didn’t want anyone eavesdropping on his mind.

“Mind-talking already?” said Zara. “He’s growing up too quickly.”

“So did you,” said Quillon, and he smiled. “They said mind-talking was one of the things that would develop stronger with each generation.”

“Sometimes I feel. . .” whispered Zara, “you never know what the future may bring.”

“What time will you be back?” said Quillon.

“In an hour or so. You worry too much, like Mother did.”

“It’s just that I sense they are close. Maybe tonight.”

“Tonight?” Zara gripped Quillon’s arms tightly with excitement. “The little ones might be here tonight? In Gol?”

“But I’ve sensed it every night for two weeks and been wrong each time. So, go, have a good time. Say hi to Riphō.”

Oh no, not that Riphō guy again, thought Corbin. He hated the small presents handed to him every time Riphō and his fixed grin dropped in. They both knew it was for show, to impress Zara. What did she see in him? He—

Zara’s excited voice interrupted. “I can’t go now, Father. Not after what you’ve just said.”

“No, go, enjoy yourself.” Quillon tapped his head then hers. “I can always mind-talk you when— if it happens.”

Corbin watched Quillon and Zara disappear down the hallway. His thoughts buzzed non-stop. Grandfather can mind-talk Mom from a distance? How can he do that? I thought you had to be near someone to mind-talk them. And Little Ones? In Gol? Who’re ‘they’? And what other things get stronger? What’s happening tonight? Typical. They do still think I’m just a kid. Never telling me anything. Has it got something to do with The Dome?

Grandfather was the official Guardian of The Dome, something like a boss Councilor. Corbin’s thoughts jumped from the curly-haired Durm and the chase to The Dome, the sewer, the loose stone, and that amber light. What exactly was it? Then he yawned long and hard. The day had been too much, too tiring.

I’ll get up extra early and finish my homework, he thought. I suppose Mom’s going to meet Riphon at that stupid Ice Cube place. He yawned again and fell immediately asleep.

— CHAPTER 3 —

Stepping Into The Night

The Ice Cube was Gol's coolest nightspot. It was well known for its low lighting and high prices. People dined at softly lit tables and cool couples danced slowly to cool music played by an even cooler trio.

In a booth, Riphō – fortyish, darkly handsome in an individually-tailored officer's uniform with an insignia on each collar – stirred one of two drinks. Even sitting down, people knew he was tall. He re-read the text message on his WristCom – an ultra-thin videophone powered by its flat crystal wristband. The words burned deep in his heart. “. . . once again your application for promotion to Captain of the Gol Guards has been respectfully declined. We encourage you to—”

“Don't give up, Riphō,” interrupted a man's voice.

Riphō quickly switched off his WristCom and looked up at Commander Biss, the Gol Guards' highest ranking officer. Biss was in his late fifties. Once he would have been barrel-chested, but now he was barrel-stomached. He wore a gold dragon head insignia on each epaulette and two beautiful women on his arms.

“It took me fifteen years to make Gol Guard Captain, then another fifteen to earn these.” Commander Biss gave a nod to his insignias. “You're a good officer and our best strategist by far. So don't lose heart, son. By the way, how's work on the forcefield going?”

A small team of scientists worked under Riphó, developing a crystal-powered forcefield that would give more protection to Gol than any perimeter wall could. If they could get it to work consistently, that is.

“It’s well on track, Commander Biss,” lied Riphó with a forced grin. “It’ll cover Gol and protect it from the worst of what’s out there.” He knew Commander Biss was an old-school-give-me-laser-guns commander with little faith in way-out energy field development.

“I hope so,” said Commander Biss, “those Snowlanders are getting to be a real problem to the outer villages and towns. Somehow they’ve grown a lot smarter in the last few years. See you at 0-500 hours.”

Commander Biss and the two women sauntered off to the drinks bar.

A few moments later, a low murmur buzzed through the nightclub. Dancing couples nodded respectfully to Zara as she strode to Riphó’s booth. She removed her coat and slid in. Riphó smiled, and leaned to kiss her lips but she only offered her cheek.

“I remember when you didn’t do that.” Riphó took an old photograph from his tunic pocket: a teenaged, smiling Riphó with his arms around a teenaged, smiling Zara. “Remember this?”

“I’m not fifteen anymore.” Zara smiled and gently pushed the photograph back. “Have you heard anything about your promotion yet?”

Riphó discreetly dropped a hand over his WristCom. “No,” he lied again and quickly changed the subject. “Zara, when are you going to marry me?”

“Please, you know I only need a friend right now. Ever since Toma—”

“I’m sorry for what happened to your husband. Patrolling the Snow Mountains is always dangerous. Toma was a good friend and my captain too. Don’t forget I was almost killed in that avalanche. Wrong place, wrong time. That’s all.” Riphon, a little miffed, pocketed the photograph.

“I know it’s dangerous. Dangerous with—”

“Don’t say Snow Dragons or Keepers or any other creature,” Riphon interrupted with a sharpness to his voice. “I’ve covered the entire Snow Mountains and never seen hide nor hair of anything. Not even lost diamond caves.” He paused, took a deep breath, exhaled, then smiled. “Zara, what happened was ten years ago. Don’t mourn forever.”

“You sound like Father.”

“Ah, yes, the famous Quillon. If it weren’t for him putting in a good word, I would still be a lowly Gol Guard and not an Officer of the Dome Division of the Gol Guards, on track for further promotion.”

“You will make a wonderful Captain of the Gol Guards. Just like Toma— sorry, I didn’t mean. . . I know the Dreamstone will be guarded well.”

“The Dreamstone’s Guardian will be guarded well.”

“Father is still the Guardian.”

“Yes, but for how long?” said Riphon. “A little bird tells me your training has increased. And you know it’s now my job to know everything.”

“My training, as you call it, is of an ambassadorial nature. Nothing more.”

“If you say so.” Riphon smiled knowingly. For a few seconds there was an awkward silence between them.

“Marry me?”

Before she could reply, Quillon's mind-talking filled her mind.

"Zara, it's time."

"Now?" Zara said out loud.

Ripho was surprised. "Now?" he said excitedly, trying to stay cool. "Well, if you—"

"Yes, Father, no, Ripho, not you, I mean—" Zara slipped her coat on and headed for the doors.

"Is that a yes?" Ripho called out hopefully, but Zara didn't hear. He held his 'in love' smile as long as he could see her. When she was gone, his face darkened, as if a mask had been peeled back. He tapped a code into his WristCom.

On its screen appeared a man. His face was hidden by a crimson hood, and his chin rested on a hand wearing a dragon ring.

"The Transference Ceremony is definitely tonight," Ripho whispered into the WristCom, his voice deep, threatening. "It's the only time the Dreamstone's combination is revealed. I'm not waiting years to sweet-talk it out of Zara."

"No, Ripho, it's too dangerous," the sinister man said. "Use her to get to the Dreamstone as we planned. When we have control of it, no one will dare oppose us. You're mad if you—"

"Madness gives you the edge, my friend," snapped Ripho. "And there's nothing more insane than a crystal full of living nightmares. It's the ultimate weapon." He switched off the WristCom and his face resumed its usual handsomeness. He gulped the two drinks down and snapped his fingers for a passing waiter's attention.

In the same moment, Corbin woke to a soft whirring

noise. Was that Grandfather's hover car fading into the distance? He got off his bed, descended the stairs two at a time, and searched the lower level of the house.

"Grandfather, are you there?" Corbin opened the side door to the garage. Empty. "He's gone. The Ice Cube? No, too old for that. Where would he go this time of night?"

Suddenly, the house was quiet. Too quiet. He checked the wall clock. 10:59.

He was unnerved, spooked. It was the same feeling he had earlier under The Dome. "That's where Grandfather's gone, I bet."

Moments later, Corbin stood outside his house, strapping on his WristCom. He placed his palm against the flat, metal dragon head on the door. The dragon head lit up from within, and the door locked with a loud 'click'.

Corbin pulled a gray beanie from his coat pocket, and tugged it down over his ears. He stared at the dragon head, and in his mind its internal circuits surged with energy.

The dragon head lit up and the door unlocked with a loud 'clack'.

He again 'zoomed' in on the circuits. The door locked with a 'click'.

"Still got it," he said smugly, and smiled. Then he stepped into the night, not knowing that his life and his world were about to change forever.

Imprisoned somewhere deep inside The Dome, the tiny Nightmare Durm began to play its role in Corbin's future. It hissed through clenched teeth and its fingers scraped against diamond-like walls glowing under an eerie amber light as it desperately tried to escape.