



DRAGON CITY



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DRAGON CITY

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KATIE & KEVIN TSANG

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*To Kevin's mom, Louisa, and Katie's mom, Virginia.
Thank you both for everything.*



The Moon

The moon is patient. High in the sky, she waxes and wanes. Sometimes she smiles, sometimes she cries. The teardrops of the moon fall down into the sea, lost for ever, no matter how many times she pulls the tide back and forth, revealing what lies hidden beneath the waves. The moon is always there, always watching, always waiting, until she is most needed. But only by those who are worthy of her power.

High in a spiralling tower, a dragon watches the sky, waiting for the very moment when the moon will appear. The dragon asks for forgiveness, but

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there is no answer. The moon does not smile and she does not cry.

The dragon turns and gazes down at her shadow – one she no longer recognizes. Even though it is always there . . . even in the dark.



Dragon Teeth

Billy Chan was inside a dragon's mouth.

It was hot, damp and it smelled terrible. And, of course, there was the ever-present danger that the dragon might decide to crush Billy between his jaws.

He peered out from behind the dragon's sharp teeth. 'Could you open up a little wider? There's something stuck back here,' he called out.

The dragon, who had sleek black scales and flowing silver whiskers, as well as a surprising and impressively long silver beard, grumbled but unhinged his jaws a bit so Billy had more space to move around.

'Thank you!' Billy said, repositioning himself so he had better access to the dragon's back molars. Because

Billy Chan, twelve-year-old surfer from California, was currently spending his days cleaning dragon teeth.

‘Ugh,’ he muttered under his breath, as he picked out something with feathers from in between the dragon’s molar. ‘What *is* this?’ Why couldn’t dragons have toothbrushes?

A loud voice from outside the dragon’s mouth interrupted his thoughts. ‘Now, how sharp do we want these today?’ The voice belonged to Billy’s friend, Charlotte Bell, who spoke with a southern American accent because she was from Atlanta, Georgia. She was filing the dragon’s front claws.

‘Wait! Don’t reply!’ Billy said. But it was too late, the dragon’s mouth was already moving, his teeth gnashing dangerously close to Billy’s hand.

‘As sharp as you can get them,’ said the dragon.

‘And what about the back ones?’ called another voice, this one in a lilting Irish accent. Dylan O’Donnell, from Galway, Ireland, was in charge of doing the dragon’s back claws.

‘COULD YOU PLEASE WAIT UNTIL I AM OUT OF HIS MOUTH TO ASK QUESTIONS?’ Billy shouted, as he yanked his hand out of harm’s way.

‘Sorry, Billy!’ Dylan called out. ‘We’ll be quiet now.’

There were faint murmurs of agreement and then his friends fell silent. Billy wiped the sweat off his brow and waited. All he heard was the dragon’s heavy breathing and the noise of claws being sharpened, which sounded just like blades slicing against each other.

It *must* be safe to start the teeth-cleaning again. Surely. Taking a deep breath, Billy moved further back in the dragon’s mouth, regretting that he’d ever offered to be in charge of teeth. With a small blade, he started picking at a piece of bone stuck behind a back tooth, careful not to stab the dragon in his gums. Billy had learned the hard way that their gums were surprisingly sensitive.

‘Your beard is looking particularly nice and shiny today,’ said a soft, musical voice. It was Liu Ling-Fei, who was responsible for scale shining, mane brushing and whisker maintenance.

Ling-Fei had grown up in the mountains of China, near where Camp Dragon had been. The four friends had met there, though it now felt like a lifetime ago. Ling-Fei was always happy to offer a kind word to a

dragon or a human. This was usually a quality Billy appreciated in her, but not right at this moment. As long as the dragon didn't reply, and he probably wouldn't, Billy would be fine. Most of the dragons they worked with barely acknowledged them, let alone responded to their praise.

'Thank you!' rumbled the dragon, clearly pleased with the compliment.

Billy groaned as a glob of dragon spit hit him in the face.

'Guys!'

'Sorry!' said Ling-Fei, before letting out a quiet giggle. 'Although that wasn't a question. It was a compliment!'

Billy rolled his eyes as he listened to his three friends chatting as they continued grooming the dragon. Easy for them; they weren't inside his mouth.

But still, Billy knew how lucky they all were.

To be alive and to be together.

They had each other and Billy clung to that whenever he found himself feeling sad or scared when he heard the roars of dragons and the screams of humans.

*

Everything had changed.

After Billy's dragon, Spark, had betrayed them and joined the Dragon of Death, giving her the eight pearls she needed to choose her own destiny, the world around them had disappeared.

When it had come back, it was completely different. Billy, Ling-Fei, Charlotte and Dylan had woken in a dark and distant future. One where the Dragon of Death ruled with a fearsome and terrible might. One where somehow she had been ruling for years and years already, even though it felt like only moments had passed between their lives in the past, in the Dragon Realm, and this version of the future where there was no Dragon Realm and Human Realm, only Dragon City and the Void beyond. Both the Dragon and the Human Realms had been decimated and devoured by the Dragon of Death and the Noxious and their never-ending quest for power, leaving Dragon City as the only habitable place for dragons and humans.

But at least Billy and his friends had been together, and they still had their memories of their lives before. And even though they had been separated from their

dragons, they had heard them when they had first arrived in Dragon City and had found themselves in chains in an unfamiliar and terrifying cityscape. Knowing that their dragons were alive had given them hope. Because the dragons were more than just friends. Deep in Dragon Mountain, the four children had each heart-bonded with a dragon, connecting them for ever. Dylan had bonded with Buttons, a healer dragon who cared deeply for humans. Ling-Fei's dragon was Xing, a dragon with the ability to seek out magic and power, and whose tough exterior hid a kind heart. The fierce warrior dragon Tank was Charlotte's heart-bonded dragon, and the two of them together could take on almost any opponent. As for Billy . . .

He didn't like thinking about his dragon, Spark, with her electricity powers and ability to see into the future. He had trusted her more than anyone and she'd let him down. Despite everything, part of him hoped that they were still connected through the heart bond. But when he tried to reach down their bond, there was nothing. It made him feel empty inside, like something was missing.

Even though they had been separated from their dragons, they weren't alone in the terrifying world of Dragon City. The tiny gold flying pig had been sucked into this future alongside them. And even though it couldn't speak, Billy knew it could understand them, so when they'd needed help escaping their shackles, he'd asked the pig to find the key.

It was a big ask for a tiny pig, but the pig had brought him Dylan's Claddagh ring, after all, and it had led Billy and the others to where Dylan was trapped in a tree by dark magic. Surely it could find a key to open their chains.

Hours had gone by during which the four friends had watched in horror as nox-wings swooped down on unsuspecting human workers and tossed them up into the air in some sort of twisted game, laughing as they did. At one point, a dozen humans had run down the street screaming that 'Death's Shadow' was coming. Billy and the others had pressed themselves closely against the wall they were chained to, as a giant dark shadow passed by overhead, leaving a trail of crackling cold air in its wake. They'd tried to ask for help from passing humans, but everyone had

stared blankly at them and then hurried on, not even daring to glance back.

‘Humans are so frightened in this time,’ Ling-Fei had said softly. ‘Everyone is only looking out for themselves.’

‘We don’t need anyone else,’ Billy said, trying to sound brave even as fear nipped at his toes. ‘We’ve got each other. And the pig will find the key. I’m sure of it.’

‘I can’t believe we’re putting all our faith in a flying pig,’ Charlotte muttered.

‘That little pig saved me before. It can do it again,’ said Dylan with forced cheer.

But as the sun had sunk lower in the sky, so too had Billy’s heart. Fewer and fewer humans were passing by, and the dragons that flew overhead clearly had no interest in helping anyone. If anything, they seemed to be antagonizing the few humans hurrying through the streets.

Billy had begun to wonder if trusting the pig had been the wrong choice. If they’d be chained up here for ever. Or if they’d even survive the night. He didn’t have any other ideas, and he didn’t know how much longer he could put on a brave face for his friends.

Finally, just before sundown, the tiny gold pig had come back! Billy was so excited and relieved that he let out a great shout of joy at the sight of it.

‘Shh!’ Charlotte said. ‘We don’t want to draw any unnecessary attention to ourselves!’ But she was grinning, too, and relief shone from her eyes. Ling-Fei clapped with delight as the pig came closer, and they saw that it carried a small key in its mouth.

‘You, my friend, are a genius,’ said Dylan, holding out his hand as the pig dropped the key into it.

‘Thank you,’ Billy said with a wide grin.

‘I wasn’t talking to you,’ said Dylan pointedly. ‘I was talking to the pig. A genius flying pig!’

‘I’ll never look at bacon the same way again,’ added Charlotte with a laugh.

‘Don’t say the B word in front of the pig!’ whispered Ling-Fei, gently stroking the back of the tiny gold pig.

‘Let’s try the key,’ said Billy, holding his breath. With trembling fingers, he put the key in the lock, and with a click, the chains fell off his wrists. Moments later, they were all free.

As the bells began to toll, the sky grew dark and the city’s neon lights flickered on. Billy, Ling-Fei,

Charlotte and Dylan crept down darkened streets and alleys, careful to stay out of sight, and the tiny gold pig fluttered anxiously around them. Billy hadn't known it at the time, but any human caught out in the streets after dark was considered fair game for a nox-wing to take as a slave, a snack, or worst of all . . . to drain for life force. But he'd felt a primal fear of being out after dark, with the bright lights and darkening sky closing in on them like snapping teeth. In a panic, Billy found himself reaching out through his bond to Spark to see if she was in this future as well. And he'd felt something answer.

But it hadn't sounded like Spark. It had felt like a thread pulling him in a certain direction. And with nothing else to go on, he'd followed it. 'Something is telling me to go this way,' he said.

'Something, or someone?' challenged Charlotte, frowning. 'What if it's . . . ?'

'It's not,' Billy said brusquely. He knew what Charlotte was implying. That Spark, his Spark, could no longer be trusted. But an invisible force was urging him on, and he had no choice but to follow it. 'Do you have any better ideas?'

So Billy had led his friends through the unfamiliar streets, careful not to be crushed by huge dragon feet or caught up in dragon fire or frozen by dragon ice. They avoided the snapping jaws of bickering dragons and gasped at the sight of humans, so many humans, all with their heads down, doing whatever the jeering nox-wings demanded. Billy noted not *all* the dragons seemed to be antagonizing humans. Some of them were being shouted at by nox-wings too. These dragons wore collars crackling with electricity and Billy knew that meant they were being controlled by dark magic. But while it was terrible to see, it also gave him another slight burst of hope that there were still some good dragons in this future.

The streets were lined with huge buildings, each big enough to house dragons. They had gigantic windows and doors that dragons flew in and out of. And in the centre of the city, a towering skyscraper stretched high into the clouds. It radiated pulsing electricity and purple smoke poured out of the windows.

‘We should stay far away from that tower,’ said Ling-Fei, eyeing it with unease. ‘It feels evil.’

The four friends had hurried through the dark, careful to avoid any dragons, until they turned down a narrow alley and reached a sewer grate at the end. Billy paused. The feeling pulling him onwards was stronger here, drawing him closer, like someone cold seeking heat.

He looked at his friends and swallowed. ‘I think we should go underground.’

A voice from the dark slithered out. ‘A good idea, boy, a good idea indeed.’ And then a tall, thin figure emerged from the shadows. It was a woman in a black cloak with silver hair down to her waist, but her face was young and smooth. Most alarming of all was the glowing knife gripped in her hand and the net thrown over her shoulder. She caught Billy staring and flashed him a sharp grin.

‘That’s right, I’m a nox-hand. I could get a fine reward for turning in humans, especially *young* humans, caught out after dark.’ Without having to ask, Billy knew that a nox-hand was the human version of a nox-wing – someone who dabbled in dark magic and served the Dragon of Death.

Charlotte stepped forward, her hands on her hips.

‘I’d like to see you try. In case you can’t count, there are four of us and one of you.’

‘Charlotte,’ hissed Dylan in a high-pitched whisper, ‘she has a *knife*. And we don’t have our pearls!’

Charlotte shrugged, keeping her gaze on the cloaked woman. ‘I could still knock her flat on her butt.’

Billy moved closer to Charlotte. If she was going to fight this nox-hand, she wasn’t going to do it on her own. Without saying a word, Ling-Fei did the same, and after a short moment even Dylan stepped forward, muttering under his breath. This woman didn’t know what they had faced. They had battled a giant scorpion, conquered nox-wings and even defeated the Wasteland Worm. They were not afraid of a stranger with a cloak and a knife.

At least not *that* afraid.

The nox-hand had taken another look at them and then laughed, long and loud. ‘Perhaps I won’t turn you in. It would be a shame for all that energy to be sucked up into the Tower.’

Billy glanced anxiously up at the glowing Tower that loomed over them. Was it functioning like the

red dome had back in Dragon Realm – sucking up life force and energy to be used for dark magic? The idea chilled him to the bone.

The nox-hand kept talking. ‘Run along, little rodents, before another nox-hand finds you. Or worse, a nox-wing. They won’t find you as amusing as I do.’ She turned on her heel and strode into the dark, holding her knife aloft. When she reached the end of the alley, an enormous turquoise dragon flew round the corner. Billy watched as it went straight for the woman, but as it registered her glowing knife, it stopped short and gave her a curt nod. The woman nodded back and disappeared into the shadows. The nox-wing raised its large head and looked straight at Billy. Its tongue flicked out, like it was licking its lips.

Billy gulped.

‘Come on!’ he said to his friends. He didn’t want to wait to see what would happen if the nox-wing reached them. He yanked open the sewer grate. ‘We’ve got to get out of here!’

‘We don’t know what’s down there!’ cried Dylan.

‘It can’t be worse than what’s heading straight for

us,' said Charlotte. 'I'm going in.' And with that, she slid into the dark.

There was a muffled thump. 'The drop isn't too bad,' she called out. 'But it is wet down here. And gross.'

'Hurry,' said Billy to Ling-Fei and Dylan. The nox-wing was forcing its way through the narrow alley, its snapping jaws getting closer with every second. They were running out of time. 'I'll go last.'

'Be careful, Billy,' said Ling-Fei. Then she glanced at Dylan, who was standing frozen, staring at the nox-wing as it grew closer and closer. 'Come on, Dylan!' She grabbed Dylan's hand and pulled him along with her. With a loud squeak, the tiny gold pig flew in after them.

Then Billy sprang into action. He slid into the sewer, feet first, pulling the grate behind him. It slotted back into place with a clank as he let go and dropped down.

A second later, the nox-wing crashed snout first into the grate. With a roar of frustration, it ripped the grate away, but it was far too large to fit through the narrow opening. It shot a jet of fire down into the sewer, momentarily lighting it up. Dylan screamed as

they scrambled away from the flames, but Billy took advantage of the brief moment of light to take in their surroundings. They were in a long tunnel with rusted tracks lining the ground, and the walls were slick and wet with damp.

‘Stay underground where you belong, vermin!’ the nox-wing shouted with a laugh, and then it flew away into the night.