

CHRIS D'LACEY

UNICORNE FILES

BOOK THREE

A CROWN OF
DRAGONS

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FOR LISA, WITH LOVE





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1 • ARTIFACT

“There is a question you have never asked me, Michael — one, I suspect, you have yet to ask yourself.”

We were sitting at a table in a windowless room, me and the android, Amadeus Klimt. The room was lit in mauve-colored shades, though I couldn't see a lightbulb of any description. We were somewhere within the UNICORNE complex — a craft of indeterminate size, laid deep underwater off the coastline where I lived, accessed through a complicated network of tunnels, hidden in the workings of a disused mine. They, UNICORNE, were an organization that investigated UNexplained Incidents, Cryptic Occurrences, and Relative Nontemporal Events. But the biggest mystery was UNICORNE itself — the why, the what, and particularly the who, because the “who” included my father, Thomas Malone, who had secretly worked for them before disappearing after a mission to New Mexico. Disappearing from family life, that is. For three long years, me, my mom, and my sister, Josie, had suffered in silence, praying for news of Dad's return. Gradually, our hopes had dwindled to nothing. Then,

shortly before my last birthday, along had come Amadeus Klimt to draw me into UNICORNE's clutches. An uneasy alliance that had culminated in the shocking discovery that Dad — or the shell of his body, at least — had actually been on this craft all the time, floating in a tank of gooey fluid, surrounded by small octopus-like creatures called Mlepra. And Klimt had the gall to say, "There is a question you have never asked me, Michael." Pick any one from a thousand, Mr. Klimt. Starting with:

"Where's the nearest restroom?"

He tapped his perfect fingers on the table. "This is not a moment for levity," he said. He had a very slight German accent and an even slighter sense of humor. He leveled his purple-eyed gaze at me.

"I'm serious. I need to pee."

"Interesting."

"It won't be if I leak all over the floor. I thought you were bringing me here to show me an artifact?" After proving myself to them over two UFiles, both of which had almost gotten me killed, they had promised me "a brush with dragons" and some answers about Dad — starting in what they called the artifact room.

"It appears you have already detected it," he said. "Or it has detected you. One of the most interesting phenomena associated with the scale is that its atoms vibrate at a rate

somewhat higher than the coherent electromagnetic pulses that keep the rest of this planet stable. It is not uncommon to experience some discomfort around it.”

And that meant *what*, exactly? This was the way Klimt often spoke, like a physics teacher who’d gotten too close to his Van de Graaff generator. I crossed my legs and looked into a corner. The room was small, the walls just fading into shadow. Even the desk on which my elbows rested was as smooth as glass and completely black. “Scale?” I said. It was the one bit of his sentence that had piqued my interest.

“Lay your hands flat.”

“Why?”

He tilted his head in a robotic manner, his standard way of expressing displeasure.

Sighing, I spread my fingers on the desk. The surface was slightly warm, not unlike the wall of the tank in which my father’s body floated.

“A little wider, please.”

I moved my fingers until he told me to stop. “Why am I doing this? What’s going to happen?” He was scaring me now — something else he did on a regular basis.

Saying nothing, he swept one hand across the desk as if he was spreading a pack of cards. The surface cleared like mist off a window. And there, caught like an insect in amber, was the “artifact” he’d brought me here to see. It was about

the size of a man's hand and looked a little like a roof shingle, longer than it was wide and gently furrowed from side to side. Its surface was rough, crusted with millions of tiny crystals, all glinting the same pale shade of green.

"You're not serious?" I said, even though just looking at the thing had registered a real wow factor in me (and, *boy*, did I want to pee).

"I assume," he said, in as serious a tone as I'd ever heard him use, "that you are asking me to verify that this is the object I sent your father to investigate in New Mexico?"

I looked at it again. "Are you telling me this fell off a dragon?"

Another slight tilt of the head.

"But everybody knows that dragons aren't *real*." I stared at the scale as if it was some kind of precious jewel, the most valuable thing in the entire world. Maybe it was. Maybe, deep down, I wanted to believe that this really had come from a dragon. Maybe this was the answer not just to where Dad was but to all those questions humans ask themselves from time to time. *Are we alone in the universe? What's our purpose? Why are we here?* Just thinking about it made my eyes water. It was a strangely emotional moment.

Klimt placed his hands flat on the surface of the desk and spread his artificial fingers like mine. What looked like a very fine lightning bolt emerged from the uppermost tip of

the scale and skewered through the gooey stuff it rested in, before splitting and connecting to each of Klimt's fingertips. "It does not matter how you name it," he said. "You merely have to accept that this piece of tissue — and I assure you it is organic — was once attached to a creature of some stature. Extensive chemical testing has established that it could not have come from a genus of dinosaur nor any reptilian, avian, or mammalian species known to have evolved on this planet. We call it dragon because we can find no better word for it. As you have frequently pointed out, a romantic mystique has formed around these creatures, but it would disappoint me if you bowed to such idle conjecture. You are, after all, a UNICORNE agent. Your role is to separate truth from fantasy. In this case, the truth is greater than the fantasy. To employ a term you regularly misuse, the scale is 'alien' to this world. How it arrived on our planet, we do not know. What happened to the creature that shed it is a mystery. But here it is. This is what your father brought out of New Mexico. This is what took him to the limits of human consciousness — and beyond."

"This is what put him in that tank?"

He nodded. "The Mlepra are keeping Thomas in biological stasis. But time is running out. He has grown weaker in the last two months. This is one of the reasons you are being activated."

“Activated? What does —?”

“You have performed well for us, Michael, but your greatest test is still to come. I told you on the first occasion we met that you might be the only person capable of finding your father. The shell of his body may be in the tank, but his mind is elsewhere. We want you to find him. We want you to put him together again.”

Like all the king’s horses in the nursery rhyme. If they couldn’t manage it, why should I be able to? “How?”

“Shortly, Preeve will prepare you for something your father called The New Mexico Phenomenon — or The Mexico Phenomenon for short. To perform this task, you will need to be connected to the scale at a high vibrational level.”

Preeve was their scientist, the man in control of the UNICORNE labs. He didn’t like me much. To him, I was just an interfering little kid, someone he’d put in a jar if he could and screw the lid on tight. “What is it — this . . . Mexico thing?”

“A means of accelerating your thought processes, allowing you to explore . . . deeper levels of consciousness.”

Why did I not like the sound of that? “Will it be dangerous?”

“Do you really need to ask?”

That pee I’d been talking about? I thought I felt it as a warm patch on my thigh. It didn’t help that a new bolt of

energy had fizzed out of the scale and was connecting me to it in the same way as it had Klimt.

“Do not move your hands,” he said.

But it was hard to resist wanting to pull away. My fingers were beginning to tingle. It felt like the scale was scanning me somehow. “What’s happening? How is it doing that?”

Staring right into my eyes, Klimt said, “The crystal-line nature of the surface is home to thousands of Mlepra. They inhabit the minute cavities in and around the crystals as sea creatures would a shell. It is not clear how they survive, but they are extremely robust and highly adaptable to changes in their environment. As you know, we have extracted samples and found that they will grow in culture to the size you are more familiar with. The Mlepra have many remarkable properties, but they are probably little more than parasites. They cling to their host, this scale, not only because it offers them shelter but because they wish to absorb its power. Think back to what I asked you when we came into the room.”

“Something about . . . the question I’ve never asked?”

“Yes.”

I lifted my shoulders a touch. “I don’t know. I’m confused. What is it?”

“You have the power to alter your reality, to move away from dangerous situations by subtly reinventing the world

around you. How many others do you know who are capable of that?”

“No one I’ve met.” Thank goodness the class idiot, Ryan Garvey, wasn’t able to “rearrange the multiverse” as Klimt liked to put it. We’d all be living in trees and eating nothing but popcorn if it was up to him.

“An incredible gift, you would agree?” said Klimt.

More often a curse than a gift. It had screwed up the life of my best friend, Freya, and turned her into a crow. But it had saved me from danger several times as well, and slowly — very slowly — I was beginning to learn how to master the reality shifts. I nodded. “I guess.”

He smiled. A rare twist of the lips for him. “But where did it come from, Michael? How did you acquire this extraordinary talent?”

“That’s the question?”

“Yes.”

I shrugged again.

He looked down at the scale.

“This?”

He raised an eyebrow, another uncommon gesture for him. (It also made him look disturbingly human.) “Look at your hands,” he said.

They were glowing green, the same color as the scale. I

could see right through the skin to the veins, where the blood was running a darker shade of green.

“Do you feel it?” he asked.

I jumped back, knocking my chair to the floor. After a few seconds, my hands returned to normal, but my heart was pumping like crazy. “What have you done to me?”

“Shown you your place in the universe,” he said.

I shook my head and ran around the desk to the door. It was locked and wouldn’t budge. I hammered my fist against it. “Let me out!”

“And where would you go, Michael?”

“Home, to Mom. And this time I’m gonna tell her everything. *Everything.*”

“And she will think you delusional and bring you straight back to me.” He reached out and quickly gripped my wrist. I’d once been held by a chimp at a zoo after foolishly putting my hand into its cage. That chimp was strong, but nothing near as strong as Amadeus Klimt. “An hour ago, in the director’s presence, you were willing to go through any procedure that might enable us to contact your father. This is merely the beginning, Michael. If you fail now, there is no hope.” He let me go. I stepped away, clutching my wrist. “I showed you the scale to uphold our veracity, but there is something else I want you to see, something that I hope will . . . secure your

commitment to the mission.” He flipped his hand and a white rectangle lit up the wall to my left. A flickering ten-to-one countdown began, like an intro to an old-fashioned movie reel.

“What’s this?”

“A film, made by your father.”

“What?”

“He’s using an iris camera, a recording device secreted in a contact lens. A quite brilliant innovation, developed for us by Preeve. The images are jerky, but the eyecam has recorded documentary evidence of your father’s time in New Mexico — seen, quite literally, through his eyes. Sit down, Michael. This is something you will not want to miss.”

And as a black hole formed in the center of my chest, pulling everything I knew into its dark, tight grip, I sank into the chair again and stared at the screen.