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Dragon Rider

Written by

Cornelia Funke

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Dragon Rider

A MESSAGE FROM CHICKEN HOUSE

To dream of flying is one thing, but to fly on the back of a dragon is a dream really worth having! Believe me, you'll have the journey of a lifetime with the marvellous characters on board, sharing what will seem like a thousand adventures, all rolled into one.

Brilliant!



BARRY CUNNINGHAM
Publisher
Chicken House



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For Uwe Weitendorf

CHAPTER ONE

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 made for 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! I ask you!'

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 sulphur-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 further into the cave, where a fire burned blue, keeping the darkness and damp away from the heart of the mountain. Beside its flames the dragon lay asleep, curled up with his head on his paws. His long tail with its spiny 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 off 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 enquiring glance at Sorrel, who was now sitting by the fire, nibbling a root.

'No idea,' said Sorrel, munching. 'She just keeps nattering 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 in a bad temper because the mist makes her fur damp.'

'Pull the other one!' Rat cast 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 grey 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 round 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 a-quiver, 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 his paw out to Rat. Looking offended, she scrambled on to 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 some day,' 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 fancy, 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 on to his shoulder, and then went slowly towards the mouth of the cave. 'Come on, Sorrel,' he said. 'We must wake the others.'

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