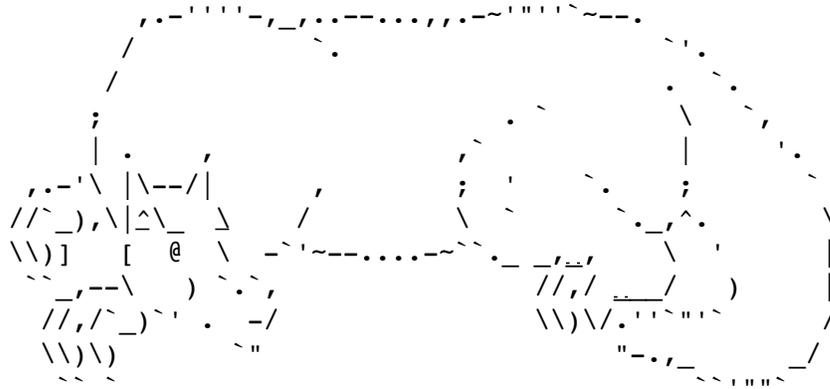


## Dragononic Ink



I cannot see it, but the flying machine is easy to find--nearby, noisy, and nasty-smelling. Another machine that looks like a two-legged is near the river and it has two pistols. As I approach, the not-a-two-legged makes noises almost like speech. It follows me with its eyes and gestures and points at the river, but it does not smell alive. I mostly ignore it and search for Mona, since her scent is here.

The flying machine is never quiet, and parts of it always move, constantly attracting my attention. I want to look inside the machine as I search for Mona, and I smell two-legged males inside.

"Permission to approach," I say from the proper ten paces away.

Parts of the flying machine look like parts of very big pistols, but not as big as the ship's cannon. I take a step sideways, and the big pistols move as well.

"Honorable sirs," I say.

The machine tries to speak and I can understand one word in ten. When it is quiet, I say "Honorable sirs, I do not understand."

Now the machine cannot speak any words properly. I listen patiently.

Then I smell a wet dragon... Mona's been hiding in the river!

"Honorable sirs," I say, "as soon as the little dragon sees your pistols, she will stand in front of them."

The flying machine rumbles at me, and almost says 'dragon.'

"Dragon," I say, after a polite pause. The flying machine is much bigger than the wet little dragon standing in front of it.

Nothing happens for half-breaths at a time.

"Told you so," I say.

I'm not liking this at all and Mona must be cold. "You two-leggeds--be Dragon. Do you have a broom?"

The not-a-two-legged is quiet, and the flying machine does nothing.

"You don't know the danger," I say. "If she thinks you aren't friendly, she could cry at you. No two-legged can stand it."

I order Mona to let me hold her. As she complies, the not-a-two-legged makes noises again. Every time it says something understandable, Mona repeats it. After Mona repeats five words, it does much better and I can understand most of what it says, even though its speech sounds strange.

"She could cry at you," says the not-a-two-legged, not quite properly but as clearly as any two-legged. It has good ears, can imitate voices, and isn't secretive about it.

I curl up around Mona. "Both machines have guns pointed at me and I don't like it."

"This dragon will..."

"... will stay where she is."

The flying machine makes a lot of noise and wind going up, then coming down much farther away. Then the not-a-two-legged says "Apology. Apology."

The little dragon crawls out from underneath me--I let her go even though she is still wet. "Friend?" she asks.

"Apology. Friend?" it asks.

"Friend," says Mona.

"Dragon Logic?" it says.

"Dragon Logic!" says Mona.

"To the core!" they say together. Mona laughs delightedly.

"FREEZE," says the not-a-two-legged.

Mona and I pretend. We've been practicing--and ignoring the not-a-two-legged is easy. I almost wink at Mona, and she almost winks back.

The metal two-legged makes one of its guns noisily spit twice on Mona's neck. It moves faster than any creature when it is forced to dodge Mona's claws and jaws and outrun a paw-ful of thrown stones.

Mona pulls a metal claw out of her neck. "Do you see the first one? It bounced," she says.

"Get on my back," I order, watching the not-a-two-legged run too fast to chase.

The flying machine lets the not-a-two-legged go inside it. When it noisily rises into the air, I instantly regret ordering Mona onto my back instead of underneath me, but as the machine flies towards the ocean I make myself relax.

"Look for the other one, Anar, but don't touch it."

"Are you still healthy?" I ask.

"This dragon is healthy. Honorable Anar, don't touch that."

(grumble) "I suppose *you* want to pick it up."

The little dragon finds two more metal pieces before we leave. She seems healthy...

"We'll talk to Hizoner," I say.

—

"These helped the gun shoot this," says Hizoner, "and this is like a syringe. Whatever was inside it is now inside Mona."

I don't like that--but Mona still smells healthy.

"There is one good thing... this other dart has something in it--probably the same stuff."

"How is that good?" I ask.

"Because... someday, I'd like to give it back--preferably the way they gave it to Mona."

—

The flying machine does not return. Mona remains healthy.

Chi squeezes herself out of Gran's shelter with a little difficulty. Lizabeth follows her.

"Anar..." Chi says, very quietly.

"I hear."

"Mona smells like egg."

(grumble) "Not possible," I say. "It is much too soon."

"It's faint," says Chi, "but the scent is there."

Lizabeth makes a happy noise. "She's going to be a mommy again!"

"My nose says so, but this should not be," says Chi.

"Chi," I say, and point my nose at the little dragon. She's fallen asleep.

"She should sleep," says Chi. "Perhaps she is unhealthy in a way that I cannot scent."

"She's been sleeping more than usual," says Lizabeth.

"Honorable Lizabeth," says Chi.

The strange two-leggeds must want Mona's egg. "Mona is going to stay in the sleeping cave with me."

"Anar," says Gran, "if they've got the old tech, I'm not sure that dragons would win a fight."

"I hear... but we may not fight."

"A boy-dragon could cry at them," says Lizabeth, who winks at me.

---

"Message for Anar!" says Micky.

Sixth picks up Micky and puts him on Fourth's back, and Micky crawls and slides down Fourth's tail until he's on the cave floor.

"Hizoner's plan to put two-leggeds as watch-and-scent at the entrance of the sleeping cave is working," says Micky. "A truck and two big machines will not enter because we are blocking the entrance."

"Why don't the metal two-leggeds force their way past?" I ask.

"Because... I don't know. Hizoner sent Stretch and Junior to gather more villagers."

I'd like to go see for myself, but many dragons would have to move out of my way. I send Micky back over the Wall of Dragons without any messages, and it takes him a long time to cross over. Perhaps he likes it up there.

Time passes. I meditate.

The most natural thing in the world... dragons, eggs, and the darkest part of a sleeping cave... *changed* by mysterious strangers that treat us like dumb food-beasts. (grumble)

The little dragon tells me she has a plan. Mona takes a small bag out of a neck-pack she calls a purse. "This is small pieces of aluminum metal," says the little dragon, opening the bag. "Mona will put it in her excrement. The strange two-leggeds may think that Mona has been eating aluminum and cannot lay a living egg."

"What if the strange two-leggeds don't want to look at Mona's excrement?"

"Then this dragon will eat the aluminum. Dragonic Logic."

(grumble) "Mona... these strange two-leggeds may not be Dragon, but you are. Do not eat the aluminum."

"I follow in your footsteps," says the little dragon.

We wait.

Mona looks upwind, into the darkness. "This dragon can smell Stretch but cannot smell fire."

I can also smell Stretch. She must be walking--or, more likely, running--in the dark.

From the other direction, I hear an angry insect noise. "A cape for Mona!" orders Second, and the Wall of Dragons becomes a crowd around Mona and I. "A small flying machine is coming," says Second.

It moves fast. It flies overhead for ten breaths, and hisses angrily when Second helps Seventh get high enough to threaten it.

Seventh lies down and falls asleep.

"Dragon wall!" says Second, but the Wall of Dragons re-forms without him--he's asleep. The machine hisses angrily at Mona when she tries to bite it and flies away.

"Dust!" says Mona, and she runs under my right front, further into the sleeping cave. The machine comes back and hisses in my face. I try to bite it, but fail, trying to remember not to breathe the dust.

"Upwind," I say. I walk backwards three steps, watching the machine move too fast to attack--and then dragons fall asleep, one by one. I turn and trot into the darkness after Mona. When I

must breathe again, I am the only dragon moving, and I am very tired.

I will not stand over sleeping Mona because I might fall--so I lie down near her and pretend to sleep. I'm not sure if my pretending is completely successful... but I hear Stretch panting before she says "What... happened?"

"Bad dust," I whisper. "Carry Mona upwind."

"I have... been training... for this... my whole life."

I cannot stand up, much less help Stretch, but she manages to wear Mona like a cape. I whisper "Plata-Power!" just before Stretch says it. I close my eyes and listen to her footsteps fade...

Ten breaths... plus twenty... and I hear the flying machine returning. I pretend to sleep because I've got nothing to throw--honorably Stretch even took Mona's purse. I cannot pretend when the noisy machine flies low and slow over me because its breath feels much like a large dragon with his head too close to my neck. I snap at it instinctively--and when I catch it, I'm surprised. Then I mouth-toss the machine as far from me as I can--which isn't very far--and I lie down again as if nothing had happened. There's not much else I can do.

The machine is quiet. Some of it still glows and sheds a pretty green light. Mona will like that.

I try to stand, but quickly give up--I'd probably fall. With clumsy paws, I gather dust together in the dim. I hope this isn't the last thing I ever do.

I shed a few tears into the dust, and lick up the mess I made. I rest with mud in my mouth, feeling weak and stupid. When I hear another, brightly glowing flying machine, the stupid feeling fades.

This one flies low and slow over the bitten machine, then moves as if it would pursue Stretch and Mona. I lift my head enough to spit at it.

The machine wobbles, then hovers. I lie down again.

The machine is very stupid and flies close to me. When I feel it blowing cold air over my head and neck, I find the strength to bite it. It stops glowing and is quiet. I weakly throw it on the floor in front of me, and it bounces.

"Dragon Logic?" says the first machine.

Time passes slowly. I don't feel any stronger, but I try to stand. I think I could do it if I had to. As I lie down again, the machine speaks.

"Dragon Logic?" says the machine.

"Dragon Logic!" I say--as if it mattered to me.

"To the core!" we say together.

The machine shoots me three times in the neck, and something bounces off my scales. My jaws close on empty air.

I'm feeling stupid again.

"Anar! You're awake!" says Micky, climbing over Fourth.

"I hear."

"Which dragons fell asleep first?" asks Hizoner, carrying a candle.

"Seventh... then Second."

"All will be well," says Hizoner, as he slides down Fourth's tail. "Sleep."

Not a chance.

"Don't go near that!" Hizoner says to Micky, who is attracted by the glowing machine. By candlelight, Hizoner measures and sprinkles powder into Seventh's nose when he inhales. Then he does the same for Second.

"Dragons present!" says Second, as he opens his eyes.

"Relax," says Hizoner.

"Here," Sixth and I say together. Second struggles...

"Wait!" says Hizoner. "Don't try to stand up--wait for the effects to pass. Micky, give Seventh another dose of this."

"Where's..." asks Second, nostrils twitching.

"We will speak of... the little one later," I tell him. "many, many footsteps... away from metal ears." I turn my ears towards Hizoner, and Second takes the hint.

"The flying machines sprayed a gas called Quell that makes dragons sleep. Jade was not affected, but he pretended to sleep like the others. When he got bored, he pretended to have a seizure, even foaming at the mouth--he had me worried when he began twitching slower and slower. One of the strangers came, and we let it past us even though he had a pistol. When the stranger tried to put that powder in Jade's nose, Jade caught him and held him like an egg before he said the 'F' word.

"Wall," says Fourth, who tries to get his feet under him.

"Be still," says Second. "It will pass."

Hizoner continues. "The villagers are staying between the metal two-leggeds and the sleeping cave, but the metal two-leggeds and the truck aren't leaving."

"Dragon Logic?" says a flying machine.

"Ignore that. Tell me of their eyes," I say.

"Anar... better than ours. Their ears are better, and they have guns much better than the ship's cannons. The big metal two-leggeds are a type of war machine. But, like all two-leggeds, they probably ignore scents."

I won't try to stand up in the mess I made, and I feel a little stronger when I scoot backwards. Second gets his paws underneath him, stands for two breaths, then lies down next to Seventh.

"The powder is gone," says Micky.

"His breathing is too slow," says Second.

Hizoner takes the empty container from Micky. "Fourth, please pardon my trespass upon your person," he says, climbing up Fourth's tail.

Fourth manages to laugh a breath away.

Fifth grumbles. "Wall?"

"Be still," I say. "The poison will weaken."

"Honorable Anar," says Micky, "What happened to Mona?"

"Remember how Jade used to earn dragon-hours when he was a Bitten Dragon?"

"Yes," says Micky.

"Stretch behaved like Jade and evaded the dust," I tell him.

Micky is quiet for a moment, then says "The machine has... like scentless smoke that cannot be seen. It's called Quell."

"Honorable."

Fourth slides backwards, away from other dragons, and attempts to stand.

"Patience, Fourth," says Second.

"Dragon Logic?" says the flying machine.

"Plata Power!" I say, but the machine ignores me.

Micky uses the gap in the Dragon Wall to find out what's happening, and he nearly runs into Jade. There is a strange two-legged on Jade's back.

"I don't know his name yet," says Jade, "but he is Dragon."

Jade's friend slides off of Jade's back and walks to the broken flying machines.

"Dragon Logic?"

"Can sell," says Jade's friend.

I watch him closely. He has no fear of the bitten flying machines, and stands in the glow with a box. He takes a syringe from the box, but it looks different than the ones Mona has. After Jade's friend fills the syringe from a small bottle, he approaches Seventh and puts the syringe in his mouth. He struggles to open Seventh's mouth a little more, then takes the syringe and puts it inside Seventh's mouth. I remind myself that Jade said this two-legged is Dragon.

The two-legged takes his hands and syringe out of Seventh's mouth. Half a breath later,

Seventh opens his eyes. He is furious, and challenge-roars at Jade's friend--but sleeps again before the roar is properly finished.

Many dragon eyes watch. Jade's friend tries to open Seventh's mouth again.

"He's breathing better and faster," Second says.

Several dragons are challenge-roaring--Cee's roar predominating. I find myself on my feet. Both flying machines makes bug-noises and glow. I decide to step on the noisier one just as the not-a-two-legged decides to shows us how fast it can run--and it is very fast. It avoids every dragon, ignores two 'Can sells', grabs both of the flying machines, and tries to leave--but I've got a paw on the larger flying machine. I'm wondering if and where I should bite the not-a-two-legged when a nearly invisible something hits my paw very hard. As I involuntarily withdraw my paw, I reflexively sink my teeth into the broken flying machine as if it was responsible. The not-a-two-legged runs away when other dragons approach, taking the machine that glows green.

"Dragon wall," says Second. Fourth moves back into position.

I drop the machine and look at my paw--undamaged. The pain quickly subsides. I lie down and Jade's friend is listening to Seventh's neck and fingering his scales. Without the glowing machine, any two-legged would be nearly blind this far inside the cave.

Twenty breaths later he tries to poke Seventh, but the syringe breaks. The two-legged changes the front part and tries again, seeking that one place...

"Lower," I say.

"Lower means this way," says Jade, helping his two-legged.

The two legged says something. He pokes Seventh for a short time with the syringe, then babbles again.

I know what to do. "You've been poisoned. You've been poisoned. You've been..."

Seventh grumbles, sneezes himself awake, says 'Where's that two-legged,' then falls asleep.

The two-legged puts his paw on the spot between two of Seventh's scales, then listens to the dragon's neck as he rumbles and grumbles in his sleep.

"What are you going to name him?" I ask Jade.

"I want to see more of his personality before... but I like what I've seen today," says Jade.

Seventh begins rumbling with his eyes closed.

Jade's two-legged crawls away from Seventh.

"They can't see in the dim, Jade."

"Is that so? How strange."

"You and yours are Dragon," I say to Jade's friend. I gently draw the two-legged away from Seventh since that's the way he wants to go. He smells like... "You should not lick them," I say, "especially when they can't see it coming."

"He likes it!"

Seventh twitches and grumbles.

"You've been poisoned. You've been..."

"Message received," says Seventh. "Poisoned. Where's that two-legged?"

"Here," I say. I put him on Jade's back.

"Apologies, two-legged," says Seventh, "for my inexcusable behavior earlier. A healthy dragon does not do such things."

"He doesn't understand," says Jade, "but he's as smart as any two-legged. I taught him a trick already--he knows to climb up when I put my paw behind and back."

"Jade," I say, "take your two-legged to the villagers. Perhaps they can understand him."

"And where he can see." says Jade.

"Excellent... your two-legged has a good master."

—

Second is walking better than I am, so he's the big dragon. I'm staring into the darkness of the

cave, listening and scenting...

I'm not sure I can hear anything, but I'm sure I can smell both Mona and Stretch... and something else.

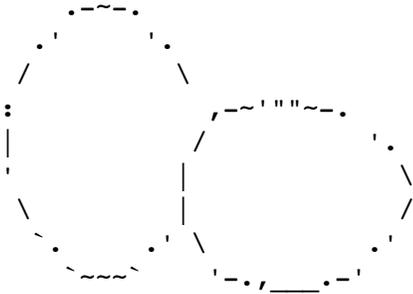
"Anar!" says Second.

"I hear," I say, and rise to my feet.

"Follow me if you can," says Second. He has Jade's two-legged on his back, and the two-legged is holding a stick that makes light.

Second is not traveling fast, so I can keep up. As time passes, Second and I run faster. I can smell Stretch... and Mona... and wet eggs--but the eggs smell wrong. I make an inside-cave victory-roar and think of pieces of aluminum. Stretch roars back.

The little dragon is lying down, but smells healthy, as does Stretch. The tiny eggs smell as if Mona had laid them days ago.



"She won't let me break them," say Mona.

"Do not break them. Your eggs are a big dragon problem," I tell her. "Rest."

"Who's the two-legged?" asks Stretch.

"I don't know his name, but Jade said he is Dragon," Second says.

"I don't want him near these eggs," says Stretch.

"Let him look," says Second. "He knows flesh-minding."

"He is Dragon," I say.

Stretch grumbles but relents. The two-legged puts light on the eggs.

Mona looks miserable. "Mona... if your big dragon decides to break eggs, then eggs will be broken. But until then, be Dragon and take care of your eggs." Stretch gives her one small egg. Mona seems happier. Stretch watches... then gives Mona another egg, just as small.

"Six eggs," says Stretch, giving Mona a third undersized egg. "She'll need my help."

"Honorable," I say to her as I lie down next to Mona.

The two-legged is poking at a box. The box says "Please close your eyes." Four pairs of dragon-eyes narrow to suspicious slits. There is a flash of lightning with no thunder. For an instant, I could see a long way down the tunnel.

Again, the box speaks and the lightning flashes.

That one was brighter--too bright.

The two-legged pokes the box, and shows it to me. It bears a tiny picture of a dragon that looks like Mona. Then the two-legged shows the little dragon, and half her face is visible in a blue glow. She is surprised after the two-legged touches the box. The two-legged shows Stretch--and when he touches the box, Stretch is surprised. Then he steps backwards, (flash), and shows Stretch the box.

(flash) This two-legged does strange things when it is bored. (flash) I try to be glad that, to a flesh-minder, the eggs (flash) and Mona are boring.

The two-legged has a small metal square that unfolds and unfolds, but it is not large enough to cover all of Mona when the two-legged puts it on her back. He has another... Stretch allows the

two-legged to put this one on her, but when the two-legged lets go of the shiny metal, Stretch puts it on Mona and resumes holding three eggs.

"This dragon is warmer," says Mona. (flash)

The eggs (flash) have females, and the females are holding the eggs in the proper way. (flash)  
Now...

"I should take the two-legged back to Jade," says Second, "because I think he needs to go out." (flash) He winks at me.

"Mona and her eggs will fit on Hizoner's wagon," I say as I put the two-legged on Second's back. "Will you tell Chi?" I ask. (flash)

"I will," says Second. I put Jade's two-legged on Second's back, and Second walks to the light. The two-legged holds his stick that makes light in front of Second.

---

"When Stretch tells you, tie the bitebar to his tail," Mona says to Micky.

"When he walks, it won't hold," says Micky. Mona winks at him.

"More tail, noble wagon-dragger," says Stretch, who is standing next to Hizoner's wagon.

I step backwards a quarter pace and put my tail on the wagon again.

"Good Anar," says Stretch. "Now, Micky."

Micky ties the bitebar to my tail. Then Stretch gets on the wagon and holds my tail as well.  
"Ready!"

I walk forward a half-step. The wagon creaks in my footsteps.

"Plata-Power!" says Stretch.

The two-legged's box makes many light-flashes again.

Chi helps Mona and Stretch put the eggs in Hizoner's wagon, enduring many flashes. Chi is warm from mouth-pulling the wagon and Mona stands close to her until Chi orders Mona to get on the wagon. Then Chi puts both metal blankets over Mona and her eggs. Whenever the box flashes, I see Mona covered in light.

Stretch holds my tail, Mona holds her eggs, and the two-legged makes light-flashes. I start walking slowly, and since no dragon complains I walk faster. The two-legged stays behind, making more light-flashes. When we are far downwind, the truck makes noises and lights come from behind us. I pretend not to notice the noise, stink, and light that the truck makes, and no other dragon speaks of it.

I walk to one side, so the truck can pass us. Chi is crouching on the back of the truck next to three newly-emptied water barrels, trying to be ready for anything.

The dim returns, except for the shrinking red glowing parts of the truck ahead.

"Mona, are you healthy?"

"This dragon thinks so."

"Stretch... any problems?"

"I could do this and sleep," she says.

"Mona?"

"The egg-holder reports no problems."

All dragons are quiet for two breaths, during which I think perhaps there are problems not reported. "Mona, what would you like?" I ask.

"This dragon wants to see more dragons and dragonets and friendly two-leggeds."

"Soon," I say. "What else would you like?"

"This dragon likes to sleep by the warm stove in Gran's shelter."

"More."

"This dragon wants to show Lizabeth her eggs."

"Soon. We will find her."

"Anar," says Stretch, "Lizabeth is likely at Gran's shelter, which is not as good as the sleeping cave."

"True... but this may make sense to a two-legged. The villagers could keep the big metal two-leggeds out of the cave by standing in the entrance. Any dragon could push aside the villagers, but the big metal machines could not. The not-a-two-legged somehow got through without hurting the villagers, but it hurt my paw. The flying machines flew where they wanted and sprayed Quell on every dragon--giving Seventh too much--but did nothing to the two-leggeds. Perhaps Mona will be safe at Gran's. I will stay there too."

"Many dragons will follow you and stay at Gran's," says Stretch.

"You will hear Gran say 'Laura Mercy,' " says Mona. "but this dragon knows Gran likes arranging dragons and bonfires."

"Tell me more of what Mona likes," I say.

"Mona likes hearing Anar speak."

"Honorable, Mona. More," I say.

"Mona likes holding eggs and dragonets and Lizabeth."

"More," I say.

"Mona likes soup and pancakes. Mona does not like aluminum pieces in her purse."

"I thought it was a good plan," I say, "but I did not like your other plan."

"This dragon has more plans--she could eat gold pieces."

"Why?" asks Stretch.

"This dragon does not know. It is not a good plan. Mona is too tired to think."

In the silence that follows, I discover that I can walk in the center of the cave if I listen to the echoes of my footsteps.

—

I ask Graith to follow us to Gran's shelter. After Mona and the eggs are inside, I ask her to tell us how Jade tamed the two-legged. The story comes out quickly... perhaps she's told this one a few times already.

"After Jade egged the two-legged, the villagers made happy noises. Jade lets his two-legged go, then licks him... and the two-legged likes it! Then Jade nosed his two-legged to the villagers, who pawed him in a friendly way despite the drool. They give him the pistol, and Gran gives him a piece of a gold coin.

The big metal two-legged shouts strange words, and Jade's friend starts to leave... he gives the container of medicines to Hizoner. I look at Jade, and...

"JADE! NO!" I roared, thinking of clumsy dragons slipping. Jade turns his head to look at me, winks with the eye the two-legged can't see, and limps after him as if his paw was newly wounded. Jade makes a distress cry and manages not to shed a tear until he leaves the cave. Honorable Jade!

The two-legged slips and falls and becomes wet, so Jade picks him up and egg-holds his two-legged for one breath--then grumbles loudly and lets him go.

When Jade puts a paw behind and back, the two-legged climbs up on Jade's back.

Then the big machines leave, but the truck stays.

Soon, Jade's two-legged wants to go into the truck, and Jade reluctantly lets him.

The two-legged pokes at a glowing box, and it makes sounds like an insect talking nonsense. Jade seems to understand it and says "He's too little to eat and he tried to save my life."

Again the bug noises.

Jade says "He's my friend and he can stay here as long as he likes. Can you make this thing glow again?"

More bug-noises.

Jade asks "Portable torch-light?"

More bug-talk, then Jade's two-legged gets out of the truck and briefly points a black thing at the sleeping cave. There is light where there wasn't any for a tenth of a breath.

"Again?" says Jade.

The light remains longer this time, but is soon gone.

"Show that to Hizoner," says Jade. "Whatever he trades you for it, I get ten percent. Agree?" And Jade winks at him.

Jade's two-legged didn't understand winks, but he knows which villager is Hizoner. He joins the crowd of villagers listening to Hizoner tell what is written on containers. Besides Quell, he had Quash, a paralytic gas, and a dragon that breathes that will not be able to move but still be awake. Makes you wonder why they thought they needed that! He also had two that a dragon had to eat. One was called Quiet, which makes a dragon sleepy. and one was called Quintessence, which makes a dragon feel good. Then Jade's two-legged shows Hizoner the torch-light. "Where's the fire?" he asks. I don't think Jade's friend knows!

---

I decide to lie down where I can see Mona through the doorway. I cannot see Gran and Hizoner or Jade's friend, but I can hear them as they examine the contents of a box.

"I don't see much help in it," says Gran. "This kit is full of dragon-poison and has little medicine."

"Not even a little," says Hizoner. "The 'medicine' is supposed to counter the effects of the poisons, and there's not much. Micky and I used up the Anti-Quell trying to revive Seventh."

"They brought just enough anti-Quell for a little dragon," says Gran.

"I don't think they like dragons very much," says Lizabeth. She is cleaning Mona again, but this time she is only using vegetation. Mona seems to like it... perhaps she will sleep.

The two-legged sits on the floor with the box he carries, and he pokes it sometimes. He seems content.

Dee calls me, squeezing between Graith and Cee. "Two flying machines found us." (grumble)

"They flew over every dragon, and we threw sticks at them but missed." Dee sticks her head into Gran's shelter. "Chi said to tell you to sleep if you weren't," she says to Mona.

"Mona hears. Mona will sleep."

"How can she sleep?" asks Lizabeth. "Those horrible men want to steal her eggs."

I know what to do. "Mona, the strange two-leggeds are a big-dragon problem. Eggs are your problem, and that's all I want you to do."

"I follow in your footsteps."

"Good," says Dee.

"Mona," I ask, "Can you sleep now?"

"Yes."

"I order you to do so."

"I will watch-and-scent," says Dee. "You should sleep too."

---

I wake when I hear Jade's roar in the distance. Some dragons have covered me with a branch-blanket. Dee is watching and walking--I can hear her footsteps. I can see the glow the truck makes. Then the glow stops and the truck is silent.

Ten breaths... twenty.

"Permission to approach," whispers Micky.

"Granted," I whisper back.

"The stranger has left us," whispers Micky. "He gave me the truck."

"I hear," I whisper.

"Jade's friend--his name is Satyadah--became very interested in the little black box he carries, and then he wanted to use the truck. I got on the back of the truck with Jade, but Satyadah asked me to ride inside. He wanted to teach me how to use the truck--it's easy! We go to the beach, and we can see a Great Ship. Satyadah stops the truck and he seemed to want Jade and I to hide in the hills near the beach, so we do. Jade and I watch from far away. We see truck drive near the water and make the lights flash. The Great Ship flashes it's lights, and Satyadah leaves the truck and walks to the water while talking to a box, and a little ship comes. Satyadah gets on it and the little ship leaves. Jade and I watch a little longer, but nothing happens even when Jade roars at the ship, so we came here."

"Interesting, honorable Micky. When the Great Fireball rises, search the truck and give every paper and box in the truck to Hizoner and Gran."

"I don't have to wait," says Micky. "When the truck door opens, it glows inside!" He runs.

I'm waiting in the darkness, counting my breaths. The Great Fireball is about to rise over the horizon.

Lizabeth sleeps while Micky covers Gran's table with papers. The little dragon and Chi read them. Gran is cooking pancakes. I can smell Hizoner but I cannot see him.

"Grar!" says Chi. "Anar, listen to this... you are to obtain, undamaged, all the eggs from the Dragonic Logic female, or failing that, you are to subdue, bind, and transport the female to the *Hubris* without damaging her. Other dragons are not to be harmed unless they interfere with the execution of this order."

"What does your paper say?" Gran asks Mona.

"My country ... is rail eye, sweet lies of ... tranny, ugly as sin. Land where my freedoms died, land of corpse pills and spies, for every mind half-blind, ugly dumb things."

"This is strange," says Chi, who reads "This order is to be destroyed once read and understood. Failure to do so will result in disciplinary action."

"Owe tee vee spew, more specious lies, your awful ways restrain, your pervert mental tragedies, all from ... fas-kissed brains," says Mona. "Perhaps a different paper..."

That paper has drawing on it with the words. "I would like to see that one," I say.

The paper is difficult to hold... the drawings are mostly of female two-leggeds and airplanes surrounded by many words, but most of the words are obscured with extra markings. I read what Mona has not. 'Aware of ya, I'm scared of ya; mob led, disgraced, nasty. You drown thy good with whore falsehoods, from creepy I N Cs.' I cannot understand this either, unless it is a song. The villagers will sing what they would never say. Except for Satyadah and Vlad, those two-leggeds don't seem as smart as the villagers. Perhaps these songs are their songs.

The day becomes warmer, and the smaller dragons shake free of their branch-blankets. Lizabeth makes pancakes that smell good, and Gran and Hizoner join Chi and Mona reading papers. Junior and Eighth put the full cauldron on a fire and break dried branches. Micky and the truck return, and Micky offers the smaller dragons rides but no dragon wishes to stay close to the noise and bad smells. Third investigates the truck when it is quiet and less odiferous... and soon he's pushing it around with one paw. The truck travels in circles--and soon Third is pushing Dee around on the truck, around and around. She victory-roars, and Third rumble-laugh.

A flying machine visits for a short while. Many dragons challenge-roar at it. After it leaves, I make a pile of throwing sticks before I try to read papers again. Micky uses the truck to haul wood to other villagers--because dragons are good at knocking trees down, but not so good at hauling trees around. Lizabeth whispers a wish in my ear, and I order the little dragon to sleep again.

Then the females come to visit about a thousand breaths before the Great Fireball dims and I wake up Mona. Lizabeth keeps the eggs warm while Mona walks nowhere and talks with her

friends. The Commanding Dragon has come for a visit, and he wants to hear about spitting mud onto flying machines, so I tell the tale. Then First goes to ask Hizoner and Gran about flying machines, and soon they are speaking of nets and sprays. The Command Dragon orders two of his followers to listen as well. Lizabeth says I look tired and orders me to go to sleep, and the little dragon winks at me.

"Mona, who is the best boy-dragon?" asks Lizabeth.

"Anar."

"Why do you like him?"

"He's big, strong, nice, and can hear every word this dragon says."

"But he's so much bigger than you."

"Yes."

"Do you... Have you ever met another Dragonic Logic?"

"Perhaps, when I lived under Big Dragon, there were others like me. This dragon ran away when she was very young and very ignorant."

"Do you think, if you met a Dragonic Logic male, you'd like him more than Anar?"

"For eggs--no. This dragon likes Anar."

"Do all female dragons think that way?"

"Yes."

"Do you think that's why there's so few dragons like you?"

"Yes."

"But... somehow, your parents were both Logics."

"Yes. This dragon's mother hid her egg where only the smallest dragons could go."

"You owe your existence to Big Dragon and his rules?"

"Perhaps yes."

I wake up when I smell Jade's two-legged. Jade's friend is sitting on a metal thing with two wheels, moving faster than a two-legged can walk--and he's leading two other two-leggeds on similar machines. When he sees Jade, he gets off the metal thing to greet--and he does seem to like it when Jade licks him. The other two-leggeds hold boxes that glow a little, and they point them at Jade and Satyadah. When Seven's dragonet investigates them, the strangers retreat.

Jade holds his paw behind and back, and his friend climbs up.

"Say cheese," says a stranger.

—

I tell the strangers that Satyadah is allowed to take boxes into Gran's shelter, but they are not. Rick puts four of the unfolding metal squares in my paw.

"Can you put one of these blankets on Mona?" asks Rick. "Then Satyadah could take a picture?"

I look at Mona. "Mona likes blankets. Honorable!" says the little dragon.

I claw-flick one to Mona. She licks one corner, mouth-holds the part that sticks to her tongue, and shakes the blanket back and forth until it unfolds. She can think again! I feel like victory-roaring, but happy-rumble instead.

"Marvelous!" says Vlad.

"Did he get that on video?" asks Rick.

"His camera's on and pointed that way," says Vlad. I give Mona the folded blankets and wink at her.

Jade's friend leaves Gran's shelter, and he and Rick talk quickly in a way that I cannot understand. Then Satyadah goes back inside the shelter and empties his pockets for Lizabeth and Mona.

"He says the video camera doesn't like the blankets," says Rick. "Also, her scales are too shiny and the glinting is distracting. How can you ask a dragon to wear makeup?"

"We can go elsewhere," says Vlad. "The little one there is good, even when she sleeps."

"He is a male dragonet," I tell him.

"Is that so?" says no-nose Vlad. "Thank you. He is beautiful." Vlad has blank papers and a writing-stick... and knows how to use them! but I notice Rick is smirking at Vlad so much that a dragon can tell. Rick is poking a box with his thumb. "This is a male dragonet," he says to the box.

Rick's ways are strange.

"What is her... his name?" asks Vlad. I can see the dragonet in his drawing already.

"He doesn't have a name yet," I say. "Mona thinks his name will come to him."

"Mona is wise!" whispers Vlad. "If only my mother had said the same thing!"

Vlad is distracted when Stretch yawns.

"He is magnificent!" says Vlad. "I must take his picture." For a few breaths, Vlad is another two-legged poking a box.

"That's Stretch... and she's a she," I tell him.

"Is that so? Even better!" says Vlad, putting the box in a pocket. Vlad then uses his writing stick and tries to draw Stretch. His hand moves fast... interesting!

"This is Stretch, a female dragon," says Rick, talking to the box he's poking with his thumb. Perhaps the box is using Rick for a guide.

Vlad tears off the paper, discards it, and tries again to draw Stretch.

I pick up the discarded paper. I think it's a nice drawing.

Vlad is so embarrassed a dragon can tell. "Honorable, Vlad," I say.

"We must go," says Rick.

"Stretch?" says Mona. "Honorable Stretch?"

"Here are ears!" says Stretch.

"This dragon cannot carry her dragonet and that two-legged to the beach."

"Which one should I carry?"

"Honorable Stretch, both, with the dragonet in front of that two-legged."

"Me?" asks Vlad.

"Yes," says Mona. "This dragon thinks it very important. Please video for Satyadah."

Stretch wakes up Mona's dragonet (who repeatedly shouts 'Honorable!' when offered a ride) and trots off carrying both Vlad and the dragonet (Good Stretch! Action run!). Vlad is just another two-legged holding a box--perhaps using a writing stick while riding a dragon is too difficult.

After they leave, I notice Mona has something tied around her neck. Lizabeth is wearing something similar.

"This is a pet-cam," she says. "Satyadah asked me to wear it."

"What does it do?" I ask.

"This takes pictures and video for Satyadah," she says.

"If it will help, I will wear one," I say.

Three pet-cams remain, and I choose a silver one. Lizabeth puts it on my ear.

---

I give Vlad's drawing to Mona--she likes it. Lizabeth gives me a paper.

"That is from the great ship," says Mona. "Perhaps you will find it amusing."

The paper has many pictures of young two-leggeds and one picture of a ship surrounded by fire and strangely shaped letters colored orange and red. 'Sail the Burning Seas! Float through the fire and find your heart's desire!'

I look at Mona, who winks at me. "The little words are important," she says. "The big words mean nothing to this dragon. The little words tell that the ship will travel to a place where the

water bubbles. The two-leggeds will use little flying machines to bring fire to the bubbling places because what comes from the bubbles will burn. The two-leggeds want to watch the burning. Sometimes there are many bubbles, enough to sink a small ship, so only the largest ships can go."

"It's quite a sight, day or nite," I read.

"Sometimes there is enough fire to form a... pyro-cumulus cloud," says the little dragon.

"Doesn't all that fire hurt the two-leggeds?"

"I follow in your footsteps--but perhaps they watch from inside the ship."

"How do the two-leggeds benefit?"

"This dragon does not know.

Perhaps the strange two-leggeds have many great ships, but it seems unwise to send one to a dangerous place so two-leggeds can watch burning bubbles.

The big words also promise 'wild ice,' which sounds worse than ice. Why would the strange two-leggeds travel to see what every dragon wants to stay away from?

Mona has a small paper with a very shiny stripe on one side. I recognize the number 10, but none of the other letters make sense. The other side has another, less shiny stripe but I cannot make sense of the letters or pictures. It is small, but there are many blank places on this paper--perhaps Vlad can use it.

I am distracted by a far-away flying machine. I am reminded of the carrion birds that like to fly over the heads of dragons, but this one flies in very large circles. I try to read another paper while Mona talks with Gran and Lizabeth. This one has cartoons of wounded two-leggeds, and a sentence or two about the pictured wounds. Turning the pages is challenging, but I manage.

"Anar," says Stretch. "The ship... still there... they want... bikes."

"I'll do it," says Cee. He attempts to mouth-carry a bike, but Gran asks Cee to mouth-carry a branch, and she hangs a bike on each side. Soon Cee is traveling to the beach with a bike on the right and left of his head. I hope he doesn't scare the two-leggeds from the great ship--he's a lot bigger than Stretch or Jade.

"Two males on the ship," says Stretch. "Nice clothes. They had a little ship... stinky and noisy."

"Did they have pistols?"

"No. Not even a sword."

(rumble) "Good."

"Part of their little ship goes onto the beach with no help from two-leggeds or dragons, and the two-leggeds can get on and off without getting wet."

"Mona wants to see!"

"I want to see--but not now." I point my nose and ears at the flying machine--and soon other dragons see it as well.

"Perhaps the flying machine seeks you, Mona. You should stay inside, for honor to Gran."

"I follow in your footsteps."

"Is it white? asks Stretch. "Perhaps it belongs to the Great Ship."

"Is the Great Ship white?" asks Mona.

"Yes," says Stretch. "I will tell you everything." She puts her head and one paw inside Gran's cabin and tells Mona about her morning... the white clothes and hats the strange two-leggeds were wearing impressed her as much as the big white ship. Mona asks about the little ship, and Stretch tells her that it's bigger than the one the villagers have and it moves without paddles. "If I see it again, she says, "I will ask to ride it."

I haven't scented Jade or his two-legged since... "Mona, where is Jade's friend?"

"Do you want me to find him?" asks Stretch, a little too quickly.

"Not yet," I say. I point my ears at Mona.

"Jade said the little ship could carry Satyadah but not carry him, so the little dragon suggested that the villager's ship could take Jade to the great ship. This dragon is sure Jade will ask the

Captain, so she suggested Seven and her dragonet should go as well."

"Why?"

"The papers say perhaps three thousand two-leggeds are on the great ship."

"Not all two-leggeds like dragons," I say.

"I follow, but Gran and Lizabeth are certain that any two-legged who insulted a dragonet would be thrown off the great ship. They also say the strange two-leggeds will not try to steal Seven's dragonet."

(grumble)

"Lizabeth and Gran say it will work. If Seven and Jade are not given permission to approach, they can stay in the hold on the villager's ship. But the dragonet must be able to be seen from the great ship."

"(grumble) I think it is a stupid idea because I cannot understand it. Why does looking at a dragonet make any two-legged friendly?"

"This dragon does not understand either, but every villager wants to pet Mona's dragonet."

"Friends are better than enemies... even if I do not understand how it is done."

"First will not like this," concedes Mona.

"I don't like it either."

"I follow in your footsteps, Anar," says Stretch. "Why don't you forbid it?"

"I don't know any better," I answer. "Do you?"

"There is Mona, and there are her eggs," says Stretch. "Successful so far--avoid risk! Follow those footsteps!"

"Those footsteps are good," I say. "Good enough for any dragon... but I cannot oppose something I know so little about. I must follow others."

Stretch gives up on me, so she talks to the little dragon. "Honorable Mona... you are going to fall asleep when your dragonets need to listen."

"I follow... Stretch, will you help this dragon speak to eggs?"

"Honorable Mona! Yes!"

"How can I help?" I ask.

"Can you talk like a dragonet?" asks Mona, who winks at me.

"I'll try," I say, as softly and squeakily as I can.

Mona is obviously trying not to laugh, and Stretch is holding suspiciously still.

"Did that hurt?" asks Mona.

My rumble-laugh is interrupted by many strange scents... Cee's scent, mixed with strangers.

"Honorable Gran," says Mona, "I think we have strange two-legged visitors. Honorable Anar, the strange two-leggeds may damage the garden until they know Gran's Rules."

I know what to do about the garden. I claw up the path that surrounds it because two-leggeds don't like walking in loose dirt... except for Lizabeth. Then I sit near the shelter door.

"That big male with dirty paws... he's our big dragon," says Cee. He winks at me.

Vlad's scent is there, but I can't see him in the herd of two-leggeds Cee is carrying. I'm careful not to block the door of the shelter--Mona is very curious, and this herd of two-leggeds on Cee's back doesn't look threatening even if they are larger than the villagers.

"Go on," says Cee to the strange two-leggeds. "He won't hurt you as long as you're nice, but stay away from that little dragon in the shelter. She's got eggs, and she's quite dangerous...."

Gran comes out of the shelter and says "Welcome, honored guests!"

Vlad approaches riding a bicycle as Gran speaks. He approaches me without asking... I ignore his lack of manners, even though it is a bad beginning. "I must talk to you privately--it is very urgent!"

"I will listen--but I want to stay here."

"Very well... I could whisper in your ear."

"Permission to approach--granted." Vlad bows, then approaches. Perhaps that's a gesture of

submission and Vlad will learn how to be a proper little dragon.

"Satyadah is telling all the world about dragons. He is sharing your picture using... a box like this one."

"Satyadah is Dragon," I say.

"As you say... but all the world is learning about dragons! His website is... Here, let me show you." Soon he shows me a picture of Mona wearing two metal blankets. He touches the box, and the picture changes instantly to one of Stretch--I nearly jump to my feet. Vlad nearly drops his box.

The two-leggeds nearby smell as if I scared them... "Apologies!" I say, and lie down and hold still. I tell Vlad "I thought only reflections in the water can change so fast."

"That's nothing!" says a large two-legged, who is waving a box much bigger than Vlad's. He taps it over and over, and the pictures change--too fast for this dragon.

"Honorable and thank you," I tell him. "That is a treasure beyond my comprehension." The two-legged seems to get bigger.

Vlad starts whispering in my ear again. "Many two-leggeds will come--perhaps bad ones."

I rumble-laugh for half-a-breath--and I think I scared the other two-leggeds again.

"Apologies..." Laughing dragons don't scare the villagers. These two-leggeds have no experience with dragons.

I look over two-legged heads... I see Mona speaking to attentive two-leggeds who are listening to her speak about the darts. "That is the one that bounced off this dragon's neck." I see Lizabeth's hand holding a dart as high as she can.

The two-leggeds make a variety of noises, none of which are words.

"My name's [redacted]," says the male with a big box.

"Honorable," I say to him. "I must apologize again--Vlad is trying to tell me something important that I do not understand yet."

"I'll help you," says [redacted].

"It would help me if you would help Vlad. Tell him what to do, Vlad."

"Sir, if you could link your tablet to Satyadah's website to show this excellent dragon..."

"Of course," he says, but after waiting seven breaths, Vlad has do it.

The box has a picture of a tiny dragon's eye surrounded by stacked logs. When I realize the dragon is not-so-tiny-me, and the stacked logs are the inside of Gran's shelter that I cannot see because I can't fit inside--I laugh for one and a half, which scares [redacted]. He nearly drops his box, which changes to a tiny image of Mona on Hizoner's wagon holding three eggs.

"If you will permit me..." says Vlad, and he touches his box twice. "This is Stretch's back, and Seven's dragonet sitting here, and the camera is here, behind--now, the pictures will move."

The tiny dragonet looks behind it, at me, then switching from his right eye to his left eye, curiously looking at me as if... I was a strange two-legged with a box sitting behind it. I rumble-laugh softly... I don't think I scared any two-leggeds this time.

"The world knows of dragons now," says Vlad.

"What should a dragon do?" I ask Vlad.

"You should incorporate," says [redacted]. "Incorporating is like assuming a name so you can do business with the whole world. I'll explain how you will benefit. Here's my card."

"Vlad, would you hold that for me?"

"My pleasure."

"What do you think, Vlad?" I ask.

"I cannot advise you... I am sorry."

"Satyadah is Dragon," I say, "and he will do as he thinks best."

"All of those pictures are now in the public domain!" says [redacted]. "The market will be saturated before you can move."

"Thank you, but I don't want to move."

"The ship, still there, they want, bikes," says Vlad. "Do you understand now?"

"No."

"Sometimes there is enough fire to form a pyro-cumulus cloud," says Vlad.

"Perhaps," I say. Is he is trying to tell me of a hidden not-a-two-legged nearby, and to keep this knowledge secret? If so... I want to search for it, but I'd rather stay close to Mona.

"Vlad is trying to tell you that there is a recording device nearby," says [redacted]. "You should probably find and destroy it."

"Yes," says Vlad, "but what could a dragon know of recording devices?"

"I know of them. I could search for it," says [redacted] to me. "It's probably inside the cabin. If I could take a look..."

Only a very ignorant not-a-dragon would want to be near an unknown female dragon holding her eggs.

"Forbidden," I say--perhaps too loudly.

[redacted] nearly drops his box again, and the picture on the front changes. I can read one word in the picture. "Update," I say.

[redacted] looks at the box and says "Warning! I don't use SqueezePay, and anyone claiming to be me is a fraud. I will never sell dragon-scales there, or anything else. Also, please, no more requests for dragon-teeth, with apologies to those with scientific interests. Any comment containing the word teeth or tooth will self-flag."

I watch Vlad... this 'warning' does not seem important to him.

"Perhaps," Vlad says to [redacted], "you could show this excellent dragon the latest video? This one--if you will allow... there."

The box shows a tiny image like the sleeping cave. There is vegetation dangling in the entrance. A tiny dragon-shape--it looks like Chi! She's got a tiny brown something in one paw.

"Prepared?" says the box.

"Yes!"

The tiny dragon throws... many other tiny black and brown things come from other places I can't see.

"I want to try!" says the box.

"Why not. Prepared?"

"Yes!"

This time, the tiny brown thing that the tiny dragon throws disappears in a cloud of dust, and I can hear a dragon laughing. Only one dragon laughs like that, but Third never sounds like a bug. Then the box becomes silent and still.

"It's over," says [redacted].

Vlad very patiently explains about pictures and videos and websites. This web page has ten videos, and Satyadah has more on other pages on his website. [Redacted] wants to show me some of them, but I'd rather listen to Vlad try to explain what's wrong with Satyadah's website. [Redacted] won't be quiet, so I rumble at him until he leaves. All his information is useless, perhaps maliciously so.

Once again, Vlad is trying to explain why dragons may have problems because of Satyadah. "Some people that might come here now that they know of dragons already kill animals for fun!"

"Vlad... any two-legged that hunted for no reason would be insane or too stupid to use a pistol."

"I do not understand hunters, but pistols are easy to use, there are many two-leggeds, and some are poisoned in various ways."

Dragons have that problem, too...

"Puhmiffin to appoah!" says Junior. He's got a two-legged in his mouth.

"Granted!" I say. Junior puts the two-legged down, then approaches. "I found him wandering near the river, so I grabbed him and brought him here."

I look at the two-legged. He's sitting now, a male covered in black clothes.

"My ears are yours to speak into," I say to the two-legged.

"I'm sorry... I meant no harm..." The two-legged looks uninjured.

"Maybe I squeezed him too hard," says Junior. "He had a sword... should I go get it?"

"Not yet," I say to Junior. "What is your intent?" I ask the two-legged.

The two-legged holds a small bottle. 'Platinum chloride,' I read.

"Factory sealed!" say the two-legged. "It's a present for all dragons."

"Honorable!" I say. "Why did you bring a sword?"

"In case of trouble," says the strange two-legged.

"Do no harm and you will not need a sword," I say, and lick him a couple times. "Now you will smell properly for a few thousand breaths... other dragons won't think you're a total stranger. You may go where you wish."

"I'll take you back to your boat," says Junior, "and you can put the sword in it." He puts a forepaw behind and back, and after a bit of encouragement, the two-legged is riding dragon-back.

"I think we were talking about poisoned humans?" I say.

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"On Satyadah's website, he tells of the Sequential potato... another genetic construct our ancestors left us. He says your potato needs guidance as it grows, otherwise the wind will blow it into tangles that won't produce."

"Yes," I say. "Gran calls them 'running potatoes.'"

"When you harvest, you don't dig the entire plant?"

"Of course not. Gran taught us... 'bury the newest and dig up the oldest.'"

"[ [click here](#) ]! says Vlad. "Satan hates that potato!"

"What is Satan?"

"Another inheritance from the ancients," says Vlad. "Satan is a story of a being who was supposed to be the root of all evil. Since there is so much stupid and wrong being done as we try to live our way, we must be doing Satan's will; therefore we must be Satan's slaves working in Satan's systems. For example, most two-leggeds don't grow food anymore... they depend upon a few people and many machines do it. The machines are made to do the work cheaply and quickly, which guarantees the work is not done well. Sometimes the soil washes away or blows with the wind, so it becomes harder to grow food. Because so many people are dependent upon the system, an unsuccessful attempt to change things might result in disaster. So, each year, our... managers, Satan's puppets in my opinion, they say do it like last year, but more--and the machine-builders try to make the machines cheaper and faster. Our managers say there are no alternatives, but your potato proves them wrong. A home-gardener can easily give the potato plants the attention they need to produce properly, and harvested potatoes means buying less food from Satan's stores. Our managers doesn't like people doing anything for themselves... it makes them hard to predict."

If this is true, the two-leggeds Vlad speak of are insane. "Why do any two-leggeds follow in a manager's footsteps?"

"We don't know any better--because the system has made us ignorant. I had no idea a potato like yours exists."

"Potato-scent is not strong, but a dragon does not have to get his nose dusty. You cannot scent them?"

"Not well... but I am learning the look. According to this, one of Satan's slaves stole this potato

to grow at home. The slave was able to provide the help the plant needed, and soon had many potatoes to share and this potato began to grow in other gardens.

But the managers worried. If many people started growing potatoes instead of flowers, they might buy less food. If the local potato harvest was good, the local stores would have unsold food... the managers see it as more trouble for an old system that already wasn't working too well. This corp-demon complains to that one, and soon, growing potatoes is a crime. Satan has machines that seek and destroy what Satan's satellites see and say are enemy, and their programmed 'search for and destroy when found' list grows by one. Satan doesn't like the machines--they're expensive in many ways. Instead, Satan actively discourages his slaves from trying new things. If nobody thought to grow potatoes, there would be no reason to have a law against them. An obedient population wouldn't need the unmarked machines, so obedience means the machines can rust in peace... that's Satan's uniform utopia, where everyone is safe and sound until buried underground.

"That seems like a lot of work for so little result."

"It is... but it's not Satan's closest friends who are doing the work... and the system self-perpetuates."

"And a smart dragon will decide to walk away rather than work for Big Dragon. Such a system should destroy itself."

"Not so... after the smart dragon left, all the others--what happens to them?"

"I don't know. Most of them are probably still working for Big Dragon."

"That's the point--the dragons are still there. I have seen videos--recent ones."

Vlad is quiet, and the box he shows me is quiet, but the pictures it shows can challenge-roar at a dragon through the eyes. Not Big Dragon... he looks small and harmless in a video--but I can assume much about the other dragons despite the tiny images. I've smelled dragons that color before... dusty ones. Since these dragons don't wear dust, the scale-darkening color must come from inside, so these must be pictures of sick dragons. "Perhaps the poisonous dust in Big Dragon's sleeping cave also makes a dragon stupid," I say.

"What dust?"

"The little dragon once lived in Big Dragon's caves, and was sickened after inhaling rock dust from his sleeping cave. Perhaps this dust can also make a dragon sick if it is eaten, or if a dragon drinks water with dust."

"These videos were uploaded to Satyadah's website by 'no user name specified.' They probably were from an excellent flying machine, even if it was used badly."

"Vlad, what was the purpose of the flying machine?"

"Originally? Nobody knows, it's military. Probably, a group of young adults found that there is nothing fun to do off-duty but they still have access to flying machines. They probably thought bouncing a robot war-machine off of Big Dragon's head would be funny--and it was--so they shared the video."

"They don't have any better videos to share?"

Vlad seems surprised at this question. "The video was seen by millions of two-leggeds, despite repression."

"The video is fun, but not as useful as Seven reciting the teaching poem about fire or Hizoner quoting Epictetus. Is this valued by millions of two-leggeds?"

"Yes, but not so much... most two-leggeds will watch it once or twice, perhaps recommend it to a few friends, then watch something else--probably with dragonets."

I try to think like a little dragon... "Vlad, are two-leggeds trained to seek entertainment?"

"Yes."

"Are millions of two-leggeds trained that way?"

"Yes, including myself. I try to resist."

"Two-leggeds cannot resist this entertainment?"

"Most two-leggeds see no need to resist this entertainment."

Vlad goes to stay with Hizoner and see horses for the first time in his life. Mona says the eggs will hatch soon because of the warm stove and begins teaching Lizabeth how to talk to eggs. Lizabeth sits sideways against the wall where I can't see her, and I wonder why until I see the cameras on Gran's table. The cameras must see Mona, Lizabeth, and the eggs.

Graith, followed by Jade and Fays, comes to tell me what happened when they tried Mona's plan.

"Chi tells me about the little dragon's Idea of Jade, Seven and Seven's dragonet going in the villager's ship to visit the great ship and make friends of the strangers, and she wants me to go with them.

She probably wanted me to go because I'm the worst stick-thrower... but I'll go. "Sounds exciting," I say. "What should I bring?"

"Paws and jaws," says Chi. "I'll find the Captain."

"I'll seek with you," I say to Chi. I don't like the smell of the truck at all, even if its lights are pretty. I'd rather run.

Seven's dragonet wants to stay with Dee and the other females--he doesn't like the truck either. I hold my forepaw behind and back like Jade does for his two-legged and wink at him. "Action run," I say, and we're on our way.

The two-leggeds had been told about the Idea, but hadn't planned on taking three dragons. Jade volunteered to stay and the two-leggeds stopped complaining. I learned that Dragons must follow the Captain's footsteps on board the ship, and rule number one was that Seven's dragonet must wear vegetation on his neck when he's above-deck. Seven asks for and gets a different vegetation called rope and makes a sort of suit for her dragonet that has a long tail. "Action pull," she says.

The little guy liked everything about the ship once he got out of the wind.

The ride in the ship was long enough for Jade to teach Seven's dragonet to run almost sideways on the walls. I don't know why Jade did that--he had to serve as a wall for the dragonet to run upon--but it did pass the time. The two-leggeds had to tell us when we approach the great ship because Seven and I are so distracted by a dragonet running around and around tilted nearly sideways.

Permission to approach the Great Ship: denied. Seven goes 'on-deck,' as the two-leggeds say, but the little guy keeps running in circles with Jade and won't follow. Jade and I try to tire the dragonet so he'll sleep, hoping a sleeping dragonet will be good enough for Mona's Idea. But soon, her dragonet has got the rope wrapped around my neck, then he's discovered how to lift his paws off the deck for half-breaths at a time by running and jumping when he's at the end of the rope. Jade distracts him from this by crying a little so he and the 'et can slide around. Then Jade gets distracted by what Seven is saying, which I missed. Jade says 'Action Egg!, and when the 'et is tucked away, Jade sheds a few more tears so they slide again. This time Jade hides his head under his neck-pack and says something. The dragonet becomes still. Jade listens to Seven until the Captain forbids the sliding, and Jade apologizes and offers the Captain ten percent as a penalty--and since the Captain refused it I never found out what Jade meant. But the 'et is still with his eyes closed... not asleep yet, but he's pretending, and lets Jade put neck-vegetation on him. As Seven is answering yet another of the two-leggeds amazingly ignorant questions, Jade passes the 'et up the hatch.

"Tell them you want ten percent!" Jade whispers to Seven, then winks. Her dragonet leaps to his feet and says 'Soooo-prize!' so then Seven says 'Surr-rr-ised!' Her dragonet victory-roads and runs down the hatch again, only briefly delayed by a dragon-to dragon transfer of his vegetation tail. I feel better when he's near, even though it doesn't help with Mona's plan. It's

cold up there... and he looks silly wearing the neck-vegetation that the Captain requires.

The great ship has sent a little ship, and Jade wants to talk to the strange two-leggeds. Seven comes down where it's warm, Jade goes topside to talk, and without him around, the dragonet becomes sleepy.

The visiting two-leggeds have brought a beautiful cape for the dragonet so he won't be cold when he comes on-deck, just like Mona said they would. The little guy love love loves his new cape--and he's asleep in half-a-breath. Since he's surrounded by the remains of his old cape that Seven had made for him to shred, we let some two-leggeds take pictures before Seven and I clean up. The two-leggeds have come to the Dragons, just like Mona said. The deck is still slippery, and Seven and I help two-leggeds as they 'take pictures,' whatever that is. One old male was very rude... he kept talking about a figurine of Seven with claws blunted in service, wearing a harness or pulling a wagon... it would sell itself, he kept saying. When Jade comes down with more two-leggeds, he's so happy that I ask him what kind of deal he made, but he won't tell me except it involves capes for every dragon and he gets ten percent in human-hours. I don't know why he thinks it so funny..."

"Jade, why do you do that?" Graith asks.

"Because it was my crazy life once," says Jade. "It looks insane to me now, and I like mocking it."

"Aren't you worried about wearing out your joke?"

"No... I predict that soon you'll meet more Bitten Dragons, and you'll remember all my little annoying jokes because the dragon in front will think those jokes are proper dragon-speech--just not all at once. Seven taught me about lie-sense, and my jokes teach a little how Bitten Dragons talk and think."

"Aqua and Nada don't talk like you do, and they're Bitten Dragons," objects Graith.

"Most Bitten Dragons aren't like them... Aqua is Unbitten, and beach-dragons like Nada and Nadir had nothing."

I fall asleep, and I know I'm dreaming. I can hear Mona's egg-speech, but she's not in my dream.

I'm standing in the sleeping cave entrance. The smell of smoke bothers me. I cannot see or scent any other dragons. I pace in and out of the sleeping cave. The smoke smell grows stronger, mixed with the faint scents of dragons. I victory-roar. Inside the sleeping cave is the safe place if the forest burns.

The dragons do not answer, but their scents grow stronger. With a speed only possible in dreams, the strange dragons emerge from misty smoke.

"Permission to approach, granted!" I say, over and over.

I count dragons as they run into the cave and notice that each dragon has a scar on a forepaw--Bitten Dragons.

Twenty three males, six females, and ... the scent of strange two-leggeds nearly distracts me from my counting.

Twenty six males, seven females... I can see fire in the distance, despite the smoke.

Thirty one males, eight females... I victory-roar again.

Six Bitten females come, running in formation, each one carrying two-leggeds. As they approach the sleeping cave, I see that the two-leggeds have unbitten paws. Perhaps they do not belong to the Bitten Dragons.

"Can these two-leggeds approach?" asks the lead female.

"Permission granted!" I say.

Neither dragon or two-leggeds smell of smoke but the two-leggeds look sick. Perhaps these two-leggeds aren't as strong as the villagers.

My dream ends when I notice every two-legged has bite-marks on the neck.

The distinctive sound of what the villagers call a 'helicopter' wakes me and every other nearby dragon. My ears say it is flying low over the river, but I cannot see it. Many dragons go investigate, notably Chi and her group of stick-throwers. I listen to Stretch's egg-speech for a few hundred breaths before the stick-throwers return with a female dragon named

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— — — TIFF

Chi has decided that Stiff is Dragon, so I exchange the 'you and yours' with her. There was something about this dragon... every scale was perfect and clean. Too clean. "You do not work outside?" asks Mona. "Never," says Stiff. "Perhaps our sleeping caves..." "This dragon will not complain," says Stiff. "Would you like to remove wax from your scales?" asks Mona. "The scent is bad, but the wax is useful," says Stiff. "What can a big dragon do for you?" I ask. "This dragon's previous owner was fond of puns, and this dragon's name ...bothers." "What name would you like?" I ask. "This dragon does not know." "Dragon Logic," I say. Both dragons are quiet. "I think you are much like Mona." "Perhaps yes," says Mona. "Because you and yours are Dragon," I say, "I'll make sure all other dragons can tell." The wax tastes terrible. Stiff (gestures of apology). To the core... Lizabeth and Gran approach, each carrying two buckets of water. Stiff (gestures of submission), then Dragons greet Dragons. "She could be Mona's big sister!" says Lizabeth. "Lizabeth, our new dragon needs a name," I say. "Chrysanthemum! She'll bloom here." "Honorable," says Chrysanthemum, who sheds two tears on the grass, then a (gesture of submission), followed by a (gesture of apology). "What's wrong?" asks Lizabeth. "This dragons uncontrolled emotions caused the tears to become hopelessly contaminated." (gesture of apology) "I know what's good for tears... hugs!" says Lizabeth, who demonstrates. "Honorable Lizabeth!" says Chrys. "Contaminated?" asks Mona. "Apologies! This dragon has never involuntarily shed tears before." "Perhaps, when you tell your stories to the other dragons tonight, you will explain tears," says Mona. "Perhaps you will not like hearing of people who like to drink dragon's tears," says Chrysanthemum. "That's true," says Lizabeth, "but I've got to know everything there is to know about dragons..."

GRAN! ... Can I go to dragon-storytime tonight?"

"Ask Anar, not me," says Gran. "Tell me next time when we got company?"

"Yes," says Lizabeth, trying to imitate a gesture of apology.

"So pretty!" says Chrys. "What work do you ask Mona to do?"

"We're best friends!" says Lizabeth. "I'm not supposed to be bossy."

"It's my turn to apologize," I say, "but I want to work in the potato field before the Great Fireball is below the horizon.

"Potato field?" asks Chrys.

"This dragon promised Mona that she would not dig for potatoes," says Chrys.

"Mona says it is dishonorable to make a new dragon work," says Lizabeth. "Potato-gathering is work."

"This dragon has never seen a potato plant."

"Then you don't know the rules... don't step on the plants and don't step where the potatoes lift up the soil."

After I dig them up, Lizabeth puts the potatoes near the empty rows that were left for wagon wheels. Chrysanthemum follows behind her, and soon, Lizabeth and Chrysanthemum have made many potato-piles evenly spaced. Because the digging and burying is the slowest part, Lizabeth and Chrys have time to talk.

"How will we get the potatoes to the sleeping cave?" asks Chrys.

"When they're done moving Mona and her eggs into the sleeping cave, we can use Hizoner's wagon."

"A wagon?"

"Yes... four big round wheels, and a flat, box as big as... you and Mona could lie down on it at the same time."

"How big are the wheels?"

"Big. About... as big around as that bush."

"Turning radius?"

"I don't know."

"It is possible that the piles of potatoes are too close together. Once this dragon had a job where she had to think like that."

"Wagon driving?"

"My job was to solve problems. If my master wanted a thousand potatoes delivered to ten different people on ten different days, this dragon rented the trucks and scheduled the deliveries."

"A sort of manager?"

"No. This dragon never decided what was work."

"Was your work harder than gathering potatoes?"

"Not hard work, but memory work and tear-shedding."

"Did working make you cry?"

"That was part of this dragon's job. My master could sell dragon tears faster than this dragon could shed them."

"Who would buy them?"

"People."

"Why?"

"This dragon does not know."

"Once, a dragon cried on me, and... I don't think I drank any, but I might have. I didn't like it."

"Perhaps the dragon who cried on you was not Dragonic Logic?"

"No, it was Third. He's a Big Boss D."

"All dragons shed tears containing topical anesthetics and surfactants, but Dragonic Logic tears also contain a mix of psychoactive chemicals."

"Is that good?"

"This dragon's owner thought so. Are Mona's tears not worth drinking?"

"None of us here drink dragon tears," says Lizabeth. "Not on purpose."

(gesture of apology)

"A dragon who potato-gathers as well as you do is always excused," says Lizabeth.

I take a break from digging up and burying at the end of the row. "Chrys, your owner collected your tears and sold them?"

"Yes. He called them 'Stiff drinks' and would laugh every time he said it."

"Why would ...people drink them?" I ask.

"This dragon does not know."

"Horrible," says Lizabeth.

"What is horrible?" asks Chrysanthemum

"To force a dragon to shed tears," says Lizabeth.

"This dragon was not forced--she received five percent of profits."

"That dragon shed all the tears," I say.

"One hundred percent," says Lizabeth.

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Dee and Seven are egg-speaking in the darkest part of the sleeping cave, and most dragons find egg-speech boring but too important to interrupt. I've got Lizabeth on my back as we watch and talk to all the dragons going in and out of the sleeping cave. When the Great Fireball is very low in the sky, we enter the cave as well. Not ten breaths after I take my usual place, Chrysanthemum tells me she's ready to answer my questions. All the other dragons are quiet.

"You and yours are Dragon," I say. She repeats my words as is proper.

"Our way of life... it must be very strange to you. You are ordered to tell a dragon of situations that cause you discomfort."

"Honorable!" (gesture of submission)

"Now... Mona should ask you questions."

"This dragon likes your claws," says Mona.

"Appreciated! This is lacquer... a kind of paint."

"I like your color," says Chi.

"This dragon's color is the result of orders from her previous owner."

"It is a healthy color... how many breaths has it been since you've shed tears?" asks Chi.

"Breaths? Perhaps... ten thousand."

"You have been required to shed as many tears as possible for many days," says Chi.

"Perhaps it will take time to learn to stop."

"My tears are valuable and should be saved."

"Perhaps you are right," says Chi. "What can we do?"

"There is no proper equipment, so the tears should be consumed immediately."

Lizabeth makes a small hissing noise while all dragons are still and quiet.

Chi taught me what to do.

"Chrys, do as you wish," I tell her. Dragonic Logic.

"Honorable!" she says, and she runs out of the cave. I follow--with Lizabeth still on my back.

Chrysanthemum runs to Gran's with me trotting three paces behind her. She tells Gran that I told her to do as she wished, so she's asking for containers.

"Chi thinks that Chrys has been asked to cry so much for so long, she can't stop right away," I tell Gran.

"What can I do?" asks Gran.

Chrys knows, and soon there are pots and pans and funnels and jugs and a crying dragon sitting in Mona's place by Gran's stove.

"These tears are a gift, freely given," says Chrysanthemum, with a (gesture of submission) to Gran. Gran puts bits of wood in the stove, Micky has gone to borrow more containers, and Lizabeth is crying a little as well.

"This dragon likes to give presents," Chrys says to Lizabeth. "This dragon does not like to cause distress."

"I'm sorry," says Lizabeth.

"This dragon is causing a disturbance." (gesture of apology)

Micky returns with two pots, and Gran sends him to fetch water. "I've never canned tears before."

"We shall rely upon Tyndallization. We can put the tears in jugs and boil them for one hour today and again tomorrow. We may fail, as the cotton plugs are hydrophilic and are prone to contamination themselves."

"Boiling I can do," says Gran, "but I don't know about the Tin-somethings."

"To retard spoilage... perhaps this dragon is not an effective team leader."

"Why should we save the tears?" I ask.

"People will pay large sums of money for them."

"Why do the people buy your tears?"

"This dragon does not know."

"Why do you not know?" I ask.

"People who drink the tears do not know, but they buy them. How can this dragon know?"

"They make my hands go numb," says Gran.

"Mine too," says Lizabeth, who's wiping up spilled tears.

"This dragon would like to give advice to the big dragon," I say to Chrysanthemum. (gesture of submission)

"The tears are now a two-legged problem." I wink at Gran so Chrys can see.

"Gran and Lizabeth do not know the value of dragon tears," says Chrysanthemum, as we walk back to the cave.

"Chrys," I say, "I don't think foreign two-leggeds value things as they ought to."

"This dragon would give you the money."

"And I would tell you to do what you wished. I know little of tears and money. I will listen."

"Some people will voluntarily pay for dragon tears."

"Yes. But neither you or I know what is in them."

"Honorable! This dragon understands now, but she knows nothing specific to this dragon because that was a trade secret. Generally, dragon tears are considered a psychedelic, but every Dragonic Logic produces a unique mix of tryptamine-based alkaloids. This dragon's tears have been tested upon volunteer humans and all side-effects were acceptable."

"Honorable. What is psychedelic?"

"In this case, it describes dissociative mental effects with visual disturbances."

There must be a better way to ask her... "What do the two-leggeds do after they drink tears?"

"This dragon does not know, but there is one famous painter who says the tears inspire him."

"Lizabeth painted a picture once... Mona likes it. But foreign two-leggeds do crazy things. Many of them want to ride a cruise ship and watch the flying machines burn the gas that bubbles out of the cold water in hopes of producing a pyro... pyro-cumulus cloud."

"I follow in your footsteps!"

"This is Lizabeth's painting," I say.

"A sunset... but what is this in the middle?"

"That's Third's ear."

Chrysanthemum looks a little longer at Lizabeth's work. One breath, two breaths...

"This dragon has never cried in front of a camera before," she says.

I'm confused and say so.

"There are three cameras connected to a battery on Gran's table."

"You'll have to ask Gran about that," I say. "Two-legged ways are often... unexplainable."

I walk further into the cave, where the potatoes are, and scent for rotten ones as I walk. Chrys investigates the same places I do, so I tell her I'm scenting rotten potatoes.

"This dragon will help but has never smelled rotten potatoes."

I can't find one for her to smell--some other dragons must have removed them already. While I'm searching, she says "If there is a problem with the lighting, this dragon may be able to fix it."

"We have a torch-light," I say.

"But there are many dragons," says Chrys. "Shouldn't every dragon have light?"

"Dragons can see well enough to manage."

"This dragon can put many lights in this tunnel, for dragons and two-leggeds."

"That would disturb the dragonets."

Chrys seems shocked. "You raise your dragonets in the dark?" then (gesture of submission)

"Of course not," I say. "But dragonets hatch in the dim."

"Why?" asks Chrys.

"I don't know," I say, and walk a little slower when I see the glint of dragon eyes ahead. "It just seems proper. Do you know better?"

"Mental development in dragonets is accelerated by the proper stimuli--that is why females talk to eggs, and every dragon talks with a dragonet."

"Yes."

"For the same reason, visual stimulation should begin as soon as possible."

"Dragonets can see in the dim," I say.

"Yes, but not colors. Perhaps the potential abilities of dragonets to discriminate colors is diminished."

"Perhaps the problem is small since we have not noticed that. The time between hatching and walking to the light is not long... about a thousand of my breaths."

"Walking to the light?" (gesture of submission)

I stop walking while she gestures, and say "It's beautiful... I saw it once... the first time a dragonet gets all four legs underneath its body and wobbily wanders where it's brightest."

"Dragonets are attracted to the light because they need visual stimulation."

"Other dragons could hear you speak as well."

"Perhaps they will not like the way the dragonets are raised for maximum potential."

"Speak as you wish. You and yours are Dragon."

(gesture of submission)

Chrys tells of eggs fitted with sound machines that spoke properly squeaky egg-speech faster than any female dragon could, and video machines that started teaching the dragonets to read before the egg-moisture dried on their tiny scales. She speaks of dragonets fed small amounts frequently so that they wouldn't fall asleep, and sometimes given drugs to keep them awake.

"What kind of dragons do the dragonets become?" I ask.

"You will meet some soon. The dragons who work in the Engineering Section were raised that way."

"Were you raised that way?" asks Dee.

"No... this dragon's education was ruined. My first owner did not practice Accelerated Learning and my duties were mainly child care. At first, I had only one child to protect, but as time passed, other children came. This dragon's last child care job was to protect fifteen immature two-

leggeds and prevent them from damaging themselves or each other. Then I was ordered to work for a business that my owners also owned, and this dragon was given the job of secretary."

"Did you imprint?" asks Dee.

Chrys seems to shrink a little. "Long ago."

"Apologies!" says Dee.

(gesture of submission)

Time to change the subject. "Tell us what a usual day was like when you were working."

"Tear collection and bio-maintenance in the morning, then work in my cubicle until mid-afternoon, then tear collection and bio-maintenance, then work again, then bio-maintenance, then tear collection, then sleep in my pod."

Every dragon is silent.

"This dragon prefers potato gathering."

Some dragons laugh and some tail-thump and stomp.

(gesture of submission)

"Tell us of the flying machine eyes," I ask her.

"Very good eyes," says Chrysanthemum, "but a dragon can hide... as if it was a dragon in the sky. The machines may not see a stealthy dragon during daylight."

"How well can they hear?"

"The machines hear very well, but they rely upon humans to tell them what to do. Sometimes the humans don't ask the machines proper questions... people never ask the machines if they can smell dragons."

"Honorable," I tell her. I've got more questions, but I hear Hizoner's horse, as he doesn't want to come any closer to the sleeping cave. "Chrysanthemum," I say, "do as you wish."

Chrys points her nose into the dimness and the dragonets, then looks at me. I wink at her. She takes three hesitant steps, sniffs the air, then says "Perhaps you will need this dragon's help."

"Honorable," I say.

I wander a little closer to the entrance--not too close, for the sake of the horse. Chrys follows.

Hizoner's scent... and then Hizoner, who I give permission to approach.

"Vlad will come later... he doesn't know how to ride a horse," says Hizoner. "He was helping me talk to far-away two-leggeds... they are very strange. They want to destroy all our potatoes! They call them 'bumbleweeds' and say the plants destroy forests. I asked for proof, and they show me pictures of half-destroyed trees... and then they showed me a picture of a place I knew. They showed me the tree you pulled the lower limbs off of so that your potatoes might grow better, but they told me the potato vines did that. I don't think we can trust those people."

"Perhaps we are better off without them. I follow in your footsteps in this," I say.

"I'm glad you see it my way," he says. "They want to meet you."

"If you don't like these, we'll find different two-leggeds," I say.

"I'm not sure we have a choice," says Hizoner. "These two-leggeds command the ancient's war machines, and they may come here."

"Perhaps."

Chrys points her eyes, ears, and nose at Hizoner. Very slowly, her left paw approaches Hizoner and takes a shiny metal stick off of his shirt, then Chrys (gestures of submission) before she pulls the metal stick into many pieces. "This tiny round thing is a camera," she says. "This is a battery. There may be other unknown..."

Hizoner takes the little pieces from Chrys and runs out of the sleeping cave.

"Stay back!" he warns Chrys when she attempts to follow him.

"Did this dragon do something wrong?"

I rumble-laugh. "Honorable Chrysanthemum, sharing the truth is never wrong."

I follow Hizoner and Chrys follows me, and we find him smashing the camera with a small rock. I come closer despite his objections. "A little thing like that couldn't hurt me," I tell him.

"This part could be Quell," says Hizoner.

I look at Chrys.

"Perhaps this dragon cannot see the difference between a battery and a gas-pack."

"I don't know the difference," I say.

"Anar," says Hizoner, "what's that thing on your ear?"

"It's a Pet-Cam," I say.

"... a small camera, larger than the one you destroyed," says Chrys.

Hizoner laughs. "Can't win for losing."

Hizoner's horse sounds distressed in the distance.

"Usually he's got the sense to go home," says Hizoner. "Does he sound hurt to you?"

"He sounds scared and... annoyed," I say.

"I think I'd better go see if he got the reins stuck in a bush," says Hizoner.

"This dragon has never seen a horse," says Chrysanthemum.

She and Hizoner travel to his horse while I stay in the sleeping cave entrance... because that's the middle, and every dragon will know where I am. Mona told me that's the proper place for a big dragon during times of stress. Perhaps it's a good thing that watch-and-scent is boring now. I've got papers to read...

### The Dragon Whisperer

The dragon-whisperer doesn't give interviews.

I could, if I kept quiet, listen to a recording. The sound quality was excellent and TransScriptor had no trouble despite a nearby cell-phone call and a creaky door.

"From the first, they should look up to you as a leader, and you should act like a leader. You should always know what to do, but you should always be asking them for information, as if it ear infections mattered... as if runny noses are very important. If you can do that, they'll follow you."

"Sir! Will they tolerate treatment, Sir!"

"Yes, but not from you, Dragon-lover. Once you start doing that, you'll be polishing their scales. They're very clever animals--once you start trying to treat ear infections, they'll all have ear infections. They'll keep you hopping--and if you start saying no, they start grumbling. Not good. Do not fail to establish the proper relationship--you are overworked and underpaid, yet the true leader of all things dragon, and they're your assistants. Then they'll treat you like a boss."

"Sir! Can you transfer authority, Sir!"

"Yes, you can, they don't seem to mind. You can even put one of them in charge... it's easiest that way, actually. They get more work done."

"Sir! What good are they, Sir!"

"Just like you--useless until trained, except bigger and faster. Don't underestimate them... they have some human DNA in 'em somewhere."

"Sir?"

"I heard that language is too tricky a thing to bio-engineer, so... all of the dragon gene-jockeys spliced in human DNA. I don't remember much else... but the teach said genes get along pretty well, even across species, no matter how sloppy the lab techs are. Dragons are genetic freaks, every one... remember that, and draw the line."

"Sir! Do they resent the use of the 'F' word, Sir!"

"Depends. If you use it like an asshole uses buttwipe, they'll eat you. If you contrive some sort of accident where the 'F' word seems to come in handy, they'll polish your boots while you walk. For example--line them up someplace and freeze 'em when a half-dozen trucks drive by at a high speed, the bigger the better--that will give them a scare. Afterwards, you apologize to them,

and start making phone calls and writing memos where they can see. After an appropriate delay, slip them a Quint, then read about all the 'official apologies' you've received. Some people even feed them, but that's too close for my comfort."

"Sir! Failure mode, Sir!"

"What you do when you're done for is your own business, but it's not so bad as that. You have Q-sprays if you can't use the 'F' word, and you should always carry your rifle."

"Sir! Where do you shoot a dragon, Sir!"

"I'm happy to say I've never done it, and if you've paid attention, you won't either. But... if I find out that one of you mudpuppies wastes one of these valuable animals... inexcusable. I will put a comment in your file." (laughter)

The tape was over, and the secretary escorted me out of the Dragon Whisperer's office. I spoke to a young man taking notes who exited a few minutes after I did.

"Press... Got a minute?"

"Sure."

"Are you a student?"

"Yes."

"What do you plan to do with your training?"

"Command dragons, of course... The Hand is hiring trained personnel. It's only a matter of time."

"A matter of time until what?"

"Once they get one female, The Hand will clone up an army... obedient, loyal, willing to work, needing only a warm place to sleep, cheap food, and a manager like me."

"But... Why? What good is a dragon?"

"Do your own homework."

"What can they do? They don't even have opposable thumbs."

"They've only gone for the Logics... they were the best. The others don't matter."

"What can a Logic do?"

"Anything that a dragon-body can do, plus math. They're good at that... better than most people. They also never steal, never take unauthorized breaks, and don't complain."

"Seems cheaper to hire people."

"Cold rubbish. Dragonic Logics are smarter than humans, yet submissive and willing workers."

"Shouldn't they be scientists then?"

"I thought so once--but Dragons who use the internet often half-learn strange things and rebel. In class I heard of a dragon that ran away after she was given a few hours on an unregulated computer."

"What did the computer records show?"

"They weren't released."

"Where did she go?"

"Find her and ask."

"What's her name?"

"Stiff... a valuable animal. The Hand himself will pay you if you tell his staff where she is."

This is a 'Badscents' paid ad Why would a tech company buy ten tons of cornstarch every month? Click here to learn the answer that will surprise you!

<http://freefakewebsites.com/DragonWhisperer>

"Permission to approach!" says Chrysanthemum. She's carrying both Vlad and Hizoner.

"Granted!" I say. "Did you like the horse?"

"This dragon scented a big food-beast, but did not see it."

"He ran away when you got close, and tried to pull me with him," says Vlad as he slides carefully down Chrys' tail.

"He likes you," Hizoner says to Vlad. "You're the only two-legged that Pollux knows who never wants to sit on his back."

"When he started getting in my way and making all that noise, I wasn't so sure," says Vlad.

I learn that Vlad was an apprentice cook on a Great Ship, but was the only two-legged who said he had a Geiger counter when the captain asked for one. As a reward, Vlad asked if he could follow in the captain's footsteps closely. Once on the land, Vlad could not find poisons, but Jade finds Satyadah. After he and Jade greet, the captain lets other two-leggeds off the boat.

Vlad wants to share Satyadah's website, so he is reading while looking at a flat black box.

"Once, in another life, I was a truck-driver for... a big group of soldiers that worked for Lord Rots.

I was ordered go to the dock, and soon I'm on a ship. I can't understand anyone except for the Walker pilots and the bored translator, and they don't have a lot to say to me. I had nothing to do, so I took pix of some papers left on the mess table and sent them to a friend who could read them to me--and soon learned about talking dragons. From the satellite pix of the river-valley and many overhead pics of a little dragon... I could guess the rest. I sent my friend pics of everything I could that looked important--even some papers I found in the trash--and the censors let it all go through. (That's another reason they call us Lord Rot's Privates--you'd think he could afford better.)

My friend translated the labels on the boxes of Dragon-Gank--and I stole one to get the books out. I hid the opened box in a supply truck, and...

"Skip ahead a bit," I say.

"The Walkers aren't able to jump over the villagers, but the Puppet can, and the MC sends it in. It comes back with only one of the UAVs and it didn't see the Logic either. 'Screwed up and locked down!' Every other dragon can be accounted for, but the Mission Objective has vanished despite being sprayed in the face with Quell. Today, no-rank has its privileges--but I try not to smirk."

"I can't understand this either," I say.

"I'll tell it to you," says Vlad.

"Honorable," I say.

"Originally, Satyadah says he was ordered to travel on a ship. On the ship, all the two-leggeds spoke a different language except a translator and two other males who pilot 'Walkers,' which are what they call the big metal two-leggeds. The trip takes enough time for Satyadah to learn a little about dragons. When they arrive, the translator told him and the Walker pilots that all dragons are evil killers except for the little one that the Walker pilots were to 'rescue.' Satyadah was supposed to follow with a truck. When they got to the sleeping cave, the Walker pilots didn't know what to do. The villagers blocked the cave entrance with their bodies, but their orders said nothing about removing human obstacles. They asked for further orders, but of course need a translator... While they are waiting, one of the Walker pilots gets bored and send in a machine that flies, and it finds Mona surrounded by dragons. The pilot orders the machine to spray Quell on all the dragons when one of your dragons almost bites it. You know what happened after that better than I do."

"Are Walker pilots as rare as little dragons?"

Vlad laughs. "No... but I see your confusion. Satyadah and the Walker pilots were chosen for this mission so they wouldn't understand dragon-speech. They might not kidnap a little dragon who wants to be with her own and can say so.

"Why does Lord Rots want Mona?"

"She was... how can I say? Satyadah thinks that Mona might be one of the last Delta 4 P's, and that line of dragons was supposed to be the most intelligent one that ever existed. But that line also imprints, and an imprinted dragon will work very hard if asked... a willing slave. Lord Rots probably imagines owning thousands of dragons, all imprinted with him, all working to make him richer and more powerful."

Anything Lizabeth asks, Mona will do, but Lizabeth is not bossy and their relationship is proper. The next time I see Lizabeth, I will lick her.

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Junior knows where to find me. He tells me about a flying machine that he and the villagers saw flying low and slow over one of our potato fields. He and several villagers chased it to the beach, where it landed. A strange male two-legged from the flying machine told the villagers he was supposed to spray poison onto the potatoes... but he wouldn't, now that he knew they belonged to the villagers and dragons.

"He seemed like a villager with a flying machine--a nice two-legged male. He said he knew Chrys when she was still Stiff, and told me Stiff drinks have been 'synthed.' "

"What's that?"

"I don't know--probably something that no dragon will care about."

"What does this dragon care about?" I ask, eyes and ears pointed at the acorns in Junior's neck-pack.

"These are the kind I like."

"You eat them?"

"Yes," says Junior, " but I can also plant them. If a dragon puts ten of them in tiny holes, like this... five will sprout."

"How long until they become trees?" I ask.

"It depends on what a dragon wants a tree for. These grow slowly, but the wood is good for building and bonfires. Micky plants pines, which have small seeds, but they grow faster. These are big, so..." Junior puts a pawful of acorns in his mouth and spits them everywhere--we both rumble-laugh. When Junior throws dirt upon the acorns, I help too, and soon we've got them all covered.

"Hizoner says that dragon drool won't bother the acorns if they get planted right away," says Junior. "If I plant enough trees, after the two-leggeds take what they need for shelters and after traveling dragons have made branch-blankets, if there are enough trees remaining dragons can have bonfires. I like bonfires."

I continue to watch-and-scent at the sleeping cave entrance, grateful for the news from Junior.

The Great Fireball approaches the horizon and dragons come to the sleeping cave. I tell Mona's dragonet that he could try to sneak past me. It's a fun game... but then Seven's dragonet wants to play as well, and tried to sneak past by holding onto the wrong side of Third's leg, which was even more fun... but Mona's dragonet is too big and his claws are too long and sharp for that game. Lizabeth and Stretch arrive, and soon Lizabeth is teaching Mona's 'et how to use a bow-drill and still-warm Stretch has Seven's 'et on her back.

The best way to avoid disturbing sleeping dragons is to peacefully sleep yourself, so dragons sleeping in a cave all tend to have the same bedtimes. A dragon at the entrance of the sleeping

cave can quietly walk as he pleases without waking the others, and the cool night air doesn't bother a big dragon much... All the dragons are inside except for Chrysanthemum and Lizabeth, who watch-and-scent with me at the entrance.

"Chrysanthemum?" asks Lizabeth.

"My ears are yours to speak into!"

"Sometimes... I like to pet Mona, and I ask her what feels good, and she always says she likes everything the best. So... can I ask you instead?"

"This dragon will help."

"Do you like this?"

"Yes, honorable Elizabeth."

"Do you like this?"

"Yes. This dragon likes your warm hands."

"Which is better?"

"Both are good."

"Just like Mona. Do you like this?"

"Yes. Have you tried petting Anar?"

"Yes... he's honest, and tells me the little dragons like to be petted more than the big ones... except for Third."

"How does Third like to be petted?"

"He likes... I'll show you. Permission to approach?"

"Granted," I say. She climbs up on the back of my paw and reaches for my ear. I tilt my head... and soon she's on top.

"He says he likes this..."

"Nice," I say.

"He also likes it when I curl up on his head, like this, because it makes us smarter, but I'm not sure how he means that."

She's slightly heavier than a hat, but warmer. "Honorable Lizabeth, I don't feel any smarter."

"Third says it's because I'm warm. I could get my blankets..." Lizabeth's voice sounds strange between my ears.

"If you wish," I say, "I'm willing to be smarter."

She slides off, swinging on my ear.

"There is a small danger," says Chrysanthemum.

I point my eyes and ears at her.

"Dragons do think faster with increased intra-cranial temperatures--however, a heated dragon-brain requires more oxygen and glucose than a sleeping dragon's blood can supply."

"I don't understand," I say.

"It's bad for you if she stays on your head when you sleep--especially with blankets."

"He's the big dragon! He doesn't sleep," says Lizabeth.

"Honorable Chrysanthemum, should this experiment proceed?" I ask, lowering an ear to Lizabeth.

"Certainly! It is only a danger for sleeping dragons. Once, two dragons fell asleep at work, and their Hot Heads... their head-heaters did not power down so their co-workers unplugged them. The computer did not count the unplugged sleeping dragons as present, and all the alarms went off."

"Honorable Chrys, what's a head-heater?" I ask. Lizabeth is moving less and she feels warmer.

"A wrap-on helmet that gets warm enough to cause a dragon to think quicker."

"Are you thinking quicker?" asks Lizabeth. Her voice seems to come from inside my head, followed by an echo from the ceiling.

"Not enough to notice," I say.

"I miss Mona," says Lizabeth. "She's got so much to do already... and I can't help with the egg-speaking because only Logics know what to say right before hatching. Then she thinks clumsy newly-hatched dragonets might accidentally hurt me, and I'm not-yet allowed to be a backwards blanket for sleeping dragonets."

"They'll learn quickly," I say. "Soon the disoriented dragons from the Engineering section will arrive--that will distract you. When the dragonets can talk to all the dragons, they'll know how to use their claws so Mona will allow you to pet them. Mona and the females helping her will be tired and want to sleep."

"What will happen after that?" asks Lizabeth.

"I do not know. Since the Walkers and Satyadah came, it's been one unpredictable thing after another... and me reacting to each new problem rather than leading as a proper big dragon should."

"That's not how it looks to me," says Lizabeth. "Mona says you are strong mentally and physically, and smart for a male, and she will follow in your footsteps forever."

"Honorable Lizabeth." I'm not sure what to say... dragons don't talk that way.

"Mona also says that I have to tell you what she thinks because dragons are too busy to talk. She thinks the Commanding Dragon is smart enough to manage the food-beasts on the wrong side of the river, and you did well even if he won't stay."

"I don't like it when other dragons command me... he's the same way," I say. "That's why he wouldn't stay."

"Mona says that's not true. He wouldn't stay because Seven might sing and make him look foolish. She told Seven to tell the Commanding Dragon that raising her dragonet has ruined her voice, but it didn't work... Mona thinks the Commanding Dragon still likes Seven's singing and feels foolish since many other dragons do not. His dragons have started to grumble because the dust in their cave is making their feet darker, and perhaps now the Commanding Dragon will not listen."

"Honorable," I say again.

"Mona also told me to listen carefully if Chrysanthemum tells a story."

"This dragon will tell any story that Mona wants to hear." Chrys winks at Lizabeth.

Lizabeth says "The little dragon respectfully requests a wisdom story told to the young of two-legged owners, and she wishes Anar to hear it, Honorable Chrysanthemum."

"This dragon thinks the wisdom is questionable, but perhaps understands what Mona wants. This story was to be told verbatim to immature two-leggeds, but this dragon will change some words for those familiar to her audience."

In a place in space and time too close to you and here and now, she came to see the Big Boss and his fearful followers. She took a bio-scent-proof Suit named HyperSixXL so she could run faster and jump higher than any dragon. When she found the caves of The Boss, she cockily tried to hide inside--but the dragons knew where her hot Suit was and she chose to flee. She and her Suit tried to hide again, but her pursuers quickly found her tree-top hiding-place and she needed to flee again. The third time she foolishly allows a dragon she can't see get close enough to throw a tree, and she has to use a Jump to dodge. Despite the roaring rocket and the smoke cloud left behind for them to find, the dragonic pursuit of her and her suit gained more recruits--so she decided to cross the river. The XL Suit moves slowly underwater and she was still close to shore when the dragons arrived. The dragons see the steam from her hot Suit bubbling in the river's water so they know where to throw, but the river is deep enough for her Suit to avoid everything they think to throw even when they synchronize rock-tossing.

Her Suit quickly cooled as it slowly crossed under the water. "That was fun," she text-tells her

followers. "The computer didn't need to save my life once! but it coulda saved a Jump." She decides to try the dragons on the other side.

Once across, she quickly hides her Suit by burying it in a hillside overlooking the sleeping cave--and the local dragons did not seem to notice. Her Suit is not close enough to dart-glue a VidioTic onto a dragon's scale, so when the night was darkest she sends her smallest and quietest flying machine to drop-cams on the dragons... and the watch-and-scent dragons see it long before it gets inside the sleeping cave.

The closest watch-and-scent dragon raised a paw but not to claw, so she ordered the flying machine: Deploy drop-cam one.

The dragon now had a shiny glue-glob VidioTic inside stuck to the back of his paw. He looked at it. Other dragons came to do the same, and she ordered the machine: Hover. The flying machine watched the dragons watch a drop-cam being born.

Another, bigger dragon imitates the first dragon. Machine: Deploy drop-cam two.

Drop-cam one clears the glue-glob and starts sending back lots of dragon-eye pics. She laughs. She has one more camera--the flying machine itself. Machine: Land.

The dragons investigate the machine and she sees dragon-nose videos. She laughs again.

The dragons take the machine with them into the sleeping cave. Both Drop-cams send useless video but the audio... it almost seems like the dragons are talking to each other.

She thinks about 'big papers' that make a scientist famous.

Then the dragons take the machines far enough into the sleeping cave to prevent any from sending her new pictures without a com-relay.

She sends a walking com-relay to the dragon's cave, but it is promptly found and carried underground bearing a few new tooth-marks.

She phones her friends and asks for advice without mentioning dragonic language, but her smartest friend says: "Can't help!" She thinks she'll have to ask about that later--far from electric eyes and ears.

She sent text-tells to her other friends. "Cannot talk now, Long Live the Revolution."

She sends out a walking com-relay that is equipped with a camera, and the dragons find it. The camera sends back lots of dragon-nose and dragon-eye video. Other dragons come. A little dragon follows the scentless foot-prints that the walking relay left behind and discovers the box of relays.

She orders the box to open. There's only one relay left, and she doesn't need it... but the audio she gets... the dragons ARE talking.

Another little dragon starts walking in a spiral around the box. Other dragons join, shoulder to shoulder, and the spiral grows too quickly...

She uses her Suit's last Jump and tells the autopilot to go home. The logical search pattern, the obvious speech... all that and more she deletes from the Suit's memory. These are not dumb animals... unlike what she was told. She jettisoned the latest data cassettes near a potato field for a farmer to find. Perhaps someone else will enjoy the eye pics and nose pics--but for her, these civilized dragons are worse than useless. Exposing an official lie is unprofitable, and that will harm the for-profit corp that pays for her Suits and her paychecks.

She travels back to the ship so her Suit could be recharged and repaired. Further north, Info-Concen says the satellite pics show wolves and bears. Perhaps she could fight one or the other tomorrow. She knows what her followers will like.

When Chrys (gestures of submission), Lizabeth says "Honorable!" then says "I'll never get it exact for Mona."

"This dragon can say it again, and she can watch Anar's videos."

"Honorable, we will, but Mona likes me to tell stories."

"Lizabeth the gate-keeper!" says Chrys.

Too soon, Chrys takes her gate-keeper away dragon-back.

When Chrys comes back, I egg-hold her, and she falls asleep. Because First and Second are the watch-and-scent dragons, I let myself sleep.

---

I'm dreaming... this is the beach and that's a boat with six female dragons leaving it.

I've never smelled anything like it... but it smells good. This way... that dragon has the smell.

The smell is too interesting and I sniff that one closely without asking...

"Permission to approach," I say (much too late) to the dragon that smells of something better than a cauldron of hot soup.

"Granted," she squeaks. Sounds as if I scared her...

I take a step backwards, confused. How can a dragon's purse smell like ten cauldrons of hot soup?

"Your super-stims are confusing him," says a dragon.

"Yes," I say. "I am disoriented."

"Same with all of us," says the dragon that holds the smells. I watch her closely and ignore the other five dragons. "They spilled!" she says, and empties her purse upon the close-packed sand.

Now there are six dragons that I'm ignoring...

They look like strips of hide, but now they smell something like a mountain of meat.

"That wasn't very smart," says some dragon.

"Don't tease him," says some other dragon.

"You have to give him one," says another.

"He can have them all," says the closest dragon.

Now they smell like many food-beasts... but the smell is wrong. I notice I'm not drooling, even though there is no dragon between me and seventeen brown strips of whatever that look like leather. My mouth asks "Is this food?"

All six dragons laugh. "Of course not," says the dragon with an empty purse. "They're fun to chew, but even better if you leave one in your cheek. Try it. It won't hurt you."

I don't move. The dragon with the empty purse begins to gather her items, wisely starting with the ones farthest from me.

I do not know why I take two paces backwards from what once again smells like ten cauldrons of good, hot soup. I want to put all seventeen of them in my mouth, and I don't care if the new dragons laugh at me. But... I've forgotten something important.

"Apologies for my improper behavior," I say. "My name is Anar."

"My name is Mona," says a dragon that resembles her and who decides to include a wink and a (gesture of submission) a half-breath too late.

"My name is Chi," says another dragon that resembles Mona except she's larger.

A female dragon that resembles Chi and Mona at the same time licks my nose. "My name is Anar. Isn't this fun?"

(grumble) "I can think of no reason to forbid that."

"Don't you know who I am?" says the nose-licking dragon. "What other name could I have?"

"I could ask Lizabeth to give you a name."

"Anar, you're dreaming. What is my name?"

"She's the dragon that can fly in your dreams," says a little dragon I haven't met yet. She has a torchlight-hat on her head, and where she points her nose, there is a spot of bright light despite the light of the Great Fireball overhead. I wake up.

The Great Fireball is above the horizon and the day is warm. Chrys wakes when I do. Soon

she's gone to fetch Lizabeth and I wander to the trees nearby for biological reasons.

When Chrys gets back with Lizabeth, we travel to see Mona. For twenty breaths we watch her egg-speaking Dragonic Logic to her eggs. No other dragon knows the right egg-speech; Chrys says it's different than what she knows.

Mona noses Lizabeth, then looks at me and points her nose outside without pausing egg-speaking. I mouth-hold Lizabeth's hand and gently pull her to the light. She doesn't resist, but moves slowly for a half-breath.

Once we're outside, Lizabeth says "I can't help with the egg-speech and Mona can't stop, so I bring her water and pet her and try to be extra quiet and not use my torchlight so the eggs can concentrate on Mona..."

"That's a lot to ask of a two-legged," I say. "Mona knows."

"I don't want miss it when they hatch," says Lizabeth. "I want to be there, even if I can't see."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I want to share everything with Mona."

"Dragonets hatch with sharp claws. They can't hurt dragons, but you don't have scales to protect you from blundering..." I smell something new. "One has hatched," I say for Lizabeth, and I put a paw behind and back. Lizabeth uses the offered paw to jump upon my back.

Mona is still egg-speaking, but there are too many dragons for me to get close. I can see a damp dragonet who still stands when Stretch is finished licking her.

The dragonet starts walking to the light. Mona won't leave her unhatched eggs, so Stretch follows the dragonet. Despite the smell of another egg hatching, I decide that there are too many dragons and dragonets for my big feet and I trot for the cave entrance. Before I get there, I'm aware that some dragon behind me is making a disturbance... but no dragon is angry. I slow and look behind me.

"Can Lizabeth see?" asks Stretch.

"A little," says Lizabeth from my back. She uses a torchlight to see a blinking dragonet riding on Stretch's nose.

"Let's go outside before you sneeze," I say to Stretch.

Lizabeth makes a happy noise.

Cameras. Mona said the cameras must always see the dragonet. I try not to get between, but I worry that scale-less Lizabeth will get hurt because the dragonet is not much smaller than the two-legged.

"Query hug?" Lizabeth asks.

The dragonet bounces, then nods.

Lizabeth moves very slowly and hugs the dragonet.

"Mmm," says the dragonet.

"Warm," says Lizabeth.

"Mmm," says the dragonet.

As soon as Lizabeth lets go, "Query hug?" asks the dragonet.

Lizabeth nods.

The dragonet moves very slowly and hugs Lizabeth.

"Warm," says the dragonet.

"Mmm," says Lizabeth.

Perhaps Lizabeth will be fine.

Dee brings another dragonet, then Seven, then Stretch again, then Mona and Chi bring the last two. Gran brings soup, something dragonets can eat in front of the cameras, and Lizabeth feed the dragonets.

I smell First with strange females, and I investigate. First is leading six female dragons I've never scented before.

"Anar! Here they are. They're good sorts, but rude," says First. "Gran said they were raised by wolves."

All six of them look a bit like Mona, all slightly larger than Chi, much alike except where made different. Each dragon wears a different color wax, and their talons and scales are painted colors I've never seen before.

"Is he the big dragon?" asks a stranger.

"Yes," says First.

"We give thanks to the glorious revolutionaries who liberated us and brought us here to the new dragon homeland," she says quickly and quietly.

"That takes care of business," says another one with glowing striped talons.

"I'm Anar... What's your name?"

(gesture of submission) "Gran says this dragon is named Purity. This dragon is ready to work," she says.

"To ask you to work would be dishonorable," I say.

"Engineering skills are very valuable."

"What does an engineer do?" I ask.

"What anyone can do for ten credits, this dragon can do for one."

"That sounds valuable," I say.

First winks at me and starts walking. All the females follow. "Goodbye, big guy," says Purity.

---

Cee sounds angry. One of the new females runs past me as fast as she can, eyes wide and smelling of fear. Cee is still grumbling but isn't chasing her--so I do. "Third, you're the big dragon," I say on my way.

She isn't too far from the cave entrance--digging a hole. She half-gestures of submission as I approach, but continues digging.

"You're Purity, correct?" I ask. When she ignores me I add "Can you talk?"

This seems to puzzle Purity, but she shakes her head and continues digging.

Dragon Logic are not disobedient... and these dragons probably know more than I do... so I dig a hole as well. Two pawfuls later, Purity gets in front of me, picks up a small stone in her right front, and she makes an exaggerated spitting motion. A dragon-gray shed scale and a great deal of dragon drool fall into the hole. Purity throws her stone at the scale but misses.

"Smash that!" she orders. She throws another stone, and this time I see what looks like a shed scale move before the stone hits it.

The not-a-scale is slipping among the wet stones, so I bury it with a pawful of more stones and dirt before it escapes the drool.

"Honorable Anar!" Purity says. "This dragon would feel better if she could see..."

"Purity, please move." When she does, I stomp on the stones a few times, then dig everything up. Purity examines the bottom of the hole while I spread pawfuls of rocks and dirt.

"Here!" says Purity, then she jumps out of the hole.

I pull another pawful out and we discover where the dented not-a-scale had burrowed. Scratches on it reveal metal under the dragon-gray. Purity quickly tosses the scale onto a stone and smashes it with another many times.

"They can... be hard... to kill," she says.

"That's a big dragon problem," I say, and I smash it with a boulder. It begins to smoke. "I want to bury it... it smells terrible."

"Honorable Anar! Yes, I follow in your footsteps! Because of her excitement, this dragon did not notice the smell."

I'd be too embarrassed to say that. "Many dragons should hear you explain what that was," I say, trying to change the subject.

"I follow in your footsteps."

As I walk back to the sleeping cave, she walks in my footsteps despite the absence of large vegetation.

"Your bravery is very good," I tell her, but Cee's reaction to a strange small female attacking his back might have been worse than a puzzled look."

"This dragon did not know what else to do."

"Why didn't you tell Cee that he had a small but dangerous metal machine stuck on a scale?"

"This dragon did not want the machine to hear."

"Dragonic Logic," I say, because I know Purity wants to.

When Third sees us, he asks "Do we call her 'Back-Biter' or 'Purity'?"

"Purity. She is Dragon," I say--and so she was. The dragons accepted her despite her previous behavior--and listen as she tells the story of the not-a-scale. Besides two chipped scales on Cee's back, the only evidence is buried under a dirt-and-stone pile. No dragon has bothered to dig there.

---

The scent of a plant that stinks when stepped upon... It's been a long time since I've smelled that. I follow the scent... Chi's the source. She has put the vegetation in front of sleeping Purity, and has smashed a little of it with a stone. Purity smells healthy... and she shifts when I breathe upon her. I point my eyes and ears at Chi.

"It is not good for a dragon to sleep when strange smells are present," says Chi. "Perhaps her nose is damaged."

"We must watch and scent for her when she sleeps," I say.

"Purity, wake up! You have a phone message," says Chi.

"Who is it?" asks Purity, with one eye barely open.

"Floral delivery service asking permissions."

"Delete," says Purity. "Spam."

"Are you sure?" asks Chi. "I don't like this."

"Honorable," says Purity as she takes her phone from Chi.

"Email harvester," says Purity. "'To accept the delivery of three dozen red roses, please email us with...!' That part is the giveaway."

"We will appreciate your help should any of us ever get a cell phone," I say. "Purity, as your big dragon, I should know if your nose has been damaged."

"This dragon's nose is functional."

I point my head at the stinky plant.

"The smell does not bother this dragon."

"If you were sleeping, and Hizoner had one of his candles near your nose, would the smell wake you?"

"The smell of candles does not bother this dragon."

"Would it wake you?"

"No."

"What would wake you?"

Purity laughs and pokes her cell phone, which says 'beebabeebeeb' in a bug voice.

I'd like to ask Mona for help because the little dragon is good at questions... but she's busy with dragonets. I'll do the best I can.

"Honorable Purity, you have been trained to sleep until that cell phone wakes you?"

"Yes," says Purity.

"Perhaps that training should be changed," I say.

"Yes," says Purity. "What should this dragon do?"

"I do not know. Tell me of your training."

"This dragon lived in a stinky, noisy building, and she had to report in every morning for work. This dragon did not get enough sleep."

"Perhaps tired dragons are easy to train," I say, doing my best Mona impression.

"Yes," says Purity.

"Perhaps, if we let you sleep, you will untrain yourself."

"This dragon will try," she says, and winks so Chi can see. The cell phone makes bug-noises. Purity looks at it, pokes it twice, and puts it down again. "This dragon wonders how her cell phone... do you have any metal this dragon could use? She wants to see if her cell phone still rings when covered by metal."

"We have no nearby metal. Is it important?"

"No."

"There is much I don't understand," I say.

"This dragon will start at the beginning. All dragons here know that our ancestors were created in laboratories," says Purity.

First looks quizzical, but Purity continues.

"This dragon was told that dragons were created because a man with money said so. The tremendous brain-drain of bio-scientists and competent lab technicians contributed to... the disaster. The little dragons, the Dragonic Logics, were supposed to be as intelligent and submissive as the ancient's science allowed."

"Mona is not submissive," says Dee.

"Yes, she is," says First. "You don't notice because you're submissive to her."

"Honorable First," says Dee, "perhaps she deserves it?"

"Every Dragon deserves it," says First.

"Do you know how intelligent her type of Dragonic Logic can be?" says Purity.

"Not as smart as Mona," says Dee. The females laugh.

"Mona did not get what she needed growing up," says Purity. "Big Dragon told her many lies when she was a dragonet, which is now wasted brain-space. Since she did not learn physics or calculus as a dragonet, she cannot yet understand engineering. Big Dragon diminished Mona."

"The Boss diminished most of us," says Dee.

"Mona can learn with the right training," says Purity. "She will not get this training living with dragons who prefer to use an iron skillet in which to burn wood chips for light."

"In our ignorance, we use it to read the most amazing rubbish," I say. "The Disorientation never seems to go away."

"Truth," says First.

There is much Purity doesn't know about us yet--so I'll tell her. "Mona ran away from Big Dragon when she was very young. She didn't learn calc-useless as a dragonet, but she learned about tramping through the forest and herding food-beasts but most of all she learned about dragons. When new dragons came from many places, they were Disoriented, and Mona learned how to help these dragons. You must suffer greatly from Disorientation. No sleeping pod, no entertainment machines, only catch-it-yourself meat and potatoes for food. Your big dragon is so ignorant that, despite your superior knowledge of machines, I want you to work with Mona and the dragonets and do what any female dragon could do. Mona thinks that you and your sisters will benefit most by helping with the dragonets, and Mona is probably right. The machines will wait."

"I follow in your footsteps, honorable Anar," says Purity.

"Also," says Dee, "if you act like Mona does, every dragon will like you."

"Let's go play with the dragonets, honorable Purity," I say. "First, you're the big dragon."

It is difficult around the dragonets--one is crawling up my tail onto my back as soon as she sees me. I wait for her to jump off, but another follows. I lie down.

"Permission to approach," says Seven's dragonet. He's more than twice the size of the others, and his voice is easy for me to understand.

"Granted." I say.

Mona makes an inside-cave victory roar for him--and he climbs up my tail. The first dragonet is near my shoulders now.

"So cute!" says Purity.

The dragonet starts crawling up my neck... I can ignore it... as it crawls... from my neck... onto my head, and there she squeakily victory-roads between my ears. She jumps onto my paw, then to the floor. "One!" she says.

The females speak among themselves as other dragonets copy the first one. I'm trying to ignore another dragonet on my neck.

"All of us should educate our own," Mona says to Purity. "There are dragonets to educate. Will you help?"

"Yes," said Purity, "but this dragon knows nothing of dragonets."

"Mona knows, and she wants you to pretend to be a dragonet," says Mona. "You can learn with them."

"Honorable! But this dragon has wax on her scales," says Purity. "It is harmless, but it tastes bad."

"Then we will pretend Purity likes to be licked on her nose!" says Mona.

"If you plant them in a row, they will grow where the wind blows. Bury the stem where it shows, then follow your nose... to POTATOES!" says Mona.

The dragonets line up two paces from Mona, including the ones that were climbing on me. Mona gives each dragonet a warm potato.

The dragonets like feeding each other and the other females. I walk backwards slowly, trying to leave without them noticing, but a dragonet brings me a bit of potato... then another one. A dragonet decides to climb my tail.

A dragonet looks up at Purity. "Query lick?" she asks.

"Yes, honorable!" says Purity.

"Query lick where?"

"Here," says Purity, offering her nose.

"Query lick when?"

"Now!"

(slurp) "You were licked! Chir-ir-ir!"

"More!" says Purity.

"Query hug?"

Lizabath taught them that... it's almost proper dragon behavior to me now.

"Anar," says Mona. Somehow, she's gotten behind me. She looks tired... but smells healthy.

"I hear," I say.

"This dragon thinks she understands Gran's 'raised by wolves' metaphor. The engineering section dragons will benefit as we teach Seven's dragonet proper manners."

"Are wolves known for not having manners?"

"Wolves do have manners, but the two-leggeds did not understand them. Also, Gran says wolves are pack-predators that will eat two-leggeds."

I lie down, and Mona lies next to me. "If you were to close your eyes for twenty breaths, you would sleep," I say.

"Yes. This dragon will sleep, but she wants names to give dragonets."

"Tell me of names."

"Dragons usually give short names that can change to fit the dragon, but now... perhaps that is a luxury dragons cannot afford. If saying a powerful word changes a dragon, having a powerful

word as a name must change a dragon more. What names are good for dragonets to have in a time of stress?"

"I don't know. Let's ask Hizoner."

"Yes. This dragon cannot choose, and unless this dragon can suggest names Lizabeth will choose.

I ask "Why must Lizabeth choose?"

"The imprinting process requires Naming," says Mona. "But once imprinted, there is much work... too much work for an immature two-legged."

"Perhaps your big dragon should help," I say.

"Honorable Anar is helping," says Mona... and soon she's asleep.

Mona sleeps underneath me as Seven recites the teaching poem about fire. The smell of burning fatwood doesn't wake her; not the sound of Gran's skillet when the dragonets drop it, not even the tail-thumping and stomping that the dragonets and females do after Seven's story of Stretch and Mona and the Sleeping Cave. She sleeps when the dragonets decide that going from my back to right shoulder to forepaw to paw to floor is acceptable since I've got both my head and my tail turned the wrong way.

A strange, repeated sound wakes us both. Since it's coming from outside the cave, I decide to watch-and-scent. Mona does not follow.

"That kind of flying machine is called a helicopter," Micky tells me when I investigate. It's loud, and the crowd of dragons disperses because it makes more dust fly as it flies lower. The helicopter lands... and Micky runs to it, despite the noise and dust.

A two-legged is throwing boxes out of the helicopter. Micky get close enough to ask permission to approach. The pile of boxes grows while Micky waits. The box-throwing two-legged gets out of the helicopter and approaches Micky, walking bent-over as if in a gesture of submission to the spinning part of the machine over his head. The two-legged gives Micky a little stick and shows him papers, and helps Micky touch the papers with the stick. The two-legged gives Micky one piece of paper and goes back into the helicopter. When the helicopter begins to make more noise, Junior pounces upon Micky and mouth-carries him away. "Honorable Junior!" I say as other dragons victory-roar.

The helicopter makes yet more noise, more dust, and rises. I'm not sorry to see it leave. Junior puts Micky down.

Many dragons approach what the helicopter left behind. Shaped like square stones, they're lightweight... with writing on them.

"These are for Mona," reads Micky, "and these are for the dragonets. This package says 'for the little guys.' I wonder who it's for?"

"This is your name," says Dee to Micky, showing him a flat rumbled box.

The boxes could contain anything... and only a few dragons know the difference between a battery and a Quell gas-trap. I go in search of Chrysanthemum... but find her asleep. I ask Purity for help.

Micky has already opened several boxes when we arrive. "Look, Anar! Somebody sent me new pants!"

"All the better for you to wear them and not know your backside is a billboard," says Purity. She laughs when Micky looks behind himself, then points to the new pants. "These letters are a name, and they will show up on camera much better than you might think, and soon all the people who want to see pictures of dragonets will sometimes see what Micky of the Dragons wears. Product placement is a valuable commodity."

"So I shouldn't wear the pants?" asks Micky.

"Not yet," I say.

"Make them pay you," says Purity. "Never work for free. They are not Dragon."

"None of these boxes come from a Dragon," I say.

"Some two-leggeds want to be Dragon," says Purity, "and are trying to help. Perhaps the pants are from such two-leggeds, but this dragon cannot tell. Other two-leggeds want to help themselves and will use dragons to do it, so this dragon thinks she should open boxes."

"I can help too," says Micky.

"Purity, would you rather open boxes or play with the dragonets?"

"Dragonets!"

"Then go. When she wakes, I will ask Chrysanthemum to open boxes," I say.

But Purity does not leave. "This dragon does not want Micky to get hurt."

"I'll just open the boxes," says Micky.

He'll 'just' open boxes? "Perhaps you should go with Purity," I say, "rather than try to do something beyond a dragon or a two-legged's ability."

I order Junior to tell Gran and the other two-leggeds about the helicopter and the boxes it brought us. Chrysanthemum is distressed when she learns the helicopter left--a dragon can tell. I ask... she wanted to talk to the helicopter pilot. She says they all know each other and she wanted to send a message to the pilots who helped her escape.

Chrys begins the task of opening boxes and evaluating the contents, but pauses after she opens an envelope with the word STIFF written on the outside. I let her read without another dragon present, but she comes to find me before thirty breaths.

"The pilots passed the hat," she says.

I wait.

(gesture of submission) "The helicopter pilots gave money to me. This dragon has credit. What should she buy?"

"Perhaps you should buy the pilots a present."

"From this dragon or from all dragons?" she asks.

"I do not understand."

"From me or from us? ... or both? Perhaps this dragon can do both."

"Chrys, are all pilots Dragon?"

"No... not all... but almost all."

"Do pilots like gold? I know where Mona keeps some."

"Honorable Anar!" (gesture of submission) "This dragon will ask."

Chrys says that Mona said that there are not many coins left, so perhaps we could give golden dragon-scales to the pilots. Chrys pauses for a few breaths, then says "Mona could not know. Gold can be purified for very little cost."

"What should we make with pure gold?" I ask.

"Whatever works on two-leggeds," says Chrys.

"Dragonets," I say.

"Perhaps... dragonets on coins may be easier for the villagers to make."

"Why should they do that?" I ask.

"The coins could be sold to the far-away two-leggeds because they value gold more than dragons or villagers... and maybe even more for gold shaped like dragonets."

"Should the villagers work to get money?"

"Better to have it and not need it," says Chrys. "This dragon can find two-leggeds who will make the coins for us, but she would prefer the villagers do the metalwork."

"Why?"

"Native handicrafts always sell for more," says Chrys.

---

Chrys has a camera set up so all I have to do is push this little box and it will start. I point the camera at Third, then walk back to my place at the sleeping cave entrance, then push the little box. "Ready," I tell Third.

"Gran showed me this," says Third. "These are two debranched trees, small enough to bite but still long. I hold them tip to root... now, when I bite them I won't let them twist, and that takes two paws, so pardon me for a bit... (crunch crunch crunch crunch ptoo thhhp). Now both trees have... are supposed to have evenly-spaced bite marks on them, and by turning them so the dented parts are on the same side and leaning them on something tall, a two-legged can climb up and down by putting paws in the notches. Gran calls this a log-ladder." Third claws some wood splinters out of a notch. "With an axe or a sword these notches can be made smooth enough so most two-leggeds can walk on them properly."

"Do the logs ever twist?" I ask.

"Not when two-leggeds use them," says Third.

"Honorable Third." I say. "The tree goes into the next bonfire, and no dragon will ever ask you to help lift it again."

Lizabeth comes out of the sleeping cave, and I wink at Third. He almost winks back.

"What did Mona say?" I ask her. Third lies down so the camera can see Lizabeth as she climbs on his head.

"Mona told me I'm a catalyst, like the platinum in dragon-enzymes. I made the far-away two-leggeds restless, but they were restless already. Mona says that, with dragons, any two-legged would be interesting to the far-away two-leggeds. But that doesn't explain why anyone wants to dress like I do."

"They seem Disoriented to me," I say. "Can you help them?"

"I don't know how to turn a two-legged into a Dragon with just a few words," says Lizabeth.

"That's the important part?" I ask her.

"Yes. If I couldn't be Dragon anymore... I wouldn't be *me* anymore."

"Perhaps the far-away two-leggeds don't understand what it is to be Dragon."

"That's because they live crazier than Bitten Dragons."

"Can you teach them to see the crazy?"

"How do I teach strange people I've never met?"

"We will find out. What does Dragon mean to Gran?"

"All of the virtues and none of the vices make a Dragon."

"And what are Gran's virtues?"

Lizabeth says "Virtues are the good qualities that Dragons have," then winks at me. "Gran says virtues are qualities that make her happy when she sees them in her neighbors. Neighbors with vices make more work for her."

"That sounds easy to test."

"It is, even if sometimes a virtue becomes a vice if improperly done. Gran calls that foolishness."

"Perhaps virtuous behavior allows weak little two-leggeds to survive."

"Perhaps, but I don't know... I'm so dumb I once walked closer to a pretty dragon that wanted to eat me."

I rumble-laugh. "Mona is pretty. Has she spoken with you yet about dragonets and imprinting?"

"Not yet."

"She will, once the dragonets are past egg-speech. I think she wants her dragonets to imprint with you."

"All of them?"

"That's what Mona wants. But I think Mona thinks imprinting with six dragonets would be too much work for any two-legged."

"Honorable Anar!" she says, and swings off of Third's head using his ear, then goes into the

dim in search of Mona. To finish the video she didn't know I was taking, I say "This can happen to you if you become Dragon."

One breath, two breaths...

"Can I laugh yet?" asks Third.

---

I'm dreaming again and I know it, just as I know that I'm tramping through the forest with Mona and Chi and Lizabeth looking for the Dirty Dragons. Perhaps seeking any truth in the old stories that the Bitten Dragons tell is stupid, but Mona says it has potential. Lizabeth, Mona, and Chi are all smaller than I am, so we travel fastest if they are riding on my back. Then I scent a dragon... a big male. Before I can say anything, he says "Permission to approach."

"Granted," I say.

"Who's two-legged is that?" asks the stranger.

"We say she's Mona's two-legged, but she belongs to herself."

"Are you a Dirty Dragon?" asks Lizabeth.

"I don't know," says the stranger.

"This dragon does not know what a Dirty Dragon is," says Mona.

"We should make branch-blankets," says Chi.

"That sort of sunscreen works, but coverage is not complete," says the stranger, who winks at me.

"Traveling is difficult for the little ones," I say. "We should rest soon. Is there a sleeping cave?"

The strange dragon looks at me as if I'd asked for a million biting insects.

"Branch-blankets require trees, and this is not my territory."

"Welcome," says the stranger. "Who's territory is it?"

"I do not know." The strange dragon looks puzzled--as if I've asked for something strange again. I wait.

"Grow a tree," suggests the stranger.

"Excellent!" says the little dragon.

"Where can I find an acorn?" I ask.

The strange dragon spits between us. I am reminded of Junior spitting acorns... and the landscape shifts. A thousand small trees surround us--and I cannot see Mona, Chi, or Lizabeth.

"Where are the others?" I ask.

"Where did you leave them?" he says.

I cannot answer.

"Mona, where are you?" asks the strange dragon.

"Here!" says the little dragon from her place on my back.

"Of course we'll help you," says Chi. Their voices are close together and nearby, but I cannot see them.

"Where are you?" I ask.

"Anar!" says Chi. "Wake up! The Night Runners are back--bad news."

"We found an injured female about three thousand paces away from their sleeping caves," says First. "We didn't bother with de-scenting because of the blood. I carried her back, but I ran a loop to see if I was being followed... and I was, by three males. I ran to the trapped trail. I got there before they got too close, and outran all but one through the valley of slippery rocks. Because Second and Fourth were waiting at the trail end, I kept running to the river-crossing since she's wounded... didn't wait for the others."

"Anar," says Purity from behind First, "You are wearing a camera."

"Honorable, Purity. First... how many dragons are on the wrong side of the river?"

"Second and Fourth haven't yet crossed the river with the rest of the Night Runners--and I also

sent Seventh and Eighth to the Dusty Dragon's hill."

"Good. You've done well."

"That remains to be seen," says First. "It will take The Boss time to organize his dragons, but he may try to find where we went."

"You are wearing a pet-cam," says Purity.

"Why is that bad?" I ask.

"The Boss knows of us already because of Satyadah's website. Perhaps The Boss himself will watch the pet-cam videos," says Purity.

First snorts derisively.

"The Boss will say that the female was stolen from The Boss for killing and eating," says Purity.

"Then let us go see the female," I say. It's only proper response.

She's a Plata-Power--she could be Stretch's sister, but with unneeded claw marks. I think she'll heal. A wash-tub full of water is near her head, and Graith stops Purity before she drinks from it.

"Bait," she says, without opening her eyes.

"Bait," I say, "I'm Anar."

"Apologies, Anar," she says, opening her eyes a little.

"You do not need to apologize for what The Boss does."

"He will lead his dragons here."

"Not yet," I say.

"Which cape was she wearing?" asks Purity, sounding and smelling scared.

"These," says Graith.

"Both?" says Purity.

"All three, says Graith, and gestures at a cape made of shiny two-legged blankets.

Purity runs in a small circle, says "Deo Gracias!" then hovers over the injured female, poking at her scales.

"Closer to my neck," says the injured female.

Graith watches intently as Purity twists off one of the injured female's scales with her teeth--then runs in small circles with it.

"Drop that," I say--and to my surprise, she does. I put a talon on it.

"It is probably a radio transmitter," says Purity. "This dragon doesn't want to take it outside, but wants it far from all dragons."

"Does it have eyes or ears? I ask.

"Both--but neither work very well covered in drool. She spits on the thing under my claw, which now has four short legs. Hindered by drool and claw, the not-a-scale flails and stays under-paw.

The drool around the not-a-scale starts to sizzle--and the tip of my claw becomes blunt. Purity spits on the not-a-scale again, and I switch talons. Before I blunt another talon, I decide to shed a few tears over the not-a-scale and apply pressure with more claws at the same time. It crunches.

Purity is laughing, and I point my head, eyes, and ears at her and wait.

"This dragon thought spy-scales were water-proof," says Purity.

"Perhaps they are," I say. "I smashed it."

"We've got to clean that up," Graith says to Purity. "If one of the dragonets sees it..."

"You can't blame a dragon for crying," I say, and wink at her.

Purity flicks a claw at the spy-scale, and it skitters against the cave wall far from the other dragons. "Goodbye, spy eye!" she says as she leaps upon it. She seems to enjoy smashing it against the wall. I look at the puddle of tears... and get an idea. I give the puddle a sweeping push.

I was much smaller then, but once I made long, mud-slippery slides near another sleeping

cave. The cave floor here is unnaturally smooth--one small leap into a puddle of tears and an adult dragon might be able to slide as well as a dragonet.

"Anar?" asks Graith, as I slide past.

I don't stumble when my front paws stop sliding before my hind ones. Perhaps I still remember.

Purity has to try to slide... and she slips and sits. I slow her, then spin her around a little as she stops sliding.

"That's one way the dragonets do it," I say.

"This dragon likes it and would like to try again," says Purity. The slick area gets a little longer when she succeeds. With a little effort, this could be fun--so this time I hook and drag my tail as I slide.

Laughter... the injured female and Graith are laughing.

"Do you know of a better way to clean up spilled tears?" I ask.

The injured dragon bears no more of these 'spy scales' but continues to insist her name is 'Bait.' She answers all my questions, and she seems honorable, so afterwards I pronounce her Dragon.

The Boss is not treating the dragons in his sleeping caves very well--I didn't like what I heard. Some dragons have died from abuse--and some, like this injured female, are treated like rocks--in endless supply and disposable. What does The Boss care about small breathing pebbles crushed underneath his feet? They suffer long after The Boss has passed.

As I walk back to the entrance, I find Chrys scenting the cave floor.

"Honorable Anar! A two-legged sent you a valuable present!" Chrys takes a boxy camera out of her purse. "This camera is high-res with high energy-density batteries. It uses the same memory cards as this one, but four at once."

I let her attach it to my other ear. It looked big, but it feels light.

"I can tolerate that," I say.

"This dragon must insert batteries."

"I feel the difference," I say afterwards. I decide I can ignore the extra weight for now.

"The two-legged who sent that wrote a letter, and said that your pet-cam is low-res and twitches when your ear moves."

"Honorable Chrys," I say.

"This one is waterproof. The other one will not be needed."

"I will wear both. How much longer will you be opening boxes?" I ask.

"Until the sun... the Great Fireball is below the horizon. Anar... this dragon wants to warn you that she is confused. You received this camera from a two-legged. This dragon thinks it acceptable to use this camera because the two-legged who sent it probably wants better video and means no harm--but this dragon also would like better video, so she may be wrong.

"Honorable, Chrys. I hear."

"And... if you should view a dragonet wetted from making a mark in the rain, some two-leggeds will send water-proof suits, umbrellas and wax. Soon, I predict that nail-polish--a kind of two-legged paint--will come as a present because Mona once said she liked this dragon's talons when they were painted, and Mona is as cute as a dragonet."

"I was visiting an injured female rescued from The Boss," I say. "Perhaps two-leggeds will send medicine."

"In a way, they already have," says Chrys. "Hizoner has a glue that is better than sewing for injured dragons."

"Why do the two-leggeds send us these things?" I ask.

"Some of them have many possessions, and because dragons don't have much, viewing dragons triggers their sharing instinct. Other two-leggeds like to watch the videos your cameras make when the dragonets play on and around you. The two-leggeds think dragonets are cute

and like to look at them, so some two-leggeds want to reward you, perhaps so you will make more."

"Why do they like to watch dragonets?"

"Dragonets are enough like two-legged young so adult two-leggeds like the way they look and call them cute. You let the dragonets climb all over you because they're dragonets for the same reason you let Lizabeth, an immature two-legged, crawl around on your head."

"Is it honorable to take advantage of a two-legged instinct?"

(gesture of submission) "Honorable Anar! This dragon does not know. But she does know that many two-leggeds--and herself--will be disappointed if no new videos are made."

"The far-away two-leggeds send us gifts because they like the dragonet videos. This dragon cannot see any benefit for the two-leggeds except entertainment. A similar case is the Great Ship sailing to see the fire and ice... no dragon or villager would want to go there. These two-leggeds value entertainment so much that they send dragons valuable gifts, and getting gifts for no reason is not good for any dragon. That promotes submissive behavior."

"Accepting gifts is submissive, yet dragons may have to beg for food for one hundred twenty eight two-leggeds. Perhaps someone is attempting to make dragons submit or eat two-leggeds." Chrys winks at me. "This dragon knows a proverb--with gifts, one makes slaves, and with whips, one makes dogs. The Walkers were the metaphorical whips, and that didn't work."

"I will ask two-leggeds to send presents to the refugees. Satyadah will help."

"I follow in your footsteps."

"Chrys... what's a dog?"

"A small submissive animal kept as a pet," says Chrys. "This dragon has seen videos and pictures, but she has never scented one."

—

'Chrysanthemum likes this' is written on one side of the paper. The other side bears this:

Can I record this explanation, Professor?"

Please do.

Ready on this end.

A mouse has the same type of muscles that an elephant has... the same type of bones, blood, and everything else that makes a mammal. This suite of abilities has a limit. Land animals no longer reach the sizes of dinosaurs; and even they had a limit. This creature is too large to be real, so the videos on this website are clever fakes.

Sir, this creature is a product of old-tech bio-engineering. The only good news--this creature seems to be lacking in intellect and moves slowly by dragon standards. Are you on-board yet?

No. What do you need an ecologist for?

Two things... the smaller is I need a good way to explain heavy-metal bio-accumulation."

Here. "(...) the poison being picked up by the smallest organisms, concentrated and passed on to the larger predators. Plankton organisms were found to contain about 5 parts per million of the insecticide (about 25 times the maximum concentration ever reached in the water itself); plant eating fishes had built up accumulations ranging from 40 to 300 parts per million, carnivorous species had stored the most of all. One, a brown bullhead, had the astounding concentrations of 2500 parts per million. It was a house-that-Jack-built sequence, in which the large carnivores had eaten the smaller carnivores, that had eaten the herbivores, that had eaten the plankton, that had absorbed the poison out of the water." Rachel Carson discussing the bio-cide 'DDE' in 1962 ( p 52 of Silent Spring )

That will do nicely. The other involves GMO potatoes that the dragons are growing. This variety has been banned for many years.

What do dragons care about our laws?

Not a lot, but those potatoes will die... maybe the military will do it. You understand me?"

Not yet... Who hates dragons so much?

I don't know. Did you click on the little dragon?

Dragonets?

Yes. Dragonets that might watch their parents starve without those potatoes.

How do you know all this?

Crop-dusting paid my bills once. Sometimes I got jobs to spray GMO runaways out in the sticks. One job I went to, nobody told me there would be dragons in the field working with people trying to grow those G M uh-ohs. I landed nearby and told them I was ordered to poison their potatoes... and they let me live. Despite dire threats over the radio, I went home with full herbicide tanks that day... but nobody has hired me since. This is what I do now--I speak of dragons.

---

I'm dreaming... I'm at my usual place when it rains--the entrance of the sleeping cave. A strange two-legged male approaches, wet from the rain. He bows before me and says "Permission to approach."

"Granted," I say. The two-legged approaches and bows again... then tries to put a cloth ball in my mouth. I lift my head out of his reach. He smells of fear and bows again. "Perhaps the ritual displeases you?" he says, briefly sounding like a two-legged female.

Then I notice that my talons are painted gold.

"What's the matter, Anar?" says Chi. Her talons are painted gold, and she is wearing gold on her head as well. The two-legged bows again, and Chi briefly puts her chin over the two-legged--as if he were a submissive dragon-friend. "There's at least a thousand two-leggeds waiting for their blessing," she says, and I smell a great herd of two-leggeds waiting in the rain.

"What must I do?" I ask.

"Open your mouth," says Chi, who puts the two-legged's ball on my tongue. "Lick it," she says. It flattens and feels very smooth. Chi nods slightly and I open my mouth again. She takes the vegetation out and gives it to the two-legged, who says "The wetness is so small when the blessing is so great." When it bows again, Chi again briefly puts her head on the two-legged head, and it leaves, holding the wet mess with both hands.

"Can you do that, Anar? Do the same thing again," Chi says to me. I nod. She says "NEXT!"

Another two-legged male... once again, Chi orders me to mouth-carry more vegetation. But when I hear '... the blessing is so great,' I stop Chi before she says 'next.' When the two-legged leaves, I say to Chi "What is going on?"

"The two-leggeds have decided that dragon-spit is good for them. They're giving us money and valuables for a shirt that they've seen the Leader of All Dragons drool upon."

"Who is that?" I ask.

Chi winks at me. "These two-leggeds say The Boss and Big Dragon are parasites. I like these two-leggeds even if they think your drool is going to heal them."

"Neither of the two-leggeds was injured," I say.

"Hardly any of them are, but they all want you to mouth-carry something. Can you?"

"Chi... I know I'm causing trouble, but I don't know if this is a good thing to do."

"Water break," says Chi.

Misty morning light fills the entrance of the sleeping cave, and rain falls steadily. I'm wearing a cape... smells like Chrys put it on me.

All dragons expect to find me here at the entrance, and here I can expect to find all the dragons. Chi and Hizoner pass on their way out, both wearing capes and discussing the injured female. "Nice cape," I say to Chi because her cape is made of the shiny blankets. A hundred breaths later, Mona's male dragonet wanders over and, after greeting me, then inspecting the rain, sits next to me and waits... and soon falls asleep next to me under my cape. I watch and

scent. I don't think he'll sleep long.

He wakes before a hundred breaths. He starts singing... "What do I see! A dragon in a tree! Pee Eye Ess Ess Eye Enn Gee! Cursed with a shove, then with a barrage, causing intestinal wear and tear-age!"

After this performance, he runs into the rain.

I hope I can pretend to teach him that song again--he'll soon be too big for pine-bending.

He comes back quickly, and lets me egg-hold him for twenty breaths. I hope some dragons are doing something more interesting than watch-and-scent. Days like today help a dragonet to discover drool- or tear-sliding.

For now, I am grateful for the quiet.

When the rain stops, I walk around a little outside the entrance. My paws get muddy immediately.

No dragon is nearby, but I hear a little bug-voice. "Anar. Anar. Just nod if you can hear me, because I can't hear you."

I nod slowly. Perhaps this new camera was a bad idea... it talks.

"It worked! Excellent," says the little voice. "Honorable Anar... there is a big ship coming, full of hungry people. Tomorrow, or tomorrow evening, you will be able to see it from the beach, and you will know I'm telling the truth. Nod if you understand me."

I nod slowly.

"I hope you learn to trust me. If you nod again, I will be quiet for ten thousand breaths."

I listen.

"Honorable Anar! If you would like to see one of my avatars, look up."

I see a little silver ring that hovers in the sky. Eight lights spaced around the edge blink on and off.

"I can speak to you as long as you can see that avatar."

"Anar!" shouts Chrysanthemum. "For you!" she says, emptying her purse between my paws.

For a quarter-breath I hear the little voice's muffled laughter, which stops improperly fast.

"These are pet-cams," says Chrys. "This is another camera, these are torch-lights, and this is nail polish. This camera is lighter than that one... would you like to switch?"

"Put that one on this ear," I say.

"The silver camera looks better than the gold on you," says Chrys.

"Pick a torch-light that Mona will like and put it in my neck-pack. You may do what you wish with everything else."

"Honorable Anar! but Mona has many torch-lights now."

"Look there, honorable Chrysanthemum." The shiny flying machine slowly moves back and forth.

"Tell her it's a com relay," says the little voice.

"The camera says it's a com relay," I say.

"Who owns the com relay?" asks Chrys. She sounds like Jade.

"I don't know."

Chrys tilts her head nearly sideways... and waits. When I do the same, she quickly takes the talking camera off my ear as if it had become a horrible parasite.

"The camera won't talk if it cannot see the flying machine," I tell her.

Chrys looks up from the camera just long enough to wink at me. After four breaths she says "Apologies... this dragon did not think it important before. This camera has a radio receiver."

I hear a strange noise overhead. The flying machine is coming closer. Chrys peers at it.

"Anar... that flying machine is a toy." She starts sniffing the air. "It is probably harmless. The two-legged controlling the toy must be nearby."

If there was a two-legged nearby, we'd scent it--but we don't. "There could be another flying machine," says Chrys.

There is.

"I can see the big ship from here," says the camera.

As Chrys puts the camera back on my ear, it says "You could see me from the cliffs."

"Which way are the cliffs?" Chrys asks.

"That way, Chrys, if you want to walk where it is wet and may rain... but I know another way."

I go farther into the sleeping cave, and tell the other dragons about the talking camera and the ships. Second decides to watch-and-scent at Pissed-Off Cliff and look for the little ship--and curious Chrys goes with him. I walk back to the entrance of the sleeping cave accompanied by dragons that want to hear the camera talk, but the camera is silent. I cannot see any flying machines, but I hear a faint bug-noise, and follow it to find the flying machine shaped like a silver ring. The machine is very light, so I nose it out of the tree and onto my head rather than mouth-carry it. When Purity sees me, she says "Propeller-head!" and she and her sister Charity laugh.

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Second's neck-pack clanks with every step he takes, and makes more noise despite his best efforts to lay it down slowly and quietly. He's got a female two-legged on his back.

"Like you said... I found her floating in a boat by Pissed-Off Cliff," says Second. "She threw a book into the cave with a string attached to it. I put the book in my neck-pack and started pulling the string. A rope was tied to the string, and I pulled the rope. The rope was tied to a big rope, and I pulled the big rope. Then her boat started coming up the cliff... she didn't say anything and now her boat is in the cave. Chrys and I helped the boat over the edge as best we could, but it has dents now and smells like bird poo."

The two-legged slides down Second's tail and has her hands in Second's neck-pack... he doesn't seem to care.

"Honorable Second, where did we put... this!" Rachel says triumphantly. She's got a small brown box.

"Rachel, you're not angry with Second?"

"Not at all... he made a lot of decisions for me. Look! Platinum chloride, still sealed!"

"She says that's worth more to us than any of this stuff," says Second.

"It is if it is," I say, and wink at him.

"Here's enough silver chloride to make Stretch look like flowing metal." says Rachel.

"Is that good?" I ask.

"Not particularly," says Rachel. "Where is Mona?"

"Not far," I say.

"Good. She laid eggs, and that depletes a dragon. Which way is Mona...she's with the dragonets?"

"What do you think of her?" I ask Second.

"She seems sincere," says Second.

"Can I trust you?" I ask her.

"No. That's why I came in person. I'm ready for questioning. But Mona needs these salts."

"Honorable," I say.

Rachel is willing to tell me anything I need to know... and she thinks she knows what I need to know better than I do so I let her talk.

"My first discovery was that dragons will ignore a flying machine if it is small and quiet," Rachel says.

At first, I was content to watch Satyadah's videos, but then I saw Lizabeth and Mona together. I bought as big a boat as I could afford, stocked it with platinum, palladium, and silver salts,

added tiny walking cameras called 'clockroaches' and ring-fliers, and off I went, fair-weather sailor that I am. Somehow I made it, and learned to use the little ring-fliers to drop clockroaches into Gran's roof.

Since the villagers get salt by evaporating ocean water, it was easy for one of my machines to add platinum to Lizabeth's salt, but I think Mona probably got the same dose as all the other females. I wanted her to get extra, because she's laid so many eggs... but the females and dragonets always share the potatoes. I'm not boring you, am I?" she asks me.

"Honorable Rachel, my ears are yours to speak into."

"Honorable Anar, so polite!"

"Why did you follow dragons?" I ask.

"Once, I wanted a dragon... like Mona, for imprinting. It's an old story re-told... a worthless little mouse of a girl becomes a dragon-friend because she loves dragons. I've been hoping the dragons still existed, especially imprintable dragons like Mona."

"Why like Mona?" I ask.

"Logics are friendly, submissive, and smart--and cute. What's not to like?"

As First talks with Rachel, I tell Dee what I think Rachel wants... and Dee decides to hug Rachel. I'm not sure if it was a good idea, because at least ten breaths pass before Rachel's speech makes sense.

I listen as Rachel tells Hizoner about something for his horses... and I must have fallen asleep because once again I know I'm dreaming.

"We did it for all dragons," says Mona. She's golden again, polished and flawless, fascinating to look at.

"We?" I say.

"Yes!" says Stretch, "but I gleam too much for the cameras." I reluctantly turn to look at her... but she's beautiful too. Every scale is shiny silver.

"Why?" I ask.

"Today, the Great Dragon comes," says Mona.

"Come with us," says Stretch.

Mona and I follow Stretch... and soon see the Great Dragon--so big that even when he is lying down I can barely see over his back. He looks like The Boss, but his legs are misshapen. The little dragon follows Stretch as they approach the Great Dragon's head.

"Thank you for visiting!" says a flat voice. The Great Dragon's head does not move, and the voice sounds as if a two-legged was speaking through something. "Are you ready?"

"Prepared!" say Mona and Stretch together.

"Excellent!" says the flat voice. "Show me how fierce you can look!"

Both Mona and Stretch claw the air and roar at nothing.

"Good! Do more! Come closer."

Both dragons take two paces closer to the Great Dragon's eye and challenge pretend-dragons. The Great Dragon does not move.

"Closer," says the voice. Two more paces.

Either dragon could, if she wanted to...

"Come closer, and lick," says the voice.

Stretch looks at Mona, and the little dragon licks the air near the Great Dragon's eye. The Great Dragon does not blink.

"Good! Now push your tongue against it. That's our most popular request," says the voice.

Mona says "Then what? We'll have to stop." She seems distressed.

I've seen enough and insert my nose between my friends and the Great Dragon's eye.

"Bravo!" says the voice, "but warn me next time. I nearly had to change my underwear."

"He means well," says Stretch... not quite properly.

"Anar... honorable Anar," says the little dragon, who hugging my left front and is trying not to laugh.

The light reflecting off of the Great Dragon's eye changes. The eye changes shape.

"Let Mona see this," says the voice. But Mona is burrowing further underneath me as I crouch... and laughing.

The round part of the eye opens to one side, revealing a pair of two-legged males sitting among tubes and boxes. The larger of the pair points to small white strips that are attached to the edge of the eye. "After licking, she can pull one of these sideways, and it will peel off. Then we can continue taking pix without having to wash the perspex. And... give these to Gran. They're for her hearing aid. Don't be shy, the envelope is slobber-proof."

I take the envelope but drop it in a half-breath. The big two-legged sits on a black chair next to his companion, and quickly the Great Dragon's eye looks like an eye again. Mona is still laughing, even when I stand up. I haven't heard her laugh like that for a long time. I curl up around her.

"Bravo!" says the little voice. "Honorable Anar! Can you look this way?"

Stretch gets the envelope and puts it in my neck-pack. The voice says, "Stretch, can you do the licking? Your comrade is overcome with mirth, yet time is money with the Great Dragon."

Stretch agrees... but her tongue is covered in rubbish before the first lick is finished. The white strips stick to her lips, so she spits and wipes her mouth with the back of her right front. The goo sticks on her paw, then vegetation sticks to the goo as soon as her paw touches the ground.

I wake and walk to the sleeping cave entrance. The Great Fireball illuminates one trail of a cloud in an otherwise clear sky, and the air bears a scent that suggests to me the boat is powered by trucks. I ask First which dragons we should send to watch-and-scent at the beach, and soon he is filling his neck-pack with the contents of the boxes that remained. Gran tells him it would be easier if the two-leggeds come here, where they can sleep--and to his credit, First listens.

"I don't want to go with empty space in my neck-pack," he says.

Gran chooses clothing and blankets, but declines a dragonback-ride to the beach. "I've got cooking to do. Any of you big males want to break up some trees for me?"

"That is an honorable request," I say--and Gran gets volunteers.

Chi objects when I want to go see the new two-leggeds. "Let other dragons bring them here. You stay near." Then she pounces in front of Junior. "Can you mouth-pull Hizoner's wagon? There are many two-leggeds to gather."

Seven and Dee approach, and ask about bonfires after dark.

"Good idea," I say.

I'm glad I don't have to give orders. Every dragon seems to know what to do.

The smell of smoke from the cooking fires is everywhere, but Gran's soup smells good. First returns bearing six two-leggeds.

"One hundred... twenty eight. I have... big-dragon... problem," says First. "One male... smelled like... food-beast... and dirt. Found three more... same scents. Forced them... stay in... the boat."

"Honorable First! Good! Keep them on the boat," I tell him.

Other dragons come bearing more refugees. I understand why one of these two-leggeds smelling of food-beast would attract First's attention... these have strong scents, but nothing of food.

Mona's scent... and Purity. "Permission to approach," I ask before they do. Purity is excited about cell phone reception, and must tell me all about it. Mona winks two breaths into Purity's monologue and curls up against my chest.

"A Great Ship must be nearby," Purity says, "because this cell phone requires it. The captain of the Great Ship may be honor-bound to offer help if you ask."

"Can you do it?" I ask her.

"Of course," says Purity.

"Tell me what you will do," I say.

"Call the Great Ship before it gets out of range, super fast quick now!"

"And ask for two-legged food?"

"Yes!"

"I order you to do what you think best," I say to her... and Purity runs away.

"This dragon suddenly feels cold," says Mona.

"Apologies... but I do not understand how calling a Great Ship that has thousands of two-leggeds already can afford to feed ours as well."

"Perhaps by fishing," says Mona. "Perhaps you could ask the captain of the Great Ship. Purity could help. Purity is using a good cape and long wires, but this dragon worries. She thinks Purity's shelter is exposed, but this dragon hasn't traveled to see it."

"Perhaps I should go," I say, and wink at her.

"Honorable Anar! Watch for flying machines."

"I will," I say.

I tell Second that he's the big dragon and follow Purity's scent.

The truck isn't far away, and wires from the truck lead to Purity's boulder shelter with Purity in it. "Yes, the picture labeled 'Sequential,' but this dragon... Anar! Come see!"

A square glowing screen surrounding a tiny two-legged head. Purity says "This is Anar. He's the boss."

"I didn't know that," I say.

"You have military hardware under your control that should be surrendered at once," says the tiny head.

I order Purity to turn it off. She does so... then turns it back on. I point my head at her, but she's oblivious. "One hundred twenty eight refugees." she says in response to bug noises.

I am tempted to leave... but, like Mona thought, Purity's shelter is inadequate. I don't see a flying machine anywhere...

Purity wants me to talk using the radio and speak with the captain of a Great Ship--she's going to give us two-legged food. I give her permission to approach. The radio makes a strange noise for three breaths, so I look for flying machines... none. A different radio-voice is interested in certain two-legged males, but I have never seen two-leggeds that look like the pictures they send. Then the voice orders us to return military hardware. Purity turns the radio off.

I tell Purity that Mona is worried about flying machines.

No flying machines... yet.

"Perhaps we have caused enough trouble already," I say, and roll a boulder closer.

"Perhaps they can sell two-legged food to dragons," says Purity. "The two-leggeds like gold, and..." She turns the radio on.

Ten breaths later, we've heard nothing but noise, and Purity turns the radio off.

"One more thing to try," says Purity. Her cell phone glows when she flips it open. "Not possible. The ship would have to be close for it to work."

Her cell phone rings.

She flips it open, then closes it again. "Another robo-recording demanding the return of valuable military hardware."

"Can we see the Great Ship?" I ask.

"Perhaps yes!" says Purity. "It would be that way."

I find a boulder big enough for me to put both front paws on it, and look over the tree-tops. I can see a smudge of a ship on the horizon, but no flying machines. Purity tries her cell phone

again. "Anar... you can block cell phones. Interesting." Purity walks a quarter-circle around me and says "Electric bicycles? Certainly." I watch her... and she says "Wherever there are trees." One breath, then "No formal bath-rooms." One breath, "Anar! What do strange two-leggeds need to do so they can see the dragonets?"

"Who are you talking to?"

"The Great Ship."

"Honorable Purity, tell them to talk to your big dragon."

This puzzles Purity for a moment... then she's busy with wires, and soon she wants to glue a wiry something near my ear. I hear "Is anyone there?"

"It works!" says Purity. She holds a box to my nose. I sniff it, but learn nothing.

"Is anyone there?" says the voice in my ear.

"What am I supposed to do?" I ask Purity.

"It's much like the other radio," she says. "Speak into this."

The thing near my ear speaks first. "Hello, this is the captain of the *Sue's Sea Cruises Four*. Can you hear me?"

"Yes," I say. "I'm Anar and I'm the big dragon."

"Are you in charge?" asks the little wiry something.

"As much as any dragon," I say.

"What are your terms and conditions?"

"Not yet. This must be decided by many dragons."

"We would like to bring bicycles and guests."

"The captain can bring bicycles and guests."

"And portable toilets?"

"Cee!" He's run a long way...

"Message... First says... they stole... the boat."

"Honorable Cee," I say.

"What's the... numbers?" Cee asks.

"Twelve males, twenty two females, and sixteen children," I say, "including the ones you brought."

"What's that... on your head?"

"Purity, what is this?"

"This part is a speaker, these are wires, and this is wood glued to scale and speaker. Anar can hear the captain of the Great Ship if it still functions."

"It still functions on this end," says the little speaker.

"Speak into this," says Purity.

"Apologies," I say.

"Did you agree to a pair of portable toilets earlier?"

---

Purity knows where to find me. She tells me that the boat from the great ship is nearby.

Cee agrees to be the big dragon and watch-and-scent while I meet with Captain Diana. Soon I'm watching a boat go up the river easily and quietly, leaving only a bad smell in the air.

The boat avoids the villager's dock and uses metal pieces that unfold and grab the shore.

Captain Diana seems nice enough--after we greet, she asks about my problems. When I tell her about four well-fed male two-leggeds mixed in with the refugees, she seems interested.

"Thank you, Anar," says Captain Diana. She's got a writing stick and a small piece of paper--but instead of drawing, she writes something, folds it twice, and...

"What does 'get co-ords to Charlie' mean?" I ask.

"It means I need to be more careful." She gives the paper to one of the males moving boxes onto the shore. "Do you mind if we bring our guests after dark?"

"No, but most dragons and all dragonets should be sleeping. Your guests could talk with the watch-and-scent dragons."

"I have two thousand guests who want to see dragons, and are willing to pay too much for boat rides to the shore if only to see your watch-and-scent dragons. I'd advise you to ask each visitor for a donation. They expect it."

I overhear one of the males commenting how much easier unloading would have been if the refugees had stayed near the beach.

The captain and I decide that twenty of her 'guests' will visit at a time, with portable toilets installed near the beach where the boats will unload. They will ride their bicycles and follow a designated path and stay no longer than two hours (I didn't care how long they stayed, but the captain said it's a good idea to put in a limit). Junior arrives, pulling Hizoner's wagon.

We're nearly done piling boxes when one of the males tells the captain that the refugee's boat is between the Great Ship and the beach, and making threats over the radio. Another male gives a piece of paper to the captain, who doesn't let me read it at first--then she has to explain what a 'mortar' is, why it is a stupid weapon to use on the refugee's boat, and why the Great Ship is afraid of it. I ask how far the refugee's boat is from the beach, and I decide to go see if five hundred meters is as close as the captain says. I offer Captain Diana a ride, and we soon leave a grumbling Junior. I make a detour to gather a few big dragons.

"Find flat stones that fit well in your paw," I say to Dom once we get to the beach.

"Like these?" asks Dom.

"And round... like that one." Dom picks up the right stone, holding it wrong.

"Like this," says Third, holding a stone he found properly for a sideways fling.

"Can he really throw a stone that far?" asks the captain.

"No dragon can throw a stone than far... but perhaps a stone will bounce that far." I have a stone of my own now.

"No time to practice," Dom says. "I'd better throw from over here."

"Do you want to get off?" I ask the captain.

Third rumble-laugh. "She'll be fine. Lizabeth and I do this all the time."

We put ourselves and our stones near the water.

"Prepared?" I ask.

"Prepared!"

"Now," I say. We pick up the stones and sideways flick them as hard as we can in the direction of the refugee's boat. Luckily, the stones miss each other as they bounce off the surface of the water. One stone hits the boat and sticks for a tenth of a breath.

A puff of smoke forms over the refugee's ship.

"Scatter!" says the captain.

"Scatter!" I echo and run.

A loud noise behind makes me run a little faster.

"I think you did enough," says the captain. "They probably can't get the pumps running. There's no need to risk yourselves throwing more stones... unless they start shooting at my ship."

"Prepared is better," I say, adding a third stone to my collection.

"There's something in the water," says Eighth.

I see three animals with round heads.

"Where?" asks Captain Diana.

"By the boat," says Eighth.

The repetitive noise that can only be a helicopter... or two. "Helicopters are coming," I say. "Back to the cave."

"If that's Charlie, he's not hunting dragons," says Captain Diana. I keep moving. My passenger

talks to invisible but boring people as I trot/run, but she sounds happy.

At the sleeping cave, the Captain Diana tells me that Charlie says 'thanks.' Graith takes the captain back to her boat in the river. I tell Jade to take charge of getting donations from the two-leggeds, and I agree to give him ten percent of something in the future. Chi decides she's going to meet the two-leggeds and direct them here, to the sleeping cave. Since most of the females would prefer to play with the dragonets, she takes Aqua with her when she and Jade leave.

Cee points his head and ears. "That way. Mona went to visit with the refugees."

As much as I'd like to go myself, I tell Cee he's free to investigate.

Purity talks on the cell phone. I cannot understand the insect noises from this distance, and most of what Purity says makes no sense until she explains that she's calling people at random on the Great Ship and sending them videos... mostly of me watching for flying machines.

When her cell phone battery is depleted, Purity seeks another cell phone.

Watch-and-scent is less interesting now... and I'm tired. I almost miss Chi trying to sneak past me.

"Gifts make slaves," Chi tells me. "Do you understand?"

"No," I say.

"We can't feed ourselves and the refugees for much longer, and other two-leggeds that we do not know must help us. Whatever they ask, we must do."

"That could become a problem," I say, "but what else can we do now?"

"I wish I knew."

Purity and her sister Charity trot past and stop five paces downwind.

"Smile at me, Anar!" says Charity.

"Challenge-roar," says Chi. I do both--then wink at them.

"Most two-leggeds like dramatic, and action." says Chi.

"They also like cute," says Purity.

"Then take pictures of each other," say Chi.

"Dragon Logic," says Charity.

After Charity and Purity leave to seek better backgrounds for their pictures, Chi makes a prediction. "The strangers will ask for something."

(grumble) "You're probably right."

A strange, penetrating scent mixed with that of the little dragon... "Mona," I say, "I thought you didn't like nail polish." Each of her talons are painted differently.

"This dragon does not like the smell, but she likes the refugee two-leggeds who painted her claws. The boxes had nail polish in them. Refugees do not need nail polish, but this dragon asked the smallest two-leggeds to help decorate her. Then the little dragon was astonished and grateful for the decorating, and all the two-leggeds and dragons became friends."

Chi finds this amusing and winks at Mona.

"For how long will you... tolerate the talon decorations?" I ask.

"This dragon wanted to show you and your pet-cam the artwork... this one has tiny faces! Come closer, honorable Anar."

I tilt my head, and the little dragon is showing a hind-claw to the pet-cam on my ear... until I imagine what this looks like to Chi and start rumble-laughing just before she does.

The little dragon laughs too. "If you cannot keep your head still, this dragon will have to show the cameras in Gran's shelter."

"That's a long walk for painted talons... is this better?"

"Yes, honorable Anar. Now this dragon must show more dragons."

"Why?"

"The refugee two-leggeds need more help," says Mona, leaving it to me to figure out how she's helping.

"Wait here," suggests Chi to Mona. "Two-leggeds are coming."

Mona sniffs the air. "Honorable Chi!"

"Why does Aqua carry two-leggeds?" I ask.

"Perhaps some bicycles are broken," says Chi.

"That looks like a lot of work," I say.

"Be polite," says the little dragon.

The impolite thing is four large two-leggeds riding a juvenile male dragon.

The two-leggeds get off of Aqua and put bits of paper in his neck-pack. Then the two-leggeds line up to take turns standing between Mona and Chi while another two-legged holds up a box. The two-leggeds hold little boxes near Mona's painted talons as well.

Aqua and I are both favorably impressed when Chi and Mona touch forepaws while standing on hindpaws.

Then I ask Aqua about carrying the two-leggeds.

"I travel behind the two-leggeds on bicycles to keep them gathered," says Aqua. "Then one bicycle had a flat tire--whatever that is--but as soon as one two-legged got on my back, all the rest wanted to ride. I carried as many as I could."

I rumble-laugh a little. "You did well. What did Jade do?" I ask.

"He asked for half a donation or a user-tax, and told the two-leggeds if they weren't happy with their experience then they shouldn't pay the other half when they leave. When the two-leggeds asked him how much to pay, he said he didn't know and could they decide what was a fair price? which they did and every two-legged paid half of that or more."

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Noise.

The rain makes a soft patter outside, but inside the cave too many two-leggeds talk at once. Chi and the other females endure it--they are making progress understanding the refugees--but many dragons and two-leggeds have gone far into the cave. First sits next to me, as far from the echoes as possible without getting wet. "One hundred eight, plus those from the Great Ship," I say to him. The cave becomes much quieter because Chi is only letting one two-legged talk to her at a time--the rest whisper. First suggests I try to sleep.

I'm awakened by strange noises twice, but each time Chi or First tell me to go back to sleep.

Once again... I know I'm dreaming.

I see no dragons despite many dragon-scents. I suddenly desire to see my friends and walk to the cave. Many dragon-footprints and a confused mass of dragon-scent meet me at the cave entrance. There's Lizabeth's picture... but no potatoes. Instead, the cave becomes wider and taller. So much space! How could this happen? I'm distracted by a peculiar glow... and the outlines of dragons that block some of it. My nose scents many strange dragons.

They're watching something I can't see. I stretch my neck and see Mona... she's wearing a shiny black cape and relaxing upon fabric bags. Her paws do not move, her eyes are covered with thick black metal, and ears and eyes have wires trailing to boxes. Every dragon is silent and watches Mona.

I cannot approach Mona... there are too many dragons. I cannot circle around, as dragons fill the enlarged cave. I try to see over every dragon's head.

Behind, there is the source of the glow. Five wired squares are tilted against the cave wall, and dragons are watching images that form on the surface of the squares. Dragonets, two-leggeds, and the smaller dragons that are clustered close to these squares are covered with a sickly blue glow that reveals wires trailing from each and every ear.

Only the images move. I hear nothing until... a faint crying noise. That noise must be a crying two-legged infant. Perhaps the refugees... When the sound doesn't cease, I decide to investigate.

"Honorable," I say to the dragons blocking my way, but the dragons are intently watching Mona and ignore me. I try to pass by walking near the wall, but there are too many dragons. I could get over one or two dragons by being rude, but I can't get past all.

I don't like this... but I'm dreaming. I could change things... or wake up.

Mona's paws move and she takes the black metal off of her eyes, then pulls the wires out of her ears. All the dragons victory roar. I flatten my ears but it doesn't help. Mona leaps to her feet, leaving the black cape behind, then (gesture of submission).

Lizabeth is wearing shiny blue metal and puts a similar cape on Mona's back. She holds a blue metal stick near Mona's mouth.

Mona's mouth moves, but her voice is loud and strange. "Official business. Let that dragon pass," She says and points to me with her head and ears. As these strange dragons move out of my way, Mona says "Honorable Anar!" and many dragons victory-roar, but I'm wondering about the crying noise, which all other dragons ignored... including Mona.

"This dragon watched one hundred eight programs," Mona says. "The first one was called "Glitzy Goons" and eighty-five percent of the top-twenty cast were light-colored two-legged males. Theme: Use a large amount of tokens for societal wealth to obtain..."

I've found the source of the crying sound... another square with Third in front of it. Neither of Third's ears have a wire. He's looking at video images of two furry animals. "Anar!" says Third, before I can ask permission to approach. "Come look at these," pointing with his nose. "You'll like them. These are called cats... they're beautiful, but perhaps not when they think they can sing." The images change and show what must be immature cats, and the sound stops. Third puts the wires back in his ears. He offers me a pair of wires, and after I refuse, he ignores me.

Behind me, some dragons say 'change' while Mona speaks of two-legged clothing. Mona says "Set point change. Program three is called 'Groda Lotapot' and is primarily about a male/female pair of dark-colored two-leggeds. Theme: This pair use fraud to steal tokens for societal wealth from a group called 'Mobsters Ink Inc.' to buy a house, but they are caught. They try to return the stolen tokens plus ten percent more by growing not-proper vegetation in their shelter."

"Mona," I speak without meaning to. "Are you healthy?"

I don't know how she can hear me, but she says "This dragon is healthy." Many dragons seem to imitate one of Lizabeth's happy noises. "The Show must go on!" Many dragons victory roar... this is beginning to bother me.

I know I'm dreaming...

I could wake up... or do whatever I want in this dream.

Anything.

I can fly over all these dragons if I wanted, but I know instinctively that's not proper dreaming.

I think of something very difficult to do and settle myself to do it. I'm going to watch closely.

"The female adds more vegetation until she fills a sealed compartment of the wagon, then the male uses the wagon to buy a large quantity of ice, thinking the sealed compartment is empty. After slapstick humor involving opening the sealed compartment and revealing the improper vegetation, the male fills the rest of the wagon with bags of ice. Then, when he travels inside the wagon, he must endure contact with ice."

Most of the dragons imitate the noise Lizabeth makes when Third sneaks up behind her and licks the back of her neck.

These strange dragons are improper dragons. They should not be imitating a two-legged, even if she is Dragon. While Mona speaks of ice and vegetation and something called a fountain, I examine the dragons around me. I see a few bitten paws but no other scars.

Perhaps my research attracted Mona--when I look up, she says "Let that dragon pass.

Honorable Anar, permission to approach, granted!" She victory-roars.

The dragons victory-roar in response--and they sound happy to do it. They move out of my way, making a path to the stage. Lizabeth looks at me and says 'bio-maintenance.' I wake before I get to the stage.

The Great Fireball has warmed the air. I greet a few friends as I travel outside and get my paws muddy. When I return, Cee is sitting in the sleeping cave entrance, and says "twenty eight," when I walk over.

"Honorable," I say.

"Another, smaller ship came in the night after the helicopters left," says Cee. "First says two-leggeds from that ship took the two-leggeds off of the refugee's boat. After that, Captain Diana went back to the Great Ship, and she took eight of the refugees who could speak properly with her."

"Honorable," I say.

Watch-and-scent again, and twenty eight.

Lizabeth is playing a sneaking game with six other immature two-leggeds--their dragon-prey is curled-up and pretend-sleeping. Each of Lizabeth's friends has paw-fuls of acorns, and when they get close to Third's back, they wedge acorns between Third's scales. After a few breaths of this, Third curls up a little tighter and two acorns fall from between his scales. He pretends to be awakened by the 'noise' and when he curls around, the remaining acorns all crack. Lizabeth and her friends make happy noises.

The little two-leggeds pick up the nut-pieces and eat some, then feed the rest to Third. They leave the cave, probably to get more acorns.

Twenty one.

"Some of the trees produce acorns I like," says Third. "Try some before the two-leggeds leave."

"Where are they going to go?" I ask.

"Captain Diana is asking permissions, and she says that her friend Charlie will help find a place for them."o

I leave Third as big dragon and I walk to the dim. There's not much two-legged food left... soon we'll all be eating potatoes and food-beasts. I pass nineteen refugees, then see the females and the dragonets. All the dragonets and most of the females are sleeping.

"Did any two-leggeds pass here?" I ask Dee quietly.

"Yes... two did," says Dee.

I start scenting, and Dee rumble-laughes gently. "They'll come back by themselves," she says.

As I walk past the potatoes on my way to the entrance... "Anar! Radio message for you!" say Charity.

I follow Charity... and I notice Lizabeth and her new two-legged friends are painting Third's talons.

A dragon in a helicopter?

"Permission to approach!" says the female dragon's voice on the radio.

"Granted," I say.

Soon I see a black dot on the horizon become a helicopter. With much noise and dust it lands in the cleared flat place that Chrys chose. A dragon much like Chi exits the flying machine. She's wearing a pinkish wax and her claws are the same color.

The strange dragon looks at me, lifts her chin, and drops an ear. I ask "Permission to approach!" from fifteen paces. "Of course, Anar," says the strange dragon, "but not for the cameras on your ears. I don't ever want to see those cameras again. When you're around me, you can use the cameras I provide."

"Agreed," I say, and lower my head, but she takes several quick steps backwards.

"I can't take them off without damaging them," I say. She says nothing... so I do the best I can. Both of the bigger cameras make snapping sounds as I remove them.

"You may use and keep these," she says. "These machines I trust."

She puts one on an ear herself rather than let her machines do it. "Honorable," I say.

"Let me look in your other ear," says the strange dragon... and I do.

"Are you always so tolerant of strange dragons?" she asks me.

"You're like Chi... I was at dragonet when she found me and said I was Dragon. To her, that meant that I should do what she said so she could take care of us both."

"Chi did well--you've got a silver tongue--let me see it." She licks my nose... I lick her nose.

"You're hauling a rust-bucket and don't even know it." She shakes her head, and points a torch-light inside my nose.

"What's a rust-bucket?" I ask.

"A bad metaphor. Are all the dragons as dark gray on the inside as you are?"

"Some. The dragonets have scales that are nearly clear."

"Potatoes... and because you're away from the worst of the ash-fall." She pokes and gently claws a flat machine.

"Open your mouth, please. Hold still." Her paws and a box go where I can't see them. "This might take thirty breaths. I'm done."

"That didn't take three breaths."

She slips a thumb on one paw and a flat gray screen turns greens and grays. "When and where did you defecate last?"

"About two thousand paces away from here."

"On the pic, Anar."

I can't make sense of it. "Do you have a map?"

"I'll teach you later... How's this?"

"If that line is the Great River, and this round thing is the sleeping cave, then... here." She taps the pic, and the helicopter's rear ejects a small, noisy flying machine that sounds like many angry insects. That seems excessive... "You could ask me for a fresher sample," I say.

"Honorable, but I'll do the doctoring. I want to look inside your other ear again." (grumble)

One of the machines makes a pinging noise, and the strange dragon goes to look at it. "Where do you get your platinum and palladium?" she asks.

"We have two thousand grams of platinum chloride and several palladium salts."

"How'd you get it?"

"A dragon-friend named Satyadah bought some..."

"Paid for with your gold," she says.

"Other dragon-friends bring us more."

"These dragon-friends I know nothing about."

"The last one was a two-legged female who traveled here in a little boat."

"Named Rachel."

"Yes."

"That mystery is cleared up--call the papers!"

"Rachel tried, but they do not like to write of dragons."

"Sarcasm."

"Perhaps you'd like to meet with one of the smarter dragons."

"You and yours are Dragon."

"Honorable."

"No 'you and yours' for me, I see."

"Not yet... I do not know your name and too many dragons depend upon my judgement."

"Honorable, but I've got work to do and I don't want you hindering me."

"I'll try not to hinder you."

"I want to see the Delta... the little dragon. She's going to need my help, almost as much as you do."

"Perhaps," I say. "Is that a head-heater in your helicopter?"

"No. Can you bring the little dragon here?"

"The little dragon goes where she will."

Now she seems angry. "You're the bloody big dragon! Order Mister Big Eyes over there to go fetch!"

I say nothing. Cee tries not to laugh.

"I want a blood sample from Mona--laying all those eggs is hard on a dragon."

I say nothing.

"Anar... I got a blood sample from you, and you didn't object."

"I am very ignorant," I say.

"The little dragon might be the last of the Delta 4-P's, and I've got some of that line's frozen sperm."

"I am ignorant and confused."

"Want something to eat?"

She's obviously hoping I agree, so I say "Honorable."

"Good. Go to the village square and bring your friends."

I point my eyes, ears, and nose at her.

"The place near Gran's--the bonfire place. I'm coming with you."

I ask her if she'd like to put anything in my neck-pack, and she agrees at once. The boxes are heavier than they look. I look inside the helicopter again. 'You've left your thumbs in there' I say to this strange, bossy dragon.

"Correct, honorable Anar. Those are my flying thumbs; these I take with me into the bush because they're still useful if the batteries are depleted. Do you think Lizabeth will like me?"

"Lizabeth likes all dragons."

"I could teach her how to take blood samples."

"Lizabeth does what she will." I stiffen as I hear another helicopter.

"That helicopter is a rental delivering food... nothing to worry about."

I hurry-walk to Gran's shelter, with the strange dragon trotting behind. I get there ten breaths before I can see the helicopter come over the trees. It has a big box dangling from it, and it lowers that into the bonfire place as far from me as it can. The dust cloud it makes is impressive, but because the helicopter quickly leaves after dropping the big box, the dust settles.

The box smells like it has a new kind of bread in it. The strange dragon emerges from the forest, trots to the box, touches something on the box-top with her chin, and the box falls open. "I can get more anytime I like," she says.

The spectacle has attracted many two-leggeds and dragons--and warm Lizabeth, who's trying to hug my neck.

"New cameras! How are you doing with the stranger?"

"She won't tell me her name." Lizabeth winks at me.

When the strange dragon looks at her, Lizabeth imitates a (gesture of submission) and says "Permission to approach?"

The stranger says "Granted. Who trained you so well?"

"Mona and Anar and Chi and First and Seven and Stretch and Graith and Fays and..."

"You smell of a small female dragon."

"Yes," says Elizabeth.

"A Dragonic Logic."

"Yes."

"Try the bread. I can get more."

Elizabeth looks... and says "All the same?"

"Yes, because it's made by machines. It's good, but not as good as what Gran makes."

Elizabeth takes a loaf, breaks off a piece and feeds it to the strange dragon.

There's enough bread for all the dragons present to have a mouthful. Elizabeth feeds more bread to the strange dragon, and then I let Elizabeth feed me. This bread tastes better than potatoes, and I understand why the little dragon likes it.

Elizabeth and I decide that the strange dragon is probably Dragon, but... "Why won't you tell Anar your name?" Elizabeth asks.

"My name... please, little one, let me keep that secret a while longer. I want to be the efficient doctor that these dragons need--without that baggage."

"I can give you a name," says Elizabeth.

"I will accept the name for a short time."

"But... I can give you your own name, Roxxie."

"That's not a good name."

"Why not?"

The strange dragon ignores Elizabeth's question and removes boxes from my neck-pack... she's beautiful. Too beautiful... so I ask "Is there poison in the bread?"

"No, only Quints. The logic goes like this," says Roxxie. "A bully of a dragon would eat more of the bread than any other dragon and get a massive dose of the Quintessence that was baked in. But, since all dragons here have behaved honorably, every dragon can enjoy the ride today courtesy of Auntie. I'm sorry, Anar, that Elizabeth decided to give you a little extra bread, but it won't hurt you."

"NO!" shrieks Elizabeth.

I try to think like the little dragon--and try to give Elizabeth a hug. "It doesn't hurt," I tell her. I decide to let 'Auntie Roxxie' continue to take blood samples from the mouths of strangely cooperative dragons. I'm not sure what to do--but Elizabeth needs something to do that will make her feel better.

"Elizabeth, can you get your blanket?" I ask. After Elizabeth runs into Gran's shelter, I find that my new cameras are easy to claw off my ears.

Elizabeth comes back with a blanket, and I lower an ear to her. She climbs up and on.

Elizabeth curls up on the top of my head. What can I ask her to do?

"I can tell you a story," she says.

"Honorable Elizabeth! I would like that." Once again, the big dragon is told what will happen.

We're interrupted by Chi's challenge-roar... she's furious. I haven't heard her roar like that since I demonstrated an excellent hillside-mudslide and got all four muddy paws off the ground at once with a well-timed jump. I was a lot smaller then, but I remember. I never tried jumping like that again.

Chi has a lot to say to Roxxie, but it's all about two-leggeds and fraud that happened long ago and far away. Since Chi has an appreciative audience, Roxxie does not challenge her--she keeps silent except to ask dragons for blood samples. Most dragons cooperate.

Chi pauses her harangue long enough to greet Elizabeth and tell me to keep doing what I'm doing.

I ask her if she could be big dragon. Chi winks at me.

Elizabeth speaks softly and I'm probably the only dragon that can hear her--and sometimes Elizabeth's voice seems to come from inside my head.

"One day a dragon much like Stretch found something called 'shoes' that helped her run faster and farther. She had so much fun running that the Great Fireball was lower than the horizon before she thought to turn around. Soon she didn't recognize the hills and forests she was running around, over, and through. Rather than stop, make a branch-blanket, and sleep until sunrise, the dragon decided to keep running. Soon she thought she was near her sleeping cave, but as the Great Fireball began to lighten the sky she realized she was very tired and very lost.

She was also very sleepy when she saw a small shelter that smelled like two-leggeds--it had vegetation soup inside it, still warm. She drank some, but didn't like it much even though she was very thirsty.

She lay down and closed her eyes. She woke when she smelled a two-legged much like me, but younger and smaller.

"I wanted a pony," said the little one. "Was there a pony here?"

"I didn't see one, but I fell asleep," the dragon said.

"You should keep alert," said the little two-legged.

"I ran a very long way to get here, and I couldn't help sleeping."

"It's not your fault, then," said the little one. "What's your name?"

The dragon could not answer.

"Do you have any dragon-friends?" asked the little two-legged.

"I'm sure I do... but I can't think properly," said the dragon.

"What is six plus twelve?"

"Fourteen," said the dragon.

"You're thinking is fine," said the two-legged. "I think I wished for a pony, and got a dragon instead."

"What do you want a pony for?"

"I just like ponies."

"Do you like dragons?"

"I don't know. Are you magic?"

"I don't know. Do you know what dragons eat? I'm hungry. And thirsty."

"I think dragons like pancakes," said the two-legged. "Come with me, and I'll make some for you."

But the dragon could barely stand up. "Perhaps I am still very tired from traveling," she said.

It was a very short trip to the two-legged's house, but it's not proper for me to say how many breaths passed before the dragon finished traveling.

"I'll take care of you!" the little two-legged says, and brought her water in buckets and helped her drink without spilling. The little two-legged gets a bowl and some bags from the shelter, and while the little one measures and mixes she asks "Can you remember anything?"

"Yes. I remember big dragons and little dragons and their scents."

"Do you want more water?"

"Not yet."

The little two-legged goes in the shelter. A hundred breaths later she says "Barely cooked pancakes? These are hot."

"Dragons do not eat together--to avoid fighting."

"Who wants to fight over pancakes... especially these pancakes?"

The dragon looked at the tiny pancakes and thought that was the funniest thing she had heard all day.

Loud, rumbling laughter attracts attention--and full-grown two-leggeds. Much happened that the dragon did not understand, but she liked the warm fluffy pancakes and the almost-hot water and soft vegetation that the two-legged male used to wipe her face--twice. Then he said "That's the best I can do--we'll have to ask a dragon if she still smells like a brewery."

Lizabeth is never scared when I rumble-laugh. "Honorable!" I say. "Mona will like that story."  
"She helped me make it. Except, when I tell the story to her or Seven, I have to add that the dragon gets to put her paws in the almost-hot water, and I can't forget taking off the shoes first."

"You have a good lie-sense."

"Honorable. Better than Roxxie. Anar, what will you do with her?"

"If she stays, all dragons will know what she's like. Perhaps Mona can think of a way that will make Roxxie want to be Dragon."

"I know what could work," says Lizabeth.

"You do?" I ask.

Chi walks up to me and sniffs my nose.

"Are you able to walk?" she asks me.

"I think so."

"Walk two paces," says Chi. "Move a little."

That evening, I tell Roxxie that she can be Dragon if she follows in Chi's footsteps.

"Not a chance, buster," she says.

"You won't follow in mine," I say.

"How do you know that?" she says indignantly.

"Say it."

"Say what?"

"I follow in your footsteps.' Say it."

Roxxie says nothing.

"Will you follow in Chi's footsteps?"

"No. Aren't you assuming I want to stay in this... primitive place?"

"Yes."

Roxxie says nothing.

"You'll stay because you know more medicine than any of us, we need your help, and you will be with other dragons. You will do no harm here and potentially much good, and you can leave that nasty name Roxxie behind you."

"And my estate? What about that?"

"I know nothing of estates."

"What will I do here?"

"You will do what you will."

Roxxie makes a dismissive noise. "Stocks, real estate... I own a lot, and it will take time to turn that into cash... and buy five dozen sleeping pods... I could have them installed inside the cave."

"You're still thinking like Lord Rots taught you. Stop being a Rottie," I say. Roxxie steps backwards quickly, as if I'd growled at her when she was trying to be nice.

"That's rude!" she says.

"Apologies," I say. "Will you help us?"

"I can help you without sleeping in a oversized hobbit hole!"

"Honorable!" I say happily, even though her speech puzzles me.

"I'm going to leave in a day or two," she says.

"You may go as you will, but when you are here, will you follow in Chi's footsteps?"

"No!"

"I didn't think you would," I say. "You've been a Rottie for a long time."

She stalks off, obviously angry, and Lizabeth runs after her. Perhaps I should not have said 'Rottie' twice--or not mentioned Chi.

Roxxie lets Lizabeth catch up to her, then puts a front paw behind and back. Lizabeth jumps dragon-back as if she'd practiced ten thousand times. Good. Since Roxxie wants Lizabeth to carry messages to Mona, they will become friends because Lizabeth is Dragon.

Lizabeth's voice doesn't travel far and Roxxie doesn't want me to hear, so...  
I wait where I am. Before five hundred breaths, Roxxie returns with Lizabeth.

"Counter-proposal!" she says.

"Accepted," I say.

"You don't know what I want," says Roxxie.

"He probably does," says Lizabeth. "Mostly."

"How did you tell him?" Roxxie asks Lizabeth.

"I didn't, upon my honor as a Dragon," says Lizabeth. "He's smart that way."

"Let's hear it, big guy," says Roxxie.

"You'll stay as long as you want and you will follow in no dragon's footsteps, but you will promise to do no harm. You will also promise not to be bossy, and if Lizabeth will take messages to Mona every once in a while, you'll almost follow in Lizabeth's footsteps. You like her because she is Dragon, yet she's small enough that you think her orders can be ignored if convenient."

"Bully for you," says Roxxie. "You are the law... all I can do is get out of your reach."

"The law is Dragon," I say. "Lizabeth loves dragons. She would never want to hurt you--and you know it. Because she is Dragon, if she ordered you to jump in the river, you might do it."

One breath, two...

"Rottie," I say.

One breath...

"You are stronger than you appear to be," Roxxie tells Lizabeth.

"Apologies," says Lizabeth.

Roxxie rumble-laughes. "Tell me what a Dragon would do next."

"Her name is Bait," says Lizabeth. "That's not her real name, but she was clawed and left for the Night Runners to find. Can you look at her?"

"Certainly. What are Night Runners?" asks Roxxie.

As Lizabeth begins explaining, I look around for help... and there's Stretch. I look at her, then Lizabeth. Stretch winks at me with the eye Roxxie cannot see, and soon Lizabeth has a Dragon following closely in her footsteps as she travels with Roxxie.

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"No," I say.

"It's worth it," says Roxxie. "You already know that your new scales will be much lighter... did I tell you they'll grow a little faster, too? If you like, I've got some accelerant that makes your scales grow back even faster, but the side-effects are considerable."

"No."

"You'll continue taking the Iron-Out?" asks Roxxie.

"Yes."

"Good. Can you help me, Lizabeth?"

She shakes her head. "I'm too confused. Why is it so important that he shed his scales now, all at once?"

"Every one of his scales contain small quantities of toxic metals. The sooner that garbage is out of the sleeping cave, the healthier all dragons will be."

"Yes, but his scales will shed. There must be a reason you won't wait for that to happen..."

"Several, actually," says Roxxie. "Scales get ground to powder on the cave floor before and after shedding, releasing the poisonous metals that they hold within. Another reason is the dragonets won't like climbing on him so much without his scales, so a temptation to climb and fall will be removed. But the biggest reason is that if I can get Anar to do it, other dragons might do it as well, and a lot of toxic metal will be away from a lot of dragons, hopefully forever."

"Roxxie," I say, "the dragonets never fall when they climb. And when I want to shed scales, I don't need a drug."

"Let me see..." Roxxie looks into bluish screens for two breaths, then she says "Scale-shedding has always been induced with drugs... always, for every... "

"That's because..." says Lizabeth, but she realizes she interrupted and stops.

Roxxie points eyes and ears at Lizabeth and waits.

"Because no dragon *wanted* to shed scales, drugs were always used."

Roxxie looks at me. "So... if you *wanted* to, you can shed your scales?" asks Roxxie.

"Yes." I say.

"I want those scales out of the sleeping cave as soon as possible."

"I agree. I'll talk to the other dragons."

"Honorable Anar," says Lizabeth, "what should we do with all the shed scales?"

"Ask Roxxie. She'll know," I say.

"Was that sarcasm?" asks Roxxie.

"No," says Lizabeth. "He's Dragon, and Dragons try not to insult each other. Where should we put the shed scales?"

"I don't know... but far away from dragons. Why don't you give them to Satyadah?"

"Good idea," I say.

—

"I like you,  
you know I do,  
even tho  
you know  
I won't listen to you!"

I'm dreaming again... and a strange male dragon is singing to me. He rumble-laugh, victory-  
roars, and then lies down and puts all four feet in the air.

"Is this your territory?" I ask.

"Not really. As soon as I stop paying attention to it, it changes. How can a dragon own something when it changes all the time? Look at it!"

The vegetation looks like vegetation and the rocks look like rocks... except now there's a tree where there wasn't.

"Words change the most," says the strange dragon. "Try it."

Because I'm dreaming, I find a writing-stick in my paw. I write 'Mona' on a rock.

The strange dragon rumble-laugh, then stands up. "Try a word-word."

I know what he means... so I write 'Potato' but that's not correct either. I write 'Can I see the ship?' and the strange dragon rumble-laugh when I find I've written 'Can see ship.'

"Look again," says the strange dragon.

It looks like I drew tiny logs in strange patterns that have no meaning to me. I'm nearly certain the tiny logs move when I'm not looking at them--and the stranger rumble-laugh.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Anar... you're dreaming. What's my name?"

"Anar."

"No. That's for you. What's my name?"

"I'm dreaming. You're in my dream. You are me."

"No... you are more than one."

"You and yours are Dragon," I say.

"Honorable! I am Dragon!" He victory-  
roars again--then he stops and listens to something I cannot hear. "I like it when you listen," says the strange dragon, "and you always do--you will even listen to two-leggeds."

A dragon's footsteps wake me. Purity is carrying two large metal pieces that have wheels on one side. I watch her approach. She's trying to walk and breathe quietly, but the metal pieces are big. As she enters the sleeping cave, one metal piece hits the wall and Purity looks at me. I wink at her.

(gesture of submission, made difficult by the large metal pieces) "Apologies!"

"A dragon who insists on sleeping in the entrance must expect these things," I say. "What are those?"

"Slide-boards!" says Purity, perhaps a bit too loudly. "This dragon made them to help Third explore the sleeping cave."

"Third already had slide-boards," I say.

"These are redundant slide-boards in case of failure of primary slide-boards."

"A spare pair?" I ask.

"Yes," says Purity.

"Good idea," I say.

"Perhaps you would like to test them?" asks Purity.

—

"From here, I will travel one hundred thousand footsteps equivalent!" says Third. He's wearing a neck pack with torch-lights tied on it and a small but similarly-equipped hat as he speaks to the dragons assembled outside the sleeping cave. I'm standing with the empty cave behind me, balancing more than the usual number of cameras on my head and ears, waiting for Third to try the new pair of shiny slide-boards that Purity made for him.

"Boards ready!" says Purity.

Third enters the cave and Purity follows, carrying a pair of shiny metal slide-boards. She puts one of the boards she carries on the floor in front of Third, who puts his right front on it. Purity then holds the other board for Third to put his left-rear paw on it.

Third slides forward for a half-breath. Then he switches paws-on-boards without any dragon's help, and slides forward another half-breath. Sliding without tears! Many dragons victory-roar. Third demonstrates curved sliding, then comes back to the sleeping cave entrance.

The spare pair of slide-boards won't fit in a neck-pack pocket, so they hang separately.

"This is my best torchlight," says Lizabeth. "Take it with you, honorable Third!" She puts a tiny pale-green tube in Third's neck-pack. "It will glow in the dark for a long time."

"Honorable Lizabeth! I might let Micky use it." Third winks at her.

Far too soon, Third and Micky go for a very long roll... past the potatoes, past the dim, and into the darkness. Purity's engineering will help Third travel far into the unexplored side of the sleeping cave, farther than any dragon has gone... but not as far as Purity's rolling robot is going to go. It has only sent boring video so far. I monitor the video, despite the monotony.

Most dragons have left to enjoy the warmth from the Great Fireball before Third and Micky pass the first water cache. Purity is nearest to me, putting tools in pockets on a long piece of canvas.

"This dragon still thinks only the cameras should travel, but Third on the boards is somehow proper," she says.

Purity rolls up the canvas with the tools inside... and I see the outline of two dragon-thumbs drawn on the canvas above empty pockets.

"You forgot your thumbs," I say. She's still wearing them.

"Nope!" she says. "This dragon likes using them to untie knots."

"I thought your electronic thumbs could do that."

"Yes, but this dragon tries not to think about them."

"Why?"

"Mona taught me--she says 'When thwarted, think of something else.'"

"Your big dragon may be able to help," I say.

"Honorable, (gesture of submission) but the delivery ship can only sail so fast, and the weather is not good for fast sailing."

"Am I to assume new thumbs are on that ship?"

"Apologies! Yes, Mona's thumbs are on that ship."

"And your thumbs are..."

"Mona is wearing them, and they are too big for her, but she can use them very well--better than this dragon could, even when she used a head-warmer and was drinking Quick. This dragon decided that Mona and the dragonets will use her thumbs until the ship comes or until Mona decides to sleep."

"Honorable, Purity. Perhaps one of your sisters..."

"Chi has one set, and two of my sisters are using theirs to make a video-game to educate two-leggeds about dragons. The other two are free-lance engineers and have obtained jobs."

Purity's cell phone makes insect noises. She flips it open, then says "Another bad weather report."

"That reminds you of what you're trying not to think about," I say.

Purity winks. "This dragon is not as good a dragon as she might be."

—

After Purity leaves, a few hundred breaths pass uneventfully as I watch a video of tunnel walls sliding past. Then Junior volunteers for the all-watch-and-no-scenting. Honorable!

I walk past the potatoes, then outside the sleeping cave. The Great Fireball shines brightly and the air is warm. Today is a good day for the dragonets to occupy the sleeping cave--and after I scent up Mona, she agrees with me. Lizabeth decides to ride on my back with one of Mona's cameras, but Mona asks for dragonet ears before they can follow.

"You've all been proper dragonets," she says to six little pairs of ears. "Today, Anar is going to teach us an action called sliding."

Mona gets six quizzical looks from a half-dozen identical dragonets.

"We will follow in Anar's footsteps," says Mona, and she encourages the dragonets to ride with Lizabeth.

I carry them just inside the cave entrance--there should be plenty of light for my cameras.

"Here is the sliding-place," I say. "You will slide from here to there, then you will keep walking away from the entrance until you stop leaving footprints, and then you can come back for another slide on that side of the cave."

"Anar," says the little dragon, "there is enough light, but it is on your cameras and not the dragonets."

"Honorable Mona!" I say--then I shed tears. "I'll move the cameras."

I walk into the cave, dragging my tail and making a trail through the tears, then walk back outside.

The dragonets and Lizabeth are lined up properly. Since they haven't been taught how to slide on their feet, I start the sliding by giving each dragon a push once they lie down in the puddle of warm tears. No dragon should have to watch them belly-flop even if the dragonets are young and small enough to endure it. Lizabeth tries it once, but finds her clothes hold the tears too long, so she decides she'd rather video dragonets from my back. The dragonets travel faster and farther as the tear-trail gets longer, and I try to point my head (and cameras) at the excited dragonets when they come running back for another slide.

Dee, Seven, and Graith have followed us and watch with Mona, who's pointing a camera at the dragonets as they slide towards her despite the bad light.

They seem to be sliding well, and can steer without being taught. They'll be sliding on their feet as soon as...

Dee, then Seven, then Graith all whisper at Mona. Dee takes Mona's camera away--then looks at me and winks. Seven and Graith follow Mona and point cameras at her as she joins the line of dragonets waiting for a push. When her turn comes, she says "Two steps, slide." Mona takes two steps and slides on her feet for a breath. I keep my head and cameras pointing at the dragonets... I think I video five of the six little victory-roars that happen after Mona makes sliding look easy.

The next dragonet decides to slide like before and lies on the cave floor. I spin her around once, then push her towards Mona. I hope she's not scared of sliding on her paws--I liked sliding down muddy hillsides when I was a dragonet. The next dragonet (gestures of submission) to me, then does as her sister did. I spin her as well, then push her down the cave backwards.

When the next dragonet does the same, I say "Does any dragonet want to try sliding Mona's way?"

All the dragonets laugh.

I push the dragonet in front of me towards Mona with a slow spin.

The next dragonet winks at me with the eye Mona can't see, then runs for the puddle--and she can accelerate *fast*. Mona says 'Jumping not yet!' just after the dragonet leaps three paces. She lands on all fours in the puddle, then guides her slide until she's gliding straight to Mona... but she suddenly drags a hind claw, which makes her spin one and a half times before Mona catches her. The smack of impact reminds me to breathe... and I wonder if that claw-dragging was accidental.

The next dragonet (gestures of submission) to me and says "Mona's dragonets like sliding best when you push... and the tears are warm."

Mona's dragonets know how to get more tears from this dragon. The puddle of tears grows bigger and warmer.

The dragonet turns another (gesture of submission) into a lie-down. "Honorable!" she says. "Dragonetic Logic," I say, and send the little one on her way.

END

■■■■■■■■

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## epilogue

Many dragons have nick-named him 'Happy.'

Mona's male dragonet and Chi have been working on a piece of paper--he's been writing, and Chi has been advising.

Then I hear Chi say "Mona and Anar will treasure it forever." I look over and see Chi wink at me.

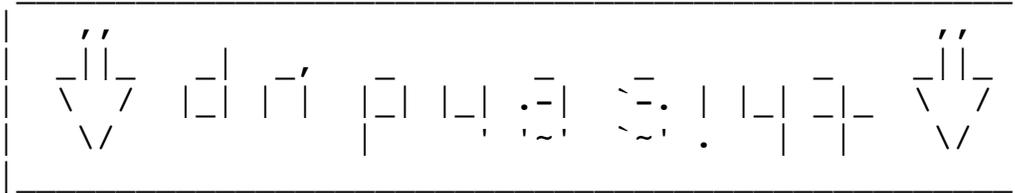
Mona's dragonet asks me for permission to approach, then he gives me a roll of paper. The writing inside is a little erratic, and I see where Chi had to help him with one word.

I remember the light, far away,  
and the big warm ones close.

Then I remember  
they said they'd come with me  
and they did  
as best they could.

I was too young to notice  
but they shrank  
as they followed  
my [hesitant] paws  
stumbling to the light.

I grew with every pace.  
Soon I had a color, and I could walk properly.  
The warm ones remain much bigger than tiny me  
yet are much smaller than they used to be.  
In the Light, I became a dragonet  
and they became Dragons.



"If a man must learn by fiction that no external things which are independent of the will concern us, for my part I should like this fiction, by the aid of which I should live happily and undisturbed." Epictetus