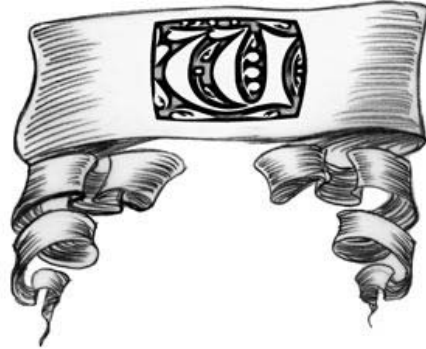


## CHAPTER 9



# Wonderful Words

**R**YANN AND LIDDY beamed with delight. They were experiencing a fantasy, previously lived out only through adventure books. Not wanting to miss a thing, they stumbled over themselves, looking in every direction as they tried to keep up with Raz and Essy.

The great hall of Castle Myraddin was bursting with activity. Echoes of roaring, barking, squealing, cooing, neighing, singing, and laughing resounded off the lofty peaked ceilings as everyone made their way into the hall. Ryann was amazed at the pairs of animals conversing together—lions with zebras, foxes with rabbits, and bears with sheep. Back home they would have been eating one another. More amazing were the creatures that didn't exist back home: unicorns, fawns, pixies, elves, centaurs, and

dryads. Of course, there were humans—at least he assumed they were—but nothing appeared very special about any of them.

“Look!” Liddy cried out, tugging on Ryann’s arm. Off to the side, down in front, a white dragon sat back on its haunches, perfectly still and stately. Ryann would have thought it was a large statue, except for the wet nostrils that rhythmically flared in and out.

“Is it safe?” Liddy asked as she caught up to Essy and pointed in the direction of the dragon.

“You mean Sorcha?” Essy grinned. “That all depends upon how you define *safe*.”

Having adjusted to a roomful of talking animals and up until now purely mythical creatures, Ryann looked ahead of Raz and Essy to a few open spots at the bulky wooden tables. The great hall was just what he would have imagined an ancient castle would look like. Roughly chiseled stones formed the massive walls that soared skyward into the darkness. Red and orange rays from the setting sun splashed through large, stained glass circular windows midway up the walls, creating a banner of colors streaming to the floor. Coupled with two-foot tall, thick green candles, this was the only light for the room.

“Have you ever seen such a spread of food, Ryann?” Liddy asked, looking up and down their long row of tables.

“Only at Thanksgiving or Christmas dinners. But never this much variety.”

Shiny golden bowls spilled over with fruits of every color. Ryann marveled at how large and fresh the grapes, bananas, oranges, apples, pears, peaches, and strawberries looked. Then there were some other odd-shaped things he assumed to be fruit but had never seen before. He thought he’d have to try the pinkish, oblong fruit that looked like the fruit he had seen on the Tree of Life. He wondered if it would taste sweet or sour. Other bowls of varying sizes were heaped full of vegetables, steaming rice and noodles, mashed potatoes, olives, nuts, and breads. Breathing in the tanta-



lizing aromas made Ryann's stomach growl in desire, having been deprived of food since breakfast early that morning.

*Dong!*

The clanging brass gong interrupted the roar of conversation and the great hall grew silent.

Ryann and Liddy looked out of the corners of their eyes to see what everyone else was doing and bowed their heads to mimic those around them. At first, Ryann kept one eye open to see if someone would pray like his family did at home around the dinner table. Silence. Then he shut both eyes, shifting back and forth from one foot to the other. He was tempted to raise his head and look around, but knew he didn't dare at this point. Then...

*Donggg!—Donggg!—Donggg!*

The gong reverberated throughout the cavernous hall in three lengthy blows. Heads rose in unison and everyone sat down. Ryann and Liddy imitated the others, not wanting to seem out of place, while the first ones seated began attending to the food.

"Here you go, young man," snorted a jovial warthog Ryann hadn't noticed sitting to his right. He tried to ignore the wet snout staring him in the face as he took a bowl of puffy rolls and then passed them along.

"Would you mind passing me a quant?" the warthog grunted, pointing past him while stuffing three rolls into his mouth.

"A what?" Ryann turned in the direction the warthog had pointed. One of the huge bowls of towering fruit was off to his left, in front of Liddy.

"Liddy, pass me a quant, please," Ryann said loud enough for those in front and beside him to hear.

"A wha..?" she started, giving him a quizzical glare.

Raz came to her rescue, his paw darting out to retrieve one of the pink-colored oval-shaped things and handing it to Liddy. Ryann passed it along.

"Name's Grotch," the warthog chortled before chomping into the quant.

