

## Dragon Rider



**K**EEPING THE RIVER to their left, they traveled for an hour before Ryann stole one last glimpse back at Myraddin. He thought he could still see a lone tower rising up above the horizon. The image was so small he wondered if he would have mistaken it for mountain peak if he hadn't known any better. The Elan River flowed rapidly in the same easterly direction they had traveled on their previous adventure. While the town of Myraddin had proliferated into a vibrant city, along the river Ryann could not see any evidence that four hundred years had passed.

As they trudged along the riverbanks, visions of Drake's army, bows in hand, resurfaced in his memory. He recalled the horde coming out of the thick brush along the shores, his narrow escape, and that further down the river the scenery would open up in rocky, barren areas with patches of dried grass. Thin trees with broad willow canopies had sprung up along the banks of the river, providing welcomed shade as they walked single-file into the desert. Off in the distance to the south lay miles and miles of sand and rocky wasteland. If he had his directions correct, eventually past the desert there would be the Pedr River and beyond that the transition to the mountainous region.

Ireth stopped under one of the larger trees. The shady covering extended out over the river. "Let's get a drink and rest here for a few minutes."

Ryann dropped to the sandy bank and took off his boots. They fit

perfectly when he first put them on, but the angry red spots where they were rubbing told a different story. The sounds of Terell slurping at the river water carried up the embankment as he turned his boots upside down and watched the sand pour out like an hourglass. He looked around for Liddy and saw her sitting downstream at the river's edge dangling her feet in the cool, rushing water. The scene reminded him of one of his family's vacations out west to Arizona and resting along the rocky sandbanks of a sparsely shaded Sedona stream.

He welcomed the few minutes to drink his fill of water and massage feeling back into his toes. Ireth waved them over, and they gathered in a circle along the top of the riverbank at the base of a sturdy oak tree. Ryann noted Terell had the prime seat with his back resting against the tree trunk, legs limply splayed out in front of him.

"We shouldn't be too far away now," Ireth began. "From what I gathered from my contacts in Myraddin, this dwarf they speak of is at the edge of the ancient canyon where you found the sword on your previous visit."

"You read that in the book as well?" Ryann asked.

Ireth nodded.

"I feel like a historical figure that's come back to life," Liddy said. "I mean, can you imagine having someone we've read about in history class coming to Mount Dora?"

Ryann turned to Ireth. "How many Aelianians have read about us?"

"Oh, very few, and then it is just those in my clan."

"That's good."

"But—" Ireth hesitated.

"But what?"

"There are always legends, rumors, and stories passed down from generation to generation. Historical accounts can be good and bad

depending upon whose point of view it's coming from. That magnifies the importance of having the written word from firsthand witnesses. It conveys the truth about what happened and cannot change from storyteller to storyteller over time."

Nodding, Ryann shifted his attention toward Terell. His friend's eyes were wide open and his mouth formed a large oval.

"G-gu-guys!" He raised his shaking hand to point behind Ireth.

Knowing Terell only stuttered when he was very nervous or excited, Ryann turned in the direction he was pointing. An enormous white creature the height of the tree stood quietly watching them.

"Dra-dra-dragon!" Terell finally spat out.

Ryann glanced at the others. Liddy had a quizzical look on her face, and Ireth showed no fear.

"Sorcha?" Liddy asked meekly.

They stared at the imposing dragon silently gazing back at them with frosty blue eyes. Stunning white scales adorned her massive torso. Her wings stretched out thirty feet on both sides and, except for the frayed edges tinged a pinkish blue, were equally brilliant white. The dragon's streamlined head began with a small pointed beak at the tip of her snout and arched back over crests that staggered to its scaly neck. A few teeth protruded from her closed mouth, which curved slightly upward. Ryann wasn't sure if she was grinning or not.

"Greetings," the great white dragon replied. "Surely you can't be the same Earth children I met four hundred years ago?"

"Oh, but we are," Liddy eagerly responded. "We've come back only a year older, but time has passed much faster here. How is it that you're still alive? Uhh, no offense."

"None taken. It is the privilege and curse of being a dragon. When we first met, I was only a juvenile dragon of twenty-five years, and

now I am an adult. So many friends have come and gone, the creator choosing to give them shorter lives. For some reason, He allows dragons to live a thousand years or more.”

Liddy turned to Ireth. “And elves? I had read somewhere that you’re immortal and live forever.”

“If you mean our souls, all of us live forever, for the soul cannot die. Only our location changes,” Ireth explained. “We either spend eternity with the Word in heaven or with Abaddon in the place prepared for him and his followers. If you mean our current life forms—like the Creator choosing to allow dragons to live in their temporary body for a thousand years—then yes, He gives elves one hundred years to live here, and then we cross over to our final destination without having to die in this one.”

“So you can’t be killed?” Ryann asked.

“It’s certainly possible, but it requires extreme measures to do so.”

Having regained his nerve, Terell joined the conversation. “Let me just say how much I appreciate this being a happy reunion and that we’re not her lunch,” he said, pointing to Sorcha. “But I don’t recall meeting you on my last visit.”

“Nor I you, dark one. A dragon’s memory is quite keen. I do recall meeting the other two briefly. I believe it was at the ninetyeth feast of the Word.”

Ireth’s ear twitching caught Ryann’s attention, and he watched her hesitate, glance across the river, then make eye contact with Sorcha and nod her head in that same direction.

Sorcha’s mouth opened wide. Terell yelped as a cone of white frost erupted from her mouth with a loud, windy rush. Shooting across the river, the freezing blast expanded, blanketing an entire row of bushes in a thick mass of ice.

“Whoa, that was cool!” Terell shouted.

Ireth’s eyebrow raised. “That is stating the obvious.” Ireth started down to river’s edge, motioning to the trio as she said, “Follow me.”

At the edge of the stream she stopped and turned to the dragon. “Sorcha? If you please,” she said, pointing toward the water.

Sorcha hopped into the middle of the river, the water rising up to wing level. She spread her wings wide, forming a bridge from one side to the other. Ireth started across and motioned for the others to follow. Ryann didn’t hesitate after watching Ireth step across with ease but was surprised at the sturdiness of Sorcha’s wings. He expected to sink down with each footstep, like stepping onto a trampoline. Instead it was more like walking across a flat wooden bridge with barely any noticeable give. Once they had crossed, Sorcha rose out of the waters, shaking like a dog to rid herself of the cool river water.

“What was that all about?” Liddy asked.

Ireth waved them forward, leading them around to the back side of the eight-foot block of ice. Frozen within was the body of a Hugon, mouth open in shocked surprise, his last moment encapsulated in the block.

Liddy gasped, “Is he—”

“Dead?” Sorcha finished the question. “No, not dead; just frozen in suspended animation for a few hours until the ice melts away. In this heat, it might be a little quicker.”

“What was he doing?” Ryann asked.

“He’s one of Narcissus’s Peacekeeper spies,” Ireth answered, displaying a rare grin. “This will slow down his report on our whereabouts.”

Liddy looked from the frozen Hugon to Sorcha. “I take it you’re not on good terms with Narcissus?”