

DRAGONS IN OUR MIDST  
STORY WORLD READING ORDER

**Dragons in our Midst**

Raising Dragons  
The Candlestone  
Circles of Seven  
Tears of a Dragon

**Oracles of Fire**

Eye of the Oracle  
Enoch's Ghost  
Last of the Nephilim  
The Bones of Makaidos

**Children of the Bard**

Song of the Ovulum  
From the Mouth of Elijah  
The Seventh Door  
Omega Dragon

Once upon a time, a crazy father told his son about a dream he had. Together, they twisted that dream, broke it into pieces, and built it into a story that touched their hearts. Thank you, James, for dreaming with me.



DRAGONS  
in our  
MIDST

# Raising Dragons

Bryan Davis



**Raising Dragons**  
**Volume 1 in the Dragons in our Midst series**

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## Merlin's Riddle

When dragons flew in days of old  
With valor in their wings,  
One fell prey to evil's song  
And learned what Satan sings.

Goliath, stained with Satan's words,  
Made other dragons flee,  
For songs like leaven spread decay,  
Corrupting souls born free.

Now Satan's scales coat dragon lore;  
He hides between the lines.  
He sings foul words in books corrupt  
And dances on their spines.

Are dragons vile? Are dragons tame?  
Depends on whom you ask.  
Do scales hide tricks of Satan when  
He dons a fearful mask?

One man brought sin into the world;  
One dragon brought all shame.  
One man redeemed his fallen race;  
Will dragons find the same?

Yet dragons dwell in hearts of men,  
From God and some from baals,  
And some sing words with angels' wings,  
While most chant Satan's scales.

God redeems what men cannot,  
Forgives what e'er thou didst.  
Who else can save the men of earth  
With dragons in our midst?





# DRAGON BREATH

**H**alt, foul dragon!” Billy stared at the tall stranger, a ghostly figure draped in dark chain mail. He appeared to be a knight of some kind, like a toy box action figure come to life. But what was he so mad about? Why was he yelling?

The knight swung a sword. Its brilliant blade flashed in the sun, and his armor jingled across his body, echoing his swift, skillful moves. With a wave of his shield he barked a challenge. “I fear you not, fiend, nor your hellish fire. Come to battle, and we shall see whom the Creator will protect.”

Billy opened his mouth to answer, but his throat burned, raw and sizzling, and acid bubbled up from his boiling stomach. With a convulsive shudder, he belched a plume of hot, steamy gases, blistering his tongue and scorching his lips. A second later, a raging river of fire blasted through his gaping mouth and hurtled toward the knight.

He jerked his shield up and tucked his body behind its protective armor. The flaming torrent splashed around the shield's edges, tearing the sword from his hand and enveloping his sleeve. He flapped his blazing arm. "Cursed lizard!"

Billy clamped a hand over his mouth and sucked cool air between his fingers to soothe his swollen tongue. *Where did that fire come from? And does that knight think I'm the dragon?*

Billy looked at his hands. They were normal, no scales or claws. But something was different. A ring glittered on his right index finger. Somehow it looked familiar.

In the ring's center, a dark red stone stared at him like a bloody luminescent eye, the prophetic eye of a mysterious old man peering at him from a deep cauldron of swirling scarlet. The cyclonic vision drew Billy closer and closer, and his mind swam in the dizzying whirlpool. The stone reflected everything, even his worried face.

As the eye's red glow deepened, Billy's features morphed. His ears grew long and pointed, and his mouth stretched out wide and toothy. Within seconds the transformation was complete. "I *am* a dragon!"

The knight appeared again from behind the shield, holding his bare arm away from his body. His sleeve had been scorched to ashes. An angry, reddish brown welt on his forearm oozed curling strings of smoke.

"Of course you're a dragon," he bellowed. "Do you think me a fool?" He raised his sword again. This time it cast a laser-like beam through its point, shooting high into the sky, and the knight tightened his jaw with renewed strength. "I still fear you not, neither your fire from hell nor your demon wings!"

*Wings? Did he say wings?* Billy twisted his neck and looked at his back. *Wings!* He tried flapping them. They worked! As



he flapped harder, his body lifted from the ground. Ten feet. Twenty feet. Below, the shrinking knight waved his sword, but his shouts grew garbled, and his words scattered in the wind, becoming a ringing sound, more like an alarm clock than a bellowing knight.

As he flew higher and higher, light melted away, leaving him floating through calm blackness. The air thinned to a bitter cold vacuum. His wings collapsed and shrank to the size of butterfly wings.

He dropped through the vacuum, flailing his arms, desperately trying to grab something, anything, to stop his fall. He tried to scream, but his voice died in the hollow void. At any second he would crash into trees or rocks below, breaking every bone in his body. He closed his eyes. He was falling, falling ...

Billy shot to a sitting position. As he tried to read the dim surroundings, he panted, his tongue dry. Instead of coldness and a falling sensation, softness supported his body underneath and warmth covered his legs. On a night table at his side, an alarm clock rang, the remnants of the knight's wind-scattered shouts.

With a quick slap, he shut off the alarm and exhaled. It was just a dream. Still, it felt so real. He rubbed his palms against his sweat-dampened cheeks. No scales. But what about wings? Unable to see his back, he jumped to his feet and tiptoed toward the light switch, dodging half-finished pencil sketches that lay on the floor. With an upward swipe, he slapped the switch on. Light flooded the room.

Billy blinked at the two bulbs in the ceiling fixture. With a series of one-footed hops, he maneuvered through his art-strewn room and headed for his mirror, almost afraid to look as he turned his back.

A sweaty pajama top clung to his shoulders—wrinkled, wet, and flat against his skin. He breathed a sigh of relief. No wings.

He smacked his hot, dry lips. It felt like he had fried that knight and eaten him for breakfast. How could a dream blend into reality like that? Probably from too much pepperoni on the pizza last night.

After gathering his school clothes and tucking them under his arm, he shuffled down the hall to the bathroom, thinking about the quickly fading dream. Was he really a dragon? Was that man a knight?

He flicked the light on and found the mouthwash on the bathroom countertop. He grabbed the green plastic bottle and read the writing on the side. Makes your breath sparkling, clean, and cool. It was worth a try.

4 After gargling the tangy stuff several times, he smacked his lips again. His mouth still felt like used charcoal. He slammed the plastic bottle on the countertop. Nothing helped.

As he straightened his body, he examined the hair on his arms. It seemed thicker and more reddish than ever, even though there wasn't a hint of red in the brown follicles on his head, just a flattened, ragtag mat of dark unruly strands that needed a dose of discipline. He brushed his hair with a quick sweep of his fingers. His thick, short nap perked straight up, then wilted to one side.

Studying his reflection, he leaned forward until he could see the individual pores in his skin. With his mouth open wide, he breathed on his image, straining his eyes to catch any results. The mirror stayed clear—no fog. Third day in a row.

He drew back and blew softly on his knuckles. "Ouch!" He shook his hand and doused it with cool water from the faucet. As a red blister appeared under the water's spray, he grimaced.

His breath had never been this bad before. Was it finally time to tell his mom and dad about the problem? Would they make him wear a surgical mask to keep everyone safe? Some of the kids at school already called him Dragon Breath. He didn't want a new name, like Lizard Lips or something even worse.

Maybe it was a fungus or an alien life form that took up residence in his cheeks to create a new civilization. He ran his tongue along the roof of his mouth. It felt like glazed pottery, a series of slick ridges that failed to register his tongue's touch. Aliens that live off saliva? Stranger things had happened, though he couldn't remember when.

"William," Mom called from downstairs. "Hurry up. The bus will be here soon."

He sighed and put on his clothes, starting with his favorite cargo pants—the light brown ones with deep pockets on the sides of the lower legs. The right-hand pocket still held two pens and a mechanical pencil, all tightly clipped to the opening.

After throwing on a shirt and quickly tying his gym shoes, he headed toward the stairs, pausing for a minute to pet Gandalf. The long-haired cat yawned and arched his back to fully take in Billy's deep strokes. "I guess you'd never call me Dragon Breath, would you?" After rubbing the purring cat one more time, he bounded down the stairs, jackhammering every second stair on the way down.

When he reached bottom, he stopped and listened. Mom was humming. That meant something good was cooking.

As he followed the sweet sound, his nose picked up the delicious smells of morning—fried bacon and fresh coffee. His mood perked up, prompting him to whistle along with his mother's song, a tune he had heard recently in a movie, a

song about remembering the past, though he couldn't recall the title.

As soon as he walked into the kitchen, Mom turned toward him and extended a foil pouch and a tall glass of orange juice. "Your father's having bacon and eggs, but I didn't know if you'd be up on time, so I didn't make you any."

Billy grimaced at the silver pouch. "Pop-Tarts again?"

"No complaints. The early bird gets the hot breakfast. You're the one who decided to stay up late."

Billy took the pouch and glass, his eye level even with hers. Since his recent growth spurt, their five-foot-seven frames matched, giving him confidence to playfully spar with her from time to time. "I'm a night owl, not an early bird."

"You're the bird you set your mind to be. Now excuse me while I finish up. It's my turn to be the clean-the-kitchen bird." Smiling, she ran a hand through her hair, intentionally mussing her light brown locks, then did the same to Billy. "Don't ruffle my feathers, and I won't ruffle yours."

"Don't mess with the mama bird. Got it." Billy turned toward the breakfast table. Dad leaned back in his chair munching a slice of toast. If he was a bird, he would definitely be an eagle, though not a bald eagle, not with so much reddish brown hair on his head and the backs of the hands that gripped his newspaper. And it seemed that he could grow a beard in just a week, though he stayed clean-shaven most of the time, including this morning.

Billy shook himself out of his trance. "Mom, can I help you with the dishes or something?"

"Nope. I got it covered." She set a frying pan in the sink, squirted a stream of soap into the pan, and turned on the

faucet. “So, night owl, what kept you up so late? Were you working on the poster for the festival?”

“No, I wanted to finish that portrait for Dad’s friend.”

“The one of the basset hound? Dr. Franklin’s dog?”

“Yeah, I left it on Dad’s—”

“I have it right here,” Dad said, holding up a large sheet of paper. “You did a great job. It looks just like Maggie.”

Billy stepped over to the table and sat, placing his glass of juice next to his elbow. “Thanks,” he said, reaching for his dad’s cup of coffee. With his fingers wrapped around the warm mug, he waited, displaying a big smile and a “may I please have a sip?” look.

Dad glared at him, his thick eyebrows curling downward, but the gleam in his brown eyes gave away his playacting.

Billy took a long slurp and watched over the edge of the cup while Dad hid a smirk and pretended to be interested again in the drawing. Billy set the cup down, let out a satisfied “Ah!” and wiped his mouth with his father’s napkin. “Dr. Franklin’s photo of Maggie was small,” Billy said, pointing at the paper, “so I blew her up on my easel.”

“Old Doc will love it. How do you want to be paid this time?”

“Just tell him to send a check to the Humane Society and put my name on the memo line. They’ll know what to do with it.”

“Now you’re including your name? What are they doing, constructing the Billy Bannister wing for stray cats?”

“Well, they *are* expanding. Gandalf’s buddies need a better place to live, you know.”

“Yes, I remember when you chose Gandalf. Those cat cages were stacked higher than my head.”

“So they need all the help they can get.”

“True, but don’t you want to keep some of the money for yourself?”

“Not really. I should get plenty at the festival tomorrow night.” Billy smiled and stared at the coffee cup. “Maybe I’ll get enough to buy my own coffeemaker.”

Dad peeked around the drawing and casually tipped the cup forward to get a look at the penny-sized splotch of coffee remaining at the bottom. “How much should I tell him to send?”

“I don’t know.” Billy shrugged. “Twenty dollars?”

“This might be your best work yet.” Dad rolled the portrait into a tube, set it between the salt and pepper shakers, and picked up his newspaper. “I’ll ask for fifty. That shouldn’t be a problem for Doc.”

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“Cool. Fifty would be great.”

“Right. Gandalf’s friends might want to buy you a coffeemaker for Christmas.” Dad grinned and whacked Billy on the head with his newspaper. Billy tried to grab it, but Dad snatched it out of the way just in time. Billy lunged, wrapped his arms around Dad’s neck, and pulled him to the floor. A world wrestling championship match had commenced right there in the Bannisters’ kitchen, but it wasn’t very convincing with both competitors laughing so hard.

Billy rose and gave his father a helping hand off the floor. “Better keep working out. One of these days, I’ll pin you.”

Dad laughed. “Not a chance.”

“Billy,” Mom called from the foyer, “I heard a motor. The bus might be here. Kind of early, though.”

Billy guzzled the rest of his juice, set the glass on the table, and walked backwards toward the door as he spoke. "Dad, will you be able to help me at the festival booth tomorrow?"

"I have to change the flight schedule, but it shouldn't be a problem."

"Great." Billy hurried to the foyer, grabbed his backpack from the floor, and gave Mom a quick peck on the cheek. She winced and rubbed her face, then quickly recovered and waved as he rushed out the door.

Billy continued in a fast trot, glancing back. Mom felt his superheated breath. He had been careful to keep his mouth safely away from Dad while wrestling, but this slip-up probably revealed his secret.

Billy looked down Cordelle Road, the two-lane street in front of his house, but the bus wasn't in sight, only a dark blue Cadillac idling at the corner about a hundred feet away. Strange. Had he already missed the bus?

He hustled across the street to the stop and searched the other end of Cordelle. No bus that way either.

The Cadillac began rolling slowly his way. Billy stiffened. Did this guy mean trouble? Maybe he was just lost.

Trying to catch a glimpse of the driver, Billy squinted, but the rising sun painted a glare on the windshield. A heavy uneasiness churned in his stomach, like the feeling of impending doom. He had to get away from this guy.

Billy snapped his fingers, pretending he had forgotten something, and turned toward the road. As he stepped off the curb, the Cadillac gunned its engine. Billy jumped back. The car lurched forward with a tire-biting screech. At that moment, the bus came around a distant bend in the road.

The Cadillac screeched again, this time stopping within ten feet of Billy. The driver's door popped open, and a short, stocky figure stepped out. Billy accelerated to a quick march in the direction of the school, hoping the bus would pick him up farther down the road.

"Bannister!" the driver shouted. "Stop!"

Billy broke into a jog. *He knows my name. But I don't know him. Just keep going.*

When the bus pulled up to his side and stopped, Billy halted.

"Bannister!"

Billy pivoted. The Cadillac driver was now running in his direction. When the bus doors swung open, Billy hopped up the steps, feeling the hair on his neck sending a shot of tingles down his back. He waved at the driver. "Mr. Horner, close the doors. Quick."

Mr. Horner pulled a lever, and the door's two panels swung together. Billy looked out the vertical windows. The Cadillac driver stood on the sidewalk with his hands on his hips, staring at the bus.

Billy tried to read his expression. Was he angry? Disappointed? As the bus pulled away, Billy turned to the driver and gave him a questioning look, wondering if he had noticed the man.

Mr. Horner had never been much for words, but he communicated his thoughts with a masterful collection of at least a thousand prune-faced frowns, one for every negative human emotion imaginable. Today's frown said, "Hurry up, Bannister. I spilled hot coffee on my pants, and I'm in no mood to watch you dawdle."



BRYAN DAVIS

Billy sighed and looked down the bus's long center aisle. Out the back window, the Cadillac driver's figure shrank as he walked back to his car.

The quaking sensation in Billy's stomach spread into his limbs, making him shake all over. *Who was that guy? What did he want with me?*

As he stepped toward the seats, images from the weird dream again haunted his thoughts along with his mom's pained expression after he kissed her cheek. He felt pursued by phantoms, a swarming host of invisible fears. And now a physical stalker lurked close to home, bold and real.

Billy shivered and pulled his backpack up higher. *I feel like a hunted animal, but who's the hunter?*