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Opening extract from

Dragon Rider: The Griffin's Feather

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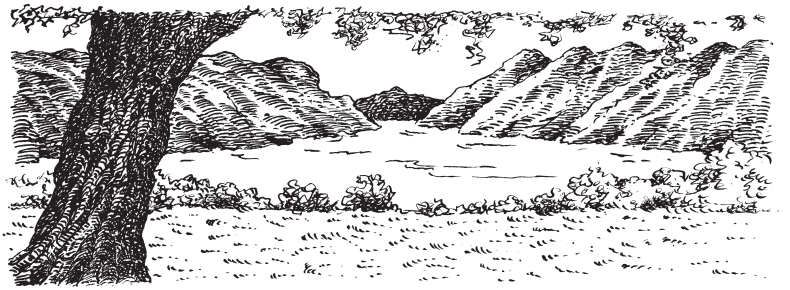
I didn't write this story for people who
want to rule the world.
Or for those who always have to show that they are
stronger, faster, and better than everyone else.
Or for those who think that human beings
are the crown of creation.

This story is for all who have the courage to protect
instead of dominate, to save instead of plundering,
and to preserve instead of destroying.

Cornelia Funke

My boy, you shall be everything in the world,
animal, vegetable, mineral, protista, or virus,
for all I care – before I have done with you –
but you will have to trust my superior backsight.
The time is not yet ripe for you to be a hawk . . .
so you may as well sit down for the moment
and learn to be a human being.

T.H. White,
The Once and Future King



CHAPTER ONE

A New Place and New Friends

It was a great mistake, my being born a man. I would have been much more successful as a seagull or a fish.
Eugene O'Neill

It all looked so familiar to Firedrake. The misty woods outside the entrance to the cave. The smell of the sea nearby in the cold morning air. Every leaf and every flower reminded him of the Scottish mountains where he had grown up. But Scotland was far away, and so was the Rim of Heaven, the valley that the last dragons in this world had called their home for two years now.

Firedrake turned and looked at the dragon lying behind him on a bed of moss and leaves. Slatebeard was the oldest of them all. His wings twitched in his dreams, as if he wanted to follow the wild geese crossing the grey sky, but he would soon be setting out on the longest flight of all. To the Land of the Moon, as dragons called the place to which only death opened the door. Slatebeard was the only one who had stayed behind when the

others moved to the Rim of Heaven. Even then, the long journey had been too strenuous for him, but thanks to good friends he had found a new place to live when the ancient home of the dragons was drowned in the waters of a reservoir.

The cave where Slatebeard slept was not a natural one. A troll had built it, to the instructions of human beings who knew exactly what dragons needed. But caves for dragons were not the only accommodation to be found here in MÍMAMEIÐR. Trolls, impets, mermaids, dragons – any fabulous being could take refuge here, although some guests from the south complained of the cold Norwegian winters. MÍMAMEIÐR – Firedrake thought the name sounded as mysterious as the creatures who stayed there. They could all find suitable living quarters, and those places were all different too. Caves, nests, stables, tiny houses for impets . . . on the banks of the nearby fjord, in the surrounding forests, below the meadows that greeted the morning sunlight outside, wet with dew.

'How's Slatebeard this morning?'

The boy standing at the entrance to the cave had just celebrated his fourteenth birthday. His hair was as black as a raven's feathers. His eyes looked out at the world fearlessly and with curiosity, and Firedrake would have flown thousands of miles at any time just to see him.

Ben Greenbloom.

When they had first met in an abandoned harbour warehouse, Ben had no surname yet. He was a boy with no parents and no home. But Firedrake had made him his dragon rider, and had taken him on a journey that gave them both new homes. On the way, Ben had even found parents and a sister: Barnabas, Vita and Guinevere Greenbloom, protectors of fabulous animals, and the best family that a boy who rode dragons could wish for.

'Sleeping a lot,' replied Firedrake. 'But he's fine. He's getting ready. When I next visit you he'll be gone.'

Ben stroked Slatebeard's shimmering neck. His silver scales were getting darker every day, as if he were turning into the night, the favourite time of all dragons. A few tiny lights shone in the darkness above the gigantic sleeping body, like motes of dust dancing in the sun.

'It's beginning,' Ben whispered.

'Yes.' Firedrake laid his muzzle on the boy's shoulder. This was the first time a human being had ever been present to see a dragon peacefully leaving this life. Firedrake had had to explain it to Ben and the Greenblooms. There was nothing about it in any of their books, maybe because none of the people who had been so keen on chopping dragons' heads off in the old days had waited around to see what happened next.

Ben looked up at the roof of the cave, where more lights were gathering every day. 'When a dragon dies, he sows new stars,' Firedrake had explained. 'The more peacefully he says goodbye to life on earth, the more of them there are. But if his death is violent, there will be red stars in which his pain and anger live on. Unfortunately there are a number of those in the sky!'

Slatebeard would surely not sow any red stars. All the inhabitants of MÍMAMEIÐR would see to that. And they would all miss him, Ben in particular. He had always come to see the old dragon when his longing for Firedrake was too much for him. The Rim of Heaven was hidden in the mountains of the Himalayas, and they were terribly far from Norway.

'Firedrake! Oh, they all deserve to be barbecued! I know dragon-fire has to be used cautiously, but it would be in a good cause!'

Ben knew the voice that sounded so shrill in the cave almost

as well as he knew Firedrake's.

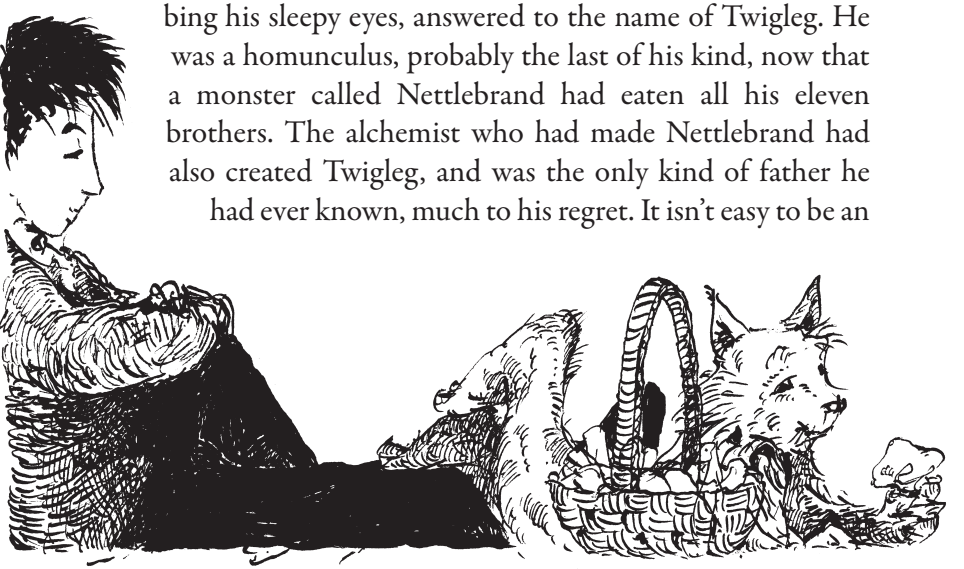
Sorrel.

At their first meeting, Ben had taken her for a giant squirrel, much to her annoyance. By now, of course, he knew enough about fabulous creatures to see at first glance that he was looking at a Scottish brownie, and those were as essential to dragons as the moonlight that fed them.

'You should have seen the fuss they kicked up! Just for a few chanterelles!' Sorrel guiltily lowered her voice when she saw the sleeping Slatebeard. 'As if every mushroom in this darn forest belonged to them!' she whispered, putting down the basket she was carrying in her brown paws. 'And why? Because they look like walking mushrooms themselves? Whoever said we need mushrooms with arms and legs? They should be glad I don't just eat them all up!'

Slatebeard opened his golden eyes and uttered a grunt of amusement. 'Sorrel,' he murmured. 'I feel sure a brownie voice will wake me in the morning even in the Land of the Moon.'

'Too true, you can't get away from them anywhere!' The tiny manikin who made his way out of Ben's jacket pocket, rubbing his sleepy eyes, answered to the name of Twigleg. He was a homunculus, probably the last of his kind, now that a monster called Nettlebrand had eaten all his eleven brothers. The alchemist who had made Nettlebrand had also created Twigleg, and was the only kind of father he had ever known, much to his regret. It isn't easy to be an



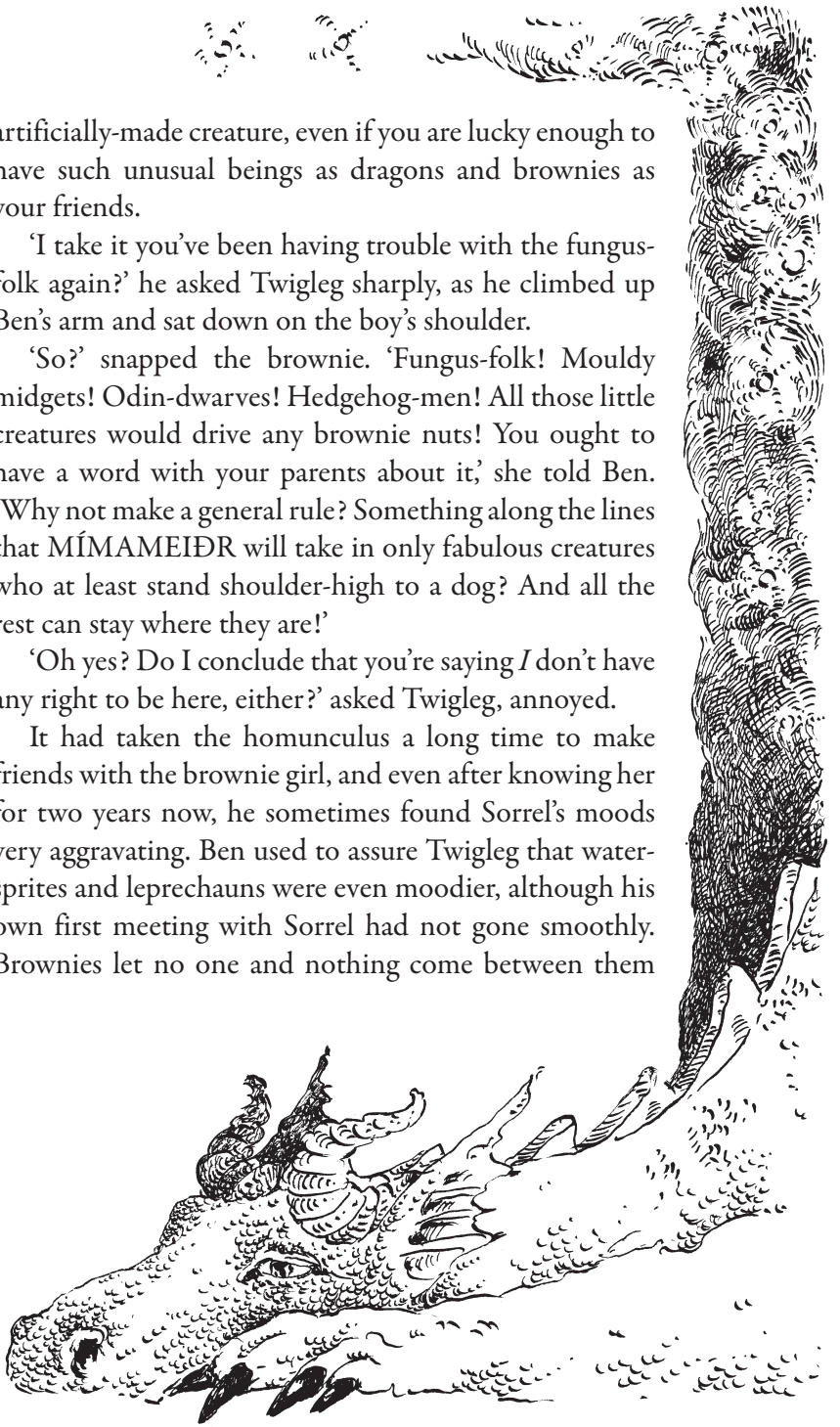
artificially-made creature, even if you are lucky enough to have such unusual beings as dragons and brownies as your friends.

'I take it you've been having trouble with the fungus-folk again?' he asked Twigleg sharply, as he climbed up Ben's arm and sat down on the boy's shoulder.

'So?' snapped the brownie. 'Fungus-folk! Mouldy midgets! Odin-dwarves! Hedgehog-men! All those little creatures would drive any brownie nuts! You ought to have a word with your parents about it,' she told Ben. 'Why not make a general rule? Something along the lines that MÍMAMEIÐR will take in only fabulous creatures who at least stand shoulder-high to a dog? And all the rest can stay where they are!'

'Oh yes? Do I conclude that you're saying *I* don't have any right to be here, either?' asked Twigleg, annoyed.

It had taken the homunculus a long time to make friends with the brownie girl, and even after knowing her for two years now, he sometimes found Sorrel's moods very aggravating. Ben used to assure Twigleg that water-sprites and leprechauns were even moodier, although his own first meeting with Sorrel had not gone smoothly. Brownies let no one and nothing come between them



and their dragons, and for a long time Sorrel had been suspicious of the boy who had won Firedrake's heart so quickly.

'Okay, okay,' she muttered as she knelt down beside Slatebeard. 'As opinionated as ever. Is every homunculus like that? I suppose we'll never know, seeing that there's only one left.'

She put a paw into her basket, which was full to the brim, and brought out a milk-white, spongy fungus. 'This is a very special delicacy! I spent two hours searching for it, and I had to shake a dozen fungus-folk off my legs to pick it. Brownies eat one every day when their fur begins to turn grey, so I'm sure it will do a dragon good too! Yes, yes, I know you like moonlight best, but even Firedrake makes an exception now and then if I bring him especially tasty flowers or berries. Not that it's easy to find those in the Himalayas!' she added, with a reproachful glance at Firedrake.

Then she put the fungus down between Slatebeard's claws, like a precious sacrifice made with a heavy heart. Anyone who knows the first thing about Scottish mountain brownies can tell from that gift how fond of the old dragon Sorrel was. Brownies loved only one thing as much as the dragon that they followed: mushrooms and fungi, large or small, firm or spongy. Sorrel could spend hours describing the colour, shape and flavour of her favourite varieties.

Of course Slatebeard knew all this. In the course of his long life, he had known three brownie companions. They had all gone to the Land of the Moon ahead of him, and he missed them very much. It made him all the happier that not only Firedrake but Sorrel too had made the long journey to say goodbye to him.

'This is really extraordinarily generous of you, my dear, highly esteemed Sorrel,' he said, bowing his head to her. 'You have

always been the most gifted mushroom-hunter of all the brownies I've ever known! Allow me to eat your present for supper.'

'And I'd better have a word with those fungus-folk,' said Ben. He had volunteered to come and look after all the imp-like creatures in MÍMAMEIÐR, and that surely included fungus-folk. Not a very clever idea, as it had turned out. Ben's adopted sister Guinevere had taken charge of the water creatures, and Ben now envied her. Even fossegrims, the Norwegian water-sprites who played the fiddle, couldn't compete with impets for aggression.

But when Ben left Slatebeard's cave to go over to the fungus-folk's homes, a mist-raven flew out of the trees and landed on the grass in front of him, which was wet with dew. Mist-ravens owe their names not only to their grey feathers, but also to the fact that they can make themselves invisible.

'Red alert!' croaked the raven. 'Proceed to Control Centre! Quick march!'

Mist-ravens like a military vocabulary, and expressions that sound significant and mysterious. But they are also excellent scouts, and very reliable bringers of news. This one had sounded distinctly happy, which made Ben and Twigleg exchange a glance of concern.

Only bad news makes mist-ravens as happy as that.