

BOOK 2

**BATTLE  
DRAGONS**  
CITY OF SPEED

ALEX LONDON

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**THE FIRST RACE OF THE** season brought the whole city of Drakopolis out, or so it seemed to Abel. The bleachers were packed uncomfortably close around his parents and his two best friends beneath the heat of a blazing blue sky.

The raceway held over a hundred thousand people, and it was full past any measure of safety. At the top of the arena perched the luxury boxes of the wealthy owners and sponsors, set where the dragons would race right past their windows. At the bottom was the flat oval infield, where a motley mixture of crooks, gamblers, and goons stood shoulder to shoulder, their necks craned straight up, as far from the aerial raceway as you could get while still being inside the arena.

In between the luxury boxes and the gritty infield were the bleachers, where a ticket bought you a reclining seat to look up at the race above and a discount on one extra-large Firebreather Soda. You could enter a code in the app on your phone to place bets, order food to your seat, or even look up the statistics of your favorite racing dragons.

“This technology is better than anything we have at school,” Abel’s best friend, Roa, lamented. “Why does a sport have more advanced stuff than our educational system?”

“Because racing is fun and cool and school is boring,” their friend Topher said, popping sour gummy serpents into his mouth. “Anyway, school is for tomorrow. We have one more day of summer. Live in the now.”

Roa nodded. This was the last day of summer break for all three of them—Abel, Roa, and Topher—but Abel was actually excited for the new school year. They’d been out since an emergency closing in the spring. During that time, Abel had learned how to ride a dragon, learned that his sister was a dragon thief and his brother was an undercover Dragon’s Eye agent, and flown in a dragon battle, a match between all the criminal kins that controlled the underworld of Drakopolis. He’d ridden a powerful Sunrise Reaper named Karak. Together, he and Karak and his friends on his ground crew had won. Then he let Karak go free into the wilds beyond Drakopolis. Word got around. For the first time in all their lives, Abel and his friends were considered . . . cool.

He couldn’t wait for school to start.

Abel was also excited because he liked the beginnings of things, when everything felt like potential and nothing had yet gone horribly wrong.

“Summer’s over,” he told his friends. “This trip to the races feels a little desperate, right? Like trying to lick the icing off the box a cupcake came in.”

“That’s the best icing,” Roa replied. Topher agreed.

The racing dragons were still in their starting pens behind a fiery gate at the far end of the arena. The air around the gate shimmered with heat, and the holographic display above it showed the racing positions of the dragons waiting to start. People in the stands all around the arena cheered and clapped and placed their bets, gossiping about how *this* dragon flew faster on windy days or *that* dragon hurt its claw last week, so might be hesitant in close flying. Abel’s parents didn’t gamble, and no one under sixteen was allowed to place a bet, so they didn’t have much to do before the race except wait and eat snacks.

As far as Abel was concerned, the best part of any sporting event was the food.

Still, he realized as soon as his order arrived that a dragon pepper ice cream sundae had been a bad idea. He stared at the hot-pink mound of spicy ice cream and felt his stomach churn.

Topher grinned. "Eat up!" his friend said. "A dare's a dare."

To thirteen-year-olds, an accepted dare was as unbreakable as a dragon's scales. He couldn't back out now. What had possessed him to agree to eat this?

"You don't have to eat that if it's going to make you sick," Abel's father told him. "Dragon peppers are the spiciest found in nature."

"Actually, they were developed in a lab," said Roa, who loved science. "Geneticists fused regular peppers with dragon blood."

"Why would they *do* that?" Abel wondered.

"Scientists do stupid things all the time," Topher mumbled between licks of his simple chocolate-peanut butter swirl cone. "Just admit defeat."

There was glee in Topher's eyes, and it wasn't just from his ice cream. He'd issued the dare, and if Abel didn't eat the spicy sundae, Topher could claim victory for . . . well . . . how long did the shame of a ditched dare last? Eternity? Eternity plus forever?

"Technically, you'd have to actually *try* it to be defeated by it," Roa added unhelpfully. "This would just be giving up. There is shame in just giving up."

Abel looked to his father.

"That's true," his father said, licking his salted caramel scoop.

Abel had thought he could at least count on Roa to have his back. They had gotten a mango bubble tea and sipped it loudly and happily.

"You're are *all* incorrigible," Abel's mother said, glaring at her

husband and then looking gently at Abel. "If you don't want the ice cream, don't eat it." She paused, and Abel saw a glint of mischief in her eyes. "Of course, it *was* expensive, and you know we've spent a lot on your school supplies for this year . . ."

"Flaming skies, Mom!" Abel cried out. "*You're* guilt-tripping me? Is no one on my side here?"

His mom smiled. "A dare's a dare, honey."

"I can't believe you brought us to the races today, on the last day of our summer, just to torture me!" Abel exclaimed. "Your youngest child!"

That made his mom and dad lean their heads together and grin.

"Aw, he's right, sweetheart," said his dad. "He's just a wittle-bitty baby."

"Maybe he needs his binky," cooed his mom. "Does witty-bitty Abey Baby need his binky boo?"

"Maaaaa-uuum!" Abel blushed.

Topher and Roa looked smug about his ordeal. What were friends for, if not to dare you to eat things you shouldn't? He'd have felt the same in their position.

The people around them in the stands at the Drakopolis Raceway weren't paying attention to Abel's spicy sundae situation. They were more interested in the racing dragons about to compete.

"It's a sure thing!" the man next to Abel shouted into his phone. "Furious Drifter pulled a wing muscle last month, and the treatment gave her extra thrust! I'm telling you, I heard it from the trainer's cousin's best friend's manicurist's ex-boyfriend's landlord!"

Abel turned back to his friends and family. They were all staring at him and the bright pink blob of dragon pepper ice cream in the plastic dragon claw dish.

“Now or never,” said Topher.

“The race is gonna start soon,” Roa reminded him. “Do it if you’re doing it.”

“You remember where the bathrooms are?” his mother asked.

He rolled his eyes at her, at *all* of them. Then he took a breath and slammed those rolling eyes shut as he shoved a spoonful of hot-pink dragon pepper ice cream into his mouth.

“Hmmm . . . s’good,” he mumbled through the frozen deliciousness. It tasted something like cocoa strawberry swirl, with just a hint of a minty flavor, which he normally didn’t like but totally worked here. The mint flavor blossomed a bit and brought out the taste of chocolate, and a surprising burst of sweetness. He smiled at the eager faces of his friends and family. *Ha! He was showing them!* “Not bad at all!”

He shoved two more spoonfuls into his mouth, letting that chocolatey-berry-mint flavor spread so it coated his tongue and slipped down his throat in a cool, creamy river.

“Careful,” his dad warned. “Dragon pepper takes a few seconds to—”

“BAAAAAAHHH!” Abel yelled as the cool minty flavor turned into a hot chili burn. Then, like the sun rising over the great glass desert beyond Drakopolis, it turned into jagged, sizzling pain that tore through his teeth, his tongue and throat, filling his face and his head and then his entire body with a heat that no human word could describe. It was *agony!*

“OW, OW, OW!” Abel added to his previous cry. And then, because he couldn’t help it, he started jumping up and down, while alternating between “OW” and “BAAAAAAHH!”

“Drink this.” His mother shoved her jumbo Ice-a-coolada at him,

which he immediately chugged. The whipped cream and iced coffee cooled the inferno on his tongue. Now it just hurt with a normal amount of unbearable pain. His skin tingled and he had tears in his eyes. He panted like Percy, his pet pangolin.

“Not to be *that guy*,” Topher said, clearly enjoying being exactly *that guy*, “but the dare was to eat the *whole* sundae.”

Abel looked down at his cup of frozen pink pain, and the thought made him want to scream, want to run away, want to throw himself on the ground and weep.

He also didn’t want to lose the dare. Abel did not like to lose.

“Mom,” he said, his voice scratchy. “I’m gonna need my own Ice-a-coolada.”

With that, he dove back in and ate the entire dragon pepper sundae so fast he nearly passed out.

“Done!” he declared, dropping the cup at his feet. His hands shook. His forehead sweat and his skin tingled and he had the intense urge to jump up and down screaming, but he was triumphant.

“Wow,” Topher said. Roa just whistled.

“*That’s all?*” Abel shouted. “I just ate more dragon pepper ice cream than anyone in the history of ever and all you can say is ‘wow’?!”

“I mean, people eat that much all the time,” Roa told him. “Otherwise they wouldn’t sell it. They don’t stay in business just because of kids daring each other to do dumb things.”

“Dumb things!” Abel threw his hands in the air, looked around for support or a high five or, like, a medal. Surely he deserved one. But all eyes had drifted back to the gate. The race was about to start.



“Sit down and look up, honey,” his mother said.

The horn blared, and the fiery gate burst open to unleash the racing dragons. The whole crowd roared as one, but at that moment, Abel’s stomach made a sound that no human stomach was supposed to make.

The shadows of sixteen dragons passed over him, but he couldn’t stay to watch.

“I think I need to go to the bathroom,” he announced. “Right. Now.”

He ran straight for the restrooms under the bleachers as the dragons flew their first lap of the arena sky. The crowd hooted and cheered. He didn’t even look back.

When he got to the restrooms, he’d expected a long line and was relieved to find no one else there. Everyone was watching the start of the race; he had the place to himself. It was a nice surprise.

What was not a nice surprise was what he saw on the way out of the bathroom after he was done. His older sister, Lina, ran past, sprinting up the stairs toward the bleachers.

He frowned.

Lina wasn’t supposed to be at the raceway.

Lina was supposed to be in hiding.

Lina was a fugitive from the law.

If the Dragon’s Eye secret police caught her, she’d go to Windlee Prison for the rest of her life. And if one of her enemies in the kins caught her, she’d *wish* she’d gone to Windlee Prison for the rest of her life.

Abel ran after her, because whenever Lina made a surprise appearance, disaster followed.

This time would be no exception.