

Meaghan Marina

The Birth of a Rider

With every step Rueben Jade Labeau took deeper into the surrounding woods, her chest pulled her along with increasing enthusiasm. Birdsong filled the trees with warning cries, matching with the beat of Rueben's feet. This sensation was nothing like she had ever felt before, and as the path became perpetually dense with spiraling elder woods, the more turning back seemed like a better option. Lord Hedrick Labeau and Lady Cynthia Labeau would be two pains she'd rather endure than the curiosity that brought her into the eerie forest.

A low rumble shook the ground beneath her feet, and despite her mind screaming at her to turn back, the tug at her chest only grew sharper. Great spiraling trees outlined a vast meadow covered in blue flowers spotting the surface. One foot into the clearing, and a deep growl came from behind her, sending vicious trembles that raced up her spine. The pull that had been tightening with every step was now more lax, but was urging her from deep within to turn around. It was a gentle coo: a lullaby tugging at her heartstrings. Telling her that whatever was behind her was the thing she was seeking.

Rueben turned and craned her head to look at the scaled muzzle peering down at her. Teeming with spikes over itself, the giant black scaled dragon had a wide face. It looked just like what was described in the texts that she had taken from her father's study. Although its neck curved down to peer at her, the apex reached the tops of the trees. Two paws, if you could call them that, were crossed over each other. The dragon's eyes pierced angrily down at her, glowing a vibrant golden tinged with orange as the pull inside her chest released its tug, and a joyful sensation filled her heart as their eyes met.

“It’s true? Why have you come here, of all places?” Rueben said to the beast, awe colouring her voice. At her question, the dragon simply lowered its head, narrowing its eyes into darts.

It was barely visible at first: swirling around its jaws were flecks of orange, swelling as more flecks joined the rest. Her eyes could only widen at the sight in front of her. Rueben had to be the first human to see a dragon of this generation. For it to use magic in front of her made this discovery extraordinary! As the orange particles shone brighter in the air, the dragon rose, its claws tearing deep gouges in the earth. Loud crashes percussed as the trees were uprooted and the dragon now towered over her.

Her legs struggled to stay upright as the ground shook beneath her, and she took two steps back before falling down from earth’s trembles. A beam of pulsating energy seared the ground she had just been standing on. Wisps of power pulled life from the grass surrounding her, and they hovered towards her. One orange wisp touched her skin, and it burned away any energy that would have kept her standing. Scrambling backwards, a feeling of fear caused her hands to shake.

The dragon roared. With ringing ears, she willed herself to turn her back on the beast and jump into a run, despite the exhaustion building within. She tripped over her feet, but somehow, she didn’t fall. Debris flew in her periphery and a loud crash felt from the earth caused her to trip again. A quick glance behind her showed deep claw marks in the ground that had displaced another group of trees. Rueben’s ribs greeted a sharp rock, and her right forearm saved her from bashing her head. Heat swirled around her forearm, and a quick glance at it showed blood rivulets painting her skin.

Her breath came hard from her chest, and slowly the ringing in her ears died out. She laid against the rock where she landed, and curled her injured arm around her bruised side. She couldn't see the dragon, but wings beat the air nearby. There was no time to catch her breath. With a racing heart, Rueben staggered to a stand. Now upright, a huge shadow blanketed her surrounding area. Tilting her head back, fear overwhelmed her.

With jaws wide open, the dragon flew directly down towards her. It was a vision, with orange particles lighting up the side of its scales, along its legs and brightening the golden eyes glaring at her for a split second. Its teeth were backlit by an orb of orange energy pulsating above its tongue. Rueben's head spun looking at it. Her feet struggled to find purchase while she attempted to avoid the oncoming dragon. It was no use. Rueben's heel caught the slope of the rock she was leaning against, causing her to slam into the ground, she was suddenly surrounded by a whirlwind of orange wisps. Pain radiates from her back at her fall. A heavy thud smashed the ground and a rush of air punched through the area.

If she had been standing, she would have faltered at the sudden onslaught of exhaustion that enveloped her body. The orange wisps seared her skin and felt like they dug holes through her stomach, causing the pain of her bleeding arm to flare, and forced exhaustion on her soul that she never thought possible.

"Take that!" her left hand picked up a twig and weakly threw it at the beast. It sat, with its head perched on both its arms, curiously peering down at her still body. Its hot breath fanning her legs. The twig somehow managed to hit it in the nose, causing it to blink in what appeared to be surprise.

At her action, knives dug into the muscles of her left shoulder. Her groan greeted the skies. The wisps were not letting up on their onslaught, pulling all the energy they could from

her body, refusing to let her move another inch. They ebbed and flowed above her body, and a small trickle of them twisted back towards the dragon that watched her. Rueben must have blacked out for a couple moments. When she blinked her eyes open next, a large muzzle greeted her sight as it gently pressed down on her belly.

“A valiant effort, child” a deep voice caressed her mind. Her head swam through rivers of fish, unable to comprehend what was happening. The pull of her chest that had brought her here suddenly strengthened and it was like puzzle pieces fell in place. A warm feeling entered her at the thought, but the unfamiliar sensation scared her. *“Take it easy. Just a moment longer.”*

“What?” she said. The sound of her own voice confused her brain and she frowned. What was happening? Why wasn’t the dragon eating the flesh upon her bones right now? A huff of warm air covered her body, and a deep chuckle came from her mind.

“Your thoughts are amusing. It’s only another moment longer child,” said the voice again. She raised her head to look at the muzzle at her stomach, and caught the golden eyes glowing in the darkening sky. Hues from the sunlight glistened like rainbows on the abyss scales shielding the dragon from harm.

“Are you talking to me, beast?” she asked the dragon, but then felt extremely foolish right after. Why would a dragon speak to her? How would it even speak to her? She must be dreaming, and would soon wake to the cold shoulder of her father and the judging voice of her mother as they picked her apart. The tips of her fingers flowed with a sudden warmth that tickled her thighs. Suddenly, the exhaustion that had been plaguing her was leaving, and instead energy slowly returned to her body: a trickle of water filling a cup.

“Good. It has settled,” the voice said. Right after that, the dragon shifted, lifting its head from her belly and instead rose to its four legs. It stared down at her with a gentleness she hadn’t

expected. *“You are worthy, for surviving one of my powerful attacks is hard to come by. Rise, dragon rider!”*

Not even a twinge of pain stopped her limbs as she slowly stood, expecting to suddenly fall over from the effort. Rueben stood with ease, and as she surveyed the area, she was the epicentre of at least a five metre radius of earth and plants so dead they appeared black. The dirt at her feet shifted like sand, void of moisture.

She raised her head, and stared in shock at the dragon that gave a display of vicious teeth. There was a gleam of wisdom in the golden eyes that looked down at her with a love she never experienced as a child and with excitement. A dragon rider? Surely the beast was jesting.