

A DRAGON RIDE

With no moon in the sky and clouds obscuring the stars, it was the perfect night for flying without being seen. The greenish blue dragon and the dark skinned boy had waited for a cloudy night without rain, a rare occurrence on the west coast of Vancouver Island.

This was the first time the dragon had flown through the skies on Earth, and he was enjoying the flight every bit as much as his rider. Below them was the island where the two of them attended school. They'd been in the air for an hour and the dragon reluctantly made up his mind to return to the school.

"Yeah!" the boy yelled as the dragon did a nosedive toward the ocean. "This is better than a rollercoaster."

They skimmed over the waves until a grey whale breached nearby. The dragon arced around the whale before climbing toward the clouds.

"Hold on," the dragon called back, his words carried away by the wind. "I'll do another roll."

The dragon rolled to the left and soon they were flying upside down. The boy laughed. "Ben, that was so cool. Do it again."

"Once more, then we need to head back."

"So soon? Okay, but on the next moonless night I want to fly further up the coast."

"Denzel, we're not doing this again. We agreed that if I took you for a ride you would stop asking."

"That was before I knew how awesome it was," Denzel said. "I was meant to be a dragon rider."

The dragon did what dragons always do when they are angry: He breathed fire, which streaked out like lightening across the sky to light up the clouds around them.

"Cool! Do that again," Denzel yelled into the wind.

The dragon roared in response.

"Okay. Okay. You're right. I did promise, but I still hope we can do this again sometime."

Denzel knew that Ben was just as reluctant to return, even though every moment they were in the air increased the chance of getting caught by Miss Templeton.

They were racing away from the island when the unthinkable happened. There was a clap of thunder and a huge face appeared on the cloud in front of them. They knew the face well, but had never seen it angry before. Static electricity danced in the dinner-plate sized eyes that were staring straight at them. Ben's wings beat backwards as he desperately tried to keep himself from flying through Miss Templeton's face.

The huge mouth spoke. Lightening flashed with every word. Denzel and Ben did not hear actual words, they heard loud claps of thunder, but they knew what was said. Come see me! Come see me, right now! Then the face broke apart and disappeared.

When Ben turned and flew back towards the school there was smoke coming from his nostrils.

"Don't go back yet," Denzel coughed. "We can't get into any more trouble than we're already in. At the very least take the long way back to the school by flying across the Island and around the southern tip."

Ben erupted in a roar. Fire lit up the sky.

"I guess that's a no then?" Denzel asked.

The dragon remained silent, but there was still flame coming from his mouth.

"What! Are you mad at me?" Denzel asked.

Ben roared again.

"I guess, that would be a yes," Denzel said, "but let me remind you that you wanted to do this as much as I did. You weren't that hard to convince."

Ben remained silent.

"I guess you did say no the first time I asked," Denzel said.

Ben didn't speak, but more smoke and flames issued from his nostrils.

"I guess you said no more than once," Denzel said. "I'm sorry for getting you in trouble, but I'm glad we did this. It was so worth it even if we get a detention."

At the word detention, the amount of smoke and flame coming out of the dragon's snout increased.

"Don't worry," Denzel said. "I'll tell Miss Templeton it was all my fault."

The dragon never said a word, but the smoke decreased a little.

Ben landed in the same spot where they had taken off, behind the barn, out of sight of the residences and the large gray stone building known as the castle that served as a school for the students attending Fairhaven. Ben transformed and in place of the dragon stood a fifteen-year-old boy with wild brown hair and brilliant green eyes. Smoke continued to come out of Ben's nose and mouth even after his transformation back into a human.

Denzel and Ben silently turned and walked toward the castle. On the third floor, above the classrooms, they would find the Principal of Fairhaven; Earth's Watcher and the Guardian of the portals that linked Earth to other worlds.

Denzel remained uncharacteristically silent as he walked beside Ben. He thought of and discarded excuses they could give the Watcher to avoid the detention that was sure to come. He also thought of the school's secret purpose. It trained the Chosen and sent them to other worlds to do the work of the Guardian. Denzel envied Ben who had been off world twice. The first time,

Ben had stopped a war between humans and mer on Lushaka and discovered he had a secret identity. The second time he'd been sent to Zargon to find his mother's family so they could teach him how to safely transform from human to dragon and back again. Without that training, Ben had been in danger of becoming something that was neither human nor dragon. Denzel wondered how long he would need to wait to be Chosen to go through one of the five portals to another world.

Denzel walked silently beside Ben past the recreational complex with its gym and swimming pool, the separate boys' and girls' dorms, and the guest and staff quarters. At three in the morning most everyone was asleep. No one saw them except for a fur-covered creature who stood approximately four and a half feet tall. Moses fell in behind them. When they arrived at the castle, Moses followed them as they climbed the stone steps leading to the large oak doors. They pushed open one of the two doors and walked down the dimly lit hallway past the classrooms to the staircase that led to Miss Templeton's office. Once they arrived on the third floor, they knocked softly on the door.

"Come in, boys," the voice on the other side said.

Ben and Denzel stepped through, and quickly closed the door behind them before Moses could follow them in.

Miss Templeton sat at her desk wearing a faded blue bathrobe. Her long gray hair hung down over her shoulders. Her narrow face was grim and lacked her usual warmth.

"Don't bother sitting down," she said. "I will hear no excuses. Ben, I told you not to transform and fly over this island. There are good reasons not to draw attention to the fact that we have a dragon living here. We do not want the citizens of this world asking about this school and our students. We don't want journalists drawn to this island because someone saw a dragon flying above it."

"It's not Ben's fault. I talked him into it," Denzel said. Ben looked at his friend with gratitude.

"I do not doubt that, Denzel Carter, but it's Ben's gift and he's responsible for the use of it. But don't worry; you will share Ben's punishment because you knew Ben was not supposed to fly. So the only thing that remains is to decide the amount of detention you will serve."

Ben and Denzel held their breath as they waited for the words that would come next.

"It is now January twenty-fifth. Your detention will last until June twenty-fifth, which coincidentally is the last day of school. With exceptionally good behavior I'll make it April twenty-fifth."

"What?" Denzel burst out, his heart sinking at the thought of six months of cleaning the kitchen and washing pots and pans.

"You don't think the detention is fair?" Miss Templeton asked, anger flashing in her eyes.

"Uh...uh..." Denzel began.

"What about you, Ben Taylor? Do you think it's fair?"

"It's fair," Ben replied quickly. "We're sorry for disobeying your direct order and it won't happen again."

Denzel stared at his friend in astonishment. Why wasn't he standing up for them? Then it struck him that Miss Templeton had the power to expel them from Fairhaven. Maybe Ben believed there was a chance that could happen. Actually Ben wouldn't be, there would be a problem with letting a dragonborn loose on the world.

Miss Templeton looked at Denzel. "What about you?" She spoke quietly, but with steel in her voice.

"I'm sorry too," Denzel choked out, but did not say a word about not doing it again.

Miss Templeton's face softened. "I suppose since you're here, we may as well test you both again."

She picked up the medallion sitting on her desk.

Ben stepped toward Miss Templeton, who laid her medallion on his outstretched hand. The medallion opened up to reveal dials for the day, month, and year, but the dials did not spin around as they normally did. The three pointers went directly to the same spot they had gone to the last time Ben was tested.

Miss Templeton dropped the medallion with a sigh. "It looks like you are still scheduled to go to Farne on the first day of the fifth month this year. I was hoping there was a mistake. It's not a world I feel comfortable sending you to. Your turn, Denzel, let's see if the Guardian still thinks you're a good candidate to be a Chosen." Miss Templeton emphasized the words 'good candidate' making it clear she had her doubts.

Denzel held his breath as Miss Templeton placed her medallion on his shaking hand. He didn't know what he would do if the dials refused to move. The only good news was the heartbreak would only last as long as it took Miss Templeton to wipe his memory clean.

As the needles started to spin, he released his breath and grinned. When they stopped, one needle pointed to the first day, another to the fifth month, while the last one pointed to the current year.

"Awesome. I'm going with Ben to Farne," Denzel said, punching the air with his fist.

"Not so fast," Miss Templeton said. "You could be going to a different world on the same day."

The principal closed her hand around the medallion and then laid it on Denzel's palm again. The medallion opened up for a second time, but this time it was changed. The dials with days, months and years were gone, and in their place was a single compass with six points on the circle. The dial went around and around before coming to a stop.

Denzel looked expectantly at Miss Templeton, waiting for her to tell him what it meant. She frowned as she stared at the dial.

"Apparently, you are going to the same world as Ben. You will be among the first Chosen that world has had in almost one thousand years, ever since their war to end all wars. For a long time they didn't even have a Watcher. Then a dragonborn who failed to make the transformation was sent."

“I heard about the Watcher of Farne when I was on Zargon. Zachery Zaltzburg is his name and he is the brother of an ancestor of mine,” Ben said. “If he had stayed on Zargon he would have had a terrible life. The dragonborn are nasty to those who fail to make the transformation.”

“I doubt his life on Farne has been much better,” Miss Templeton said. “There is very little alive on that world.”

“So he’s your grandfather’s brother?” Denzel asked.

“More like my grandfather’s great-grandfather’s great-grandfather’s brother,” Ben said.

“What!” Denzel exclaimed.

“Watchers live a long time,” Miss Templeton told him. “I myself have been alive for close to a thousand years.”

A look of shock appeared on Denzel’s face, while Ben thought of Mack, the boy who had been his roommate for a short time last fall, but was now the Watcher of Zargon. Mack had been a strange boy, who knew Ben’s secret without being told. He knew Ben was dragonborn and had tricked Miss Templeton so he could go through the portal with Ben.

“I wonder,” Miss Templeton continued, “if Zachery knows that three Chosen are coming from Earth? After centuries of no arrivals he may have given up hope.”

At those words the door burst open and Moses barged in. “Four,” he said. “Moses go too.”

“Hello Moses, I wondered how long you would stand outside my door listening to our conversation. Has no one told you that it is impolite to eavesdrop?” Miss Templeton asked sternly.

“I go where Allie go,” Moses said, ignoring Miss Templeton’s question.

“Yes Moses, but you are from Zargon.” Miss Templeton frowned at the creature she had named Moses less than three months ago. “I wasn’t counting the Zargonians.”

“Zargon not good to brownies. Earth be Moses home now. I be given own name here,” Moses said.

“I’m not sure you can choose your own world.” Miss Templeton put the pendant she’d been holding back down on the desk. “The rules dictate that the Chosen return to their home world when a quest is over. Their home world is the world they were born on. The only exception to that rule is Ben’s mother, who now calls Earth home because I requested special permission so she can live with her husband and Ben.”

“Moses need special permission. Earth Moses home. I stay Allie,” Moses said stubbornly.

“We’ll see, but I wouldn’t count on it.” Miss Templeton words were accompanied by a shake of her head. “I plan to send you back to Zargon when you return from Farne. If the wrong eyes see you here, there will be too many questions asked about who and what you are.”

“I be more careful,” Moses promised.

“So who all is going to Farne?” Denzel asked.

“There is a larger group than normal going. From Earth it is you, Ben, and Allison.”

“And Moses. Moses from Earth.”

Miss Templeton frowned at the brownie. "From Zargon, the Guardian has chosen Moses, and Ben's uncle Zinc. I doubt there will be more Chosen selected, but can't say for sure there won't be."

"So the Guardian is sending an old man to look after us?" Denzel asked.

Ben rolled his eyes. "My uncle Zinc is the same age we are, and trust me, we'll be looking after him."

"The Guardian had a good reason for choosing Zinc and you would be wise to remember that, Benjamin," Miss Templeton said. "I myself would feel better if a graduate was going, rather than four students and a brownie. However, as always, I will trust the Guardian and send those who've been chosen."

"How are we going to find time to research Farne when we have to report to the kitchen every day for detention?" Denzel asked.

A faint smile crossed Miss Templeton face. "When you're not peeling potatoes and washing pots and pans, I expect you to read every book you can find pertaining to Farne. To help you do that, I'll give you weekends free of detention. The information you'll find will mostly be from the time before the war, as no one has come or gone from Earth to Farne since then. For now, I suggest you get some sleep in the few short hours that remain. Your detention starts tomorrow and you will need to be up an hour earlier than normal."

