

DRAGON RIDER

THE AURELIA
CURSE

Written and Illustrated by

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1. A Feathered Flower

In New Zealand, January is a summer month. But this particular morning was quite crisp, and Guinevere Greenbloom spotted eleven dew elves as she followed her father to the boat that would carry them out into the bay. Dew elves love cold mornings. Of course they had made sure that they couldn't be spotted easily—all fabulous beings are masters of camouflage. Guinevere was quite sure nobody else noticed the tiny elves—neither the men loading their boats along the pier, nor the three fishermen who were sitting side by side on the wooden boards dangling their lines into the water.

“It’s incredible. It almost feels as if the world is younger here!” Guinevere whispered into her father’s ear. “Dew elves, fish-men, gullings, wind riders . . . I’ve never seen such an abundance of fabulous creatures!”

“And once again, we seem to be the only ones who detect them!” her father whispered back. “How can people be so blind?” He cast a glance at the fishermen. “I guess the fabulous friends we brought may have drawn the others.”

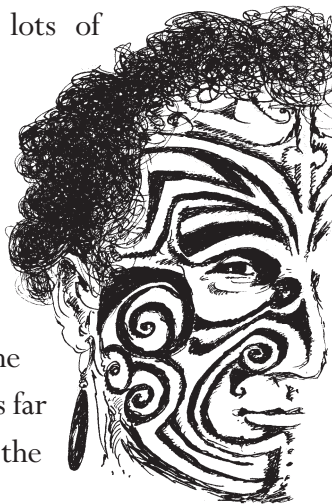
Guinevere heard voices in the small wooden suitcase he was carrying. But before she could ask her father about its inhabitants, Barnabas stopped in front of a boat, its name written on the white hull with blue paint. *Kaitiaki*. That was the name of the sacred Guardians of the Māori.

“You are right, by the way, my love,” said Barnabas Greenbloom, stepping onto the narrow gangway. “The world *is* younger in New Zealand. Its two islands are the most recent large landmasses to rise from the sea, and humans probably settled here no earlier than CE 900. It is also the only place on Earth where many of the native birds walk on foot.”

“Which can prove to be quite deadly a habit.” The man who appeared behind the railing wore the traditional tattoo of the Māori on his dark face, along with a wide smile. “Our birds didn’t foresee all the predators that would come to these islands by ship one day, along with lots of white men.”

He was a bear of a man, and the fierce hug he gave Barnabas had Guinevere worried for a moment that he’d break her lanky father in half.

“Guinevere, may I introduce you to Kahurangi Ngata?” Barnabas said when the Māori man finally let go of him. “He is, as far as I know, the only human who speaks the dialects of thirteen whale species.”



“Which were far easier to learn than the three tortoise languages I speak, not to mention the kiwi dialects I barely manage to utter with my leaden human tongue.” Kahurangi Ngata held out a hand to Guinevere, a hand that was covered in swirling lines and patterns of leaves. “Very honored to meet you, Guinevere Greenbloom, protector of the last Pegasi, friend of moss fairies and mermaids.”

His T-shirt showed the kiwi, the most famous of the walking birds of New Zealand. Guinevere would have loved to see one, but sadly they never showed up during daytime and were famous for their shyness.

Guinevere and her father had originally been on the way to the Himalayas to visit her brother, Ben, and thirteen freshly born dragons. Why they had taken a detour to New Zealand Barnabas had explained only in very vague terms, but Guinevere was too busy taking in the beauty that surrounded them to ask, and New Zealand had always been a place she had yearned to visit. But while Kahurangi was steering his boat through an archipelago of islands that drifted on the glassy water like mossy green turtles, Guinevere began to wonder about the purpose of this expedition. In the past months her parents had often discussed buying a farm in New Zealand. MÍMAMEIÐR, the sanctuary they had founded in Norway, by now could barely host all the fabulous refugees who came to them hoping for shelter and safety. Many had lost their homes to roads or dams. Others had been driven away by farming, deforestation, or human wars. MÍMAMEIÐR



granted them all safety, but for many of them the north of Norway was too cold. So when Barnabas had told Guinevere about the detour to New Zealand, she had assumed the search for a second sanctuary to be the reason. But when she had suggested that, Barnabas had only muttered: “No, no, my love. We decided to go somewhere else for that. But there’s just something I have to quickly check on.”

The clear water around them was even more densely populated with fabulous creatures than the small harbor. One of them was a green seahorse, a creature so rare that her father normally wouldn’t have been able to rein in his enthusiasm, but Barnabas cast only an absentminded glance at it. He seemed distracted and worried, and he lowered his voice when he talked to his Māori friend—a behavior Guinevere wasn’t used to from either her father or her mother, as they usually didn’t keep secrets from their children.

Something to check on. What *had* they come for? This detour was becoming more and more mysterious.

Hothbrodd wouldn’t tell, either. The troll, as always, was their pilot. (He had also built their plane.) “If your father hasn’t told you, it’s not on me to do so, Guinevere Greenbloom!” he had growled. “And if it’s any comfort to you, he didn’t tell me much, either.”

Two flying fish jumped over the boat, their tiny nixling riders waving at Guinevere. *Ben will be so jealous when I tell him about this place!* she thought. *No, Guinevere,* she corrected herself, leaning deeper over the railing so as not to miss anything, *your brother isn't jealous of anyone or anything at the moment. For he's probably holding a young dragon on his lap right now.*

That thought—she had to admit it—filled her with jealousy. She was glad her father had promised that after this they would head straight for the valley in the Himalayas where the last dragons had found refuge from her kind. It was only fair, of course, that Ben had met their offspring first—after all, he had helped the dragons to find the valley. And then . . . he had become her brother. *Your foundling brother,* she could almost hear Ben say.

Guinevere missed him. She always did when they were separated for too long, and it had been more than a month since he'd left for the Rim of Heaven, as the dragons called their valley.

Kahurangi slowed the boat down and let it drift toward the steep shore of an island that was still wrapped in morning mist. A sign next to the wooden pier announced that it was a bird sanctuary, and Guinevere spotted traps for possums and rats between and in the trees. The walking birds of New Zealand were easy prey for the predators that had been brought to their islands by humans.

"I guess we can all agree that birds who prefer to walk shouldn't become extinct," Barnabas said in a low voice as they followed Kahurangi up a path that was lined by tropical trees and

views of the sea and other islands. “But as you know, your mother and I despise traps, so she suggested bringing the suitcase you’re carrying. Let’s see whether my old Māori friend likes it.”

He winked at Guinevere and stopped under what looked to Guinevere like a kauri tree.

“Kahurangi!” Barnabas called. “I forgot to tell you. We brought a gift. I hope you’ll like it.”

He placed the suitcase on the ground and carefully opened it. Kahurangi frowned when he saw the two dozen small creatures inside. They were as blue as cornflowers and stood barely higher than a can of beans.

“What is the meaning of this, Barnabas?” the Māori said. “You know we don’t like creatures from outside to be brought to our islands. They cause nothing but harm!”

The gnomes frowned back at him as they climbed out of the suitcase.

“You aren’t a native of these islands, either, my friend,” Barnabas replied. “May I remind you that the Māori arrived here barely seven hundred years ago? These are bluelings, and I think your birds will be very grateful to have them around for a while.”

“The possums will chop off their heads!” Kahurangi exclaimed.

The bluelings burst into laughter. One of them turned to the suitcase and tapped his finger against it. It disappeared.

Kahurangi stared incredulously at the spot where it had lain just a second ago. Then he bent down and picked up a suitcase as small as a grain of rice.

“That’s what they’ll do with your bird-eaters,” Barnabas said. “I guess even flightless birds can eat predators that size?”

The Māori stared down at the gnomes. “Well, I suppose the Greenblooms’ methods always were a bit different!” he murmured.

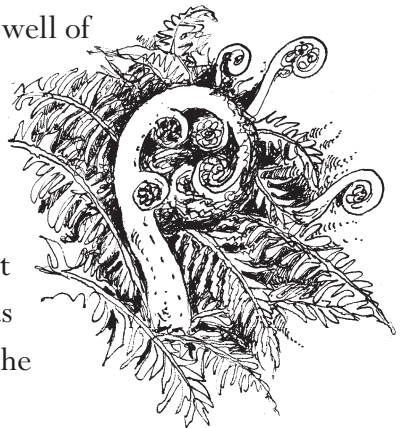
“I hope so!” Barnabas smiled. “We’ll pick them up in a month. Treat them nicely—they’re in high demand. But now, show us what we’ve come for!”

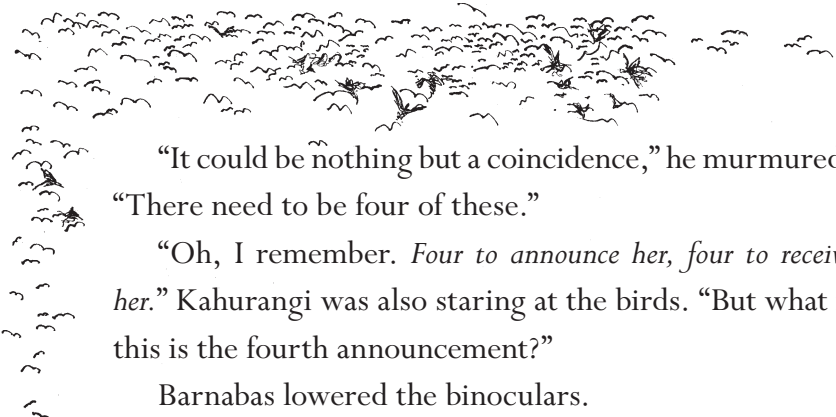
The path they followed ended on a wooden platform, rising on stilts from a thicket of the high ponga ferns that only grow in New Zealand. It granted a magical view over dozens of islands. Thousands of birds swarmed above the turquoise waters: albatrosses, petrels, shags, prions, gannets, skuas . . . Guinevere quickly gave up trying to name them all. More and more of them were landing on the water, forming a shape with their bodies that resembled a flower, a huge flower drawn by feathers and beaks.

“Look familiar?” Kahurangi handed Barnabas his binoculars. “I’m sure it reminds you as well of the tale you and I were once quite obsessed with.”

Guinevere’s father took the binoculars and trained them on the birds.

“What tale?” Guinevere asked, but her father had forgotten about her as he stared through the binoculars at the swarming birds.





“It could be nothing but a coincidence,” he murmured. “There need to be four of these.”

“Oh, I remember. *Four to announce her, four to receive her.*” Kahurangi was also staring at the birds. “But what if this is the fourth announcement?”

Barnabas lowered the binoculars.

“*In times of need . . .*” Kahurangi said. “*That’s when she will rise . . .* We definitely live in such times, don’t you agree?”

Barnabas sighed. “Yes. Yes, we do. But do such things really happen? It feels like a very foolish hope.” He pointed the binoculars at the birds on the water again. “It can’t be,” he murmured. “We’re too used to chasing dreams, Kahurangi.”

“Can you please stop talking in riddles around me?” Guinevere gave her father a friendly punch in his bony back. “Even sphinxes make more sense than you two!” She had met a sphinx once, and had found her very exhausting.

Her father put his arm around her. “Sorry, it’s just an ancient Māori tale, my love. Kahurangi and I came across it in our twenties, when we were both studying sea monsters. But there are many tales like that.”

Guinevere noticed the warning look he cast his friend, but Kahurangi only had eyes for the birds as another swarm of gulls arrived. The world seemed to be made from beaks and feathers.