



## Extract from A Rat's Tail

### Book One of the Circular Scrolls

#### Dragon

What struck her first was its size, so vast it filled the road and overlapped the edges. Its dull metallic body, lumbering towards them, gave the impression of immense power. In the split second it took Sam to register this information, the dragon saw them and stopped dead, as if it was as much of a surprise for him as them. It was an ungainly creature; its body seemed too large for its legs and its eyes too small for its head. It had a row of asymmetric spines down its lumpy back, and one or two more sticking out at irregular intervals on either side of its snout. Then the tension snapped, and it threw back its head, sending forth an arc of flame, like molten lava, and there was no doubt of its might. Like a torch from hell it ignited the earth right down the path to their feet. Transfixed in horror, the four watched as the way before them erupted into an inferno.

\*

**K**evin came to his senses first. "Right, this is easy," he said "I understand. I think"  
"OH - really?" Sam's throat was so dry she could hardly speak, but this was just too much. He turned to look at her.

"Trust me," he said urgently, "we must go - that way!"

*"TOWARDS THAT!?"*

As far as Sam could see, there was a wall of flame which stood between them and the rest of their lives.

"Yes. Come on!!! I need you to carry me...and him!!!" He pointed at the small man who was cowering piteously behind Tig

"If we all stay together we'll be fine. If we don't - we all fry!"

Sam did as she was told. This was just one of Kevin's little jokes... This was just a dream. A rather horrible, rather frightening dream, one of those where you're falling down a black hole, or drowning, but any moment now she would wake from it and the heat and the fear would just be a dim memory. In a short while she would scarcely be able to recall it; in a few days it would have been relegated to the dark corners of her mind.

Step by step like the sleep walker she was sure she was, she moved forward, one arm bent across her chest supporting and shielding her two smallest companions, Tig close at her heels.

Step by painful step; Sam's legs felt like lead. She had never before been so aware of the connection between her head and her limbs. Right now all her bits were at war with each other. Her brain was giving the commands but her

legs were in open rebellion. She could hear her own heart in her ears and she could feel Kevin's heart and the mini man's heart through her fingers. Step by step. The heat was crushing; never had she been so aware of the frailty of the human shell; the air felt like singed cotton wool being pushed up her nose. She opened her mouth to get more air in her lungs but choked on the smoke, and shut it again, coughing violently.

She could hear the dragon's roar; it sounded near and formidably enraged; it filled her head like the echoes of the deep; she could feel its presence, pressing down on the top of her head, squeezing from both sides, but she could no longer actually see it; it seemed to have disappeared into its own smoke. Focusing hard, only a few paces ahead at a time, Sam found that the path was clear. If she tried to gaze too far ahead, clouds of thick ash and smoke billowed in her face and made her eyes smart and her throat close in panic.

"Just keep going" whispered Kevin "Not far now". How did he know? This was insanity!

Was it days, hours, minutes? Sam had no way of telling.... would it never end... They weren't going to make it....did fire destroy the body entirely... was anything left... did the skin...all she could think of was sausages...

And then they were through, out the other side. Sam knew this because the smoke was gone and the heat was on her back instead of all around her. She badly wanted to look over her shoulder, to check what was happening behind her.

"No!" hissed Kevin, and Tig nudged her in the back of the knee as if to keep her moving.

"But the dragon..." she hissed back.

"Never mind about the!!\*\* Dragon! Just *KEEP GOING!* See... Up there! We'll stop there!" Raising her eyes Sam saw up ahead a large flat rock, like an oasis of calm in a desert of panic. She fixed her eyes upon it and forced her leaden legs to carry her to it. In minutes they had all reached it and scrambled up on to it.

"Now you can look back" said Kevin, and she did.

What she saw was as astonishing as it was clear. No smoke. (*How could it have dispersed so fast?*) No flames. (*Where did all that heat come from?*) No dragon. (*I don't believe it! He can't have just disappeared!*) If Kevin says I dreamt it I'll kill him!!

Kevin was watching her. "Look closer" he said.

So she did, raking the ground inch by inch. It was definitely a brownish blackish burnt sort of colour and there was an oh so faint smell of scorched earth on the air....*Not* sausages though... And then.....

"Good grief!"

The words fell out of her mouth and left it open. There, about two yards from them, and looking so very small, insignificant and a bit lost was an extremely (about the size of Kevin) small scaly thing which could (in your wilder dreams) have passed for a dragon

“What do you really know about dragons?” asked Kevin. To Sam this seemed hardly the time or the place to be discussing mythology but Kevin persisted.

“Well?”

Of course Sam knew a bit about dragons, the fire breathing stuff. She’d read quite a lot because they’d always interested her. She’d seen pictures of dragons; fierce ones with slimy scales and a predilection for human flesh; hoarding treasure and living in the depths of mountains; dopey ones with brains the size of peas who liked flying and were no good at bringing up dragon babies; dragons in myth, legend and magic; she even, very occasionally, dreamt of dragons. .

“There’s a bit more to it than that,” said Kevin, not waiting for her to put it into words.

“They do guard treasure, but the treasure is a symbol for the treasure of a good human soul, not just the jewels and the gold bit; that’s what those bits represent. And the Good Dragon does not horde. He’s not supposed to prevent the treasure being used only to prevent it being stolen and used wrongly. So if you like, we all have an inner dragon watching over our inner riches. But ancient peoples liked to make stories out of it, to make it easier to understand. So they made up a scary beast who would guard a cave or a hill or something. They believed that if the earths balance was disturbed by a lot of wrongdoing in some form, then the dragon would get out of control. Then a hero had to step in and slay the dragon, to release inner wisdom and knowledge, and set things to rights. I know a little rhyme about dragons, if I can remember it...Ahem...”

‘Dragon of earth  
Guardian of gold  
The jewel bright hoard  
The wealth of the soul.  
You yield the brave warrior  
The treasure within.’

He quoted.

“When did you learn all that?” asked Sam, impressed

“I haven’t a clue!” said Kevin, equally confounded.

“Did you just make it up?” persisted Sam.

“Don’t think so. Not really my style. Is it?”

“No!” laughed Sam. “Definitely not!”

“Probably Celtic.” mused Kevin.

“Why do you say that?” asked Sam.

“Dunno,” said Kevin.

“If I said dunno, you’d have a real go at me, wouldn’t you?” exclaimed Sam.

“Yeah”, said Kevin. “Teachers prerogative!”

\* .

The worst was over but Sam's emotions were in turmoil. She felt astounded, disappointed, bewildered, and the fear still lurked... It was made worse by the fact that she could make no sense of what had happened and yet... Kevin was on her shoulder and spoke as if he was reading each emotion in turn, though she had had no conscious thoughts.

"What do *you* think happened?"

What really distressed her was the fact that what had seemed to be impossible turned out to be quite easy. Looking back, what had all the fuss been about? Where were all the flames and smoke, the terror, the monster...?

"Did I *dream* it all?"

She looked at Kevin, quite used now to him giving form to her feelings and then offering her an explanation.

But this time he just repeated

"What do you think happened?"

Her answer surprised her.

"I made it all up?"

"Why would you do that?"

"Cos it's what I anticipated and feared, on the inside, and to understand it and deal with it, I had to see it on the outside." She felt like a robot programmed to give responses to certain enquiries but having no understanding of those responses.

"What else?"

Sam thought back over the whole thing.

"If I hadn't - got through it all I mean - I wouldn't know that I could?"

"And now?"

"And now? And now I feel as if I can handle anything! Whatever else I have to face."

"Why?"

"Because I know that fear is on the inside, an emotion, not on the outside. I give it, whatever *it* is, the characteristic - fear, dislike, disgust - whatever - by my *feeling*. And if I know *that*, I am in control, and if I understand that, I don't need to be afraid of me, or what I feel and do, and so there is no reason to be afraid at all..."

"A philosopher!"

"A what?"

Kevin laughed. "It doesn't matter dear thing. Now shall we go and see if that little hot head yonder is all right and what he can tell us about our destination?"

"You think he might know something, about the citadel... about ... what's just happened, about my, the quest?"

She had been going to say *mother* but stopped herself. How fast she learns, thought Kevin, but said instead,

"I think he might know a great deal. And..." he looked round as if seeking something and his eye fell upon mini man,

"I think that *he*," he gestured at the little man "and our scaly friend over there might have something in common, might even know each other. Let's see shall we?"

"There's just one thing Kev..." Said Sam slowly. "What would have happened if my - er - intentions - hadn't been as good as they might have been...?"

Kevin looked at her appraisingly.

"Say - for instance - I'd thought that a Black Knight and a load of treasure would suit me just fine...what would have happened..."

"I expect," said Kevin, matter of factly, "we'd have all fried - like sausages!"

"Sausages...right..."

When she got close Sam indeed wondered what all the fuss had been about. The poor creature was so small and so obviously terrified that it brought out all the compassion in her heart and she scooped it up and held it close to her cheek like she did with Kevin when she suddenly remembered how small he was. . After all, it's fire was out now. Although unyielding and rigid at first, the creature gradually relaxed against her face and after a few moments looked up at her wonderingly. Then it said

"Are you the one?" It had an odd voice, not dragon like at all, with a hint of a soft Welsh accent.

"The one what?"

"The one who they said would come. The one *who* they said would make everything all right again."

"I've no idea what you're talking about" said Sam and she hadn't, except...there was a faint stirring somewhere in the back of her mind: a very old memory, or a very young one, - gave a ghostly flicker. Kevin coughed. The dragon noticed him for the first time and then his eyes swivelled from Kevin to the mini man and his little scaly feet suddenly dug hard into the palm of Sam's hand.

"*You!!*" It was pure accusation. "What are *you* doing here again?"

*Extract from A Rat's Tail, Book One of the Circular Scrolls, by Bridget Trafford.*

ISBN 142510657-9