

DRAGON LEGEND



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Stars

The stars see everything.

And they never forget.

They watch all that happens down below and never interfere. They are constant.

At least most of the time. Because sometimes they shake free from their home in the sky and fly through the dark. Wishes are made on their flaming tails, and when they land they can change history, for better or for worse.

And sometimes, sometimes, stars are pulled down from the sky. But at great cost.

One dragon thought they knew the cost of swallowing a star. And hoped it would be worth it.



A Drop Of Blood

Deep inside Dragon Mountain, Billy Chan held a blade made of bone.

He stood at the edge of a shimmering blue pool. Next to him were his friends Charlotte Bell and Liu Ling-Fei. JJ was there too, but he wasn't a friend. Not yet – maybe not ever.

And behind them were dragons.

In what felt like a lifetime ago, but in reality was just a matter of days, Billy and his friends had opened the mountain, discovered four dragons with hearts that matched their own and linked with them for ever in a rare and ancient bond.

Now, the dragons and their humans gazed into the

shimmering pool. Spark – a blue-and-gold dragon with a long neck, twisting gold antlers and giant sheer wings – stared the most intently. Her gold eyes crackled with focus. Billy sensed her effort through their bond and tried to send her strength.

‘Are you sure this is going to work?’ said Charlotte, frowning. ‘Didn’t it take Dimitrius and the nox-wings almost one hundred years to make a portal? Can we really have made one in just a few days?’

‘It has to work,’ said Billy brusquely. He couldn’t bear to think about the alternative.

It had been two days since their friend Dylan O’Donnell had been taken by Old Gold, who ran the summer camp at the base of Dragon Mountain where they had all been campers. Old Gold, whom they had trusted as a mentor. Old Gold, whom Ling-Fei had viewed as a surrogate grandparent, but who had in fact murdered her real grandparents. Old Gold, who had a heart as evil as the Dragon of Death’s own and was getting steadily closer to finding her.

If that happened, the Dragon of Death would be stronger than ever. Her hunger for power was endless, and all would suffer for it.

The guilt of losing Dylan hung heavy on Billy. He felt as if he should have been able to save his friend. He hadn't smiled since Dylan had disappeared into the nox-wing portal.

'It *will* work,' said Ling-Fei. Even after everything that had happened, her optimism wasn't dampened. Billy knew Old Gold's betrayal had hurt her deeply, but Ling-Fei chose to focus on finding Dylan. That was something Billy admired about Ling-Fei: her ability to see the best in people no matter what.

'Buttons should go first,' said Tank, Charlotte's huge red dragon, who barely fitted inside the underground grotto in which they were crammed. 'With the other child.'

'My *name* is JJ,' muttered JJ.

'Must I travel with him?' said Buttons plaintively. Buttons – a green dragon with a long snout, thick tail and protruding belly – had bonded with Dylan. Everyone was counting on the strength of their tie to pull Buttons to whatever time and place Dylan and Old Gold had jumped to. There, they would also find the Dragon of Death – and, if everything went to plan, they would stop her once and for all.

‘Yes,’ said Xing, Ling-Fei’s slender silver dragon. ‘His connection to his grandfather will help make sure that we travel to the right time.’ Her sharp golden eyes softened. ‘I do not doubt your bond with Dylan, but we must take every precaution. You know this.’

Buttons sighed and looked at JJ. ‘I hope you don’t fall off,’ he said. ‘Without the human-dragon heart bond, riding dragons is much more difficult. You will have to stay focused and hold on tight.’

Billy put a hand on Spark and felt grateful for their bond that enabled him to fly through the sky with Spark as if he were part of her. Their connection was so deep that they could even share each other’s thoughts when they were close.

A few days ago, Billy would have found the idea of getting on a dragon completely terrifying, so he could understand why JJ might hesitate. At least Buttons wasn’t the scariest of the dragons. Sure, his claws were long and his teeth were sharp, but he didn’t snarl like Xing or look as if he could swallow you in one gulp like Tank.

And, if it had been a few days ago, Billy would

have expected JJ to make some sort of sarcastic retort, the kind JJ tossed around back at camp, but now he nodded meekly. He had dark circles under his eyes, and Billy saw that his nails looked bitten and ragged. JJ tugged on the orange bodysuit the dragons had fashioned for him. ‘You’re sure this thing will protect me?’

‘Better than your human clothes,’ said Xing. ‘Be grateful we were able to provide one.’

Billy, Charlotte and Ling-Fei all wore similar suits, given to them by the dragons when they first knew they were going into the Dragon Realm. The suits were crafted by dragon magic and made of a rare fabric that could withstand the extreme conditions of the Dragon Realm and the harsh blows of battle. The suits had already proven to be the difference between life and death, protecting them from giant crab attacks and deadly blows from enemy nox-wings.

And they had something better than the suits.

They had *pearls*.

Throughout the Human and Dragon Realms there existed eight magical pearls – the Eight Great

Treasures – and with them came powers, some of which were known and some yet to be discovered. Between them, Billy and his friends had four. At least . . . Billy *hoped* Dylan still had his pearl.

When they had received their pearls and bonded with their dragons, powers within them had been activated. Superpowers that previously Billy had thought only existed in comic books and movies. Powers that they had needed to survive in the dangerous Dragon Realm. Dylan had the Granite Pearl and the power to charm others into doing what he wanted. Ling-Fei had the Jade Pearl, giving her an affinity for nature and the ability to sense life and magic energy around her. Charlotte had the Gold Pearl, which activated a super-strength within her. And Billy had the Lightning Pearl, boosting his innate physical agility. With the pearl, he was extraordinarily fast and nimble, able to flip and jump with ease. Their combined powers had helped them fight the evil nox-wings, followers of the Dragon of Death who were intent on bringing her back to full strength. But Billy and his friends hadn't anticipated Old Gold's betrayal, which led to Dylan's kidnap

when he was pulled by Old Gold into the portal to find the Dragon of Death, leaving behind Old Gold's grandson, JJ.

JJ didn't have a pearl, and over the past two days Billy had sometimes caught JJ gazing at him when he'd untucked his necklace from under his blue-and-gold suit. Even if you didn't have a dragon bond, a pearl on its own would be something worth having. The pearls were so valuable and so powerful that Old Gold had killed Ling-Fei's grandparents for one, even without knowing its true capabilities. Not even the dragons knew everything the pearls could do. Billy was grateful to have the Lightning Pearl and Spark, because he was certain the quest to save Dylan and stop the Dragon of Death was going to be almost impossible. But, with his pearl power, his dragon and his friends, Billy felt as if he might just be able to achieve the impossible.

'Are you ready?' said Tank, drawing Billy back to the present.

The present that was soon to become the past.

Or maybe it was more that the past was soon to become their present. Every time Billy tried to get

his head round jumping through time and space, his thoughts jumbled and he felt a bit nauseous.

‘I’m ready, but I’m nervous,’ admitted Ling-Fei. ‘What if it doesn’t work? What if something goes wrong?’

‘There is always a chance of something going wrong,’ said Buttons gently.

‘The risks of going far outweigh the risks of not going,’ added Tank gruffly.

‘I’m doing this no matter what,’ said Billy. He looked at his friends, at JJ, at the dragons. ‘We have to fix this. We have to stop the Dragon of Death. We have to stop Old Gold.’ He resisted glaring at JJ here, because, as much as he wanted to blame him for Old Gold’s evil actions, he knew it wasn’t fair. ‘And we have to save Dylan.’

‘I’m with you,’ said Charlotte.

‘Me too,’ said Ling-Fei. ‘I know it will be dangerous, but this is what we have to do.’

‘JJ?’ Billy asked, looking him in the eye. He knew they had a better chance of finding Dylan and Old Gold with JJ, but he didn’t want to force JJ to come with them.

‘Do I have a choice?’

‘You always have a choice,’ said Spark, her eyes still focused and glowing as she prepared the portal.

JJ was silent as he weighed his options. ‘I’ll come,’ he said finally. ‘I want to find my *yeye*,’ which was the Mandarin word for ‘grandpa’. He paused and looked down a little nervously. ‘And I want to help find Dylan too.’

Billy wasn’t sure if they could trust JJ, but he really wanted to. They had enough to deal with without worrying about him too.

‘Enough discussion,’ said Xing, twining round Ling-Fei. ‘We should be on our way.’

‘If the humans are ready for their contribution,’ said Spark, still not taking her eyes off the shimmering pool. The pool that contained her hoard.

‘And if you are ready for this sacrifice,’ Buttons said, nodding at Spark. ‘It is no small thing for a dragon to give up their hoard.’

‘It is for the greater good,’ said Spark. She spoke evenly, but Billy felt her tension.

A dragon’s hoard was their most precious possession. It was an extension of their essence. Dragons spent

years, lifetimes, building up their hoards. And Spark was about to destroy hers by turning it into a portal.

It had to be Spark's. Billy had been shocked when he'd heard what Spark had to do, but she had gently explained that it had to be her hoard because of its precious contents. It contained living plants and fish, as well as stardust, which dragons believed all things were made of, making it more powerful than any of the other dragons' hoards, as precious as they were to them. To create a portal strong enough to break the laws of nature and to travel through time required energy, magic and sacrifice. And all the care and energy Spark had put into her hoard, and all the living energy within it, could be transferred to create the portal. It was a strange magic, she'd said, not quite looking Billy in the eye.

In the sparkling, glowing pool, starfish sat next to swirls of starlight. Tiny seahorses bobbed amid vibrant coral, and rainbow-coloured fish darted through a miniature seaweed forest. When Billy had first seen Spark's hoard, he had added one of his most prized possessions – his lucky shell from a beach in California, from *home*.

But the sacrifice of the hoard on its own, and all the life in it, was still not enough. The portal needed more.

Spark had swallowed a star once to save Billy, and she had done it again to create the swirling portal in front of them. But there was one more thing the portal needed before they could travel through it: the willing blood of all who wished to pass.

The dragons had already made their offerings, their golden blood dripping thickly from their lips. Their teeth were sharp enough to cut even their own steel skin.

That left the humans. The dragons couldn't bite or claw them to get their blood offerings. They had to be given willingly.

So the group had gone back to the place where they had found a mountain of dragon bones. And, while the dragons waited under the three moons that hung in the night sky of the Dragon Realm, Billy, Ling-Fei, Charlotte and JJ had rummaged as respectfully as they could through the bones of dead dragons until they had each found one they could sharpen to a point.

As Billy held his own blade of bone, he hoped none of the others had thought what he had while sifting through the dragon bones. That these were dragons killed in the name of dark magic. And that using living things as fuel for the portal felt a lot like what the Dragon of Death and her nox-wings did.

He hadn't wanted to say it out loud though, because what if the others agreed and they decided not to go through with it and Dylan was left lost in time with the Dragon of Death? And what if the Dragon of Death was then able to return to her full power, and enslave the human world and destroy everything Billy cared about? Demolish the whole world? So what they were doing couldn't be bad. Because Billy knew that they were on the side of good. They were trying to save everyone and everything. Not just Dylan.

'If you're ready,' said Spark, nudging Billy gently on the cheek. Billy knew she was giving more than any of them, using her own power and sacrificing her hoard, and he hoped she knew how much it meant.

Thank you, he told her through their bond.

At first, he thought Spark hadn't heard him, she was so focused on the portal pool, which was swirling faster and faster. Then he felt a rush of warmth.

Of course, she replied. I can do it. We can do it. Don't be scared.

And, as the thought hit him, he realized he *had* been scared. Scared of jumping into the unknown. But having his dragon – and his friends – with him gave him a sense of comfort. Spark was right. They could do this.

'I'm ready,' said Billy. He looked at the others, each standing with their own blade of bone at the edge of the swirling pool.

He took a deep breath and pressed his blade against his palm. Blood welled up faster than he thought it would, and, in a moment, a few drops had fallen into the pool. As they did, the water sparked as if hit by an electric current.

Charlotte didn't even blink as she pricked her finger. She glared at JJ. 'Don't wuss out,' she said.

JJ nodded and offered his own drop of blood.

Ling-Fei went last, not looking as the blood dripped out. 'Is it done?' she said.

‘It’s done,’ said Xing, wrapping herself protectively round Ling-Fei. ‘And now we go.’

It felt strange, seeing JJ clamber awkwardly onto Buttons. Buttons looked at the others, his expression unusually serious. ‘We will see you in a moment,’ he said before they disappeared into the portal, JJ’s arms clamped tightly round Buttons’s thick neck.

The last bit Billy saw of them was the tip of Buttons’s thick tail.

Tank looked far too large to fit in the portal, but magic was magic and the portal, very clearly a portal and not a hoard now, expanded imperceptibly to let Tank through.

‘Catch you on the other side,’ said Charlotte from her perch on Tank’s head. ‘Let’s go, Tank!’ And, with a yelp, they tumbled in.

‘Come quickly after us,’ said Xing to Spark. ‘Do not tarry. We might be playing with time, but we don’t have much of it.’

‘We will. Fly light, fly fast,’ said Spark.

‘See you soon, Billy,’ said Ling-Fei with a smile. ‘Don’t worry.’

‘I’m not worried,’ said Billy, even though he could

feel fear cooling his blood. *What if Spark is wrong? What if we end up in the wrong place? And what if I explode in the portal?*

He didn't know if Xing and Ling-Fei heard him as they slipped into the portal, making barely a ripple in the swirling . . . Billy wasn't sure what to call it. It wasn't water any more. It was a whirling silver-and-blue electric current, and it was buzzing and oh, he hoped it wasn't going to hurt.

'Be brave, Billy,' said Spark. She paused. 'I will need your bravery, perhaps most of all.' Before Billy could ask her what she meant, Spark dived in, wings back as if she were jumping from a great height.

As Billy hit the whirling, crackling current, he noticed, absently, that its colour was changing from blue to purple.

Everything surrounding him flashed bright white, like lightning striking all around. More than that, he felt as if he were inside a lightning bolt . . . no, as if he *were* the lightning bolt. He felt a charge run from the tips of his hair all the way to his toes, and he could barely hold onto Spark, but he knew he had to, he *had* to. If he just held onto Spark, everything would

be okay. Somehow, in the midst of everything, she must have heard his thoughts because, with a surge, he heard her.

Hold on, Billy.

He wasn't sure if she meant keep holding onto her or 'hold on' as in 'just wait a second' or 'hold on, you've got this', but he decided it meant it all and he held on. Even when the flashing stopped and darkness became so absolute it pressed down on him the way waves crashed on the shore, and he couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't feel, couldn't sense *anything*, he held on.