

DRAGON'S LURE

∞ Legends of a New Age ∞



Edited by **Danielle Ackley-McPhail,**
Jennifer Ross, and **Jeffrey Lyman**

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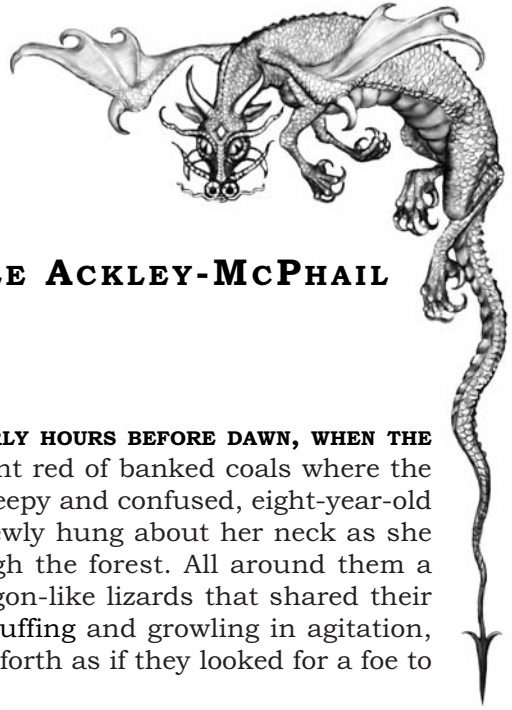
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Emberling

DANIELLE ACKLEY-McPHAIL



THEY FLED DRAIGBYR IN THE EARLY HOURS BEFORE DAWN, WHEN THE ember oaks still glowed the faint red of banked coals where the sap ran close to the surface. Sleepy and confused, eight-year-old Camirel clutched the pouch newly hung about her neck as she followed Popi and Mam through the forest. All around them a pack of embrils, the giant dragon-like lizards that shared their valley, kept pace with them, huffing and growling in agitation, their heads swinging back and forth as if they looked for a foe to fight.

The embrils did not like people but Popi and Mam had always told her they didn't count as normal people. They were Celdraig, an ancient order of runecasters who kept the lore of dragons. Mam said at one time their kind had served the dragons, cared for them, but not any more.

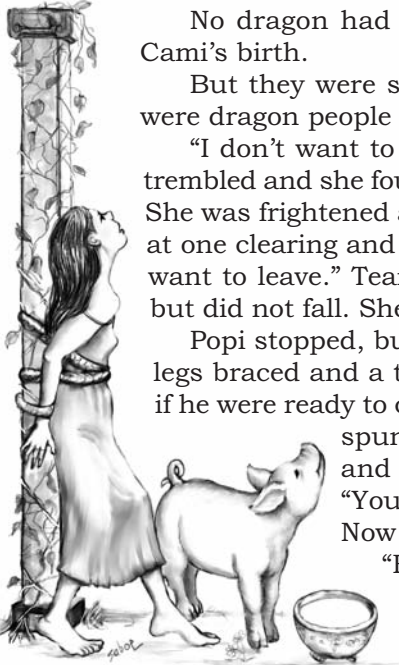
No dragon had been seen for many generations before Cami's birth.

But they were still Celdraig, anyway, which meant they were dragon people and the embrils liked *them*.

"I don't want to go to Mabet," Cami muttered. Her voice trembled and she fought against the frown tugging at her face. She was frightened and she did not understand. She stopped at one clearing and stared up at her parents. "Please, I don't want to leave." Tears brimmed in eyes the color of coal ash but did not fall. She could not keep her lip from quivering.

Popi stopped, but did not turn. Instead he stood with his legs braced and a thicket scythe clutched in both hands as if he were ready to clear saplings. His shoulders shook. Mam spun around and knelt before Cami, face pale and strained and her eyes bright, but dry. "You must, my little emberling . . . you must. Now hurry, Brother Rolfo is waiting."

"But why?"





Mam worried her lip and her gaze darted among the trees and back. “Camirel, I need you to trust me, I need you to go for a while so I’ll know you’re safe.”

Cami lost her battle with the frown. “I’m safe here. The dragon keeps us safe.”

Her father tensed but did not turn.

“You know there are no more dragons.” Mam’s words were both bitter and sorrowful.

So her parents had told her, but Cami did not feel that was so. She was sure she heard one murmuring and shifting as she drifted off to sleep each night. But Mam always said it was the wind through the trees.

“Then you’ll keep me safe with your magic.”

Her mother groaned and Popi glanced over his shoulder, looking fiercer than even the embrils. “We have no time for this, Bayel . . . Listen to your mother, child, now.”

Mam shushed him and took Cami’s hands, unfolding them from the pouch. “It is like our secret paintings,” she said, her face gone red, her voice strained, “the way we hide special things in the picture so only certain people can find them . . . do you understand?”

Cami shook her head, her frown deepening. One tear escaped down her cheek.

“We must hide you, daughter. You are one of the special things. Draigbyr is not secret anymore, so now you go to the sanctuary, where Brother Rolfo will keep you safe.”

“You come, too,” Cami said, the solution so simple to her that she wondered why it was not already so. “We can go together.” She smiled, her face bright with hope though tears still hovered in her eyes.

Her father spoke from behind her, his hand trembling as it rested upon her shoulder. “I am sorry, little one. They can sense our magic; they would find us too easily. Now come, we must hurry.”

Another tear escaped. Cami sniffed and tried to rub the drop away on her other shoulder. She looked at her mother with pleading eyes, too frightened to look at her father. “You were going to tell me the story of the dragon’s jewels today.”

Camirel found herself crushed against Mam’s chest in a brief, tight hug. “Soon, my emberling, I will tell that tale soon, but for now you must go wait for me. Promise you will wait for me . . .” Mam’s soft words were all but drowned out by the sound of someone running through the undergrowth, crashing and stumbling and occasionally swearing in a voice that sounded like Rolfo.

“Ware! She comes!” he called out.

Further in the distance someone laughed, but not a happy laugh. It was wrong, cruel, and the sound of it made Cami cringe.

Both parents turned, stricken expressions on their faces. “Mala!”

The name was unfamiliar, but Cami felt her parents’ panic, their



dread. Her father—for the first time she could remember—cursed, and then pulled them both to their feet. “Now! There is no more time.”

Cami heard him muttering, felt him draw magic to his call. Mam sketched runes upon the air until it burned with them. Camirel was startled by the spells they readied. They were dangerous, deadly spells. As likely to do harm to the caster as to the one they would unleash them upon. That her parents would wield such spells now spoke more urgency to her than any of their earlier pleading.

“Bayel! Get her clear,” Popi yelled. Before Mam could do as he ordered, Rolfo came stumbling out of the trees, with an angry red burn along his wrist and his robes scorched in patches. He held up a talisman hung around his neck. Imprinted upon it was a flaming dragon. “I swear to you she’ll not find us. None of the water witches will.”

Without another word he took Cami into his arms. As they fled back through the forest, Cami felt more of her parents’ magic gathering until the air crackled and smelt scorched. Though she could not see for the trees and the distance, Cami strained to look back, praying for a glimpse of her parents hurrying after them.

They did not. As Brother Rolfo settled her on his waiting horse and mounted behind her, the crackle in the air ended in a sharp crack. A roar followed, and the sky was lit with flame. He swore and prodded the horse into a frantic gallop.

Camirel’s childhood ended in chaos.



Ten years later

Draigbyr summoned.

The call was not new to Camirel; she had felt it throughout the years, faintly in the background of her life as she grew up and served the brethren at Mabet. It was but a murmur then. It had not been time. She’d been too young, not yet fully come into her magic.

Now, she heard its call deep within the pulse of her blood and answered it. She’d journeyed to the ember oak forest despite the sorrow waiting for her there. She was the last of the Celdraig. Or a daughter of that order, anyway. That legacy bore obligations she must assume.

Camirel stood at the threshold of the forest pondering her next step. These were not tame woods and she no longer had her father by her side, as she always had before.

The trees were called ember oaks because the sap ran hot in them year-round. Some said the massive trees were so large they sent their roots deep into the ground, drawing their heat from the earthfire at the hearts of the surrounding mountains. Others swore that they were not trees at all but the remnants of fallen dragons filled with their fire. Either way, one did not rest a hand casually against those trunks. If one were