



# The Red Dragon

Andrew Lansdown

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## I The Window-Stone

‘Hey! What on earth are you doing?’

Colyn jumped at the sound of his father’s voice and jerked his right hand behind his back.

‘I ... er ... nothing,’ he stammered, dropping his gaze to the shed floor.

His father propped his shotgun against the wall and leant against the wall himself, hands in pockets.

Colyn waited, not daring to look up. He could feel his face burning.

‘I’ll ask you again,’ his father said at last. ‘What have you been up to?’ He wagged a finger in warning. ‘Now think before you answer, son. Don’t make me punish you for lying.’

Colyn looked up and parted his lips to speak, then stopped. Slowly, he took his hand from behind his back and opened his fingers to show what he had been hiding.

His father reached out. ‘Give it here.’

Colyn passed it to him and stepped back.

His father turned the object over in his hand. It was a small stone disc with a triangular hole cut in the middle of it. He lifted it to his eye and peered through.

‘It’s just a window-stone,’ Colyn said lamely.

‘I thought I told you not to go making any more doors,’ his father said, lowering the stone from his eye and fixing his gaze once more on Colyn. Without thinking, he turned the disc over in his hand, feeling its shape and texture.

‘It’s not a doorway,’ Colyn said. ‘It’s a window.’

‘Door, window—I don’t care! No openings—that’s what I meant. No openings into the Otherworld!’

‘But it’s only a little opening,’ Colyn protested. ‘A dragon couldn’t get through a hole that small.’

‘No, but it could *look* through.’

‘Well, what—’

His father flung the disc to the cement floor, shattering it. Fragments of stone spun in a dozen directions. One hit Kinzar in the ear and made him yelp.

‘Don’t give me any more backchat, Colyn. I’m not arguing with you about it. I’m telling you. Don’t cut another opening between the worlds! Do you understand me? Don’t cut another triangle or I’ll take your knife away.’

Colyn hung his head and fingered the handle of the knife in his belt. He clicked his thumbnail across the lines of the triangle etched in the wood.

His father squatted and called Kinzar. He inspected the cut on the dog’s white ear. ‘Never mind, boy,’ he said, patting him. ‘You’ll live.’

Standing up, he said, ‘I can’t fathom you, son. You know the dragons are waiting for you in the mists. You know they are watching for you. Have you forgotten that gash in your shoulder already?’

Colyn slipped his hand inside his shirt to touch the scar below his collarbone. The wound from the dragon’s tusk had healed up well, although it was still slightly tender. But the wound to his mind had not been so easily healed. Even though almost four months had passed, he still had nightmares of the attack. He would see the dragon swing round to gore him again. Or he would feel himself hurtling through the air, tossed from the dragon’s tusk like a wad of hay from a pitchfork. And he would wake in a sweat, reaching frantically beneath his pillow for his knife.

‘It doesn’t hurt any more,’ Colyn said, pressing the scar gently.

‘Well maybe it should,’ his father replied. ‘Maybe then you would remember how treacherous and dangerous the dragons are and not go fooling around with their world.’

‘But it’s the Kinroan’s world, too,’ Colyn said. ‘It’s where Wayth and Insay and Yasni live. If I don’t at least look I’ll never see them again.’

‘You won’t see them in the mists between the worlds. Only the dragons go there.’ His father scratched Kinzar’s tummy. ‘Besides,’ he said, ‘Yasni has her own Dragon Knife now. She could come into our world if she wants to.’

‘Yes,’ Colyn said. ‘I have the Kinrye and she has the Nalkinrye. I wish I hadn’t given it to her.’

‘And what would you do with two Dragon Knives?’ his father asked. He stood up and half smiled. ‘It seems to me that one gets you into enough trouble!’

‘Speaking of trouble,’ he continued, picking up the shotgun and instinctively checking the safety catch, ‘that fox I shot last night was a vixen, and by the look of her teats she had cubs. I’m going to do a quick search for the den. I’ve got a hunch it might be in the bush at the bottom of the potato paddock. I’ve seen a fox there a couple of times, now.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ Colyn said.

‘Ah, better not. I doubt I’ll find the den, but if I get lucky, you won’t like what I’ll have to do to the cubs.’

‘I know all about killing foxes, Dad,’ Colyn said. ‘And I know why they have to be killed. I’ve seen how they attack our chooks. And I know they hunt the native animals. The park ranger who spoke to our class said there’d be tons of numbats and bandicoots and wallabies all through the south-west if it wasn’t for foxes.’

‘They’re rotten blighters, all right,’ his father said. ‘But fox cubs are little and cute—’

‘That wouldn’t make any difference to me,’ Colyn interrupted.

‘I’d be surprised if it didn’t—and a little disappointed, too, to tell the truth. Your mother once told me, “Life will toughen him up soon enough. Your job is to keep him tender.”’ He looked out the shed door, then back at Colyn. ‘So leave the fox cubs to me, son. Don’t be in too much of a hurry to have a grown-up heart.’

He jumped down from the raised concrete floor of the shed. ‘I’ll take Kinzar, though,’ he said. ‘I could use his nose.’

After watching his father trudge down the gravel road with Kinzar in tow, Colyn selected a large potato from a sack in the shed, then set out himself. He headed across the potato paddock for the river, making his way to a place where a tree long ago had toppled into the water. It was his special place and he never grew tired of it.

The great weathered trunk sloped gently from the riverbank to the middle of the riverbed. Using one of the twisted roots for a step, he clambered onto it. He paused to rub his toe on the flat spot where he had once carved, then scraped off, the letters of his name. ‘COLYN LARKIN,’ he said out loud, reading the letters that were no longer there.

He walked out to where a heron had left the nippers and head of a marron, a freshwater crayfish. The shell had turned a bluish colour in the sun. He brushed it off and sat down.

And immediately he began to argue with himself.

‘What harm can it do?’ he protested, talking out loud. ‘Nothing can come through! ... Anyway, who will know? ... Just once more—just for a minute.’

He looked around—not to take in the beauty of his surroundings, as he usually did, but to make sure no one was watching him. Then quickly he drew his knife and, without as much as an admiring glance at its curved blade or its engraved handle, cut a slice from the potato. He hesitated and looked around again. Sensing no danger, he stabbed the knife through the potato slice and cut a triangular hole in it. Then he peeled the slice. As the last strip of peel fell away, the potato turned to stone, a stone with a window in it, a window-stone.

Standing up again, he lifted the circular stone to his eye and peered cautiously through the triangular window. Although the sun blazed about him, all he could see was mist. One mist—many mists—white and swirling. The sight was a familiar shock, an unfading fascination.

He lowered the stone and looked at the sunlit landscape. He saw trees on the riverbank, pools in the riverbed, ducks and herons in the pools. They did not interest him.

He lifted the window-stone to his eye again. The mists twirled and twisted about one another. It was as if an Arabian woman were dancing with white silk scarves, dancing so skilfully that she kept herself entirely hidden.

He stood spellbound, losing all sense of time, like someone peeping through a keyhole into a forbidden room. He was hardly aware that he was hoping to see—and dreading to see—a dragon in the white shadows. Or at least, the fiery yellow of a dragon's eye. The knuckles of his knife-hand turned pale as he unconsciously clenched the weapon the dragons had made and lost, the Kinrye they coveted and feared.

The blast of a shotgun startled him from his trance, unsettling his balance. As he threw his arms out to steady himself, the window-stone slipped from his fingers, bounced on the log and toppled to the ground.

'Blow!' he said, remembering in the nick of time not to swear.

He spun around to face the riverbank. His father was not there. Relieved, he slipped his knife through his belt and scrambled off the log.

As he stepped into the bracken at the edge of the potato paddock, he spied his father and Kinzar barely a hundred metres away. His father waved his hat. Kinzar barked and came at him fast.

'Did you find the den?' Colyn asked, pushing Kinzar away for the tenth time.

'No, but I flushed out a dog fox. Had a shot at him but missed.'

'I know,' Colyn said. 'I mean, I didn't know you missed, but I heard the shot.'

'That's the beauty of a shotgun,' his father said. 'It doesn't bang—it booms! A truly fortifying sound! But it's a weight to carry. Here,' he said, breaking it open and plucking the shells from both barrels, 'You lug it for a bit.'

'What's for lunch?' Colyn asked, taking the gun.

'Keep the barrels down,' his father said. 'For lunch? What about an omelette and some pikelets?'

'Yum!' Colyn said. 'We could melt some cheese on the omelette.'

'And we could slap some jam and cream on the pikelets!'

'Aw, yum!'