DRAGON LEGEND

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DRAGON MOUNTAIN

DRAGON LEGEND

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SIMON & SCHUSTER

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To Rachel and Claire,
for believing in our dragons

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 his 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.

Hope And The Heart Bond

Just when Billy thought he couldn't handle a single second more of the overwhelming and complete darkness, and he was certain he was dying, or maybe already dead, he and Spark tumbled into the light.

Spark landed on her feet but swayed back and forth, clearly disoriented.

Billy scrambled off her back and collapsed to his hands and knees. His lungs hurt and his head felt as if it had been squeezed through a garden hose. He gulped in air and gripped fistfuls of dirt on the ground, needing them as an anchor that he was *somewhere*, even if he didn't know *where* or *when*.

When the ringing in his ears stopped, he heard Charlotte's voice. It sounded as if she were speaking from very far away. 'That was *awful*,' she said. Billy looked up, his vision still cloudy, and saw that she was standing surprisingly close to him, her hand on Tank's foot for balance. Another voice barrelled into his awareness.

'Oh, no, oh, no, oh, no!'

Billy looked in the direction of this new voice. It was Buttons, and he looked as distraught as he sounded.

'What is it?' said Ling-Fei, who was still on Xing's back. Her braids were messy, and she looked faint.

'Is JJ with any of you?' said Buttons.

'Isn't he with you?' demanded Tank.

'I think it is resoundingly obvious that he is not,' said Xing.

Charlotte whipped her head round, her eyes huge. 'Oh, son of a biscuit eater. He really isn't here, is he?'

'What are we going to do?' said Billy, panic rising. He didn't like JJ much but that didn't mean he wanted him to be stuck in a time-travel portal for ever. And, selfishly, he knew if JJ was with them,

they had a better chance of finding Old Gold. Which meant a better chance of finding Dylan.

Now that Billy was looking around, trying to see if they'd somehow missed JJ, he was able to take in where they were. And where they weren't. 'Shouldn't we be inside the mountain? Just in a different time?'

'It appears we have moved through both space and time,' said Xing, gazing out at the landscape.

It looked similar to the Dragon Realm that Billy knew, but there were slight differences. A brilliant oval-shaped sun still hung low in the sky, across from three moons that were always visible, but the landscape was unfamiliar.

Instead of bare land and huge, jagged mountains puncturing the sky, they were surrounded by miles and miles of grass that reached up to their knees. The land was so flat that Billy could see all the way to where the sky met the ground. It was beautiful. Billy marvelled at trees covered in gigantic flowers, and floating islands that bobbed up and down in a blazingly blue sky, like buoys out at sea. Strange-looking insects buzzed around them, dipping into the flowers above and the grass below. But, as

beautiful as the landscape was, it didn't change the awful situation they were in.

'Buttons, what happened when you were in the portal?' said Ling-Fei gently.

'JJ was with me for . . . most of it,' said Buttons, looking shamefaced. Or as shamefaced as it was possible for a dragon to look. 'When he slipped off my back, I tried to grab him, but, oh, you know what being in that thing was like!'

'We all held onto *our* humans,' Xing pointed out.

'He isn't *my* human!'

'You still should not have lost him,' Xing snapped back.

'It wasn't on purpose!' Buttons sounded miserable.

'Stop fighting!' yelled Billy, surprising himself. 'This isn't helping anyone. We have to think.' He stared up at the space above them, where the portal still shimmered strangely.

'We cannot wait for ever for the boy,' said Tank gruffly. 'Time is not on our side. Spark, is he still in the portal? Try to find him.'

Spark, who had been strangely silent since they had arrived, stretched to her full length, her neck long and her wings out. Billy helped Spark focus through their

bond, as she tried hard to locate JJ. It was another advantage of their connection: Billy could use it to help Spark magnify her powers.

Her gold eyes lit up. 'Something is coming,' she said. 'It might be him.'

'It'd better be him,' said Charlotte, eyeing the swirling air suspiciously. 'I don't want something or someone else coming through!'

And then with a yelp JJ flew out of the portal and landed face down in the grass. The portal still swirled above him.

Billy went to his side. 'Are you all right?' he said, helping him up.

JJ scowled at him. 'Did you mean for me to get lost in there?'

'What? No! Of course not. How would I even do that?'

'Your dragon set it up, didn't she? All I know is that one second I was with the green dragon and the next I felt as if I was being pulled limb from limb and my eyeballs were going to be sucked out of their sockets. And I was alone.' JJ glared at Buttons.

'It is an untested process,' said Xing smoothly. 'Be glad you arrived at all, and in one piece.'

‘I hope we don’t ever have to do it again,’ said Billy, rubbing his eyes.

‘Well, obviously we’re going to have to do it again after we find Dylan and defeat the Dragon of Death. We’re going home after that, remember?’ said Charlotte with the kind of confidence that Billy found both admirable and exhausting.

JJ frowned. ‘But where *is* Dylan? And my *yeye*? Wasn’t that thing supposed to take us to them? I don’t see . . . anyone anywhere.’

Billy found himself grateful that JJ was voicing his own anxieties.

‘It appears we are in the far reaches of the Dragon Realm,’ said Tank. ‘Even if much changed over time, I recognize the mountains that have remained constant through the years.’

‘I will see if anything else looks familiar,’ said Xing, who had the best vision of all the dragons. She flew high into the sky, until she was barely a speck, before shooting back down. ‘I think we have landed near the Forgotten Sea,’ she said. ‘We are far from any other landmarks I know.’

‘So none of us know where we are and the people

we are looking for aren't here,' muttered JJ. Again, Billy had the strange sensation that JJ knew what was worrying him, and, more than that, felt the same way.

'This *is* the time Dylan is in. I'm sure of it,' said Buttons, finally sitting up. 'He's closer. Not close, but closer. Our bond does not feel like a spiderweb as it has these past few days. It feels like something more substantial.'

'I hope Dylan can feel it too,' said Billy. 'I hope he knows we're coming for him.' He looked up at Buttons. 'So, which way?'

Buttons took a breath. 'All I know is that he is near.'

'That isn't enough!' said Billy, fists clenched as his frustration finally bubbled over. 'He could be *anywhere*.' He thrust his arms out. 'And none of you even know this part of the realm!'

Charlotte's eyes narrowed. 'Listen up, Mr Cranky Pants,' she snapped. 'You aren't the only one who misses Dylan or the only one who wants to stop the Dragon of Death. I get that you are sad. But we are *all* sad. We don't have time to be sad right now though. We have to focus. Being sad takes energy, and we need all our energy to SAVE OUR

FRIEND AND THE WORLD!' She ended her speech in a shout with her hands on her hips, breathing heavily.

Billy looked away, embarrassed to be called out in front of the dragons. He knew Charlotte was right.

'Billy, we all want the same thing,' said Ling-Fei quietly.

'I thought we would have a better plan,' said Billy, his words coming as fast as his thoughts. He looked at the dragons' solemn faces. 'We trusted you . . . and now Dylan is missing.'

'We warned you that there would be danger,' said Spark softly.

'But we should have won!' shouted Billy. He felt as if he might cry. 'We were stronger! And we closed the nox-wing portal! We did what we needed to do. If it wasn't for Old Gold, the world would be saved. We'd still have met all of you. Everything would be perfect, and now . . .' He took a shuddering breath. 'We were so close,' he choked out.

JJ cleared his throat. 'Um. I'm really sorry again about what my *yeye* did.' He lowered his gaze and locked eyes with Ling-Fei. 'Both taking Dylan

and . . . killing your grandparents. I never saw that side of him. The person you knew, the person he was at camp, that was him too. It wasn't all an act. I think he's just become . . . I don't know . . . power hungry. I hope he can come back to who he is. Who I know he is.'

'Well, I don't care if the Dragon of Death eats him,' said Charlotte, wrapping an arm round Ling-Fei.

'That is unlikely, as this Old Gold is hoping he has a heart to match the Dragon of Death's,' said Tank. 'Although the Dragon of Death has always been unpredictable.'

'And who knows what she would do with a human child in her clutches?' said Buttons. Fear shimmered in his golden eyes.

'Which is why we need to start moving,' said Billy, swallowing his fear and trying to make his voice strong.

'Billy,' Spark said suddenly, turning her gaze on him. 'Buttons and Dylan share a heart bond, but you and the others, your friendship should also help. And –' her eyes lasered in on him – 'that backpack. It's Dylan's, isn't it?'

Billy had almost forgotten about the backpack he was wearing. The one Dylan had carried every day at camp and in the Dragon Realm.

'An item of his *is* helpful,' said Xing, moving forward to inspect it. 'Something closer to him would be better, but this will do.'

'Are you like . . . bloodhounds?' said JJ, scratching his head.

'As offensive as the comparison is,' hissed Xing, 'you aren't completely wrong.'

'And you will all help guide us too,' said Spark. 'Close your eyes and spin slowly. Focus on Dylan. Think of him. Reach out to him. Stop when you feel closest to him.'

'This is ridiculous,' said JJ. 'You want us to spin round with our eyes closed and then we'll magically know which direction to go in?'

'Do you have any better ideas?' Billy said.

'Fine, fine,' said JJ, holding his hands up. 'I'll spin in a circle. As long as I don't need to go into that portal again any time soon.'

'While you focus on Dylan, we'll enchant and hide the portal,' said Spark. She looked at JJ. 'You

should focus on your grandfather since he is the one you are closest to.'

Billy closed his eyes and thought about Dylan. He thought about the jokes he made and the stories he told, how he did things even when they scared him. He thought about how much Dylan loved the pork buns back at camp, and the peaches that grew in the Dragon Realm. He thought about Dylan's Irish accent and his love for his sisters in Galway and how he had taught himself Chinese just because he liked languages. Billy thought about how he'd never had a friend like Dylan before – a friend he felt as if he could truly be himself with. And he thought about how, even though there were still four of them with JJ, it felt as if a piece of the puzzle that made things just work was missing. As if he and Charlotte and Ling-Fei were off balance without Dylan.

Billy thought all these things as he slowly spun in a circle, and then he stopped. His eyes fluttered open.

Charlotte, Ling-Fei and JJ had stopped too. Their feet all pointed in the same direction.

'I feel it too,' Buttons rumbled. 'North. I feel a pull to the north.'

‘Then north we go,’ said Tank. ‘Children, take heed, this is a land before our time but not before the time of dragons. The dragons here may not look kindly on humans in their midst.’

‘And there are other creatures too,’ said Spark. ‘Creatures we only know from legend. Creatures we would be wise to avoid.’

Billy shook his head. ‘I don’t want to know what mythical beasts frighten dragons,’ he said. Though, in that moment, he didn’t feel frightened. He felt excited. As if they were finally getting somewhere. He rolled his shoulders back and looked at Charlotte, Ling-Fei and JJ. ‘I’m ready if you guys are.’

‘I’m always ready,’ said Charlotte, swinging herself onto Tank’s head and settling behind his ears. Ling-Fei leaped onto Xing’s back, and Billy clambered into his preferred spot between Spark’s wings.

JJ eyed Buttons hesitantly. ‘I won’t fall off this time, right?’ he said.

‘I’ll do my best to keep you safe,’ said Buttons. ‘In the air and on the ground. You aren’t Dylan, aren’t *my* human, but you are a human child. And I pledged long ago to look after humans when I could.’

'I'm thirteen,' said JJ. 'Not a kid like these guys.'

'Yeah, because that one year makes such a difference,' said Charlotte, rolling her eyes.

'Enough,' said Xing. 'Billy is right. We don't have time to waste. And, if you have all sensed something in the north, we should take advantage of that. We don't know how long they will stay in that direction.'

'Let us fly,' said Spark.

The four dragons and four humans took off into the sky, hope and their heart bonds their only guide.