

JACK STAPLES

AND THE
POET'S STORM

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and
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Published by David C Cook
4050 Lee Vance View
Colorado Springs, CO 80918 U.S.A.

David C Cook Distribution Canada
55 Woodslee Avenue, Paris, Ontario, Canada N3L 3E5

David C Cook U.K., Kingsway Communications
Eastbourne, East Sussex BN23 6NT, England

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LCCN 2014957984
ISBN 978-1-4347-0732-1
eISBN 978-0-7814-1324-4

© 2015 Mark Batterson, Joel N. Clark
Published in association with the literary agency of The Fedd
Agency, Inc., Post Office Box 341973, Austin, Texas 78734.

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Cover Illustration: Duncan Stewart

First Edition 2015

CHAPTER 1

THE POET'S COFFER



The wonder of riding a flying fox had faded long ago. Two days crouched on its back with little sleep or chance to stretch her legs had left Alexia Dreager tired and sore. She'd named the fox Dagger because of the way it flew. Dagger had the precision of an eagle and the agility of a sparrow, changing direction and darting here and there without warning.

Alexia hugged Dagger close as he dove straight down, then turned sharply to the left. Her fists tightened on handfuls of fur as the fox soared toward the face of an enormous bluff, then twisted sideways and entered a hidden cavern. The fox flipped upright as he glided inside, then dropped and skidded to a stop, sending dust and shale flying.

Alexia exhaled heavily before climbing from his back. Every muscle burned, and she was weary beyond words, yet she took the time to scratch Dagger behind the ears. “*You did well,*” she sent the thought as Dagger yawned widely. She cleared her mind and waited, but nothing came; the poor beast collapsed in exhaustion.

In the past two days Alexia had spent much of her time trying to communicate with Dagger. It was the strangest thing she’d ever done, and she still wasn’t sure it was actually happening. More than once an image had formed unbidden in her mind, and she was certain it had come from Dagger. *I just need to learn how to understand what the images mean,* she thought. *And to figure out how to make him understand me!*

Alexia turned to watch as more flying beasts entered the cavern, each landing with varying degrees of grace. First was a winged black panther carrying a bleary-eyed Jack Staples. Next came Wild on an overly large meerkat, followed by Arthur Greaves, who still slept on the back of a winged beaver. Alexia could barely believe it; the boy had slept through most of the past two days, waking only to eat or relieve himself.

The giant, Andreal, was on a very large and very beleaguered winged rabbit. Every time Alexia saw Andreal climb onto the hare’s back, the poor animal let out an audible sigh before launching into the air. Mrs. Dumphry was last; her tusked elephant had two sets of wings that scraped the sides of the cavern. The ancient woman hadn’t been the same these past two days. Aias, the man she’d loved for more than five thousand years, had died in the City of Shadows.

Alexia's friends climbed down and stretched tired muscles as the rest of the Clear Eyes collapsed in exhaustion. Clear Eyes was

the Awakened's name for animals that had chosen to serve the Author.

"I do not understand," Andreal rumbled. He stretched his arms high, his fingers brushing the cavern ceiling. "We should be losing them ages ago. How be it they still be finding us?" He sat heavily on the cavern floor. Andreal reminded Alexia of a bear she'd once known back at the circus.

"A tired body can betray even the most willing mind," Mrs. Dumphry said as she rubbed her eyes. "I do not know how they continue to follow, yet I am sure the answer is simple. I am just too weary to see it."

Some version of this conversation came up each time they'd stopped over the past two days. Ten thousand of the Assassin's deadliest warriors had been pursuing them ever since they'd escaped the City of Shadows. At first Mrs. Dumphry hadn't been worried. She was sure the Clear Eyes could fly faster than the Shadow Souled's winged beasts; yet no matter how fast they'd gone, they'd been unable to stay more than a few hours ahead of the dark army.

Alexia was as vexed as the others, but for different reasons. On the day they escaped the Assassin's city, she'd learned something so incredible, she could still barely believe it. Her mother might still be alive. Until then, she'd been sure her mother had passed away when Alexia was just five years old. She had no way of knowing for certain, but it was possible that Madeleine Dreager was out there somewhere.

Yet it wasn't just hope for her mother that occupied Alexia's thoughts. Each hour spent fleeing the dark army took them farther away from the City of Shadows. With each passing hour, Alexia's guilt

and misery grew. Though she and a few of her friends had been rescued,

Alexia's best friends, her Gang of Rogues, had been left behind. *It's the second time I've abandoned them.* She shivered at the thought.

Each hour also took her farther from her friends, who were most likely being tortured and starved. *If they're still alive,* she thought. She had no way of knowing who had survived the battle or whether the Assassin would bother keeping any of the prisoners alive. The Last Battle had begun; what need did he have of prisoners? Alexia didn't care about being one of the Children of Prophecy or about what the Awakened expected of her. The only things that mattered were finding her mother and saving her friends.

She hadn't told anyone what she'd learned about her mother, in part because there had been little time to talk since their escape, and in part because she was afraid to. Although she no longer hated Mrs. Dumphry, Alexia still didn't know what to think of her. But she was certain Mrs. Dumphry would never allow her to run off. *I am one of the Children of Prophecy, after all,* she thought glumly. Besides, Alexia had no idea where to look for her mother or how to save her friends, and the only person she could think to ask was Mrs. Dumphry.

Even if I knew where Mother was or could sneak back to the City of Shadows, could I do any of it by myself? She'd spent many years on her own but had been in a different world from the one she was in now. The Last Battle had begun, and Mrs. Dumphry said that all of creation was making its choice—the Author or the Assassin. From Dagger's back, Alexia had seen things she still didn't understand. The trees of an entire forest had thrashed about as if fighting one another. Later she'd seen a lake turn black as pitch within seconds, the smell of death rising high into the air. Alexia had counted five

earthquakes in the past two days, and Dagger had needed to fly around a number of tornadoes and one hurricane.

Something was wrong with the weather. It was as if the natural progression of things had been interrupted. Winter should lead to spring, spring to summer, and summer to fall. It was this rhythm that allowed the land to bear fruit and the soil to grow rich. Yet over the past two days, it was as if the weather had forgotten its place. There was no rhyme or reason for what happened between one hour and the next. The small band of Awakened had flown through a blizzard straight into a heat wave.

“Where are we?” a voice said from behind her.

Alexia turned to see Arthur Greaves awake. “You look horrible!” Arthur gasped as he met Alexia’s eyes. “You should really get some sleep or something. I feel great! I’ve had the craziest dreams you can imagine. We were all riding on the backs of flying—” Arthur stopped as his eyes landed on the beaver. “Wait. What?” He squinted at the other beasts, then grinned. “That’s amazing! Is that how we escaped the City of Shadows? The last thing I remember is seeing Andreal and Mrs. Dumphry fighting in the corridors of the coliseum. And where is Elion? Is she here too, or was that just a dream? She was flying beside me for a time. And what happened to the rest of the prisoners? Did everyone get out? I can’t believe animals can fly! Jack, did you ever imagine such a thing?”

“Arthur Greaves,” Mrs. Dumphry said, “it’s time you learn to tame your tongue. An untamed tongue is far more dangerous than an untrained sword.” She sighed as Arthur blushed, then walked over and placed a hand on his shoulder. “It is good to see you awake, child. You’ve been sleeping for two days, and much has happened. I am sure your friends will catch you up, but right now I need silence if I am to think.”

Arthur’s jaw dropped. “Two days,” he mouthed as Jack wrapped

an arm around him and walked Arthur toward the back of the

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cavern, quietly explaining what Arthur had missed. Arthur squealed at something Jack said, and Alexia smiled. She'd once thought the boy to be a coward, but she'd been wrong. He did have that habit of squealing like a little girl, and his stomach was weaker than most, but he was no coward. Arthur Greaves had single-handedly saved every one of them in the City of Shadows. Her memory was clear.

Alexia and the others had been buried beneath a mountain of a hundred thousand Shadow Souled. Then in walked Arthur Greaves. *No*, Alexia remembered, *in danced Arthur Greaves*. Liquid light flowed around him, forming a wall that plowed through the mountain of dark flesh. Without Arthur, none of them would have lived long enough for Elion to rescue them.

Alexia unfurled her blanket, then grabbed some bread and cheese from a sack she'd tied to Dagger's back. She bit off a chunk of cheese and sat down on the cold stone. Wild walked over to sit beside her.

"Where do you think we are?" Alexia asked.

"I heard Mrs. Dumphry say something about Morocco," Wild said through a yawn, "though I don't know for sure." His hair was tight ringlets, and his eyes had an orange tinge to them.

His name suits him, she thought.

She broke off a hunk of cheese and handed it to him. "We can't keep going like this," she said. "Surely the Shadow Souled must be as tired as we are. How do they keep finding us?"

"I don't know." Wild rubbed at his eyes. "But I'm sure Mrs. Dumphry will figure it out before long."

Mrs. Dumphry stood at the entrance to the cavern, staring out at the noonday sky.

“I saw her when I was with the Assassin,” Alexia said without thinking. “He showed me a memory that was more than five

thousand years old, and Mrs. Dumphry was there. And so was Aias.”

Wild turned to stare at Alexia with awe-filled eyes. “So you saw her stab the poet? And you saw him rise from the dead a few minutes later?”

“I ... well, no.” Alexia hadn’t thought anyone knew the truth about Mrs. Dumphry. “No, the Assassin took me out of the memory just after she stabbed the poet. I didn’t see what happened next.” Alexia thought for a moment. “Does everyone know about her and Aias?”

Wild’s expression became grim. The loss of Aias was hitting everyone hard. He had been the father of the Awakened just as Mrs. Dumphry was their mother. “I don’t know what Mrs. Dumphry is going to do without him,” Wild said.

Alexia nodded. She could picture Aias battling in the shadowed city. He danced among hundreds of Shadow Souled, his sword a blur of death. And still they couldn’t touch him. She hadn’t seen the moment of his death. But she’d seen him lying in the middle of the street with a spear in his chest. Within seconds the dark servants had swarmed over him.

“So that’s why you trusted him.” There was no accusation in Wild’s voice, just a simple statement. “That’s why you almost joined the Assassin. You thought Mrs. Dumphry killed the poet and then lied about it.”

“That’s part of it,” she said. “But I also thought Korah was my father.”

Wild’s eyebrows rose, but he didn’t question her. Korah was Alexia’s uncle—her father’s twin. Alexia had been told her uncle

had died years before she was born, but that obviously hadn't been

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true. Her uncle had pretended to be her father, and to Alexia's great shame, she had believed him. On the day of their escape from the City of Shadows, she'd used a Memory Stone to go back and see the truth. Korah had killed her father and had tried to kill her mother.

"Mrs. Dumphy and Aias were the first humans to ever awaken," Wild said. "The story is legend among the Awakened. The poet himself, the Author made flesh, touched her eyes and removed the scales. He forgave her for what she'd done and saved her and Aias from the Assassin. The poet took them somewhere far away and stayed with them only a few minutes, but in that time, he asked for their help. They were to prepare the world for the Last Battle. They were to gather the Awakened and seek out the Chosen One, who would give birth to the Child of Prophecy."

Alexia didn't know what to say. She'd disliked Mrs. Dumphy from the moment they met. She'd refused to listen, fought her at every turn, and acted like a child. Now Alexia watched as Mrs. Dumphy stood with her arm outstretched, as if feeling the air. It was hard to believe she'd spent the better part of five thousand years searching for Alexia and Jack.

"Wait, what do you mean the poet rose from the dead?"

Wild grinned. "I wasn't sure you heard me. The Assassin demanded that Mrs. Dumphy bow before him and serve him forever. But she refused. And just as he was about to kill her, the poet rose from the dead and saved her."

Although Alexia was mesmerized by Wild's story, she couldn't stop thinking about his hands. They were holding hers as he talked, though he didn't seem to notice.

“It was the poet’s death and resurrection that changed everything.”

“What do you mean?” Alexia asked.

“That was the day the scales were weakened. And they’ve been falling from the eyes of humans ever since.”

Alexia felt a fresh wave of guilt. She’d allowed the Assassin to manipulate her. She’d almost turned her back on her friends for the worst of reasons—power and fame.

“You can’t beat yourself up about it.” Wild seemed to understand what she was feeling. “He’s called the Father of Lies for a reason.”

“Would you have believed him?” Alexia made herself meet Wild’s eyes.

“I might have. I don’t think anyone knows how strong they are until they’ve been put to the test. In the end you did the right thing,” he said. “It’s not what we almost do that matters, only what we do. And in the face of sure death, you made the impossible choice.”

He has beautiful eyes. Alexia blushed the moment the thought formed. For some reason, Wild did too, as he whipped his hands away.

“Is that why Mrs. Dumphry and Aias lived for so long?” Alexia cleared her throat, trying to act normal. “Because the poet gave them special powers?”

“No.” Wild shook his head. “It was because they touched the poet’s blood. Mrs. Dumphry says the blood of the poet is more powerful than we can imagine. Until two days ago, I didn’t think anything could kill them.”

“But how come Mrs. Dumphry looks so old, and Aias never seemed to age?”

Wild smiled. “Back then, Mrs. Dumphry wasn’t just the queen of the world; she says she was also the most vain human to have ever lived. So when the poet told her and Aias they would live for thousands of years, he also told Mrs. Dumphry that she would continue

to age so she would never have to struggle with vanity again!”

Alexia nodded. Through the Memory Stone, she'd seen the hundreds of mirrors that had surrounded Mrs. Dumphry's throne. Mrs. Dumphry had barely been able to tear her eyes from the mirrors even as she spoke to the poet.

"What is that?" Mrs. Dumphry's voice was a lightning crack. Alexia turned to see her staring at Arthur. "Arthur Greaves! What are you holding?" Mrs. Dumphry strode across the cavern to stand before Arthur and Jack. For a long moment, she stared at the small wooden box in Arthur's hands, her mouth agape.

Alexia had never imagined a day when Mrs. Dumphry would be speechless.

"Where ... How did ... Where did you get that?"

Andreal stepped closer as the others gathered to get a better look. "Do that be what I think it be?"

Alexia recognized the box in Arthur's hands. When she was living in the City of Shadows, she'd seen the Assassin holding it many times. Each time he noticed her watching, he'd wrapped it in shadows and hidden it away somewhere. The Assassin had seemed to both covet and fear the box.

"I stole it," Arthur said in a cautious tone. "It was after you and Aias and Andreal were taken." A pained look swept him. "I'm sorry. I just heard about Aias. I can't imagine how hard that must be."

Mrs. Dumphry wiped away a tear. "Please, finish your story."

"I was looking for somewhere to hide for the night because I didn't know what to do." He raised his hands defensively. "I know you all wanted me to go find Alexia and rescue her, but I didn't even know where to start. So I snuck into the big building or palace or

whatever, and then the Shadowfog came. At least I think it was the Shadowfog from what Jack's told me about it."

Arthur began pacing as his voice rose. “I ran up the stairs—it sure was a lot of stairs by the way. There must have been, like, a hundred floors or something. And I think I found the Assassin’s throne room, because there was a really big throne in it. That’s when I saw this box hanging above it. The box was wrapped in shadows, but I felt it calling to me.” Arthur turned to Jack. “Don’t laugh, but I think it wanted me to come get it.”

Alexia didn’t think Jack was going to laugh. His eyes were glued to the box as if he, too, had seen it before.

“The thing is, when I tried to grab it, the shadows that were wrapped around it, or whatever, burned my hand something awful.” He raised his hand to show Mrs. Dumphry the marks. “So I was going to leave, but then my name appeared on the box. It’s not on it now, but it was! I’m not lying. It said, *Arthur Greaves: Loyal, Courageous, Warrior.*” Arthur flushed. “I’m not making it up; it’s what the box said. And I know it’s probably not true, but it was right here on the side.” Arthur traced his finger along the side of the box as if offering proof. “And suddenly I felt like I couldn’t leave without it. I know it was stealing, but I figured it was all right to steal from the Assassin. So anyway, that’s when I started to dance”—Arthur blushed again—“and for some reason that worked.”

Arthur seemed to search Mrs. Dumphry’s face for some sign of what she was thinking. The longer Mrs. Dumphry stayed silent, the paler he became.

Mrs. Dumphry’s hands shook as she reached for the box. Arthur handed it to her, and for a long moment, she cradled it as if it were the most important thing in the world. “Arthur Greaves”—her voice quivered—“you have no idea what you have done.”

“I’m sorry!” Arthur wrung his hands. “I really didn’t know. I

never would have—”

“No. You have done something that should not have been possible. You have recovered the Poet’s Coffe! We had no idea where it was or how to find it, but if the Awakened are to have any chance of surviving the Last Battle, we need it.” Mrs. Dumphry glanced toward the cavern entrance. “I’m sure it is the reason the Shadow Army has been able to track us. To their eyes, this coffe would shine like a beacon in the night. They can feel its presence.”

“I would have told you if I’d known. I would have—”

Mrs. Dumphry stepped forward and cupped Arthur’s chin. “You saved us all from sure death at the Assassin’s hand. And now you have done this. Arthur Greaves, I am honored to know you.” She leaned in and kissed Arthur on the cheek. He blushed so furiously, Alexia wished she had an apple handy to compare which was redder.

“What is the Poet’s Coffe?” Jack’s eyes were glued to the box.

“The Assassin stole it from the poet after he died. I have been searching for it for as long as I searched for you and Alexia,” Mrs. Dumphry said.

Alexia studied the box. There was nothing fancy about it. If she’d seen it in a shop, she wouldn’t have looked twice.

“In the old days, poets made a living traveling between cities and towns. They told stories and juggled and did acrobatics. They played music and sang songs, and when they arrived in a town or village, crowds gathered to hear their stories and watch them perform.” Mrs. Dumphry had a faraway look in her eyes. “In those days I didn’t understand their importance. Now I know a good storyteller is far more powerful than any king or queen. All poets carried a coffe with them. It was where they kept their most prized possessions.”

“What’s inside? What was the poet carrying?” Arthur asked.

“I have no idea.”

“So why do we need it?” Alexia asked. “Why is it so important in the Last Battle?”

“Because the poet told me it was.” A smile crept along the corners of Mrs. Dumphy’s lips. “Besides that, the same prophecy that speaks of you and Jack also mentions the coffer.” Her voice took on a cadence as she recited, “‘When the Awakened are destroyed and the foundations of the world have crumbled, from beneath the Assassin’s Shadow the Child of Prophecy shall open the coffer to release the Poet’s Storm.’”

Mrs. Dumphy shook her head. “Not even the Sephari know what it means, but it is clear at least one of the Children of Prophecy will need to open the coffer. Arthur Greaves, the fact that you took the coffer is as big a blow to the Assassin as losing the Children of Prophecy, perhaps bigger.”

Alexia snickered. She’d been wrong. It was possible for Arthur to turn an even darker shade of red.

“Mrs. Dumphy”—Jack pulled a small leather fold from his cloak—“I think this might help you open it.” He handed her the fold. “King Edward gave it to me when we were in Buckingham Palace. His family kept it safe for thousands of years so he could give it to me. I think it will help you open the coffer.”

“Wait. What?” Arthur interrupted. “You met the king and didn’t tell me? Did he have a crown? How can you be sure it was really him, and why would he give you an old pen anyway?”

Mrs. Dumphy sighed as the coffer disappeared up her sleeve. “Arthur Greaves,” she said, studying the ancient quill, “wisdom and brevity are siblings. And while you have become friends with one, you have spurned the other.”

A look of confusion crossed Arthur’s face. He opened his mouth,

then promptly closed it again.

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“Jack, I would very much like to hear the story behind that pen. But I will not take it from you. If Edward’s family kept it safe so he could give it to you, then you should keep it.”

“But don’t you want to open the coffer?”

“No, I do not. According to the prophecy, either you or Alexia need to open it. And though it did not specify whether it could be opened more than once, we do know it must be opened after the Awakened have been destroyed and the world has crumbled.”

“I still don’t understand,” Alexia said. “Why did you search for so long to find me and Jack when the prophecy says we will destroy the world?”

“Because it also says you will save the world and defeat the Assassin,” Mrs. Dumphry said cheerily.

“Mrs. Dumphry,” Jack said. “I think I remember what we’re meant to do next. At least I think I’m having the memory right now.”

“You will have to talk once we’re on our way,” a voice called from the ledge of the cavern. It was Elion, a Sephari. Elion’s skin sparkled like diamonds, the tops of her ears were pointed, and her eye color shifted according to her mood. She was from the world of Siyyon, home of the Author and birthplace of the Assassin. Elion could fly on her own and had circled back to get a better look at the Shadow Army. “The Shadow Souled will be here soon, and I am sorry to say we must flee yet again.”

“That be impossible,” Andreal rumbled. “They could no be coming so quickly.”

“Only a fool questions what is, Andreal. And you are no fool,” Mrs. Dumphry said.

“They are even wearier than we.” Elion’s eyes gathered the sunlight even as they shifted from crimson to stony gray. “But it is not

just their desire to capture Jack and Alexia that has pushed them so hard.” Elion cast Mrs. Dumphy a grim look. “An Odius leads them.”

Andreal groaned, and Wild looked fearfully at Alexia.

“What’s an Odius?” she whispered.

“It’s death,” he whispered back.

“The puzzle has come together.” Mrs. Dumphy clapped her hands. “The dark army will be as afraid of the Odius as they are desperate to retrieve the Children of Prophecy and the coffer. With an Odius to lead them, they’ll not give up until they’ve captured us or died from exhaustion. Young Jack and I will discuss his plan as we fly. But we leave now. In another twenty hours or so, we should come to an Oasis. The Author willing, we will have found a way to escape by then.”

“Though you are correct that we must leave,” Elion said, “let us wait a moment longer. I’m afraid I bring even worse news than that of the Odius.” She turned to look out of the cavern. “The Assassin’s Shadow comes. Even now it smothers the world with its embrace. I came as fast as I could so we could all stand beneath the sun together one last time. Come and drink in its light. Feel its warmth in your bones.” Elion met Alexia’s eyes as she approached the cavern mouth. “It may be the last time any of us see it again on this side of life.”

Alexia had no idea what the Assassin’s Shadow was, but she did as she was told. The sun shone bright, and not a cloud could be seen in the noonday sky. Elion gripped Alexia’s hand and closed her eyes, turning her face to the sun.

Alexia was about to ask what was happening, when she saw it.
A vast, slithering darkness was sweeping the land. It came from the

south and spanned the horizon. Dread rose in her chest as her eyes lingered on the darkness.

“Do not waste a second watching this evil.” Elion squeezed Alexia’s hand warmly. “Turn your face to the sun and remember this moment.”

The Awakened stood in silence as the darkness rocketed over them, swallowing the sky.