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Dragons: Rise of the Champions - Book 4 - Champion of Darkness

Brief summary:

3,000 years ago, corrupted dragons called Raethians ravaged the land. Eventually, they were sealed underground and were thought to have died out—but that was not the case. Inexplicably, they were able to escape, and have begun to create havoc again. Four dragons, Lazuli, Thistle, Gale, and Fury are the only ones who stand a chance against the Raethians. They are the Champions, and each of them wields a unique power. In previous books, Lazuli, along with her friend Quantum, started the quest to find the other Champions. Now, in the fourth and final book, the Champions must unite their powers to take down the Raethians. However, there is one problem: Lazuli has been captured by the Raethians. Without her, the Champions do not stand a chance. Somehow, they must free her, if they are to succeed. Their journey is a treacherous one, but by far the biggest threat to their quest is the Shrouded One; a masked creature wielding eerie, dark powers, seemingly operating under the control of the Raethians. No one is sure what it is or why it exists, but there is no doubt that it plays a large role in the Raethians' plan. Together, the dragons will travel to the center of the continent, to the dark and dangerous lands that have been corrupted by the evil influence. It is there that they will find the Raethians' fortress, free Lazuli, and, if all goes well, defeat the monstrous creatures for good.

Excerpt:

~ ~ ~ Chapter 1 ~ ~ ~

~ Thistle ~

They hadn't been expecting the airships.

If they had, the five of them would have been a little more careful when trying to get out of the Badlands.

Thistle dodged yet another cannonball, evaded another spear, and ducked under a volley of arrows. After a few days of hiding and careful planning, they had taken their chances trying to escape the Badlands, only to be attacked by humans. And just like that, their plans were rendered completely futile, because none of them had been expecting the humans to have airships.

Thistle ducked under the hull of one of the ships, then soared back up, twisting in midair and grabbing onto the side of the giant, wooden contraption. The humans scurried around on the deck, shouting at each other.

"There she is, clinging to the starboard si- SHE'S ON THE DECK! I REPEAT, SHE IS ON THE DECK!" shouted one of the men.

"We're not blind!" another human called irritably. Sure enough, Thistle had, in fact, climbed onto the ship, causing it to lean precariously to one side. The humans dropped their bows and pulled Dragonsbane gold swords out of sheaths attached to their belts.

Thistle was small, for a dragon, but the humans were still much smaller, so she did not feel particularly intimidated by them. But she wasn't really trying to attack them; she was just causing a distraction.

The whole ship shuddered as something else crashed into it. Thistle stepped over to the other side and saw Fury, a Badlands dragon with blood-red and gold scales. She was gripping the hull of the ship, with one of the propellers in her teeth. With an almighty tug, she ripped the propeller off, sending the airship spiraling towards the mesa. Thistle leaped off the deck and into the air seconds before the ship crashed and exploded against the stone.

"One down, four more to go," Fury said, looking towards the other airships. Quantum, Rainstorm, and Gale

were circling around the remaining four, drawing their fire. But, now, the ships had noticed what Fury and Thistle had done.

Another volley of arrows came flying. Thistle dodged them all, but Fury was not so lucky. Thistle heard Fury let out a growl, and turned to see that at least three arrows were now lodged in Fury's back. They had not done very much harm; even arrows tipped with Dragonsbane gold or silver, specially designed for use against dragons, were quite small.

"Are you okay?" Thistle asked her.

"I've had worse," Fury replied, as she ripped out the arrows and carelessly tossed them aside. A few more arrows whizzed past their heads, and the two of them raced toward another airship.

Quantum, Rainstorm, and Gale were swarming around it, drawing its fire and attracting the other three airships.

Fury and Thistle soared beneath the ship. Under there, in the shadow of the hull, the humans could not shoot at them without risking damaging their vessel and killing those on board.

Thistle saw Quantum fly underneath to join them. His indigo scales shimmered cobalt and violet in the sunlight, like sapphires and amethysts swirled together. Thistle noticed that he had an arrow sticking out of one of his hind legs, and a small trickle of blood ran down his ankle, staining the iridescent scales.

Quantum looked at the ship above him. "I cannot figure out how these things stay in the air," he said. "They must be extremely advanced, to be so large and still be capable of flight. I've been thinking they—"

"—Need to be destroyed?" Fury interrupted.

"Well, I suppose so, although that's not—"

But Quantum was cut off again. Another dragon soared down beneath the ship—and immediately crashed into Fury.

Fury hissed and shoved Gale off of her. He struggled in the air for a minute before righting himself. Thistle was about to ask why he was flopping all over the place, but then she noticed the holes in all four of his lavender wings. He had undoubtedly been shot.

Thistle felt the wind shift slightly; Gale was commanding the air currents to keep himself in the sky.

"Drawing their fire definitely could have gone better," he said bluntly.

"Speaking of fire, why can't I burn the ships?" Fury asked. "I've tried at least a dozen times."

"They're built from the wood of a Firebark tree," said Quantum. "No amount of fire will be able to damage them." He then exhaled a bright plume of blue flame onto the hull to demonstrate. The flames licked and clawed at the wood, but did no damage to the hulking contraption.

Another dragon roared, but the roar was cut off with an ominous clanking sound.

"Oh, great, Rainstorm's caught," Fury said, and took off.

Gale tried to follow her, but Thistle grabbed his tail and pulled him back.

"Maybe you should stay out of the way for a minute. Your wings are hurt," she said.

Gale nodded and grabbed onto the hull of the ship, digging his talons into the wood to hang on. Thistle then followed Quantum out into the sunlight.

Rainstorm was chained down on the deck of the ship they had just been under. Dragonsbane gold chains wrapped around his wings and curled around his snout, and there were humans surrounding him. With a roar, Fury shot towards the ship, smoke billowing from her nostrils and trailing along behind her like spectral snakes. But she couldn't get close; humans with spears and chains stood at the ready to impale and incapacitate her. Fury was forced to retreat, with the humans far out of range of her fire breath.

"I can't reach him," she snapped. "For being so small, those humans are *quite* infuriating."

"Use your powers!" Thistle suggested.

Fury nodded. She held up one paw, and a flame sprung to life between her talons. She frowned with concentration as the flame expanded, reaching hungrily for the ships.

Arrows shot past Fury's head, and she was forced to duck, breaking her focus and losing her flame.

Thistle intervened, trying to draw away the humans' fire. She soared upward, twisting around the ship's sails. Arrows whizzed past her head, instead getting stuck in the huge, white squares of canvas billowing in the wind. She dove under the ship, passing Gale, who had just flown out to join the battle once more.

When Thistle emerged, Fury joined her, and they circled the ships. Quantum paused in midair, watched the humans for a moment, then shot down and managed to land on the deck. He started trying to get the chains off of Rainstorm. Humans attempted to stop him, but he kicked them aside or flung them off the deck with his wings.

"Try using your power again," Thistle suggested.

"I can't," Fury said. "I can't focus with all these arrows and spears everywhere."

"But you're able to use your wings," Thistle pointed out as she dodged a cannonball.

"They aren't that hard to maintain," Fury said. Normally, dragons' wings were part of their bodies. Fury,

being the Fireborn, didn't have wings naturally; instead, her wings were made out of fire. Normally, fire wings wouldn't be able to keep anything in the air, but since these were *magic* fire wings, Fury could fly anyway.

Fury split away from Thistle to distract the other ships; the arrows and cannon fire were becoming a nuisance.

On the deck of the airship, Quantum had grabbed Rainstorm's chains in his teeth and was trying to tug them off.

Then Thistle saw it; a strange machine, sort of like a combination between a slingshot and a cannon, on the deck of the ship. Humans were loading a giant spear, made entirely out of Dragonsbane Gold, into it. Then, they pulled a lever, and the contraption fired the spear.

One second, the spear was coming towards Thistle, pointed right at her heart, and the next, Fury had thrown herself in front of her, flaming wings spread wide. Thistle heard the sickening sound of a sharp object piercing flesh, and a cry from Fury.

"FURY!" Rainstorm shouted, fighting against the chains still holding him down.

Fury's wings vanished as her fire lost its strength, and she began to fall backwards towards the ground.

~ ~ ~ Chapter 2 ~ ~ ~

~ Fury ~

For a moment, the sudden agony blinded Fury. She hardly noticed as she began to fall, and Rainstorm's shouts sounded distant. But then, as the airships grew farther and farther away, it hit her; she was falling.

A wave of panic slammed into Fury as her old fear of heights returned, tearing down the fire wall they had been contained in and flooding her brain. Fury almost screamed, but forced herself not to.

Focus, Fury! Think! Why are you falling?

Fury struggled to turn her head against the air, but when she did, she saw that the Dragonsbane gold spear was sticking out of her side.

I have to get that out, she thought, gritting her teeth against the pain. At least this meant it hadn't hit Thistle.

Fury reached forward and gripped the spear in her paws. Clutching it tightly, Fury tugged it out, sending bright bursts of pain flaring through her body. She threw the spear away and felt her strength beginning to return, as her flames were no longer suppressed by the metal.

Wind roared in her ears as Fury flipped over in the air and her wings burst to life on either side of her. She shot back up into the sky.

Back up near the airships, things were not going well. Quantum appeared concerned, and Gale looked like he was about to faint from fear. Rainstorm had been freed, and was in the process of tearing the sail of one of the airships. Fury shot forward to join him.

The humans saw her and began firing arrows again. Fury felt them hit her, sending bursts of pain flaring through her scales. There were too many arrows; she could tell that they were slowly starting to weaken her.

Rainstorm flew up to Fury. "You're alright!" he cried.

"I'll survive," Fury said grimly.

"Anyway." Rainstorm looked at Fury's wounds with concern. "We need to hide. The humans... we can't fight them. We're losing."

"What are you talking about?" Fury cried. "We destroyed one airship already! We can easily take down the other four."

"Look at you; you're injured. *All of us* are injured. This battle is really risky."

"When did you decide this?" Fury asked. More arrows shot past them, so Fury and Rainstorm flew higher, out of range.

"It was Quantum's idea," Rainstorm explained. "He said that fleeing is our best option. He's telling Gale and Thistle right now; there's a cave a short distance away where we can hide."

"That's absurd," Fury said. "I'm not going to run off with my tail between my legs because some weaklings with flying boats were *too scary* for me!"

Rainstorm asked, "But isn't a little bit of cowardice worth it if it keeps you alive?"

Fury hesitated; he had a point, but she still hated the idea of running from the humans. She was a *dragon*, for flames' sake!

Despite finding the notion of running to be utterly ridiculous, she also didn't want to put Rainstorm or the others in danger, if they were afraid.

"Alright," Fury said. "You can go hide if you want. The others can, too. But *I* am going to keep fighting."

"They'll kill you," Rainstorm said. "And besides, how will you destroy them? Your fire can't burn them. You can't get close with all the sharp things the humans are firing at us."

"They aren't invincible. Those horrid contraptions have a weakness, and I'll find it."

"This is far too risky. You have to come with us!"

"We can't all hide. At least one of us—me, specifically—needs to distract and destroy the humans. Otherwise, they'll just chase you and trap you in that cave."

Rainstorm stared at her for a long moment. "Just—promise me you won't die."

"Only if you promise me that you also won't die."

He nodded. Briefly, he touched his snout to hers, then flew away, along with the other three dragons.

Fury watched them go. As long as she kept the airships' attention, her friends would be safe. That thought made her feel better about their cautiousness.

Fury turned and slammed herself as hard as she could into the mast of the ship. It cracked and splintered, but did not give way. The humans on board scrambled around in terror like bugs. And like bugs, they would be destroyed with hardly a thought.

Little pinpricks of agony appeared all through her body as more arrows pierced her scales. Fury hissed, struggling to stay in the air. She dove toward the ship, landing heavily on the deck. She knew that if any more arrows hit her, her wings would fail and she would fall again. And Fury did not think she would survive another fall.

Fury snarled at the humans surrounding her. They pointed spears and swords at her. A few of them were still firing arrows from the other end of the deck.

She swung her tail around, knocking the humans down and sending a few flying right off the ship. Her tail smacked into the mast, splintering it even more. And this time, it gave way and began to fall.

The mast crashed onto the deck, breaking the wood. It hung over the side of the ship, and the sail dangled over the distant sands of the desert. The ship groaned, leaning to one side. The human at the wheel fell off, and nobody was in control of the vessel. It began to drift towards the mesa, picking up speed as it went. Fury had wanted the ship to crash—but not while she was still on board.

As the ship hurtled closer and closer to mesa, Fury leaped desperately. She grabbed onto the stone, every muscle in her body protesting painfully. Below her, she heard the sound of the ship exploding, and felt a wave of fiery heat. Thankfully, no shrapnel hit her.

Fury dug her talons deeper into the stone, feeling the arrows slowly drain her energy. She heard the hum of propellers behind her; the remaining three ships were closing in.

Fury looked up; she could see the top of the mesa rock. If she could just make it up there, she might stand a chance, assuming nothing else went wrong. Keeping her eyes fixed upward, Fury began to climb.

It's alright. I can still do this, she thought, trying to shove back her creeping fear. She heard more arrows fly from the ships. A few of them landed in her back. Many more ended up stuck in the rocks beside her. One landed horrifyingly close to her face.

Fury continued to climb, dragging herself up the cliff face. As she went, a few more arrows pierced her scales. But she ignored them. She only focused on getting to the top.

Finally, after what felt like hours of climbing but was probably only a few minutes, Fury's talons dug into the top of the mesa. She dragged herself up, turned and sat down heavily. Every muscle in her body ached, and where the arrows had hit her, pain throbbed through her scales, flaring out in little starbursts. She could feel blood running down her back and dripping off of her legs.

Her forked tongue flicked out to lick a drop of blood off her chin. She growled; three airships against one flightless, powerless, half-dead dragon.

I'm losing way too much blood, Fury thought faintly. *But I can still do this. I can still beat them.*

Fury stood shakily, and roared at the humans with all her might.

I refuse to die here!

Fury took a single step, preparing to leap onto the closest airship, but her strength failed her, and she collapsed.

At that moment, the full realization of her unavoidable demise settled upon her.

The weight of her failure crushed her; she nearly shut her eyes and accepted her fate. But before she could, she found a spark of hope. Deep within, she could feel her flame, still burning. Still alive.

With the last of her strength, Fury focused as hard as she could, shutting out the pain in her. She channeled the fire that coursed through her veins, and a tiny flame appeared in her claws. Weakly, she commanded her flame, sending it to the humans.

She had been overthinking; she didn't need to destroy the airships. All she had to do was get rid of the humans controlling them.

Her spark found one of the feeble creatures, setting it alight. Fury coaxed the fire, let it jump, let it rise, let

it spread, until the fire had engulfed anything that could burn.

With the humans incapacitated, the airships slowly descended. They crashed into one another, wood splintering, metal bending, fire burning through everything flammable, until the ships were a single flaming mass, which fell to the ground and rained ash and cinders on everything.

A single ember drifted into Fury's paw. It was small and warm and faintly glowing. Fury closed her talons around it, and drifted into darkness.