

CORNELIA FUNKE



# Dragon Rider

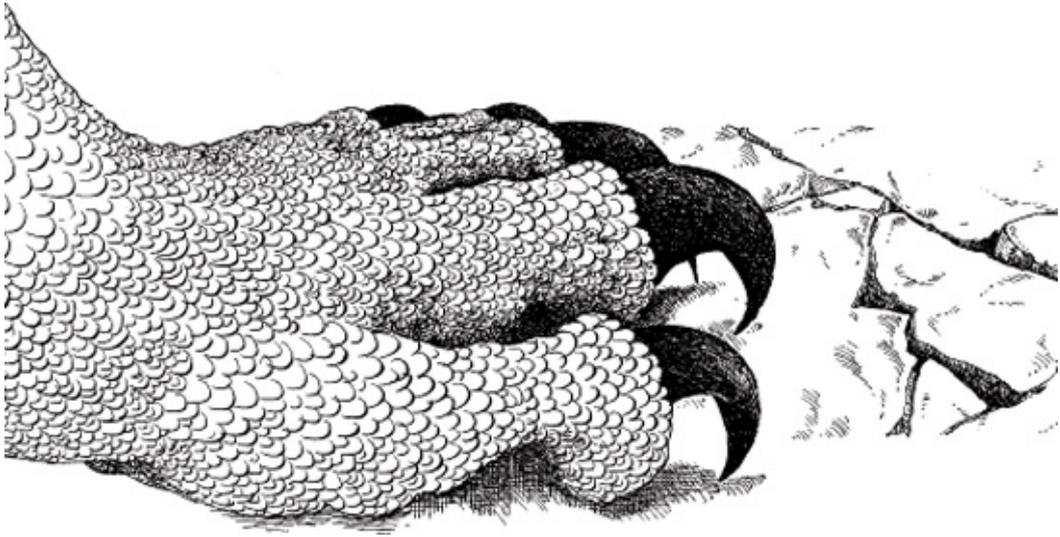
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 SCHOLASTIC

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# Dragon Rider

CORNELIA  
FUNKE



*Translated by Anthea Bell*

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## 1. Bad News



All was still in the valley of the dragons. Mist had drifted in from the sea nearby and was clinging to the mountains. Birds twittered uncertainly in the foggy damp, and clouds hid the sun.

A rat came scuttling down the slope, fell head over heels, tumbled down the moss-covered rocks, and picked herself up again.

“Didn’t I say so?” she muttered crossly to herself. “Didn’t I tell them?”

Snuffling, she raised her pointy nose, listened, and headed toward a group of crooked fir trees at the foot of the highest mountain.

“I knew before winter,” murmured the rat. “Oh, yes, I knew before winter, I could smell it coming, but they wouldn’t believe me, no, not them! They feel safe here. Safe! Huh! Really!”

It was so dark under the fir trees that you could scarcely see the gaping crevice in the mountainside that swallowed up the mist.

“They don’t know anything,” the rat continued peevishly, “that’s their problem. They know absolutely nothing about the world. Not the least little thing.”

She glanced warily around again, and then disappeared into the crevice in the rock. There was a large cave behind it. The rat scurried in, but she didn’t get far. Someone grabbed her tail and lifted her up in the air.

“Hi, Rat! What are you doing here?”

The rat snapped at the furry fingers that were holding her tight, but all she caught was a mouthful of brownie hairs, which she furiously spat out.

“Sorrel!” she hissed. “Let go of me this instant, you brainless mushroom-muncher! I don’t have time for your silly brownie tricks.”

“You don’t have time?” Sorrel placed Rat on the flat of her furry paw. She was still a young brownie, no bigger than a human child, with a spotted sulfur-yellow coat and bright catlike eyes. “How come, Rat? What’s the big hurry? Need a dragon to protect you from hungry cats or what?”

“This has nothing to do with cats!” hissed Rat angrily. She didn’t care for brownies herself, although all the dragons loved them and their furry faces. When the dragons couldn’t sleep

they would listen to the strange little songs the brownies sang, and when they felt sad no one could cheer them up as well as those sharp-tongued brownie layabouts.

“I’ve got bad news, if you want to know. Extremely bad news,” grumbled Rat. “But I’m not telling anyone except Firedrake. Certainly not you!”

“Bad news? Oh, festering fungus! What sort of bad news?” Sorrel scratched her stomach.

“Put — me — down!” snarled Rat.

“If you say so.” Sorrel sighed and let Rat hop down to the stony floor of the cave. “But he’s still asleep.”

“Then I’m waking him up!” spat the rat, making her way farther into the cave, where a fire burned blue, keeping the darkness and damp away from the heart of the mountain. Beside it flames the dragon lay asleep, curled up with his head on his paws. His long tail with its spiraling crest was coiled around the warmth of the fire. The flames brought a glow to his scales and cast his shadow on the cave wall. Rat scurried up to the dragon, climbed on his paw, and tugged his ear.

“Firedrake!” she shouted. “Firedrake, wake up. They’re coming!”

Sleepily the dragon raised his head and opened his eyes.

“Oh, it’s you, is it, Rat?” he murmured in a rather hoarse voice. “Has the sun set already then?”

“No, but you must get up all the same! You have to wake the others!” Rat jumped on Firedrake’s paw and scuttled up and down in front of him. “I warned you, I really did — I warned the whole bunch of you, but you wouldn’t listen, oh, no!”

“What’s she talking about?” The dragon cast an inquiring glance at Sorrel, who was now sitting by the fire, nibbling a root.

“No idea,” said Sorrel, munching. “She just keeps jabbering on. Well, there’s not much room for sense in a little head like hers.”

“Oh, really!” Rat gasped indignantly. “Honestly, I ask You, I —”

“Take no notice, Rat!” Firedrake rose, stretched his long neck, and shook himself. “She’s a bad temper because the mist makes her fur damp.”

“Pull the other one!” Rat threw Sorrel a venomous glance. “Brownies are always bad tempered. I’ve been up since sunrise, running my paws off to warn you. And what thanks do I get?” Her gray coat was bristling with anger. “I have to listen to her silly fur-brained fancies!”

“Warn us of what?” Sorrel threw the nibbled remnants of her root at the wall of the cave. “Oh, putrid puffballs! Stop winding us all up like this or I’ll tie a knot in your tail!”

“Quiet, Sorrel!” Firedrake brought his claw down angrily on the fire. Blue sparks flew into the brownie girl’s fur, where they went out like tiny shooting stars.

“All right, all right!” she muttered. “But the way that rat carries on is enough to drive anyone crazy.”

“Oh, really? Then just you listen to me!” Rat drew herself up to her full height, planted her paws on her hips, and bared her teeth. “*Humans* are coming!” she squeaked, so shrilly that

her voice echoed all around the cave. “Human beings are coming! You know what that means, you leaf-burrowing, mushroom-munching, shaggy-haired brownie? Humans are coming — coming *here!*”

Suddenly all was deathly quiet.

Sorrel and Firedrake looked at each other as if they had been turned to stone. But Rat was still trembling with rage. Her whiskers were all aquiver, and her tail twitched back and forth on the cave floor.

Firedrake was the first to move.

“Humans?” he asked, bending his neck and holding out his paw to Rat. Looking offended, she scrambled onto it. Firedrake raised her to his eye level. “Are you sure?” he asked.

“Perfectly sure,” replied the rat.

Firedrake bowed his head. “It was bound to happen someday,” he said quietly. “They’re all over the place these days. I think there are more and more of them all the time.”

Sorrel was still looking stunned. Suddenly she jumped up and spat into the fire. “But that’s impossible!” she cried. “There’s nothing here they’d want, nothing at all!”

“That’s what you think!” The rat bent over so far that she almost fell off Firedrake’s paw. “Don’t talk such nonsense. You’ve mingled with humans, right? There’s nothing they don’t want, nothing they don’t want. Forgotten that already, have you?”

“Okay, okay!” muttered Sorrel. “You’re right. They’re greedy. They want everything for themselves.”

“They do indeed.” The rat nodded. “And I tell you, they’re coming here.”

The dragon-fire flared up, and then the flames burned low until the darkness, like some black animal, swallowed them. Only one thing could extinguish Firedrake’s fiery breath so fast and that was sorrow. But the dragon blew gently on the rocky ground, and flames flickered up once more.

“This is bad news indeed, Rat,” said Firedrake. He let Rat jump up onto his shoulder, and then went slowly toward the mouth of the cave. “Come on, Sorrel,” he said. “We must walk with the others.”

“And won’t they just be pleased!” growled Sorrel, smoothing down her ruffled fur and following Firedrake out into the mist.

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## 2. A Meeting in the Rain



Slatebeard, the oldest dragon in the valley, had seen more than his memory could hold. His scales no longer glowed, but he could still breathe fire, and whenever the young dragons were at a loss they would come to ask his advice. Once all the other dragons had assembled outside Slatebeard's cave, Firedrake woke him. The sun had set. A black and starless sky lay over the valley, and it was still raining.

When the old dragon emerged from his cave he looked gloomily up at the sky. His bones ached from the damp, and the cold weather made his joints stiff. The others respectfully made way for him. Slatebeard looked around. None of the dragons were missing, but Sorrel was the only brownie present. The old dragon moved through the wet grass, with heavy steps and dragging tail, toward a rock that rose in the valley like a giant's head covered with moss. Breathing hard, he climbed up on it and looked around. The other dragons gazed up at him like frightened children. Some of them were still very young and knew nothing but the valley; others had come with Slatebeard himself from far, far away and remembered that the world had not always belonged to humankind. They all smelled misfortune, and they hoped he would deal with it. But Slatebeard was old and tired now.

"Come up here, Rat," he said in a hoarse voice. "Tell us what you saw and heard."

The rat scampered nimbly up the rock, climbed Slatebeard's tail, and crouched on his back. It was so quiet under the dark sky that only the sound of the rain falling and the rustle of foxes out hunting by night could be heard. Rat cleared her throat. "Humans are coming!" she cried. "They've woken their machines and fed them and sent them on their way. They're already eating a path through the mountains only two days' journey from here. The fairies will hold them at bay for a while, but they'll get here some time or other — because it's the valley of yours they're heading toward."



A groan ran through the ranks of the dragons. They raised their heads and pressed close around the rock where Slatebeard stood.

Firedrake was a little way away from the others, with Sorrel perched on his back, nibbling a dried mushroom. “Oh, terrific, Rat,” she muttered. “Couldn’t you have put it a little more tactfully?”

“What does that mean?” one of the dragons called out. “Why would they want to come here? Surely they have all they want where they are.”

“Humans never have all they want,” replied Rat.

“Let’s hide until they go away again!” suggested another dragon. “The way we’ve always done when one of them loses his way and turns up here. They’re so blind they only see what they expect to see. They’ll think we’re odd-looking rocks, same as usual. Or dead trees.”

But the rat shook her head.

“Look here!” she shrilled. “If I’ve told you once I’ve told you a hundred times, those humans are making plans. But big animals don’t listen to little animals, right?” She looked around her crossly. “You hide from human beings, but you aren’t interested in what they’re up to. Rats aren’t so stupid: We go into their houses; we eavesdrop on them. We know what they’re planning for your valley.” Rat cleared her throat again and stroked her gray whiskers.

“Here she goes again, winding up the suspense,” Sorrel whispered into Firedrake’s ear, but the dragon ignored her.

“What are they planning, then, Rat?” asked Slatebeard wearily. “Come on, tell us.”

Rat fiddled nervously with a whisker. It was no fun bringing bad news. “They — they’re going to flood the valley,” she replied, her voice faltering. “Soon there’ll be nothing here but water. Your caves will be flooded, and none of the tall trees over there,” she said, pointing one paw at the darkness, “none of them will be left. Not even the treetops will show above the water.”

The dragons stared at her, speechless.

“But that’s impossible!” one of them exclaimed at last. “No one can do a thing like that. Not even us, and we’re bigger and stronger than they are.”

“*Impossible?*” Rat laughed sarcastically. “*Bigger? Stronger?* You don’t get it at all. You tell them, Sorrel. Tell them what human beings are like. Maybe they’ll believe you.” With an injured expression, she wrinkled her sharp nose.

The dragons turned to Firedrake and Sorrel.

“Rat’s right,” said the brownie “You’ve no idea.” She spat on the ground and picked at a piece of moss stuck between her teeth. “Human beings don’t go around in suits of armor these days, like they used to when they hunted you dragons, but they’re still dangerous. More dangerous than anything else in the world.”

“Oh, nonsense!” said a large, stout dragon scornfully and turned his back on Sorrel. “Let the two-legs come! Rats and brownies may be right to fear them, but we are dragons! What can they do to us?”

“What can they do to you?” Sorrel threw her nibbled mushroom away and sat up very straight. She was angry now, and an angry brownie is not to be trifled with. “You’ve never set foot outside this valley, dimwit!” she said. “I expect you think human beings sleep on leaves like you. I expect you think they do no more harm than a fly because they don’t live much longer than one. I expect you think they’ve got nothing in their heads but thoughts of eating and sleeping. But they aren’t like that. Oh, no, not these days!” Sorrel was practical, gasping for air. “Those things that sometimes fly across the sky — being so stupid, you call them noisy-birds — those things are machines built by humans for traveling through the air. And human beings can talk to one another when they aren’t even in the same country. They can conjure up moving, talking pictures, and they have cups made of ice that never melt and their houses shine at night as if they’d trapped the sunlight, and, and ...” Sorrel shook her head. “And they can do wonderful things — terrible things, too. If they want to flood the valley with water then they will. You’ll have to leave whether you like it or not.”

The dragons stared at her. Even the one who had just turned his back. Some of them looked up at the mountains as if they expected machines to come crawling over the black peaks at any moment.

“Oh, drat it!” muttered Sorrel. “Now he’s gone and made me so cross I threw my delicious mushroom away. It was an oyster mushroom, too! You don’t find those around here so often.” In a thoroughly bad mood, she scrambled down off Firedrake’s back and started searching the wet grass for her tidbit.

“You heard, all of you!” said Slatebeard. “We have to leave.”

Uncertainly, their legs heavy with fear, the dragons turned to him again.

“For some of you,” the old dragon continued, “it will be the first time, but many of us have had to flee from human beings before. Although now it will be extremely difficult to find a place that *doesn’t* belong to them.” Slatebeard shook his head sadly. “It seems to me there are more and more humans with every new moon.”

“Yes, they’re all over the place,” said the dragon who had been mocking Sorrel a moment ago. “It’s only when I fly over the sea that I don’t see their lights beneath me.”

“Then we must just try living in harmony with them,” suggested another dragon.

But Slatebeard shook his head. “No,” he said. “No one can live in harmony with human beings.”

“Oh, yes, they can.” Rat stroked her wet coat. “Dogs and cats do, and mice and birds, even us rats. But you,” she said, letting her gaze roam over the dragons, “you’re too big, too clever, and,” she added, shrugging her shoulders, “too *different!* You’d frighten them. And when something frightens human beings they —”

"They destroy it," the old dragon said wearily. "They almost wiped us out once before many, many hundred years ago." He raised his heavy head and looked at the younger dragons one by one. "I'd hoped they would at least leave us this valley. It was a foolish hope."

"But where are we to go?" cried one of the dragons in despair. "This is our home."

Slatebeard did not reply. He looked up at the night sky, where the stars were still hidden behind clouds, and sighed. Then he said huskily, "Go back to the Rim of Heaven. We have to stop running away sometime. I'm too old. I shall crawl into my cave and hide, but your younger ones can make it."

The young dragons looked at him in surprise. The rest of them, however, raised their heads and looked eastward, their eyes full of longing.

"The Rim of Heaven." Slatebeard closed his eyelids. "Its mountains are so tall that they touch the sky. Moonstone caves lie hidden among its slopes, and the floor of the valley in the middle of the mountains is covered with blue flowers. When you were children we told you stories about the Rim of Heaven. You may have thought they were fairy tales, but some of them have actually been there."

He opened his eyes again. "I was born there, so long ago that eternities lie between that memory and me. I was younger than most of you are now when I flew away, tempted by the wide sky. I flew westward, on and on. I have never dared to fly in the sunlight since. I had to hide from humans who thought I was a bird of the devil. I tried to go back to the Rim, but I could never find the way."

The old dragon looked at his young companions. "Seek the Rim of Heaven! Go back to the security of its peaks, and then perhaps you will never have to flee from humans again. They aren't here yet," he said, nodding toward the dark mountaintops around the valley, "but they will come soon. I have felt it for a long time. Don't linger. Fly! Fly away!"

All was perfectly still again. Drizzling rain as fine as dust fell from the sky.

Sorrel hunched her head between her shoulders, shivering. "Oh, thanks a million," she whispered to Firedrake. "The Rim of Heaven, eh? Sounds too good to be true. If you ask me, the old boy dreamed it up."

Firedrake did not reply but looked up at Slatebeard thoughtfully. Then he suddenly stepped forward.

"Hey!" whispered Sorrel in alarm. "What's the idea? Don't do anything silly."

But Firedrake took no notice. "You're right, Slatebeard," he said. "In any case I'm tired of living in hiding, never flying outside this valley." He turned to the others. "Let us look for the Rim of Heaven. Come on, let's set out today. The moon is waxing. There'll be no better night for us."

The others shuddered as if he had taken leave of his senses. But Slatebeard smiled for the first time that night. "You're still rather young, Firedrake," he pointed out.

"I'm old enough," replied Firedrake, raising his head a little higher. He was not much smaller than the old dragon, but his horns were shorter and his scales shone in the moonlight.

"Here, hang on! Wait a mo!" Sorrel scrambled hastily up Firedrake's neck. "What's all this nonsense? You may have flown beyond these hills all of ten times, but," she said, spreading

out her arms and pointing to the mountains around them, “but you’ve no idea what lies farther off. You can’t just fly away through the human world, looking for a place that may not even exist.”

“Be quiet, Sorrel,” said Firedrake crossly.

“Won’t!” spat the brownie girl. “See the others? Do they look as if they want to fly away? No! So forget it. If human beings really come I’m sure I can find us a nice new cave!”

“Yes, listen to her,” said one of the other dragons, moving closer to Firedrake. “There’s no such place as the Rim of Heaven except in Slatebeard’s dreams. The world belongs to human beings. If we hide here they may leave us in peace. And if they really do come to our valley, we’ll just have to chase them away.”

At this Rat laughed. Her laughter was shrill and loud. “Ever tried turning back the tide?” she asked.

But the dragon who had spoken did not answer her. “Come on,” he told the others, and he turned and went back through the pouring rain to his cave. They followed him one by one until only Firedrake and the old dragon were left. Slatebeard, his legs stiff, climbed down from the rock and looked at Firedrake. “I can see why they think the Rim of Heaven is only a dream,” he said. “There’s many a day when it seems like a dream to me, too.”

Firedrake shook his head. “I’ll find it,” he said and looked around. “Even if Rat is wrong and the human beings stay where they are, there must be some place where we won’t have to hide. And when I have found it I’ll come back and fetch the rest of you. I’ll set out tonight.”

The old dragon nodded. “Come to my cave before you leave,” he said. “I will tell you all I can remember, even though it isn’t much. But now I must get in out of the rain or I won’t be able to move my old bones at all tomorrow.”

With difficulty, Slatebeard trudged back to his cave. Firedrake stayed behind with Sorrel and Rat. The brownie girl was perched on his back, looking fierce. “You idiot!” she said quietly. “Acting the big hero, right? Off to look for something that doesn’t exist. I ask you!”

“What are you muttering about?” asked Firedrake, turning his head to look at her.

This was too much for Sorrel. She lost her temper. “And who’s going to wake you when the sun sets?” she demanded. “Who’s going to protect you from human beings? Who’s going to sing you to sleep and scratch you behind the ears?”

“Yes, *who?*” asked Rat sharply. She was still sitting on the rock where the old dragon had stood.

“Me, of course!” Sorrel spat at her. “Tedious toadstools, what else can I do?”

“Oh, no, you don’t!” Firedrake turned so abruptly that Sorrel almost slipped off his back. “You can’t come!”

“And just why not?” Sorrel folded her arms, looking offended.

“Because it’s dangerous.”

“I don’t care.”

“But you hate flying! It makes you airsick!”

“I’ll get used to it.”

“You’ll be homesick, too.”

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“Homesick for what? You think I’m going to wait here till the fish come and nibble my toes? No, I’m going with you.”

Firedrake sighed. “Oh, very well,” he murmured. “You can come. But don’t blame me afterward for taking you along.”

“She will,” said Rat, chuckling as she jumped off the rock into the damp grass. “Brownies are never happy without something to complain about. Well, now let’s go and see the old dragon. If you’re going to start tonight there’s no time to waste. Certainly not enough time to finish your quarrel with this dim-witted mushroom-muncher.”

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### 3. Advice and Warnings



Slatebeard was lying at the mouth of his cave listening to the rain when they arrived. “You haven’t changed your mind?” he asked when Firedrake lay down beside him on the rocky ground.

The young dragon shook his head. “But I won’t be alone. Sorrel’s coming with me.”

“Well, well!” The old dragon looked at Sorrel. “Good. She may come in useful. She knows human beings, she has a quick mind, and brownies are more suspicious by nature than dragons. Which won’t be any bad thing on this journey of yours. Her big appetite could be a problem, but no doubt she’ll soon get used to eating less.”

Sorrel looked anxiously down at her stomach.

“Listen, then,” Slatebeard began again. “I don’t really remember very much. These days the pictures get more and more muddled in my mind, but I do know this: You must fly to the highest mountain range in the whole world. It lies far away in the East. And when you get there, you must find the Rim of Heaven. Look for a chain of snow-covered peaks encircling a valley like a ring of stone. As for the blue flowers growing in the valley,” he added, closing his eyes, “their fragrance hangs so heavy in the cold night air that you can taste it.” He sighed. “Ah, my memories are faded now, as if they were lost in the mist. But it’s a wonderful place.” His head sank to his paws, he closed his eyes, and his breath came more slowly. “There was something else,” he murmured. “About the Eye of the Moon. But I don’t remember what.”

“The Eye of the Moon?” Sorrel leaned toward him. “What’s that?”

But Slatebeard only shook his head sleepily. “I don’t remember,” he murmured. “But beware,” he said, his voice so soft that they could hardly hear it, “beware of the Golden One.” Then a snore emerged from his muzzle.

Firedrake straightened up, looking thoughtful.

“What did he mean by that?” asked Sorrel anxiously. “Come on, we’d better wake him up again and ask him.”

But Firedrake shook his head. "Let him sleep. I don't think he can tell us any more than he's told us already."

They left the cave quietly, and when Firedrake looked up at the sky the moon was visible for the first time that night.

"Oh, good," said Sorrel, holding her paw up in the air. "At least it's stopped raining. Suddenly she clapped herself on the forehead. "Oh, fearsome fungi!" She swiftly slipped off Firedrake's back. "I must pack some provisions. How do we know there won't be mushroom shortages where we're going? Back in a moment. And don't you dare," she added menacingly, wagging a furry finger in Firedrake's face, "don't you dare even *think* of starting without me."

With that she disappeared into the dark.

"Now listen, Firedrake," said the rat anxiously, "you really don't know much about what you're looking for. You're not used to navigating by the stars, and Sorrel's mind is usually so full of mushrooms that she could get north and south mixed up and confuse the moon with the evening star. No, it won't do." Rat stroked her whiskers and looked at the dragon. "You need help, believe you me! As it happens, a cousin of mine makes maps. Very special maps. He may not know exactly where the Rim of Heaven is, but he can certainly tell you where to find the highest mountain range in the world. Stop off and see him on the way. I have to admit visiting him isn't entirely without its risks," said the rat, wrinkling her brow, "because he lives in a big city. But I think you ought to chance it. If you set off soon you can be there in two nights' time."

"City?" The indistinct figure of Sorrel emerged from the mist.

"For goodness' sake, *must* you scare me to death?" asked Rat. "Yes, that's right. My cousin lives in a human city. When you've left the sea behind you, keep flying eastward inland, and you can't miss it. It's huge, a hundred times larger than this valley, and full of bridges and tall buildings. My cousin lives in an old warehouse on the river."

"Does he look like you?" asked Sorrel, stuffing a few leaves into her mouth. She was carrying a bulging backpack, which she had brought back from one of her excursions into the world of human beings. "Yes, of course he does, you rats all look the same. Gray, gray, and gray again."

"Gray is a very practical color!" spat the rat. "Unlike your silly spots. As it happens, however, my cousin is white. Snow-white. He wishes he wasn't."

"Do stop squabbling," said Firedrake, looking up at the sky. The moon was now almost at its height, and if they were to set out that night it was time to leave. "Climb aboard, Sorrel," he said. "Shall we take Rat, too, to give you someone to quarrel with?"

"No thanks!" Rat took a couple of small steps backward in alarm. "There's no call for that kind of thing. I'm perfectly happy to know the world at secondhand. It's a lot safer."

"I never quarrel with anyone, anyway," Sorrel mumbled with her mouth full as she clambered up onto the dragon's back. "Pointy-nosed persons are oversensitive."

Firedrake spread his wings, and Sorrel hastily clutched one of the large spines on his crest.

"Look after yourself, Rat," said the dragon, bending his neck to nuzzle the little animal affectionately. "It's going to be some while before I'll be back to keep you safe from wi-

cats.” Then he stepped back, took off from the damp ground, and rose into the air, beating his wings powerfully.

“Oh, no!” groaned Sorrel, clinging on so tight that her furry fingers hurt.

Firedrake rose higher and higher into the dark sky, and a cold wind whistled around the brownie girl’s pointed ears.

“I’ll never get used to this,” she muttered. “Not unless I start growing feathers.” She peered down cautiously at the valley below. “None of them,” she grumbled, “not a single one has so much as put his neck out of his cave to say good-bye. They probably won’t come out until they’re up to their chins in water. Hey, Firedrake!” she called to the dragon. “I know a nice little spot over there beyond those hills. Why don’t we stick around here instead?”

But Firedrake did not reply.

And the black hills rose between him and the valley where he had been born.

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## 4. A Big City and a Small Human Being



“Oh, pestiferous parasols!” grumbled Sorrel. “If we don’t find somewhere pretty quick they’ll catch us and put us in the zoo.”

“What’s a zoo?” asked Firedrake, raising his muzzle from the water. He had landed an hour ago in the big city, in the darkest part of it they could find, far from the streets that were full of noise and light, even now when night had fallen. Ever since, he had been swimming from one dirty canal to the next looking for a place to hide during the day. But hard as Sorrel strained her catlike eyes and raised her sensitive nose to the wind, they couldn’t find anywhere that was large enough for a dragon and didn’t smell of human beings. Everything smelled of humans here, even the dark water and the garbage adrift in it.

“You mean you don’t know what a zoo is? Oh, I’ll explain later,” muttered Sorrel. “Although come to think of it, they’re more likely to stuff us. Bother, it’s going to take me hours to wash this filth off your scales.”

Firedrake was swimming like a silvery snake along the dirty canal, under bridges, past the gray walls of buildings. Sorrel kept glancing uneasily at the sky, but there was no sign yet of the treacherous sun.

“There!” the brownie suddenly whispered, pointing to a tall building. The water of the canal lapped its windowless brick walls. “See that hatch? If you make yourself as thin as you can you might fit through. Swim over there. I’ll sniff around a bit.”

The dragon cautiously let himself drift toward the wall. A large loading hatch just above water level gaped open. Its decaying wooden door hung loose from the hinges. With one bound Sorrel jumped off Firedrake’s back, got a handhold on the roughcast wall, and put her head through the opening, snuffling.

“Seems okay,” she whispered. “There hasn’t been a human being in here for years. Nothing but mouse droppings and spiders. Come on.”

In a flash, she had disappeared into the dark. Firedrake hauled himself out of the water, shook his scaly body, and forced it through the hatch. He looked curiously around him at the

structure, the work of human hands. He had never been inside a building before, and he didn't like it. Large wooden crates and rotting cardboard cartons were stacked by the dam walls. Sorrel sniffed everything with interest, but she couldn't pick up the scent of anything edible.

Wearily Firedrake dropped to the floor in front of the hatch and looked out. This was the first time he had made such a long flight. His wings ached, and the city was full of frightening sounds and smells. The dragon sighed.

"What's the matter?" Sorrel sat down between his paws. "Oh, I see. Who's homesick now then?" She opened her backpack, took out a handful of mushrooms, and held them under his nose. "Here, get a noseful of these. They'll drive the stink of this place out of your nostrils. I expect our friend the rat would like it just fine here, but you and I had better get out as soon as we can." She patted Firedrake's dirty scales comfortingly. "Get some sleep now. I'll have a bit of a nap, too, and then I'll be off to look for Rat's cousin."

Firedrake nodded. His eyes closed. When he heard Sorrel singing softly to herself, it was almost like being back in his cave. His tired limbs relaxed. Sleep was laying soft, soothing fingers on him ... when Sorrel suddenly jumped up.

"There's something in here!" she hissed.

Firedrake raised his head and looked around. "Where?" he asked.

"Behind those crates!" whispered Sorrel. "You stay here." She crept toward a stack of crates that towered to the ceiling. Firedrake pricked up his ears. Now he could hear it, too: rustling, a scraping of feet. The dragon raised himself.

"Come on out!" said Sorrel. "Come out, whatever you are!"

For a moment all was quiet. Very quiet. Except for the noises of the big city drifting from outside.

"Come on out!" spat Sorrel again. "Or do I have to come and fetch you?"

There was some more rustling, and then a human boy crawled out from among the crates. Sorrel retreated in alarm. When the boy rose to his feet he was a good deal taller than she was. He stared incredulously at the brownie girl. And then he saw the dragon.

Firedrake's scales still shone like silver in spite of the canal water, and in this small space he seemed enormous. Neck bent, he was gazing down at the boy in astonishment.

The dragon had never seen a human being at close quarters before. From everything that Rat and Sorrel had told him, he had imagined them as looking different — very different.

"He doesn't smell of humans at all!" Sorrel growled. She had recovered from her fright and was inspecting the boy suspiciously, although from a safe distance. "He stinks of mice," she added. "That's why I didn't smell him. Yes, that'll be it."

The boy took no notice of her. He raised his hand — a bare hand with no fur growing on it — and pointed at Firedrake. "It's a dragon!" he whispered. "A real, live dragon."

He gave Firedrake an uncertain smile.

The dragon cautiously stretched out his long neck toward the boy and sniffed. Sorrel was right. He did smell of mouse droppings, but there was something else as well. A strange

smell, the same smell that hung in the air outside — the smell of human beings.

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“Of course it’s a dragon,” said Sorrel crossly. “And what are you?”

The boy turned to look at her in surprise. “Oh, wow!” he exclaimed. “You’re quite something, too! Are you an extraterrestrial?”

Sorrel proudly stroked her silky coat. “I’m a brownie. Can’t you see that?”

“A what?”

“A brownie!” repeated Sorrel impatiently. “Typical. You humans may be able to tell a cat from a dog, but that’s about all.”

“You look like a giant squirrel,” said the boy, grinning.

“Very funny!” spat Sorrel. “What are you doing here, anyway? A little titch like you isn’t usually out and about on his own.”

The grin vanished from the boy’s face as if Sorrel had wiped it away. “A thingummywhatsit like you isn’t usually out and about here, either,” he pointed out. “If you must know, I live here.”

“Here?” Sorrel looked around, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes, here.” The boy glared at her. “For now, anyway. But if you like,” he added, looking at the dragon, “if you like you can stay here for the time being.”

“Thank you,” said Firedrake. “That’s extremely kind of you. What’s your name?”

The boy awkwardly pushed his hair back from his forehead. “My name’s Ben. What about you?”

“This,” said the dragon, nuzzling Sorrel gently in the stomach, “is Sorrel. And I am Firedrake.”

“Firedrake. That’s a good name.” Ben put out his hand tentatively to stroke the dragon’s neck, as if he feared Firedrake would disappear the moment he was touched.

Casting the boy a suspicious glance, Sorrel went over to the hatch and looked out. “Time to go and look for that rat,” she said. “You — human — can you tell me where the dockland warehouses are?”

Ben nodded. “Less than ten minutes’ walk from here. But how are you going to get there without being captured or stuffed and put on display in a museum?”

“You can leave that to me,” growled Sorrel.

Firedrake put his head between the two of them, looking anxious. “You mean it’s dangerous for her?” he asked the boy.

Ben nodded. “Of course. Well, looking the way she does I bet she won’t get ten meters from here. The first little old lady to spot her will call the police.”

“Police?” asked Firedrake, baffled. “What kind of thing is police?”

“I know what the police are,” muttered Sorrel. “But I have to reach those warehouses, so it’s just too bad.” She sat down and was about to let herself drop into the dirty canal water when Ben grasped her by the arm.

“I’ll take you there,” he said. “I’ll give you some of my clothes to wear, and then I can

smuggle you past somehow. I've been living here a long time. I know all the back alleys."

"Would you really guide her?" asked Firedrake. "How can we ever thank you?"

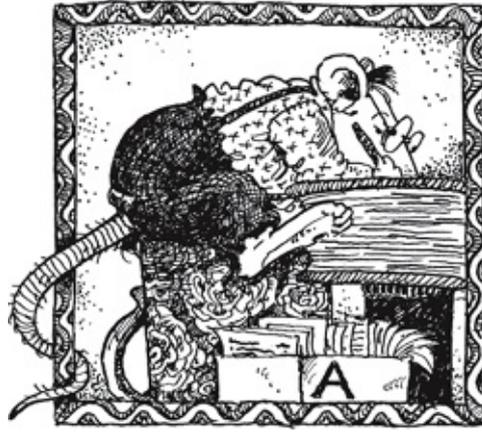
Ben turned red. "Oh, it's nothing. Really," he muttered.

Sorrel was not looking so enthusiastic. "Human clothes," she growled. "Yuck. Dismal deerskins, I shall stink of human beings for weeks."

But she put the clothes on all the same.

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## 5. Gilbert the Ship's Rat



“Which warehouse is it?” asked Ben. “If you don’t know the number, we could have a long search ahead of us.”

They were standing on a narrow bridge. Warehouses lined both sides of the canal: strange narrow buildings of red stone, with tall windows and pointed gables. The harbor of the big city wasn’t far away, and a cold wind was blowing from that direction, almost tearing the hood away from Sorrel’s pointy ears. A great many humans were pushing past them, but not one stopped and stared at the small figure with Ben, clutching the railing of the bridge. The sleeves of Ben’s sweatshirt, which were much too long for her, hid Sorrel’s paws. His jeans turned up twice at the bottom, hid her legs, and her catlike face was hidden in the shadow of the hood.

“Rat said it’s the last warehouse before the river,” she whispered. “And her cousin lives in the cellar.”

“Rat? You don’t mean a real rat, do you?” Ben looked at Sorrel doubtfully.

“Of course she’s real. What do you think? Don’t just stand there looking stupid, not that you don’t do it well, but we’ve got more important things to do.” She impatiently pulled Ben along after her. The bridge led to a narrow road running beside the bank. As they hurried along the pavement, Sorrel kept looking anxiously around. The sound of traffic hurt her ears. She had been in small towns before, stealing fruit from gardens, exploring cellars, teasing dogs. But there were no gardens here, no bushes where you could crouch down and hide in a hurry. Everything in this city was made of stone.

Sorrel was greatly relieved when Ben guided her into a narrow alleyway that led back to the canal between the last two warehouses. There were several doors in the red walls. Two were closed, but when Ben pushed the third, it opened with a slight creak.

They hurried in. An unlit stairway lay before them. Daylight filtered in through a narrow dusty window and revealed one flight of steps leading up and another down.

Ben looked suspiciously down the dark steps. “There’ll be rats there, that’s for sure,” he whispered. “The question is, can we find the right one? How will we recognize it? Does

wear a collar and tie or something?”

Sorrel did not answer. She pushed back her hood and scurried down the steps. Ben followed her. It was so dark at the foot of the steps that he took the flashlight out of his jacket pocket. A cellar with a high vaulted ceiling lay before them, and once again he saw a number of doors.

“Huh!” Sorrel inspected the light and shook her head scornfully. “You humans need your little machines for everything, don’t you? Even to look at things.”

“It’s not a machine.” Ben swept the beam of the flashlight over the doors. “What are you actually looking for? A mouse-hole?”

“Don’t be silly.” Sorrel pricked up her ears and twitched her nose. Still snuffling, she moved slowly from door to door. “Ah, here we are.” She stopped in front of a brown door that was slightly ajar. Sorrel pushed it open just far enough for her to slip through the crack. Ben followed.

“My goodness!” he murmured.

The tall windowless room they entered was stuffed with junk up to the ceiling. Among shelves full of dusty folders stood stacks of old chairs, tables piled on top of one another, cupboards without doors, mountains of index-card files, and empty drawers.

Sorrel raised her nose, sniffing, then shot purposefully away. Ben banged his shin following her. He had already lost track of the door they had come through. The farther they went the more chaotic the clutter became. Suddenly some shelving units barred their way.

“That’s it, then, I suppose,” said Ben, letting the beam of his flashlight wander around the place. But Sorrel ducked, crawled through a gap between two shelves — and disappeared.

“Hey, wait for me!” Ben cried and pushed his head through the gap.

He was peering at a small study — a study just the right size for a rat, barely a meter away from him and underneath a chair. The desk was a book propped on two sardine cans. A coffee mug turned upside down did duty as a chair. There were index-card files full of tiny slips of paper, empty matchboxes stood everywhere, and the whole place was lit by an ordinary desk lamp standing on the floor beside the chair. But whomever it was who used this study was nowhere to be seen.

“You stay here,” Sorrel whispered to Ben. “I don’t think Rat’s cousin will be particularly pleased to see a human being.”

“Oh, come off it!” Ben crawled through the gap and straightened up. “If it doesn’t get frightened at the sight of *you* it won’t mind me, either. Anyway, it’s living in a human building. I don’t suppose I’ll be the first human it ever saw.”

“*He!*” hissed Sorrel. “It’s a he, and don’t you forget it.”

She looked around curiously. In addition to the little study area under the chair there was also a human-sized desk, a huge chest of drawers, and a large old globe of the world hanging at an angle on its stand.

“Hello?” called Sorrel. “Anyone at home? Oh, drat it, what was his name again? Giselle — no, Godfrey — no, Gilbert Graytail or some such.”

Something rustled above the desk. Ben and Sorrel looked up and saw a fat white rat looking down at them from his perch on top of a dusty lamp shade.

“What do you want?” asked the rat in shrill tones.

“Your cousin sent me, Gilbert,” said Sorrel.

“Which one?” asked the white rat warily. “I’ve got hundreds of cousins.”

“Which one?” Sorrel scratched her head. “Well, we always just call her Rat. Wait a moment... I remember! Her name’s Rosa. That’s it!”

“You’ve come from Rosa?” Gilbert Graytail let down a tiny rope ladder from the lamp shade and quickly clambered down it. He landed on the big desk with a thump. “Oh, well, that’s different.” He stroked his whiskers, which were white as snow, like his coat. “What can I do for you?”

“There’s this place I’m looking for,” Sorrel told him. “Well, it’s a mountain range really.”

“Ah!” The white rat nodded, looking pleased with himself. “You’ve come to exactly the right person. I know all the mountain ranges on this planet, large, small, and medium. I know everything about them. After all, my informants come from all over the world.”

“Your informants?” asked Ben.

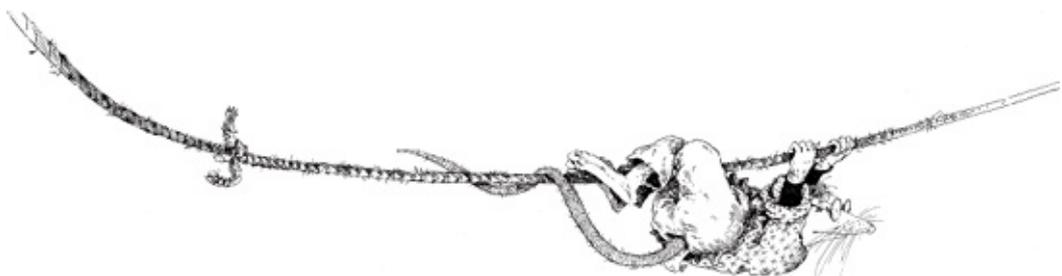
“Yes, ship rats, seagulls, the sort of folk who get around a lot. And I have a large extended family.” Graytail went over to a big black box standing on the desk, raised the lid, and pushed a knob on its side.

“That’s a real computer!” said Ben, surprised.

“Of course it is.” Graytail hit a couple of keys and looked at the screen, frowning. “My laptop, all the bells and whistles. I sent off for it to help me get my files into some kind of order. But the fact is” — he sighed, and tried some more keys — “the fact is it’s always giving me grief. Right, what mountain range was it you wanted?”

“Er, well,” said Sorrel, scratching her stomach. She was itching horribly under the human clothes. “It’s supposed to be the highest one there is. The highest mountain range in the whole world. With a chain of mountains somewhere in the middle of it called the Rim of Heaven. Ever heard of it?”

“Oh, that one, is it? The Rim of Heaven. Well, well.” Graytail looked curiously at the brownie. “The valley above the clouds, home of the dragons. Not so easy.” He turned around and hammered away busily at the keyboard. “The place isn’t really thought to exist at all, you know,” he said. “But one hears odd things now and then. What’s your interest in it? A brownie girl and a human boy! They say even the dragons have long since forgotten where the Rim of Heaven lies.”



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