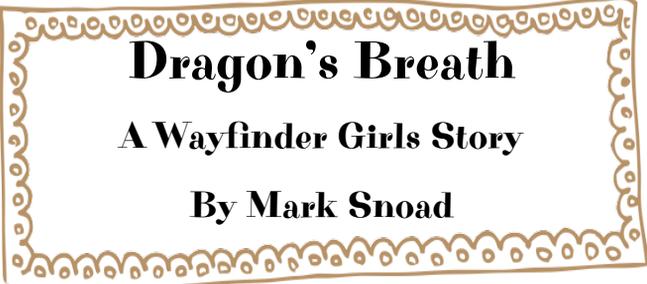


Dragon's Breath

A Wayfinder Girls Story



Mark Snoad



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By Mark Snoad

The air shimmered in front of Marie Studfall, just like it had on all the other times when a doorway to another world opened, but this time Marie's breath caught in her throat.

Something's wrong.

Marie shot a stern glance at the Wayfinder Girls leader, Mrs Lillian Anne Smythe, whose steely-eyed focus was entirely on a small golden device cradled in her left hand.

Marie glanced at the other four members of her Guardians unit, but all of the other girls seemed relaxed, none showing any signs of unease.

None except Marie.

Marie turned back to the doorway, forehead scrunched in concentration. What had sparked her fear?

There. The air. It was shifting. As though something on the other side was breathing. Something massive. Something just starting to suck in a really big breath.

The bottom of Marie's long, black Wayfinder Girls skirt began lifting in the direction of the doorway. And the one loose strand of her blonde hair started to rise from her shoulder.

Marie glanced again at the other girls. Their long black skirts were all behaving in the same fashion as Marie's, as though something was pulling on them.

Pulling on them!

Marie's Guardians unit was being sucked into the doorway. And Marie was the only one who had noticed it.

"Mrs Smythe."

Mrs Smythe continued her intense examination of the golden device she was holding, seemingly paying no attention to Marie.

“Mrs Smythe!” Marie raised her voice.

The grey-haired leader of the Wayfinder Girls lifted her attention from the golden device and peered at Marie through pearl-rimmed spectacles.

“Yes, what is it, Marie?”

“We’re being sucked into the doorway.”

Mrs Smythe studied Marie a moment before muttering, “No, that can’t be right,” and returned to her obsession with the golden device.

Marie shot a glance around her. All of the girls wore long, black, pleated skirts, part of the official Wayfinder Girls uniforms. A white blouse, yellow-and-black tie, and a black blazer completed the outfits, along with a pair of sensible black shoes. All of the black skirts were clearly rising off the ground now, as though someone was kneeling in front of each girl, lifting up the hemline of each skirt to check for dirt.

The other girls had started to notice the odd behaviour of their skirts, possibly alerted by the words Marie had just said to Mrs Smythe. One of the girls, a tall, dark-haired girl called Roselyn tried to push down her skirt, but the material proved uncooperative.

“Marie, what’s happening?” Roselyn said.

Marie didn’t answer, trying first to determine how much danger her unit was in. Mrs Smythe continued to be transfixed by the small golden device, as if it contained all of the answers. So, it was left to Marie, as usual.

Marie studied the doorway to the other world. It wasn’t really much of a door, more like a shimmering of the air a short distance in front of her. It looked like a small pool of water standing upright.

A vertical pool of water that defied gravity.

And might not have been anything at all like water.

Marie would normally be able to see through the doorway to whatever was on the other side, but not today. The doorway was blurred. She couldn’t see anything.

It hadn't started that way. Marie and the other Wayfinder girls were completing their Guardians training in the woods behind the Ravenwood campsite. The doorway had first opened with a view of a green and grey landscape, making Marie think of being high-up on a mountain, before the scene blurred. It was now like looking into a deep, murky pool of water.

And the doorway hadn't closed. That was another sign that something was wrong. It was also the reason why Mrs Smythe focused all her attention on the golden device. The device somehow controlled the opening and closing of doors. It had always worked.

Until today.

Marie knew that they couldn't just leave a doorway open. The existence of doorways to other worlds was a closely guarded secret. Not to mention the problem of not knowing who or what might come through the doorway. Although today's problem involved stopping anyone from being pulled into the doorway.

All of a sudden the problem disappeared. One moment Marie felt herself being sucked towards the doorway, the next moment the sensation was gone. Marie quickly checked her skirt - it wasn't lifting anymore. A quick glance around at the other girls showed that their skirts were all behaving themselves. Everything was back to normal.

Or was it? The doorway was still open. Mrs Smythe remained focused on the golden device and was still muttering to herself.

Marie turned to the doorway and walked to it.

"Marie," Roselyn called after her. "Be careful."

Marie slowed her pace, but did not stop. She wasn't sure about what she could do, but if there was any danger to her unit, she would face it first.

Without warning, a swift, sudden surge of air grabbed Marie and sent her hurtling into the doorway. She didn't even have a chance to cry out as she was thrust through the doorway into another world.

Marie immediately felt an intense chill. She sucked in a deep breath, finding that she could breathe okay. But it wasn't the cold or the strange air that stole her attention. It was the two huge red eyes staring at

her. Two huge red eyes with thin black slits in their centre. The eyes were framed by a massive red head, covered in scales, spikes, and horns.

Understanding came quickly to Marie.

Dragon

She had never paid much attention to stories about dragons. They had seemed fanciful and foolish. But there was nothing fancy or foolish about the terrifying creature in front of her. The dragon was huge, easily dwarfing the largest animal she had seen on Earth. It was nearly completely red in colour, from the armoured scales on its body to the horns on its head. The dragon's teeth, however, were white. Marie would have preferred never to have been close enough to a real dragon to see its teeth, but there they were. Protruding out of its open mouth were two rows of razor sharp fangs, each one longer than a sword.

Out of its open mouth.

It suddenly dawned on Marie that the dragon was sucking in a breath. That's what she must have felt on the other side of the doorway. Dragon's breath. But did that mean she was about to be incinerated by dragon's fire?

The dragon rose up onto its thick back legs, as the largest red wings Marie could have ever imagined lifted on either side. A rumbling started at the back of the dragon's throat, a rumbling that came with the sense of a fiery furnace starting up.

Marie's eyes widened as she witnessed the incredible power of a creature that she had never thought was real.

Would this be the last thing she ever saw?

Marie stood her ground, facing down the dragon. If this was the end, then she would meet it head on. She just had to somehow stop the dragon from getting through the doorway.

A silky, golden voice cut through the air. "Easy, Gwynedd. It's just a cold."

Marie searched frantically for the owner of the voice. Standing just to the side of the dragon was a tall figure bathed in light. The dragon had

so dominated her view that she had failed to notice that there was another being present.

Marie's raised her hand to shield her eyes as she tried to make out the details of the speaker. It proved difficult, as their shape seemed to never fully form, not to her sight anyway. She could just make out that the figure wore a golden crown and a long, silvery cape flowed from their shoulders.

The silky, golden voice spoke again. "Peace, Gwynedd."

The dragon responded to the voice. The huge red wings folded down, the massive mouth closed, and the dragon settled lower into the ground, appearing quite relaxed.

Gwynedd

That must be the dragon's name. And the mysterious figure had calmed the dragon down with just a word. Who were they?

The figure turned their attention to Marie. They must have known she was there all along, but had first dealt with the dragon.

"What is your name, human child?"

Marie responded immediately, knowing somehow that even if she had wanted to, she would not have been able to resist answering any questions.

"I am Marie Studfall."

"Why are you here?"

"The doorway. It wouldn't shut. I felt like we were being pulled through. We must have felt the dragon's breath."

"Dragon?" The figure answered. "Ah, yes. You humans like to use simple words. Do you really think dragon is a word that best describes Gwynedd here?"

"No." Marie answered honestly.

The figure seemed to smile. "You mentioned 'we' just before. Please explain."

"I am part of a Guardians unit of Wayfinder Girls. My unit of five girls was training in the Ravenwood campsite with Mrs Lillian Anne Smythe, opening doorways to other worlds, but the golden device we

were using was not working for some reason.” Marie couldn’t believe that she was so easily spilling details she had sworn to keep secret, but she also felt there was no way she could have stopped talking.

This time, the figure seemed to laugh, although Marie could not sense a lot of joy in the response. “The Guardians. How very quaint.”

Marie nodded, unsure of how else to respond.

“They will miss you.”

“I’m sorry, what do you mean?” Marie said.

“You won’t be able to return.”

Marie’s heart started pounding. “Why not?”

“You have seen too much.”

Marie’s bravado and courage evaporated as she realised the meaning of the words she had just heard. “Please, I want to go back.”

The figure again seemed to laugh, just as joyless as the previous one. “Tylwyth. Teg. Bring me the human child.”

Marie suddenly noticed two other figures emerge from the other side of the dragon. These two were shorter than the being she had spoken with, and their features were easier to make out. They both had long, silver hair tied back from their foreheads with a thin golden band, each band housed a gem, one blue and the other green. The figures wore green waistcoats over short-sleeved brown shirts, with brown trousers, brown boots, and green capes.

They walked quickly towards Maggie, clearly intending on following their orders.

“Please!” Marie appealed one last time to the being in light, but it seemed their attention was focused solely on the red dragon. Marie seemed to have already been forgotten.

Marie turned back to the two smaller figures steadily advancing on her. She felt unable to do anything but wait for their arrival, as though she was under a spell.

Something brushed against Marie’s ankle. Marie looked down to see the end of a golden rope touching her sensible black shoe.

A golden rope.

Marie lunged for the golden rope just as the two figures arrived. They reached out to grab her, but the rope tightened and she was pulled out of their grasp. Before she knew it, Marie was flat on her back in the Ravenwood campsite staring up at a clear blue sky.

“Marie. Marie. Are you okay?” Roselyn asked.

Before Marie answered, she looked up at the doorway, just in time to see it close.

“There, that did it,” Mrs Smythe said, looking up from the golden device and seeming very pleased with herself.

“What happened?” Marie asked Roselyn.

“You walked towards the doorway and then were gone, just like that. I ran up to the doorway and threw the golden rope after you. It took ages and we almost gave up, but then I felt you grab the rope from the other end, and all the girls helped me pull you back.”

Marie looked around at the faces of the other three girls. They were all smiling and nodding reassuringly.

“It’s lucky we had been issued these ropes.” Roselyn added.

Lucky indeed.

“Wait a minute,” Marie said. “Did you just say it took ages before I grabbed the rope?”

“Yes, it certainly seemed that way. You were gone quite a long time,” Roselyn answered.

Marie lay back on the ground. If Roselyn was telling the truth, that means that what Marie saw and experienced on the other side of the doorway took a lot longer on Earth. But how was that possible?

“What did you see, Marie? What happened to you?” Roselyn asked.

Marie lay quietly. She would reveal everything to Roselyn and the other Wayfinder Girls eventually. And Mrs Smythe too. But she first had to try and make sense of it all.

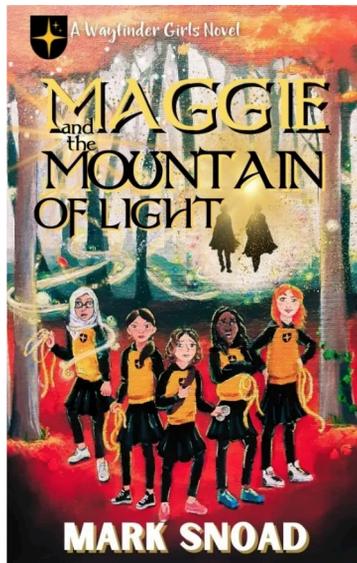
One thing was for sure, it was real. It was all real. She had always held small nagging doubts about the reality of other worlds, but those doubts had been well and truly smashed. She would never again doubt.

And she would dedicate herself to defending the Earth from any and all threats from these other worlds.

As she lay there making a promise to herself, she realised it was not the dragon she considered a threat, but the being with the joyless laugh. The one with the power to calm a dragon. She never wanted to meet someone like that again.

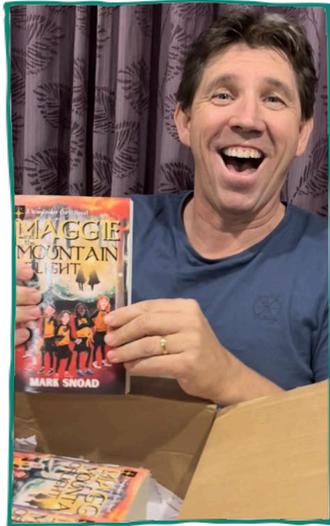
And it would be alright. She was a Wayfinder Girl and a Guardian. She would defend the Earth.

Join the Wayfinder Girls for more adventures in [Maggie and the Mountain of Light!](#)



Mark Snoad

Mark Snoad is an author and teacher living in Tamaki Makaurau Auckland. As a professional make-believer, he strives to find the magic and joy in everyday life. Mark hopes that readers will find something within the pages of his books to make them smile, and give them a sense of courage and hope. Mark lives with his wife, two daughters, and rascal dog, Wilbur.



Praise for Maggie and the Mountain of Light

"A must read for those that like positive energy, and fun in their bookcase! I'm already looking forward to joining the Wayfinder Girls on their next adventure!"

Laura Blake

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