

This is version 1.03 of '**Dragonic Logic (1)**'
Dragonic Logic (1) ver 1.03; Jade and Dragonic Logic (2) ver 1.02; Dragonic Ink (3) ver 1.15;
Dragonic Meandering (4) ver 1.00; and Dragonic Gank (5) ver 1.00 are the latest books in this series.

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NON-\$€RVIAM



Dragonic Logic

version 1.03

Humility

She is just another one of the small gray dragons, but she has Ideas. The bigger dragons will not listen to her, because her ranking is tied to her size and she is a small dragon. Rarely, her dragon-kin will listen, and they say to her that her Ideas are wonderful, but listening is their limit and they never wonder. Today, she is far from the other dragons who still sleep in the very early dawn. Dragons do not like being cold or wet--especially small dragons, and she is smaller than most; but today she must see where the Energy Ball comes from. She has gone as far up the mountain as Big Dragon will tolerate, and she waits.

Dragon eyes opened wide don't miss much, and she sees a green tinge to the light immediately before Energy Ball appears. It quickly grows too bright for such staring. She closes her eyes and thinks what she has learned: very little. Perhaps she knows even less, other than the Energy Ball is much further away than she thought. Even so, she will never again believe the legend of The Spitting.

She is hungry *now* but still has to wait two days before going to the Feeding Grounds. She could be one of many dragons that stare into Big Dragon's talons and scales that they rub and polish merely so that they might eat more often. She could go to the Training and Skills school... but she isn't big enough to polish scales, so she'll have to learn the art of Big Dragon Talon maintenance. Small dragons like herself were usually hind-left specialists, the unlucky foot thrice over--it's hind-left and it's not close to the Big Dragon's Ear. But that way lies stupidity... all she will learn will be how to take care of Big Dragon's Hind Left claws.

She impulsively strikes a piece of soft rock with her right paw.

No! She is Dragonic Logic! She will sit and think in the warm glow of Energy Ball until she knows what to do. If she does not know a way to sneak a food-beast off of the Feeding Grounds, she will hunt lagomophs. The Energy Ball is just above the horizon and the damp and chill fade. She stands and smells the air. Hungry says Food Is That Way. She looks up the mountain, and then back at the Sleeping Caves. All dragons know that breaking one of the Big Dragon's many rules is very very stupid; and that the Big Dragon can catch and eat any of her type in the space of two breaths. Up the mountain or back to school? School is stupid but safe; going up the mountain is stupid and possibly fatal--what to do? Perhaps she could put Big Dragon and The Rules behind her. Big Dragon will probably ignore her because little dragons are useless. Probably. Hungry says Go That Way.

Hungry does not want to go to the top of the mountain, but around and over. Before the sun is overhead, she cannot see the Sleeping Caves far behind her. She is not yet tired, but a flow of water crosses her path. Even though Hungry says go over or through, she goes downstream. Water does not belong on little dragons, especially her type. All dragons know that.

She stops at a place where the water flowed off a high cliff. She has no choice now but to go back or go upstream. She stares into the water that blocks her way, and sees darting shapes that bring water to her mouth. She gets the largest boulder she can lift and throws it at the silvery flickers under the water--and she gets soaked from upper lip to tail tip. She almost screams in agony but realizes she is not hurt, only cold. Hungry grabs a floating water-animal before it disappears over the waterfall, getting both of her paws wetter.

She feels very cold, but Energy Ball warms and dries her as she learns how to eat a fish. Energy Ball does this task again when she is on the other side of the flow of water with more fish in her right paw and jaws. After she eats, she is sleepy but will not--she knows she will sleep until sunset, but she is far from a warm

sleeping cave. Without Energy Ball, she will be very cold later unless she searches now.

Even though she is not hungry, her searches lead her to a place that is very like the Feeding Grounds. She finds a big herd of food-beasts and roars at them for the sheer joy of making them run, since there is no Big Dragon here to make Rules. However, there are two big male dragons--and she didn't even notice their scents! Both are greenish-gray and have ridiculous green hats.

"There's no need to scare them like that," says the bigger male.

"She hasn't been eating food-beasts," says the second, closely investigating her. "She smells terrible."

She performs the gesture of apology.

"Where's your hat, little one?" asks the bigger male.

"What is hat?" she asks.

"Her brains have been damaged by the Great Fireball. Take shelter, little one." Both dragons lead/push her into the shade under a leafy tree.

"We're supposed to bring her to The Boss," says the second dragon.

"She's not stealing food-beasts, so she's not our problem," says the bigger dragon. "Even so, we'd better watch her. She can't take care of herself."

"This dragon will give you no trouble."

The dragons are amazed that she could still speak Dragonic Logically, especially when she tells them that she'd never worn a hat. The big dragons speculate that perhaps little gray dragons can go hatless--but they stay in the shade with her so the Great Fireball will not further bake her brains. As she tells her short story, both of the big dragons shudder when they hear about crossing the river. She did not mention eating the fish, for all the dragons present do not like the odor that still clings to her. Once satisfied with her story, Cee and Junior tell her theirs--they are food-beast Gatherers for The Boss, an immense black dragon who rules their sleeping caves and has numerous followers.

Some of the dragons that follow in The Boss's [sic] footsteps almost look like she does--except they're larger.

When she asks about sleeping caves, the big dragon say they will show her how to sleep without a cave. Cee collects leaves and branches and makes a sort of nest. She does as he does, but the other dragons laugh.

Cee, the larger dragon, gives her an order. "Make your nest closer, Burntbrain. How can we cover you if you are so far away?" She does as she was told, and performs the gesture of apology.

"Why do you do that?" asks Cee, as he pauses breaking branches off of a pine tree.

"It means apology," she explains. "All dragons should know that."

"All of Big Dragon's little gray dragons should, perhaps," says Cee.

"Do it again," says the smaller male. "It's pretty."

"Certainly," she says, and does. "This is the gesture of Submission, and this one means 'I hear and obey!' and..."

"The first one is the prettiest," says Junior. "Do it again."

"Enough of that," rumbles Cee, as he settles on his nest. Both male dragons laugh politely when she copies Cee.

"We cover each other when we sleep outside," says Junior, "and we cover the biggest dragon first.

(gesture of apology)

Junior laughs.

"I'll cover his back," says Junior. "You can put the pine on--Cee likes the pine in front. But don't cover his left front paw." Then Junior gets in his bed. "Now, cover me that way... Yes. More of that pine, but don't cover my right front paw." She tries not to shudder when Cee uses his left paw to help her.

"Now you can get in your nest, and we will cover you," says Junior, with a hint of humor in his voice. She almost did as Junior asks, but she had an Idea.

"You are a strange one, Burntbrain," says Cee, as he watched

her chew right-pawfuls of pine needles. "Is there something wrong with your left paw?"

"No," she says after spitting. "It is merely that the left side is the unclean side, the backwards evil side, and is the source of disease and filth..." Both males laugh. Chewing more pine needles, she replaces several branches that were dislodged from dragon-backs, then spits out another green wad far from the males. When she climbs into her nest, Junior puts Cee's hat on her body (almost big enough), and the big dragons rumble-laugh good-naturedly.

"Your hat is warm," she says.

"It is," says Cee, who removes his hat and puts it out of Junior's reach. "That was a good idea--you smell much better. You are wise and burnt-brained at the same time."

"Your paws have turned green, like mine," says Junior, showing his green-stained right paw to her. "Pine needles will do that if you squeeze them."

"It is harmless," says Cee, as his green-tinged left paw and Junior's green-tinged right paw quickly cover her body with branches except for her front paws. She then covers Cee's left front, then Juniors right front, and then herself as best she is able, and the other dragons help with their mouths. As darkness falls, the dragons sleep while breathing into each other's branch-pile blankets.

In the morning, as they wait for Energy Ball to strengthen, Cee gives some advice. "If you go south, you will find The Boss and the sleeping caves. Stay in the forest until The Boss's [sic] dragons find you, and tell them I sent you and that you lost your hat. The dragons will find some sort of job a little one like you could do--but you will have to wear the hat they will give you. Do not speak much of yourself unless asked--I think it might bring you trouble. If you go further east, you will find the Great River before you will find the source of the Great Fireball."

"Honorable," she says.

"Soon, we will herd the food-beasts south, and many dragons will come to the Temporary Feeding Grounds. It is best if you were not with us then--unless you wish to get a job."

"I understand," she says. "I would like to travel with you, but not south."

"I am sad to lose you," says Cee, eyeing his hat doubtfully. "I have learned much."

"If I was you," says Junior, with a hint of humor in his voice, "I'd stay put for a bit and think about things."

Cee rumble-laugh. "That is a very good idea." The big males walk out from under their branch blankets, but she backs out of hers; lifting branches with her tail and leaving a hollow shell behind. She is examining this hollow and getting an Idea when Junior drops his hat upon her head, and both males rumble-laugh again.

Then Cee and Junior put their hats on and chase the food-beasts before them. She tries to remember her Idea but her thoughts were soon interrupted by a stray food-beast that nearly runs down her throat (as the big dragons say).

That day she did not travel far. She wasn't hungry, and she could see no places north or east where there might be sleeping caves. Near sunset she makes a uneven branch-blanket that she has to crawl under with her eyes closed, but she is warm enough. The next morning, she seeks food-beasts and follows the old scents. She learns of two food-beast feeding grounds, but she does not find any beasts. Carrion birds circle over her head, and she does not like this. Perhaps all the food-beasts are gone? She goes back to the river to get more water-animals. When she washes her jaws and (both) paws afterwards, she sees the river rise and the mountain summit is covered by gray, rumbling clouds.

The next day begins with rain. Her branch-blanket shelter leaks badly, so much so that she quickly abandons it and goes from the wet forest to the river. Cold makes Hungry, and catching enough

fish for herself is impossible because dragon eyes cannot reliably find a fish in a river during a rainstorm, but she persists. After eating a little, she grumpily throws more rocks just to see them shatter because she isn't quite so cold when she is active.

After the storm, she decides she will find a sleeping cave. She travels east, finding no caves, few food-beasts, and no other dragons. Six days later, she comes to a very large muddy river. Her fishing tricks don't work on this big river, and it is much too deep for her to cross holding her head above water. There are no caves here--the land is too flat. If there were caves nearby, dragons would already be in them--there are many food-beasts on this fertile plain, especially across the river.

She will make her own cave in a place like this, far from Big Dragon and The Boss and Hungry. But how?

She slept beneath trees that night, and she is tired. Her best efforts that day resembled a lean-to with a big boulder for a wall, but digging up the trees was slow and tiring. She dreamt that her branch-blanket shed all its leaves and needles while she slept. When she woke, she had an Idea--perhaps she can make a branch-blanket that will shed water!

Energy Ball is hidden by clouds that morning. She is hungry, but that can wait. She faintly smells rain... and Dragon. Two dragons. One dragon is as big and gray/green as Cee, and the other a grayish female not much bigger than she is; both are waiting farther away than the respectful one hundred steps. She backs out of her branch-blanket and performs the gestures of apology and submission. The big dragon laughs, and the smaller dragon repeats her (gesture of submission) and loudly says "You and yours are Dragon."

The big dragon's name was Anar, and after he says "You and yours are Dragon," he apologizes for his laughter. "It's been a long time since I've seen anyone do that."

"I remember," says Chi. "I still respond with the right gesture when I see it. How long have you been shelterless?"

"One storm," she answers.

"Then... I invite you to come to our sleeping cave."

She accepts with a gesture of submission.

"What is your name, little one?" asks Chi.

"The little dragon never had a name to keep," she answers.

"Why not?" asks Chi.

"Names came from others. Names mean listen and obey."

"Then you will not let another name you?" asks Anar.

"Those names do not stay with this dragon."

"Not yet," says Anar. "Someday, someone you love will name you, and your name will be a river of bliss."

"You should save your poetry, and share your field-craft," says Chi. "There is much that a shelterless one recently escaped from Big Dragon needs to know."

"My ears are yours to speak into," she says.

"You have learned of the false law of the left?" asks Chi.

"And of the hats," she says.

"You have done well," says Chi. "There are other lands, with other Big Dragons, yet all have a vision-blocking hat or a one-pawed approach to life, and all restrict access to the feeding grounds. Do you know why that is?"

"No."

"I don't know either," says Chi. "but all dragons who rule do this."

"I know," says Anar. "It's because of dragon potential."

"Do you know what that is?" asks Chi.

"No," says Anar. "Not yet."

"What I know about dragon potential is dark and I apologize for telling you," says Chi.

"This dragon will hear," she says.

"A dragon that will eat other dragons will become as black as Big Dragon, and in time may get as large."

"Big Dragon is not shy about eating rule-breakers," she says.

"Long ago," says Chi. "dishonorable acts did not happen where others could see."

"Big Dragon was smaller then," added Chi. "We were all smaller and fewer in those days--but what happened once can happen again."

The dragons travel behind a herd of food-beasts that the dragons keep together, and they travel north and east. Since the beast travel slowly, the little dragon hears Chi retell of the first herding of food-beasts; and she learns that the nearby beast-herd is the result of much work. Anar retells old stories he'd heard from the time when the Black Dragons were fighting, and the only one now remaining is called The Boss. She tells her story of escape from Big Dragon, again omitting the fishy parts. Their sleeping cave is narrow, but every dragon except Anar can sleep more than ten paces from the opening.

She likes both dragons, and their rules were few and logical. She wants to stay, but one day her Ideas did not want to be seen by any other dragon. She walks directly into a waterless forest until she feels uneasy. She can not smell food-beasts, water, or dragons.

Because she had seen boulders shatter into jagged pieces after throwing them, she discovers the paw-axe and learns to chop down small trees. Because she has seen the hollow left behind after she backs out from under a branch-blanket, she discovers how to make a piney field shelter that might be waterproof. Because she has worn a hat on her back, she discovers capes. She contemplates her work, and notices that most of her scales are stained green from frequent contact with leaves, grasses, and pine needles.

She goes into the shelter that she built and sleeps a short time. During a dream in which she is fleeing many black dragons, she

gets her first meta-Idea. When Energy Ball approaches the horizon, she methodically shreds her capes, knocks down what's left of her shelter, and blunts the edge of every paw-axe--except her favorite one, which she drives mostly into the ground with a single swing.

She knows now that these inventions will bring other Ideas in other dragons. Big Dragon will spread his minions far and wide with capes and shelters, and soon compete with The Boss to gather food-beasts from vast distances. If Gatherers following different big dragons should meet, a few well-thrown sharp stones would settle the matter, with the food-beasts likely going to the dragons that throw first. She thinks of wounded and blinded dragons becoming prey because of Hungry, and if the tales are true, there will be many black dragons... armed with edged throwing stones and wearing capes.

Not all of her Ideas are good ones.

Hubris

Her dreams are disturbing, and she sleeps outside the sleeping cave when the weather permits. Sometimes she dreams of meeting dragons like Cee and Junior that accuse her of stealing food-beasts before they attack. Chi orders the little dragon to follow Anar on a food-beast Gathering.

Anar asks often about her dreams (even the dark ones) for herding the slow food-beasts is dull work. Last night she dreamt of Big Dragon looking directly at her, preparing to bite, and she could not decide whether to run or throw the stones underfoot.

"I'd run forward, begging Drig Bagon to eat me," says Anar.

"Why?" she asks.

"I don't know... but I'm sure Drig Bagon has never seen a dragon wish to be eaten before," says Anar. "Besides, a little dragon like you shouldn't be throwing rocks, even if you are still

small enough to stand on your hind paws."

"Why not?"

"Even if you hit him with a thrown boulder, Driggie won't be hurt."

"Why not throw something smaller and sharper, then?" she asks.

"Smaller and sharper? Try it."

She quickly discovers that she cannot throw pebbles much farther or faster than a boulder. Dragons aren't built that way.

"Now try it this way." Anar picks up a stick and throws it sideways, sending it spinning much farther than any of the rocks she threw.

Using a convenient tree for support, she soon can throw small sticks even farther than the big one Anar threw. She selects a rock that is beast-sized and fails to hit it eight times. "Is it possible?" she wonders.

"Very possible," says Anar. "You will learn. I never did, because..." Anar throws many sticks at the same time, and four bounce off her rock-target.

When Anar begins walking to the next feeding grounds, she follows.

Energy Ball is low in the sky and the dragons begin branch collecting after Anar selects a sleeping place. He explains that they are far from where he hopes to find herds of food-beasts tomorrow because dragon-scents might spook the food-beasts into fleeing.

"There is a trick that little dragons can do," says Anar, who bends the top of a pine tree down to where she can reach it. "Hold this," says Anar. "Hold it tight." Anar lets the pine tree rise just far enough to lift her off of her feet for less than the time of one breath. "Now let go and stand back," he tells her, and after she backs away he lets go of the treetop. After the tree violently resumed its upright growth habit, she performs the gesture of submission.

"I didn't mean it that way," Anar says. "Try this one." This tree is smaller and struggles to lift her off the ground. "Hold it with one paw on each side. Ready?" he asks.

"Ready."

"Hold very tightly for five breaths." Anar lets the tree go, and slowly it carries her up. Instinctively, she grabs the tree trunk with her hind claws as she rises, then sways with the tree. Anar laughs and pulls the tree down again, and she lets go of the tree when her back touches the ground. When Anar lets go of the tree, it springs out of her sight.

"There's a song that goes with the first time you are carried up by a tree, but I have forgotten it. Perhaps you will like this game better." Anar bends sideways the largest tree he can manage.

"Put some branches on it before I let it go. Yes, like that, but not too close to this end." When Anar lets the tree go this time, it throws branches in many directions. She and Anar laugh.

"What happens if I put branches too close to the tree top?" she asks.

"Those branches might come down upon us." says Anar. The next time he pulls a pine tree over sideways, she puts pine branches closer and broadleaf branches farther, and sees where they fly. Anar shares his experiences trying to make flung branches fly farther. She laughs at the branches that land upright and look as if they were small trees—but she must pull one up to see if it has roots. Anar does the pine-bending trick twice more before he decides it's time to prepare for nightfall.

That night, she dreams again that Big Dragon is about to attack her. This time, Big Dragon is distracted by a thrown rock before he bites, and she runs. When she wakes up, she tells her dream to Anar as he helps her rebuild her scattered branch-blanket.

"I only know of one dragon stupid enough to throw rocks at Drig Bagon... me!" says Anar. "Was I in your dream?"

"I do not know," she says.

"If any big dragon should chase you, don't run in a straight line. I don't like it when food-beasts run one way, then another, and Drig Bagon won't like it either."

"Honorable." She finds it easy to sleep next to Anar.

In the morning, the smell of many strange dragons is in the air, and Anar decides they will go to a different feeding ground. "I've been on many food-beast herding trips, and I've never known The Boss to send more than two dragons. Can you smell the dragons that you met once?"

"No... all these dragon-smells are strange to me."

"I wonder why they are so many and so far from home."

"Perhaps The Boss wants all the food-beasts."

"I can't smell any. Those dragons ate them all or scared them away. We will go north, because The Boss's [sic] servants don't like to travel that way."

"Why not?" she asks.

"It's farther away from their sleeping caves. But since our cave is over that way, it is not much farther for us."

They find a few food-beasts at the feeding grounds that Anar knows. They herd them together, and Anar selects one out of the herd. "Chase this food-beast far from here before you eat it, or these will become unmanageable." She does as instructed, then, after wiping her paws and jaws as best she could, she went back to Anar and the herd of food-beasts. "It will be dark soon, but it can't be helped," say Anar, as he separates three food-beasts from the herd. He chases them out of her sight. She gathers leafy branches as she waits and watches for straying food beasts. It was nearly dark when Anar returns, and he seems glad to see her pile of gathered branches. "That was a good thing to do," he tells her.

Anar decides not to try to find a few more food-beasts tomorrow.

"It will be a slow trip home," says Anar, "no matter how many food-beasts we have. But the forest pathways have no food-beast

scent. I do not like this. We will go back to the cave tomorrow."

They set up nests and branch-blankets as best they can in the dark. She and Anar fall asleep quickly. She dreams of a long line of dragons chasing all the food-beasts (and the little dragon) south where The Boss and his servants wait to devour them. She wakes just before Energy Ball is in the sky; Anar is still sleeping. She can smell the food-beasts so she knows they didn't wander far during the night. She wriggles out from under her branch-blanket, which wakes Anar. "Keep the food-beasts from running off," he says sleepily.

"This dragon can do it," she says. She restores a few branches to Anar's 'blanket,' then herds until Energy Ball is in the sky.

"Why did you get up so early?" Anar asks her as they travel.

"A little dragon had another dream," she says, "of a line of dragons driving all the food-beasts south."

"You may still remember the tales of the first herdings. But dragons have learned since then, and now it only takes two dragons to gather food-beasts."

"It takes two dragons for one herd, but perhaps The Boss wants every herd."

"The Boss's [sic] dragons are more than Dig Bragon has in his sleeping caves. Maybe they have become more numerous still (grumble)."

"What will they do when they have eaten all the food-beasts?"

"I cannot remember that ever happening, but Chi once told a story of great hunger that was before the first herdings."

"Will they try to get the food-beasts from Big Dragon's feeding grounds?"

"I do not know how they could. The little river has only been crossed twice that I know of."

"A burnt-brained dragon's story."

"Tell me how you would get food-beasts to cross the little river."

"This one could mouth-carry a killed beast."

"Food-beasts can cross water--you can herd them into it, and

they do not sink. If I asked, would you cross the little river again?

"Yes. The little dragon does not fear water."

"(grumble) ... dishonorable to ask ask anything that I would not do. (grumble) I must learn how this river crossing is done, or I am not fit to lead."

"The water did not hurt this dragon."

"I always thought wet dragons would become ill dragons, but you did not." Anar sniffs the air. "Can you smell water?"

"Yes."

"Watch the food-beasts. Soon, they will smell it, and seek it. Let them. We will keep them together."

She watches the right side of the beast herd for strays until the food-beasts find a small stream and a pond. While the water attracts the food-beasts attention. Anar approaches.

"After they drink, they will want to stay here. To make them move, I will have to scare them. While they are drinking, go upstream and wait. When I roar at them, keep as many as you can from running past you or going that way. Many of them will run in the water."

(gesture of submission)

"That way, there is a large meadow. The food-beasts will gather there if you help them."

"The scent of strange dragons." She smells two big male dragons.

"(grumble) Then the food-beasts must stay together. I must think."

She gets an idea. Soon she is clinging near the top of the tallest pine tree than Anar can safely bend. She does not see any strange dragons (excepting herself). Anar bends the tree again, and she is glad to be on the ground, even if she is on her back. Once she is on her paws, she tries to smell the strange dragons.

Then she says "We smell like we ate food-beasts yesterday."

"No dishonor."

She decides to wash her paws and jaws in the pond, much to

the dismay of the food-beasts.

"Don't step on those plants," says Anar. "They stink."

Anar knows more than a little dragon—and so do the food-beasts.

He goes upstream, and digs and drops a right and left pawful of creek-bed to make room for his head, then mouths a mouthful of watery sand.

She carefully claws one of the thick-stemmed plants out of the ground as she waits.

"Be careful of dragons who drop those as they travel, because the dragon following may step on them," warns Anar.

"I follow in your footsteps."

"There won't be many footsteps today, in hopes the strange dragons go away. The food-beasts will resist leaving this place, and I do not wish to give The Boss's [sic] dragons a scent-trail to the sleeping cave."

"Perhaps the scents of strange dragons fades," she says.

"I think so too," says Anar. "Those dragons are traveling without a food-beast herd."

As they wait, she tells Anar of an Idea which he likes very much. After the dragon-scents fade, the food-beasts are wakened from their sleep by a rain of wet, smelly sand with a few plant parts mixed in. Disturbed more by the nearby smell than by two laughing dragons behind a swaying tree, the food-beasts decide to move. Anar stands by the creek so the food-beasts do not go that way. She stays on one side of the food-beast herd, and then Anar stays on the other, and they both watch for food-beasts that try to escape. They travel more than eight thousand slow steps. When they come to a different small pond, Anar crouches between the herd and the water.

"Keep together!" he says to the food-beasts. The food-beasts obey because she helps them. When the herd settles, Anar orders her to investigate the pond.

By the water, she finds paw-prints from a pair of dragons that

also left their scents here a day ago.

"When we reach the sleeping cave, the strange dragons may be there already. I am sure that Chi will invite them in."

"If so, perhaps they will have news."

"I think it will be news that we will not want to hear."

"I follow in your footsteps."

"I will sleep easier tonight if there are no dragons following us."

"This dragon will check."

"You stay here and watch the food-beasts. If I find dragons, we may fight."

Anar leaves. She waits, and watches the food-beasts watch her. She moves a paws-breadth closer and watches. Ears flick and tongues lick, but the beasts do not move. She moves closer again, but very slowly. When Anar returns, she is lying flat on the ground three steps from the nearest food-beast. Anar laughs and the beasts scatter.

"That was a good trick!" says Anar. "Let the food-beasts drink now." As the thirsty beasts gather by the pond, Anar says "I saw no dragons, but our scent-trail is strong. I think, when we get home tomorrow, I will put the stinky plant smell on all the food-beasts. When they stray, I'll be able to find them."

"You will have a large herd with few food-beasts," she says.

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As she sleeps that night, the little dragon dreams that Anar is showing her how he can carry a tree over one shoulder with his teeth sunk in the trunk. The tree is much longer than he is, and he has the tip of his tail wrapped up in the branches. When she sees his feet are not touching the ground, she is delighted with Anar's trick—but she knows better than to follow him.

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Chi says the story that she and Anar tell of their travels is the worst she has ever heard. "The Boss must have great need of

food-beasts, and I saw too few the last time I went gathering. Perhaps the Great Hungry comes again."

"I do not understand. We have many food-beasts," she says.

"Not many. Even so, other dragons may come for them."

"She's right," says Anar. "Not many. I will seek more soon."

"What ended the Great Hungry?" she asks.

"The four who invented herding and branch-blankets," says Chi.

"If there are no food-beasts here," says Anar, "we will travel to a new place."

"We were shelterless once, all of us. We survived," says Chi.

"Where will we go?" the little dragon asks.

"The best direction is north," offered Chi.

"There are many dragons south, and a river blocks east, and west is Dig Bragon," explains Anar. "I have been in those hills and mountains, and have never seen large herds of food-beasts or sleeping caves there."

"There were many food-beasts across the river," says Chi.

"I have also seen that," agrees Anar. "I have also chased food-beasts into the Great River, and they do not sink."

"Do the beasts perish?"

"No. The herd-beasts get out of the Great River on the wrong side. (grumble)"

She grumbles too, then adds "If the food-beasts can cross the river, then we can. I will not be less than a beast!"

"How could that be?" asks Anar. "Both you and Chi have crossed the little river."

"We must cross the Great River, for Big Dragon owns all the good places for food-beasts," says Chi.

"I think this too," says Anar.

"Then it is true for us," she says. "But the river is too deep for this one. This dragon tried and failed."

"Too deep for the little dragon?" asks Anar. "I will mouth-carry you." He shows them his sharp teeth, then winks at her.

The dragons laugh.

"I will not live with Hungry again," says Chi.

"But we have some food-beasts, and we may find more," she says. "It is good here."

"We can always leave," says Anar. "But other dragons may come here first."

"Dragons much bigger than Anar," says Chi.

The only dragon she knows who is bigger than Anar is Big. "Why would Big Dragon come here?" she asks.

"Not Big Dragon, and not The Boss, yet dragons as black as the carrion birds will come here. It is only a matter of time."

"You are sure of this?" asks Anar.

"Yes. I will leave," Chi says. "I will get across the Great River somehow."

"We will take some food-beasts," says Anar. "Perhaps they can carry you."

"Take all the food-beasts," she says, with a (gesture of submission). "I follow in your footsteps."

"The weather is good for traveling dragons," says Chi. "and I don't like it. I would wish for rain."

"Perhaps you will get your wish," Anar says.

The dragons decide to leave the next day if there is no scent of rain.

During the night, the scent of a strange dragon wakes her. She wakes Anar when she tries to squeeze around him, for he is sleeping nearest the entrance. Two breaths later, he is hunting the stranger. She follows.

Despite the darkness and cold, Anar quickly finds a female dragon with blunted talons. She is so tired that Anar has to speak before she notices him. Anar does not chase her away, but accepts her.

"You and yours are Dragon," says Anar.

"I am one one four seven."

"What do you seek?" asks Anar.

"I submit and obey."

"What do you seek?"

"To obey and submit."

"What is wrong with her?" the little dragon asks.

"Seven is cold, tired, and hungry, and she speaks as The Boss requires. We will bring her back to the sleeping cave."

"Tell us," says Chi, "why you are wandering shelterless."

"The dragons in section D with numbers over one thousand were deemed surplus by The Boss."

"How many dragons were... surplus?" asks Chi.

"Personal estimation, twenty redundancy notices delivered. Precise data is unavailable."

"Seven, close your eyes," says Chi, who then winks at her and Anar. The dragon is sleeping deeply within ten breaths.

"I thought so," says Chi. "This one tried to walk all night."

"Why?" she asks.

"If the night is cold, it is better for a shelterless one to keep moving," says Chi. "It is not as good as a branch-blanket. Anar, what did she say?"

"The Boss told about twenty of his dragons to leave his territory. I think this dragon escaped."

"Escaped?" Chi asks. "How is this together?"

"Sometimes The Boss tells his dragons that they are surplus and must leave his territory. He goes hunting the next day and his dragons are forbidden to follow, yet all dragons can see the gatherings of carrion birds. This dragon made a three-day journey in a day and a half, and so escaped."

"Perhaps," says Chi. "Perhaps not. The Boss could still follow this one."

"Not for only one female," says Anar.

"What one dragon can find, other dragons can find," says Chi.

"We found *her*," says Anar, "but I follow in your footsteps."

In the morning, all the dragons go to the feeding grounds.

Seven is very sleepy afterwards, and Chi decides the dragons should wait another day before traveling. The dragons take turns watching and scenting, but do not find any other strange dragons.

When Energy Ball approached the horizon, Seven awakens and Anar begins the long process of teaching her to speak properly. Chi examines Seven and says that she should eat again before nightfall, so Anar travels with her to the 'communal asset storage.'

She points her ears at Chi and waits for her words.

Chi stands and scents. "We must leave soon. There will be many like her, and then worse."

"When you were before the Great Hungry, did any dragon warn you?" the little dragon asks.

"Certainly. Some dragons did foresee. My best friend fled before the last food-beasts were eaten."

"Tell more," she asks. (gesture of submission) "Did the big dragons fight over the last food-beasts?"

"No, because The Baron made a Rule that said no fighting. He was before Big Dragon."

"What happened to him?"

"I don't really know. Some brave dragons attacked him. The Baron won, but the dragons managed to put a big stick in his eye. The Baron's wounds smelled terrible and nearly every dragon fled at his approach. I fled The Baron's sleeping caves shortly thereafter. I found this cave, and made it bigger by moving dirt. Then, when Anar was shelterless, I found him and brought him here. He was much easier to understand than Seven."

"How did you cross the little river?" she asks.

"I didn't mean to! I was chased by black dragons. I was running with my feet in the water, but the black dragons found me, so I had to go through the water. I kept my head up and ran, fear and terror pushed me, and it was very cold, and sometimes I could not breathe."

"What will you say to a group of dragons that wish to cross the Great River?"

"Go to the Great River and see what can be seen, says Chi.
"Then think of a way to cross."

"I follow in your footsteps."

"I think only of fleeing."

"Your idea may work."

"My idea is traveling fast and quiet with a slow and noisy herd of food-beasts. My idea will put us far from this sleeping cave. My idea will take us through the land of The Boss only to walk to a river too deep and wide to cross. Since The Boss is south, if we cannot cross the Great River, we must walk upstream, where the food-beasts are few and no sleeping caves are known."

The little dragon does not sleep well that night.

The next morning is gray and the smell of rain is strong in the rumble air. Anar decides he will check for strange dragons and nearby food-beasts and forbids any other dragon to follow him.

"Anar says that you are the resource manager," Seven says to Chi. "I cannot pay for what I have eaten. I submit to your arbitration."

"That's good, I think," says Chi. "When the weather changes, we will travel. Do you feel well enough?"

"I submit and obey."

"You try," Chi says to the little dragon.

"Do your paws hurt?" she asks.

"I am a hundred percent present! Ready for orders!"

"You should not ask for orders from a small one who has not yet laid an egg," she tells Seven.

"I submit to your judgement or to arbitrators of your choice."

"That's good, perhaps," says Chi.

"Did you have a job?" the little dragon asks Seven.

"I was proud to serve in Hat Construction as a Braider."

"Can you show what you did?"

"It would be an honor, but I lack the raw materials. Do I have

permission for grass-gathering?"

"Granted," says Chi. Seven leaves the sleeping cave and the little dragon follows. Seven makes a pile of the longest grass stalks, and the little dragon copies the behavior. Seven picks up the pile of grass she has collected in her mouth and returns to the sleeping cave, so she does the same. Anar finds them before they reach the sleeping cave.

"That looks like a fun game," he says, "but I don't want to act like a food-beast right now."

The little dragon makes a food-beast noise around a grassy mouthful.

"No strange dragons, no new food-beasts, and rain is coming," Anar tells Chi. "Perhaps we should not travel today."

"I follow in your footsteps. Seven is going to show us something," says Chi.

"I see," says Anar, and he winks at the dragons. "Is Seven making a head constriction?"

"Hat construction! I submit and obey."

"A little dragon would like to learn," she says.

"It is quite boring," says Anar. She finds the truth in those words but with frustration added. Her long, sharp talons make working with grass difficult. Seven's braid quickly grows longer. Chi is slightly better at braiding than she is, but would rather sleep. Anar looks out at the rain and constantly sniffs the air.

"What must happen to make this braid into a hat?" the little dragon asks.

"I will show you," says Seven, who loops her braid, then uses a blunted talon to push several strands of long grass again and again through both braids until the grass is completely tangled. When Seven picked up the top part of the braid, it stays looped. "It will take many such loops to make a hat."

Unlike Seven's blunted claws, her talons damage the loop of braided grass and she fails to tangle them together. Instead, the

little dragon watches. Seven put small bunches of grass between the braids before she tangles them together. When the braid circles around again, she uses the unbound strands of grass to tie the braids together, and two of her talons are notched in a way useful for knot-tying.

Most of the long grass collected earlier is now tied up in Seven's loops of braided grass. Seven gathers a small pawful of what remains. "This is a herd of grass, so to keep them all together, dragons must run around the herd." Seven makes a long thin bundle with the grass she holds, then twists several evenly spaced strands around the outside. Seven works new grass into the end of her bundle, and 'twists the herd' a few turns with one paw while guiding the 'dragons' with a talon that has grooves in it. "This is an inferior process, but suitable for hats," says Seven.

"What is an inferior process?"

"This is a product of an inferior process." Seven pulls the grass bundle apart.

"I follow in your footsteps." (gesture of submission)

"Dragon resource one one four seven seeks new task."

"Sleep," says Anar.

"I submit and obey."

"This dragon will keep watch," she says to Anar.

Anar says nothing.

"This dragon smells it, but does not know what it is."

"It is fire. Sometimes it comes after the dry side of storms. All dragons should flee from it."

"What is fire?" she asks.

"It is the color of the Great Fireball and it darkens the air. It makes an evil smell, sometimes so strong it hurts a dragon to breathe. It can consume many trees. The food-beasts will flee if they see it."

"What can we do?"

"Avoid it. That is a job for the big dragon."

"Then the big dragon should sleep now, and the little dragon will

watch-and-scent."

The big dragon lies down in the back of the sleeping cave. "Pardon the interruption," says Seven, "but is it possible that she is the Team Leader when Chi sleeps?"

"That's not important," says Anar. "The little dragon is wise in her way."

The smoke smell lingers after the rain stops. After fifteen hundred breaths, Chi wakes and orders the little dragon to sleep.

In a dream that night, Anar is again carrying a long tree with his tail is wrapped in the branches, and his feet only pretend to touch the ground. This time she follows in his imaginary footsteps, but suddenly she cannot walk. She wakes. Chi is licking her nose and has a paw on her shoulder.

(gesture of submission) "This one has caused trouble."

"Lie down again and sleep," orders Chi. "Forget this happened."

It is still dim when she is awaked by Anar leaving the sleeping cave. She follows him to the feeding grounds and helps encourage reluctant food-beasts to form one herd. When Energy Ball is in the sky, Chi and Seven come to assist. Seven has loops of braided grass loosely wrapped around her neck.

During the heat of the day, the herd wants to stop in the shade of a grove of trees by a creek. Anar reluctantly lets them. "If there weren't so many trees, I could keep them moving," he says.

"I will watch the herd," says Chi. "Any food-beast that is eaten now cannot be taken away by other dragons."

"I did not understand the instructions," says Seven.

"Chi expects trouble," says Anar. "Perhaps hungry dragons will come for the food-beasts soon, so we should eat now."

"I may decide to eat?"

"Yes. I don't always know when you are hungry," says Anar.

"But will that scare the other food-beasts?" asks Seven.

"Herd your food-beast far from here as I did. If you smell any strange dragon... nevermind. I will go with you.

"Will there be protection of communal assets?" asks Seven.

"If there is, the big dragon will fight."

"Production leads to profits and prosperity! Follow the big dragon!" says Seven--a little too loudly.

The little dragon is the first to finish, so she searches for and finds Chi, who is still watching the herd. Chi does not want to eat yet, so she washes in the creek where Chi can see. The food-beasts complain loudly. "The scent of dragon is lessened this way," she explains.

Chi winks at her. "That is good. Do you smell anything?"

"Smoke, and many food-beasts, and three dragons, and one wet dragon."

"Soon," says Chi, "I will take you hunting with me and show you what is useful for a little dragon. I smell lagomorphs."

"I follow in your footsteps."

"Long ago," says Chi, "before the Great Hungry, there were many food-beasts. Then the big food-beasts were all eaten. I learned to hunt the small beasts then. What I learned I offer to you."

When he returns with Seven, Anar is delighted with the idea. "Let's hunt the lagomorphs. The bigger food beasts sometimes fall into the lagomorph holes and hurt themselves if a dragon scares them enough. Once, when I hurt my paw... I haven't hunted these in a long time," says Anar.

"Not yet, Anar! I want to show my way first. The little dragon cannot hunt like a big dragon."

Chi puts rocks in most of the beast-holes, then makes a few throwing sticks as she flattens the grass near the remaining open holes with her feet and tail. She mouth-carries the throwing sticks and hides. The dragons wait, but then Anar starts forward.

"This hunt ends early," says Chi.

"Not so! Your sticks won't hurt me. Your way will work if you have patience, but this way is..." Two front paws together, he curves his talons into the grass and dirt underneath and throws it all upwards. Two squirming food-beasts lie motionless when they hit the ground. Anar does this again, but this time barely throws the grass and dirt out of the hole he makes. One of the little beasts runs until Chi's stick hits it.

When the females each eat one of the small beasts, both the little dragon and Seven copy Chi's motions. Anar laughs.

The afternoon passes slowly, as "micromanaging food-beasts" is often dull. The food-beasts will not go where the smoke-smell is strongest. "Food-beasts," says Anar, "do not understand that the fire has gone, yet the creek is still there." It is nearly dark when the food-beasts and the dragons find a mutually acceptable drinking-place.

"Fire has passed over the land ahead of us," says Anar. "The food-beasts will find nothing to eat, except for what Seven carries."

"I obey and submit," says Seven.

"The creeks I know may be fouled. The food-beasts must travel until they find good water, and I do not know which way to herd them," says Anar. "I will think."

"The smell of strange dragons!" The little dragon smells big males.

"Eat, then sleep," says Chi.

"You do what I do," Anar says to Seven. "Tomorrow, we may start early."

As usual, the little dragon finishes eating first. The water is very cold for washing, and as she chews needles from a pine tree she remembers Cee and Junior. Then she has an Idea. When she tells the dragons about the Idea, Seven wants to help because Hat Constructors tell lots of stories when they work. Anar says

they are both herding imaginary food-beasts, and the strange dragons will chase them away. Chi tells them to run if they smell a black dragon of any size.

Seven works while Chi mostly covers her with branches. Seven makes a very ugly hat out of the now blood-stained grass braid that she carries.

Chi would cover her with branches too, but she is making a cape and cannot stand still. Seven watches and, shaking off her branch-blanket, makes another cape. When the little dragon puts on her cape, Seven looks at it, then weaves in more branch-tips. The little dragon feels warmer.

Anar demonstrates how to kill a food-beast at night without scattering the herd. Seven puts the slain food-beast over her head and onto her shoulders, and her cape over that.

She and Seven walk south, choosing to pass over the places burned clear. When the dragon-scents become strong, Seven shouts, "Permission to approach, SIR!"

"Granted," a big dragon says from under a branch-blanket.

"Introducing the Grand Queen's Hatchling, The Emperor's Third Male Spawn!"

"You can put that down now," she says to Seven, who does so.

"Presenting a Gift from His Future Magnificence, Spawnling Three!" says Seven.

"That's enough, slavey," she says.

"Where did you get this?" says the big dragon.

"Royal herd four!" says Seven.

"Why did you come here?" asks the big dragon.

"Once, I was lost in this territory... The Boss, is it?" asks the little dragon.

"Yes, your Eminence!" says Seven.

"Two very nice dragons helped me get back home to my parents. I should like to reward them properly. Do you know Cee?"

"Maybe, and maybe not," says the big dragon. "Whose turn is

it?"

"Mine," says another dragon.

"Come eat this before I do," says the big dragon.

"One can't expect pre-heated sleeping places out here, but politeness to a dignitary costs nothing," she says.

"Sixth, eat that far from here. Is that better?"

"That helps," she says.

"Can you get more food-beasts?"

"Certainly, but the dragon that gives is bigger than the dragon that takes."

"Perhaps," says the big dragon.

"In the morning, we will send some food-beasts south. You do not need to follow us."

"We will come with you. The Boss talks of food-beasts, but yours I can smell."

"But will you serve, or just take what you can get?"

"Now it is you that is lacking politeness."

"Perhaps," she says, "or perhaps not. This dragon travels with three servants, and we did not bring enough food-beasts to feed eight hungry dragons for many days."

"We will take what you give us, and no more," says the big dragon.

"That is true dragon-speech," she says. "Come with me, and this dragon shall see what we can spare."

"I obey and submit."

"True-dragons need never say that to me again. It is cold now, and you have no capes. Can you follow?"

Before Energy Ball has lightened the sky, she and Seven lead eight hungry dragons to their food-beasts.

"I predicted this," says Chi, who shakes off her branch-blanket.

"Permission to approach!" shouts a large dragon.

"Granted," says Anar, from under his branch-blanket.

"I was First in the Team of Gatherers, and a servant of The Boss. Now I am nothing."

"You and yours are Dragon," says Anar. "Where are the females that brought you here?"

"Second and Third, bring the females!"

Two big dragons approach. "I smell them, yet I do not see them," says Anar.

"Here!" says the little dragon. "On the back of Second."

"Announcing The Emperor's Third Male Spawn!" says Seven.

"You were too slow that time, slavey," she says.

"I'm giving one hunnert percent, SIR!" says Seven.

"You would have tried to make me Ninth," says Anar. "because that is the Rules, which are what The Boss says."

"Yes," says First. "I understand why this was a job for the females. But I don't like the deception."

"Would you have believed the little one?" asks Anar. "Or a shelterless dragon that The Boss chased away?"

"Perhaps I would have chased them away," admits First.

"They woke up eight hungry dragons in the middle of the night with only one cold food-beast as a present," says Anar.

"Perhaps you should ask Sixth how happy he was to eat," says First.

"Your scent did not tell how hungry you were," says Chi. "The little one did no harm."

"True," concedes First. "But I don't like to look foolish."

(gesture of submission) "If the little dragon has no new friends, then her labors were for nothing."

"Your labors were not for nothing," says First. "You did as you were ordered. May you always find food-beasts under your paws."

"What were you seeking?" asks Chi.

"That's a soldier's secret," says First. "But some dragon says

that at least twenty enemy-of-The-Boss's [sic] dragons are on the wrong side of the little river."

"Perhaps dragons will fight there, says Anar. "If so, only the black dragons and the carrion birds will win. We will go east."

"That way is burned ground," says First. "The food-beasts will be that way, and we will be hungry soon."

"We will go east," says Anar. "Many dragons will go to those hills... too many. We will look for food-beasts and unburned lands in the east."

"I submit and obey," says First.

"No," says the little dragon. "Do not use those words you were taught."

"Why not?" asks First.

"The Boss wants dragons to say submit and obey many times every day. Those words belong to him. Perhaps The Boss is not your friend."

"Perhaps not," says First.

"Not now," says Second. "We're disobedient."

"We're going to the Great River," says Anar. "Perhaps The Boss will not go there."

"There may be other dragons along the Great River," says Second. "Many dragons know of the herds on the wrong side."

"That is good," says Anar. "Perhaps some dragon knows how to cross."

"Perhaps some dragon will know of a sleeping cave," says Chi.

The little dragon has several problems at once. She is trying not to fall off the back of Second as they travel at a pace far beyond her abilities while she scent-seeks rain and/or dragons and/or food-beasts in a land so blackened it hurts her eyes to look at it. Then...

"Can you... tell us... a tale... or sing?" says Second.

"A story," says Third.

"I know a story," says Seven. "Hat constructors know lots of stories. Once, there was an Emperor and the Rock of Rule. The Emperor looked like The Boss does now, and he lived in a land so far away that you'd come back here before you'd find it. The Flathead dragons lived there too, and one day The Emperor decreed that a particular stone was the Rock of Rule. The stone was beautiful, but very heavy--so heavy that the Emperor himself was the only dragon strong enough to move it. The Emperor says that was proof of his fitness to rule the Flatheads."

"That makes... no sense," says Third.

"I know," says Seven, "but Emperors talk that way. Not all of the Flatheads believed the Emperor."

"Food-beasts... tomorrow," says Third. The male dragons almost laugh.

"One day, a group of four gray dragons used a tree and some stones to push the Rock of Rule wherever they wanted. Many dragons laughed when they saw this, including the Emperor. "You have moved the stone," he says. "Now you must move the talons." He stomped his massive forepaw in front of the group, and laughed at his own joke.

The Emperor thought that would be the end of the story, but the four gray Flathead dragons had nothing to lose. Lag, the best speaker of the four, said 'If it would please your majesty, to whom we obey and submit, we would like to try.' The Emperor, like all really big dragons, was very strong but slow to move, and in the space of one breath the gray dragons tried to force the tree between his talons and the Earth. Then The Emperor flicked his talons at the nearest of the gray dragons.

The sight of an innocent dragon's blood on the Emperor's claws enraged every true dragon. That night, a hundred dragons blocked the only way into the only sleeping cave big enough for The Emperor, but when he approached, all the dragons fled. The Emperor's staff weren't at their posts, and his sleeping cave was in a disgusting condition. The Emperor got angry, and sought

dragons to punish. The dragons fled before and behind, but still, The Emperor caught a few. The remaining Flatheads remained angry. The next day several dragons were caught by The Emperor Himself defecating in his sleeping cave...

"Then what?" asks Second.

"The Emperor threw rocks at them, many rocks at once, and..." Seven closes her eyes for a moment. "At night, the dragons talked, since even Emperors must sleep. During the next day, nearly all the dragons fled when The Emperor approached. The Emperor patrolled the feeding-grounds, so some dragons still obeyed him so they could eat, but the Emperor's anger meant his remaining subordinates sometimes felt talons or teeth even if obedient and submissive.

The next day, a dragon named Underfoot (who looked very like that one [Chi] but older and disobedient) started climbing the mountain over the Emperor's sleeping cave. Climbing that mountain was forbidden and meant death, but The Emperor did not notice her until she was higher than even he could throw a rock... so he became angrier and angrier. He shouted at her many threats, but Underfoot kept climbing. Many dragons were watching the Emperor to see what would happen. The Emperor whispered to a dragon such as he is (Anar), and that dragon started climbing, and in time he overtook Underfoot. The dragon grabbed her tail and says, 'I got you! Now, you catch me!' and quickly climbed up the mountain even higher. The Emperor was so furious he began to climb the mountain himself, and his climbing disturbed so many rocks that the Flathead dragons fled the falling stones and watched from many many paces away.

Then the dragon Underfoot shouts 'Do it!' at the highest dragon, who says 'not yet.' Underfoot climbs slowly and the Emperor climbs fast, and Underfoot shouts again and again at the highest dragon, who keeps saying 'not yet.' When the Emperor was twenty steps behind her she shouts 'It's not as easy as you think! as loudly as she can... and then the rocks bigger than any dragon

slid and rolled and all three dragons were sent down into the valley with terrible noise and dust.

If you ever go into Flathead country, the rock pile that filled the valley is still there. If you go to see, don't speak much or loudly. Flathead dragons do not like noise when they are near that mountain and rock pile.

"What happened... to the rest...of the dragons?" asks Third.

"When we get to the river, we will find out, for we will be very much like them. Perhaps I forgot to tell you that the sleeping caves were covered by many rocks that no dragon could move -- not the strongest dragons, and not the gray dragons with their trees. The Flatheads were shelterless."

"What happened?" asks Eighth. "What did... they do?"

"I give the story to you. Perhaps someday, a storyteller named Eighth will tell us what the Flatheads could have done."

The burned land reaches to the Great River's edge, and Anar decides to go upstream. The little dragon agrees with First that any food-beasts will be far from the burned land. As they travel, she is fascinated by the view of the Great River from atop Second's back. Second often tosses pawfuls of whatever is handy into the wind and water, and the little dragon enjoys that very much. When the dragons walk among trees again, Energy Ball is low in the sky. The scent of food-beasts comes from across the water, but no dragon speaks of it.

Anar chooses a sleeping place, and she asks him if he would take the branches off of the trees closest to the water, because she has an Idea. Anar doesn't want to mouth-carry branches, so she sits on his back and steadies a pile of branches that Second and Third make there. They make several trips and each time the pile Anar carries is larger as she learns how to stack them.

That night, the little dragon dreams that Chi is speaking to her, but when she wakes, she cannot remember what she heard Chi

say.

That morning, she spends much time throwing sticks and grass into the water, both on and off of Second's back. When Energy Ball is high in the sky, she is ready to try her idea. Anar and Third drag two de-branched trees into the Great River at a place she chooses. The river flows slowly and is wide, but the water twists after the Great River curves, and she could almost see the twisting from Second's back. Anar pushes the trees into the water and she walks on them both. The trees settle a little deeper in the water, and she has to struggle to keep the trees close together for the space of one breath. When she feels in control, she says "This dragon is ready."

"I do not like this idea," says Anar, "but it will probably work. The wind is good."

"I can tie the logs together," says Seven.

"Honorable," she says, "but this dragon does not wish to wait." The river is trying to push her trees south.

"Wait! Use this!" shouts Chi. Chi is following First, and he is dragging another de-branched tree.

"Wait!" shouts Chi again. She feels the trees she is standing on tremble, and looking back she sees the tip of a third de-branched tree laid upon the ones she stands upon. "Ready?" asks Anar, who nearly walks into the water to prevent her trees from pointing down-river.

"Hold very tightly," says Chi. "Anar, you push from this side after you let go."

"Hold tightly, little one," says Anar. "Let's push!"

The trees she stands upon surge forward, but the right tree wishes to get ahead of the other. She struggles against this for half of a breath, then takes a tiny left-step forward. Then little dragon waits as the trees she stands upon drift closer to the other side.

When Energy Ball is low in the sky, she is very tired. Once she and her trees had drifted close enough to the far shore of the Great River for her to jump, she gathered three different herds of food-beasts and chased them into the water. Each herd swam across and onto the farther shore where she knew her friends were waiting. Now she is tired and walks by the water. She sees Chi on the wrong side of the river. She roars as loudly as she can, and Chi victory-roars back. Then the little dragon eats a food-beast that was injured in today's herding. It is delicious, a type she does not know with only one horn. She washes afterwards and makes a pile of branches to crawl underneath. She sleeps before Energy Ball leaves the sky.

She dreams of Chi speaking into her ears. "A very tired dragon can be sleeping shelterless and far from her friends in a strange land, yet without Fear. The littlest dragon can gather and chase three herds of food-beasts across the Great River in the space of a half-day. The big dragons can carry the little ones across the burned lands in less than one day. Dragon, if you live wisely and well, nothing can stop you."

She wakes and goes to the river, and the little dragon sees Seventh and Eighth on the wrong side of the river. They victory-roar when they see her, and she victory-roars back. When they start walking upriver, she follows on her side. Seventh runs, but Eighth walks as she trots.

Soon she sees dragons--including six new dragons, all sleeping despite the daylight. Chi is throwing leaves in the water and in the air. She walks to where Chi's leaves may blow upon her, but the river gets them all. Anar and First bring two tree trunks and put them side-by-side in the Great River, and Chi steps upon them wearing loops of grass braid. Seven wraps more of her work around the two tree trunks, and she finishes before four of First's dragons finish mouth-dragging a very long tree trunk to the Great

River's edge. She can see Chi talking, and the four dragons attempt to push Chi across with their long tree and their labor.

In the space of a breath, she can see that Chi is turning, and two breaths later Chi is shouting. The dragons on shore stop pushing, and Chi hits the water with her tail as she floats the wrong way. She has to force herself to stop watching Chi to see Anar and five dragons carrying the very long tree trunk on their backs faster than Chi is floating. The dragons put their tree trunk in the water. Chi is slowly floating away from them. The six dragons push their floating tree trunk at the front of Chi's trees. She cannot see what happens next, if anything. Then the little dragon must run along the Great River's edge.

She outruns Chi's scent before she stops. Chi still floats on the water even if she is facing the wrong way, and Energy Ball is still shining upon all the dragons. She waits. Energy Ball is still high in the sky when Chi is able to bite the pine sapling she is mouth-carrying, and she pulls Chi to her side of the Great River.

"The place you chose was a good one," says Chi as she steps on the riverbank.

"It was a good wind. It carried your scent," she says.

"Anar says that when a dragon does this (mouth-grasping), then more food-beasts are wanted on his side of the Great River. He says soon he will walk upriver until he finds a place that big dragons can cross, and I think all the dragons will follow him."

"I will follow in your footsteps."

"We should travel to the place where you chased the herds into the water. When we get to the forest, our traveling will be as slow as food-beasts," says Chi.

"We do not have a big dragon to follow," the little dragon says.

They take turns leading. When Energy Ball is low in the sky, Chi selects a sleeping place three hundred steps from the river and high on a hill. She branch-gathers when Chi does.

"There is a much larger hill there," says Chi. "Tomorrow, I will climb it to search for a sleeping cave. Will you will watch for (mouth-grasping)?"

"Yes. I follow in your footsteps," she says.

"Tonight," says Chi, "There will be no big dragons bending pine trees or throwing branches or wanting stories."

She does not understand. "What will they do?" she asks Chi.

"Anar wanted to go upriver faster than First," says Chi. "First wanted to walk no faster than a herd of food-beasts."

"Anar will leave soon?" the little dragon asks.

"Yes," says Chi. "Many dragons will follow him. We are to search for sleeping caves as we travel, since we will not be able to keep up on this side."

"This dragon will try," she says.

"No," says Chi. "Anar will not expect that to happen. What you and I did, other small dragons can do. Seven will travel with Anar."

"I follow in your footsteps."

"Seven may chase food-beasts across the Great River one at a time, but she will learn."

As Energy Ball becomes lower and dimmer, the dragons make branch-blankets. She tells Chi of the dream she had the previous night.

"I have wondered about that," says Chi, "but from the upwind side. There are many kinds of food-beasts, but all have fur and four legs no matter how big or small they are. There are many kinds of lagomorphs, and even more kinds of the smaller seed-eaters. But there is only one kind of dragon, and no other beast with scales."

"Dragons do not fit in other ways," continues Chi. "Dragons can see in the dark better than any food-beast, but then is too cold for dragons to hunt. No other beast eats food-beasts except dragons. Any big food-beast can cross the Great River if it must, but bigger

dragons cannot; only the hungry-when-small-never-be-tall dragons can cross by floating on trees. No other beast can talk except to scream a warning, yet dragons can talk and count and sing and tell stories. The only conclusion that makes sense is that dragons do not belong in this land, and must have come from another place. We did not come from upriver, since I have been there and do not think the land is fit for dragons."

"Downstream is The Boss," she says.

"Further than The Boss's [sic] territory, there is a vast dragonless land without caves. The first dragons must have come from that direction, even though that land is now dry forest with few food-beasts."

"Would you like to hear a dark story?" she asks.

"Such stories are best heard with the Great Fireball... but speak."

"Once, there were dragons. They lived long, and laid many eggs. Soon, the food-beasts were eaten, so the dragons and their hatchlings moved to new places. But the hatchlings grew, and all the food-beasts were eaten again, so the dragons moved again. Soon, there were so many dragons that some dragons had to live in places they didn't like, where the nights were cold and there were not enough sleeping caves. We are those dragons."

Chi laughed. "That story is like mine. I will help. When the dragons eat all the food-beasts and there are no new places to live, Great Hungry rules and dragons die and black dragons come to be. What dragons once knew is lost."

"What was lost?" she asks.

"I remember we had many kinds of food-beasts to choose from... and the sleeping caves were very good. I can remember a Great Fire that destroyed our sleeping cave, but that cannot be right."

"There are some strange food-beasts here. Perhaps you will find some food-beasts you remember," she says. Chi smells the air.

"Somehow," she asks, "we must not become so many dragons that we eat all the food-beasts and destroy all the trees. How is that done?"

"I do not know," says Chi. "But a male dragon has yet to cross the river--your hatchlings are not yet eggs."

That night, she dreams that Seven had tied two logs together. Anar mouth-carries them to the river, throws them in, then wades after them. He pounces upon the two logs, and by pushing down on the logs with his front paws, he can hold his head above the water. He laughs and begins bouncing up and down on his hind legs, deeper and deeper, farther and farther away.

"Hold tightly!" she shouts.

Anar winks at her. "I can walk on my tail!"

Chi wants to hear the dream that woke them both. "Anar would like that dream," says Chi before the dragons sleep again.

In the morning, she sees three strange dragons on the wrong side of the Great River. One of the dragons is an immature male and is limping. These dragons are watching the food-beasts closely and do not see her, and she does not roar.

"I suppose," says Chi, "that Anar decided to leave at night. Those must be new dragons, or perhaps just unwilling to travel. But I do not understand why they left at night."

"Perhaps they didn't like the smell," she says.

"The carrion smell?" asks Chi.

"That and other scents. The smell... it reminds this little one of Big Dragon and his carrion birds. This dragon can see only three dragons keeping food-beasts out of the Great River, but no other dragons, yet the beasts do not wander away."

The food beasts begin moving to the river. The dragons that can run do so in opposite directions. The half-grown male limps into

the river with the food-beasts, and by holding onto the necks of two large beasts, he can keep his head above the water.

"So that is what The Boss looks like," says Chi.

She stops watching the dragon in the water and sees Big Dragon. He looks big enough to cross the Great River. "That is Big Dragon. We should hide."

"He can't cross the Great River, or he would have already," says Chi.

The little dragon hides. "Perhaps you are right," she says.

Chi hides. "There weren't any dragons on this side of the river before."

She looks across the water. Big Dragon is looking upriver, and does not seem to care about the fleeing food-beasts crossing the Great River. "What does he seek?" she asks.

"Probably First and the others," says Chi.

"Big Dragon should not care about The Boss's [sic] disobedient dragons."

"That is probably The Boss."

"He looks like Big Dragon to this little dragon," she says, "But I have not seen The Boss."

"This dragon knows no better, but The Boss's [sic] sleeping cave is much closer. Perhaps Big Dragon is also The Boss," says Chi. "That dragon is big enough for both."

Crowned by a large flock of carrion birds, Big Dragon walks away. Then the pair of female dragons search by the water, but find only food-beast tracks and scents.

"I will climb some of the biggest hills. I will look for sleeping caves and I will see farther upriver," says Chi.

"There is not yet a scent of rain," says the little dragon.

"I will be back before darkness. Soon, I will teach you how to know which clouds and winds bring rain."

"My ears are yours to speak into," she says. "This dragon will

watch for other dragons across the Great River, then chase food-beasts across.

"That is good," says Chi.

Chi smells the air. "I haven't smelled that scent in a long time--before the Great Hungry."

The little dragon smells it too. "What is it?"

"It is an excellent food-beast for small dragons," says Chi.

"Once, when I hurt my paw... They have no claws or fangs and fur just in patches. They have only two legs, so they can't run fast. In their way, those food-beasts are almost as odd as dragons."

Eight paces from the group of two-leggeds she is stalking, an immature two-legged female sees her. She crouches. The fearless food-beast does not behave properly and approaches her. The tiny beast is beautiful, and the little dragon likes to look at it. She stops hunting and lies flat on the ground. The small two-legged food-beast comes closer, as if it had never seen a dragon before. The little dragon is happy. Six paces. Four paces. Two paces. The little two-legged stares into her eyes.

"You are pretty!"

"You are pretty!" the little dragon answers. The other two-leggeds shriek and carry her new friend away and she is sad. As the food-beasts flee, she says "Warning! Imprinting is not complete!"

Anar

I watch the little dragon climb up to the land and disappear into the vegetation. I am glad that her idea worked.

"Tomorrow," says Chi, "I will do as she did, and I will succeed as she did."

"I follow in your footsteps," I tell her.

"Does another dragon wish to try?" asks First.

"Respectfully, no," says Seven, the only other dragon possibly small enough to cross as the little dragon did. "I have discovered a resource that makes superior products."

Seven begins collecting vegetation by the riverside, but I call her back.

"First, do you know of invisible stories?" I ask him.

"No."

"I'll tell one for you and any dragon who wishes to listen, but what I tell you is for the story, not for dragons. This story is about a powerful invisible dragon that I can summon, yet I am scared of this invisible dragon so much so that I run from it even when I do not see it. Watch! I just summoned the Great Invisible Dragon on the other side of the water, where it can't get at me. Let us go away from the Great River, because I don't want it to see or smell us."

"Is this part of the story?" asks First.

"Yes," I say. "Let us hide, far from the water's edge."

"I don't mind hiding from nothing," say First. "but..."

I wait for him to finish, thinking of a little dragon trying to scare a big herd of food-beasts.

"Is this is for the story also?" First asks.

"Yes, again," I say. "so let us hide... from the sight of invisible dragons. Look, and see if a dragon you cannot see breaks any trees or throws..."

"I see something!" says Sixth.

"The invisible dragon is throwing trees," I say. "It knows I want food-beasts, so it is throwing trees to scare the food-beasts into..."

"Seventh and Eighth, stealth two hundred paces, gather that way! Fifth and Sixth, stealth two hundred paces, gather that way!" says First.

"For the story," I say.

"I'm sorry about your story," says First. "But food-beasts..."

"Of course. You see why I told that story?"

"Yes," says First. "But if you walked away from the water, we would have followed."

"Yes," I say. "That is how dragons are. Chi, please tell this excellent dragon to walk away from the river and hide."

"No," says Chi. "He wouldn't like that."

First laughs.

"You could tell him a story," I say. "Perhaps a story about a Great Invisible Dragon."

"Why not? All dragons tell stories," says First.

"Sometimes, a story is the only way to get a big dragon to listen," I tell him.

"I am happy to hear you say that," says Chi.

First laughs again.

"Why do you laugh?" I asks. "Because little females shouldn't talk back to big males, and that is how dragons are. Is that true?"

"Yes," says First. "Why is that important?"

"You believe that is how dragons are," I say, "yet you see the truth with your own eyes."

"If you wish to tolerate that from a female, that is your business," says First.

"That is true but not what I wanted to say. You see in front a dragon that had food-beasts when all the feeding-grounds did not--because Chi knows more than I do and I listened. When the little one had an Idea, I listened, and we will have food-beasts again."

"Tell me," says Chi, "isn't Third really the big dragon in your group?"

"I don't want to be," says Third. "He is First because he knows what to do when no other dragon does."

"That is good," says Chi. "When I asked First about pushing the little dragon with another tree, he laughed, but then saw the sense in it, and he did very well."

"And I let First and Chi do what was needed, and when I saw the sense in it, I helped. We succeeded. Her words have never hurt me. Chi, will you take Seven and make a killing ground?"

"I follow in your footsteps," says Chi.

"Food-steps," says Seven, and Second and Third laugh.

"And that one," I say, "can tell stories better than any other dragon, and the food-beasts that the little dragon..." I feel really stupid, even as the food-beasts step out of the water on the proper side of the Great River.

"I think it is a very stupid idea," I say. "Already the little dragon is too far away to talk to, and no other dragon has thought of a way to cross the Great River."

"I will watch from the other side," says Chi. "If you or any dragon does (mouth-grasp), I will chase more food-beasts across the river."

"I will seek a way to cross," I say, "with any dragons that will follow me. Yet some dragons may remain."

Chi steps upon two floating trees.

I look up at the circling carrion birds. "Soon," I say, "I will travel upstream."

"Yes, sir!" says Seven.

"I follow in your footsteps," says First, "but why does the sight of carrion birds mean we must go?"

"The carrion birds will attract attention," I tell him.

"Yes," says First, "but there are plenty of food-beasts."

"Enough for every dragon you know of, except one, " I say, "a very big one who may be looking for soldiers who weren't at the Fighting at Little River."

"I follow in your footsteps," says First.

"Do you know fast he can travel?" I ask.

"Faster than you can run," says First, "but like every dragon, his scent precedes him."

"(grumble) Night traveling..."

"The carrion birds are not fooled by the darkness," says First.

"That is true," I say. "but we may outrun them... Yes, Fourth?"

"Report, sir?" asks Fourth.

"(grumble) Yes," says First.

"We discovered five more dragons, one with a hurt paw. Third is walking with them, so he will report late."

"Good job," says First. "Any news?"

"Nothing about black dragons," says Fourth. "Third will know more when you see him."

Perhaps I can faintly smell a black dragon.

"It's for you, sir," says Seven.

"What is it?" I ask, winking at her.

"I'm not sure," says Seven, who winks back. First and Second throw the cape over my back, and Seven shows me how to twist the braids so it will stay.

"When you wear that, you will lead us to victory," says Seven.

"Then this cape is a... superior product, as you say. I feel warmer already."

I walk in front of the other dragons. "You've give me something else, too. I cannot name it, but it is good. I will still have it when I order Eighth to wear this cape."

"Me?" asks Eighth.

"If you fold the cape this way, it will be small enough," says Seven.

We try it. With the folded cape on, Eighth looks like a large lagomorph. When he looks at me, I stick my tongue up my nose and cross my eyes. Once Eighth starts laughing, other dragons laugh too. I sneeze.

"That's called Leadership," whispers Seven.

"That's called taking care of my dragons," I tell her. "I like the cape. When we run tonight, Eighth will run faster."

"Tonight? Why?" asks Seven.

"Scent," I say. "That's The Boss's [sic] scent, correct?"

"The Boss is probably looking for us," says First.

"We're leaving."

Seven puts loops of braids around Second and Third's necks as well as her own.

"If there are more of those water-plants, I will make more capes," says Seven.

I help her climb onto Third's back. "Honorable Seven, I will look," I tell her.

When I start walking, the rest of the dragons walk behind me. As I count them, I notice most of the carrion birds choose to circle over our heads rather than the big herd of food-beasts and three dragons unwilling or unable to travel. I decide that when it gets dark, we must travel faster. I look at Eighth, who comes running. I speak very quietly to him. "Can you hop like a lagomorph?"

"I will try," he answers.

"Not now... but before the Great Fireball colors the sky--when it is coldest--you run in front and hop."

Eighth looked puzzled. "You want me to hop like a lagomorph in front of tired dragons when the night is coldest?"

"Yes," I tell him. "Try to make dragons laugh."

The light of the Great Fireball is fading, and I decide it is time to

run. I know that the carrion birds will follow if we cannot outrun them, and that The Boss will follow the carrion birds--but we can make it difficult for The Boss to follow us.

Seven decides she must tell stories for dragons running in the cold and dark. Hat-constructors know a lot of stories.

Back in the old days, when all dragons were smaller--even black dragons such as The Baron weren't much bigger than that one. [Third] One day, a female dragon named Vermin was declared redundant, and was told to remove herself from company property before the Great Fireball's light dimmed. When the shadows lengthened, she still stood outside of the sleeping caves. The Baron roared at her, but Vermin pretended nothing important had happened. Then The Baron said "The penalty for disobedience is death!" and Vermin said "May I see if this dragon is brave enough to put her head into the valley of death?"

Many dragons were watching The Baron. But Vermin was a little dragon, and obviously no threat to one such as he, and The Baron lowered his head and opened his jaws. Vermin said nothing, and slowly moved closer to the great jaws, as if she was afraid. But as soon as she thought that The Baron couldn't see, she leapt over the teeth and tried to claw her way down the throat in front of her. The jaws of The Baron closed upon her tail; and instead of biting through, The Baron was just intelligent enough to pull Vermin out of his mouth for a proper killing bite, but it was a very close thing. The Baron tasted his own blood.

The Baron's voice was harsh and unpleasant forever after, and no dragon could listen to him without thinking of brave Vermin. For a long time after, the Baron and all his dragons spoke of the lagomorphs using Vermin's name. Any dragon who wanted to eat did the same. Since this happened so long ago, today's dragons do not know where their words come from.

The Baron never again let his victims speak before killing them,

but soon he killed an innocent dragon who had authorization and knew the pass-words. The Baron's dragons became Disobedient, and then..."

"Another... story," says Second.

"Yes... but you already know what happens next," says Seven.

"I don't," I say.

"Do you know of the battle of the broken trees?" asks Seven.

"Yes," I say.

"That's what happened next," says Seven. "I don't like that story. The Baron wins. I will tell better stories, not the ones I heard as a hat constructor."

"Big dragons always win big fights," continues Seven. "But The Boss sometimes loses little fights. That one [Anar] walked away and no longer listens to The Boss. This one was once declared surplus, redundant, and terminated all in one day, and now tells stories from upon dragon-back at night. All of you once belonged to The Boss or Big Dragon. Now we belong to ourselves and to each other. I will tell new stories that will belong to us."

"When the days are much longer than the nights, sometimes a dragon will find vegetation that smells terrible. This vegetation is named stinkleberries. A curious dragon will find that the scent only comes from the berries. A more curious dragon will find stinkleberries taste much better than they smell. A very curious and stupid dragon who eats a half-pawful of stinkleberries will sleep for a few hundred breaths, then wake and find that doing nothing is very pleasant. This makes a berrying dragon unfit for production work.

In the land of the Flatheads, there grew much stinkleberry vegetation. Most Flathead dragons thought the way of the berry was stupid. The few dragons who sometimes did eat the berries found that berry-juice stained their mouths, and the other dragons were tempted to mock and malign the berrying dragons. Some dragons tried to throw the berries far into their mouths, but the inevitable production errors were large and random. Dragons

marked by berry-juice on their heads and backs felt stupid.

One dragon tried the way of the berry once, and the stains he bore afterwards strained his friendships with other dragons. But this dragon, whose name became Mark, got many stinkleberries and mashed them with his chin so much that bits of the berries stuck to him.

Mark left smelly stains on some rocks and trees, and then told the stained rocks and trees about the dangers of eating stinkleberries. All the dragons laughed, and berry-stained dragons laughed together with the unstained dragons. Then, a small female wanted berry juice applied to her own body, and her friends helped her. She called her berry-juice patterns 'racing stripes' and many dragons laughed when they first saw them, but some small females imitated her--and so did Mark. He asked the females to decorate his body, and they did very well. Other males asked the female berry-juice painters for similar patterns on their bodies, and a marketable product was created. Soon, so many dragons wore berry-stains that it was impossible to tell who ate stinkleberries and who didn't. And then, stinkleberry season was over, and all the marks made with stinkleberry juice slowly faded away.

Seven was quiet for three breaths, and no other dragons spoke.

"Honorable," I say.

"I follow in your footsteps," says Seven.

"How do you... know all these... stories?" asks Third.

"I don't," says Seven. "I have a lie-sense. Bad lies make bad stories, and good lies make good stories. So I tell only the good lies."

"I don't... understand," says Third.

"Neither do I," says Seven, "but this one is judging lies. Anar spoke of the Great Invisible Dragon earlier. I will tell good lies about it and make a story. The Great Invisible Dragon is as big as The Boss, just as strong, but obedient. This Great Invisible Dragon will do everything it is told to do by the dragon that

creates it. But any dragon that creates it, regrets it."

"Why?" asks Third.

"You will understand by the end of this story. Once, a dragon much like he is (Third) created the Great Invisible Dragon. The dragon asks for food-beasts, and soon the Great Invisible Dragon brings a hundred. The dragon asks for females laying eggs, and soon there are so many that the dragon gets tired of that, too. (Some dragons almost laugh as they run.) The dragon gets his own sleeping cave, and many food-beasts are herded so he may have many choices. Other dragons did as he told them, even the biggest, for none wished to fight the invisible dragon that he could command. The dragon was happy, for a time--but the dragon learned that having more than enough of everything leads to not appreciating anything. Something bad began to happen to the dragon... He wanted more, or better, or something new, and was never happy. Then the dragon had dark dreams. After an especially bad night, this dragon decided that he must become wiser. When he asked the Great Invisible Dragon about wisdom, he was told it would take much teaching for little result. The dragon persisted, and the Great Invisible Dragon tried to teach; but soon the dragon thought that invisible dragons are not good teachers. He sought out other wise dragons instead, and tried to listen.

One day, a particularly disastrous hunting expedition resulted in a wounded dragon, and this dragon asked the Great Invisible Dragon if it could heal the wounded one.

The Great Invisible Dragon could not, but it licked the wound anyway; only one dragon understood what all dragons could see floating in the air. The other dragons began to avoid the one who commanded the Great Invisible Dragon, even his friends that shared his sleeping caves, even though the Great Invisible Dragon brought more food-beasts than ever before. He did not understand, but one of the wise dragons told of the fear that his fellow dragons felt watching dragon-blood floating; another told

him of envy, even though he always gave food-beasts to any dragon-friend who asked. This dragon decided he would ask for help, but he had trouble explaining what was wanted when he talked with the Great Invisible Dragon. The dragons who watched and listened did not understand either. But soon, the Great Invisible Dragon spoke.

"I suspect that your problem is that the other dragons fear you. I can chase away or kill those dragons.

The dragon did not want that.

A wise dragon like Chi asked that dragon why he always wanted more.

That dragon looked at his herd of food-beasts. Some had one horn, some with two, and some with none; some with four legs, some with two. He knew that the truth had been spoken in a question. Yet, he knew of no dragon that was shelterless or hungry--but where did all these food-beasts come from? He asked, and the Great Invisible Dragon said "I travel south, east, west, and north, and when I find what you want, I bring it."

"Is it possible," he asked, "that some of these food-beasts were in another dragon's herd, far away?"

The Great Invisible Dragon laughed. "I do not know and I do not care. Your desire is my command."

"Is it possible," he asked, "that there are fewer one-horns every herd-gathering because you are so efficient in gathering?"

The Great Invisible Dragon laughed again. "I do not know and I do not care. Your desire is my command."

"Is it possible," he asked, "that you hurt many more dragons than the ones I call mine?"

The Great Invisible Dragon said "I do not know and I do not care. Your desire is my command."

But even though he did not know, that dragon found that he cared.

The next day, he did not give a single command to the Great Invisible Dragon, even though one of his friends found some half-

rotted wood that glowed in the dark, and he thought how nice ten pawfuls of this would look inside his sleeping cave. Even though he could not foretell any harm from Great Invisible dragon roaming the woods looking for this marvel--he knew that there was much he did not understand.

Instead, he asked for and was told the tales of each female dragon that began long before the Great Invisible Dragon forcibly brought them here. He spent much time listening and thinking that day.

The next day, one of the wise dragons, very like Chi, told that dragon that perhaps he possessed some wisdom; and that if he wanted to help others he would never lack work. He tried to think of ways to command the Great Invisible Dragon that would benefit everyone, but he could not. Any command of his might damage many dragons for the benefit of a few. He tried to ask the Great Invisible Dragon for advice, but could not find the scent. The Great Invisible Dragon had wandered away.

That night, when the Great Fireball dimmed and dropped below the horizon, he went to his sleeping cave and found that the wise dragon had left him a pawful of the glowing half-rotted wood. The dim light it gave off was brighter than he thought it would be."

"Honorable," I tell her. "Your lie-sense... is good."

"Appreciated! But since you must run, I must speak."

"In the land of the Square-head dragons, there was a ground-hole.

It was discovered one night when a tiny dragon named Imagination went to the back of her sleeping cave where it was darkest. There was a big pile of rocks there, and by crawling around and under, the tiny dragon found the ground-hole, and there was more open space past it. It was so dark she could see nothing unless she breathed upon it. Tail-first, the tiny dragon explored the darkest part of the sleeping cave for a short time, then decided to go back. She found the way blocked by a big sleeping dragon. She found a comfortable place and went to

sleep herself.

The tiny dragon had many very strange dreams that night. When she awoke, the big dragon was gone, and she crawled out from under the rocks. Two other female dragons saw her, and asked if she'd been there all night.

She told the other dragons that her body was there all night, but her mind was not. She told them of dreams of flying higher than a carrion bird and faster than a 'Guilty' verdict from The Boss. The other dragons wanted to see this place where her body slept, but were too big to crawl where Imagination could go. The three of them asked a big male for help, and he was able to move enough rocks for the females to enter. The two females wanted to explore, and went tail-first into the darkness, and Imagination followed in their backwards footsteps.

The three of them explored where it was darkest. The cave sloped down, and soon all three dragons were laughing at nothing. One of the females left, not liking the smells, no matter how funny they were. The other two dragons automatically followed the footsteps that glowed in front of them, but soon following became difficult. Only one female made it out of the cave, and soon other dragons noticed and helped her and rescued the other dragons who couldn't walk properly.

The explorers soon recovered. With typical dragonic logic, once the dangers of the dark caves became known to all, no dragon thought to block the entrance. These days, any Square-head dragons who wish to explore the darkest part of the cave tells the tiny dragon, and if the exploring dragon does not contact her in one thousand breaths, Imagination and other dragons go seeking."

Seven sounds tired. Third runs closer to me.

"Message," says Third.

Seven is speaking quietly, but I can hear her.

"Soon, when the Great Fireball rises, the little one and Chi will see that we traveled at night. They will explore. Chi will seek and

find a new sleeping cave, and the little one will find a dragon such as myself. She will talk of an Idea, and the hat constructor will will work as the little one directs, and they will use plants even better than the ones that grow by the river. When they are done, the little dragon will have all of her body covered with cape, like the one Eighth is wearing, except for her eyes and mouth and one other. The body cape will be so thick and warm that the little one can cross the river faster than the food-beasts. Then she will cross the river one night, and she will seek the carrion birds and the black dragon smell. When she gets close as she can, she will defecate. She will be so warm in her suit that she can outrun the dragons that guard during the night -- so warm that sometimes she stops, and laughs at the sky, and then runs again. When she is far enough ahead of the cold dragons chasing her, she will cross the river and leave only footprints and fading scents. Because other dragons cannot cross the river, none can find her, not even her scent. The next night, she defecates close enough that The Boss will chase her for a short time. On the third night, she'll probably run to a stupid place where the rocks are sharp and shifty under the foot of a heavy dragon, and her enemy will destroy himself."

"I follow," I say. "Now rest."

"If my dragons must run, then I must speak," says Seven.

"Not so," I say.

"If I unfold your cape," says Seven, "It will be enough to cover Seventh and Eighth if they do not run."

"We run," I say.

"No scent... black dragon," says First.

"We run," I say. "Black dragon... will follow... carrion birds... we run."

"The little dragon told me about carrion birds," says Seven, who is speaking loudly again. "I will tell her tale." The dragons resume formation at the sound of her voice.

"Once, the little dragon told me that when she was sleeping far from any other dragon, the carrion birds found her. She decided to

play a trick on the birds that hoped to eat her or her kills. She knew of a certain magic stink plant that grows near the little river, and she very carefully dug up two. Then she selected a place, and found two big flat rocks, and put the magic plants under the rocks in a way so the plants did not break. One small piece of the magic plant remained, and this piece she smashed between two small rocks. Then, she was very still and waited for the birds to arrive. The carrion birds approached because of the scent and the hope for a peck at a dragon's eye. When the birds came close enough, the little dragon hit the rocks with the magic plants underneath, and some of the carrion birds were marked with the smelly juice from the crushed magic plants. All the birds flew away. She said it did not seem to bother the birds even though the smell was enough to make water in her eyes. The little dragon had to explain why she enjoyed that tale—the carrion birds are the only friends a black dragon has, and now some of them will stink.

"Honorable," I tell Seven. "Now... rest." I am tired, and the smaller dragons must be even more tired, but the slowest dragons will be caught first. Perhaps we can travel tomorrow for a few hours...

"Scent!" says Seven.

"Honorable," I tell her again. That one knows when to be disobedient. I can smell the strange dragons--not too many, no young ones. I slow my pace.

I have never before seen dragons like these. The two males are a brownish-gray. "You and yours are Dragon," they say, one-after-the-other, before I say anything.

"Honorable," I tell them.

The strange dragons are delighted to hear that we outran the black dragon scent four thousand paces ago, and invite us into their sleeping caves. I accept. The dragon named Dom will guide

us. Dom says that their long, narrow sleeping caves will not permit two male dragons to walk side-by-side except in a few places. This will make talking difficult, so we remain outside the sleeping caves.

"The middle of the cave has more sand than the edges," says a male dragon named Dom. "If you feel pebbles underfoot, then you're about to hit the wall. Many dragons have labored to keep the center of the sleeping caves pebble-free."

"Very good," I say.

"No black dragon could possibly enter our caves," says Dom. "The entrance is too small."

I follow him to one side, and I pretend not to notice Seven following me. The air coming out of the cave is fresh but smells faintly of rot and excrement.

"Are there other ways out?" I ask him.

"Certainly, but we haven't found them yet. Sometimes the air blows through so much that my brother and I block the entrance. There are many very long and dark tunnels, but there are only five of us."

"Does the air ever carry scents?" I ask.

"Yes, certainly, many scents, but nothing useful. Mostly vegetation scents."

"I think I must stay outside for a few hundred breaths before I sleep," I tell him.

"You must feel the call. You and yours are Dragon," Dom says, and enters the cave.

"A most amazing dragon," I say once I am twenty paces from the cave entrance. I keep walking. Two hundred paces more, then Seven speaks quietly.

"That dragon is ill."

"I think so too," I tell her. "The Boss could be right outside the sleeping cave, and no dragon in the cave could smell him. I will sleep outside."

"I follow in your footsteps."

"Perhaps the females could tell you something."

"Perhaps not," says Seven. "I will sleep outside too."

"Perhaps we aren't the only ones sleeping outside tonight," I say. "I think I smell a giant lagomorph."

"Where?" says Eighth. "I must ask it how to hop."

I laugh with Eighth. "Are you and Seventh on patrol?"

"Watch-and-scent."

"Very good." Then Seven (gestures of submission) in front of Eighth, and works on the cape for a few breaths. I ask Seventh to stand next to Eighth so that Seven can spread my cape over both dragons.

The next morning, many dragons are hungry, and they gather to hear a female named Graith tell the group the Rules of their Feeding Grounds. I notice that she is not walking properly. When I try to smell her closely, I sneeze, and my nose hurts. I see that she is covered with a light brownish-gray dust. Grays tells me that the dust makes her beautiful and quiet inside, and that she still has many rules to explain. I ask her to walk a few paces back and forth as she talks, and she obeys me but her tail twitches. Graith occasionally stumbles. I interrupt her rule-speaking once again by asking if a paw hurts her. (NO!)

Dom's brother comes. His paws are dark gray.

Seven comes out of the sleeping cave. She has brown-gray dust on her front paws. "They grind the rocks together... makes dust. Don't smell it... hurts. Fays told me... it will pass."

"What will pass?" I ask.

"The stupid," says Seven. "If you breathe it in. I didn't intend... didn't know."

I have to concentrate to walk properly. I tell First that he is big dragon, and he tells many dragons what to do. Second and Third

are ordered to watch me to make sure I don't do anything stupid. I order Seven to follow me, and I go to the feeding grounds. Once I know where the killing grounds are, I become too stupid to care about their rules. Second and Third laugh with me, but we become silent as Seven attempts to hunt. We hunt for her.

When we come back to the sleeping caves, First and Second cover me with my cape when I lie down. I walk out from under it and put it over Seven, then sleep in the glow of the Great Fireball.

The Great Fireball is nearly gone when I awake. Seven is still sleeping, and Third says she did not wake while I slept. Her nostrils and front paws are a darker shade of gray.

"They tell me that she will regain health," says Third.

"Who says? These dragons?"

"The dust does not affect them," says Third, who winks at me.

"They are strong dragons. Dom himself told me."

"Then it must be true," I say, and wink back.

Seven wakes before the Great Fireball dims. She wants water, but cannot walk properly. I help her onto Third's back and we take her to the river. Seven washes her darkened paws and drinks water. As Third returns to the sleeping cave, Seven says she's unfit for production work.

"Sleep now," I tell her. "We will travel soon, far from the dragons who put poison on their bodies."

"Tonight?" asks Third.

"No," I answer, "but soon."

"They have few food-beasts," says Third. "Dom and Rex watch by the river, and bring all fleeing dragons to their caves. Honorable, but they do not hunt or herd."

"We can hunt, if there are any food-beasts."

"Very honorable!" says Dom, from twenty paces. I help Seven off of Third's back. Seven walks to the sleeping cave while I talk to Dom.

"My behavior was disruptive today. It will not happen again."

"Easily overlooked!" says Dom. "My brother and I will bring dragons here, and you and Third can gather new herds."

"Easily done, if there are food-beasts," I answer. I notice Seven is walking very slowly.

"There are not many food-beasts within a half-day of traveling," says Dom. "Neither my brother nor I are superb hunters, but you and Third may do what we cannot. But you certainly must wait until the Sun rises tomorrow!"

Dom has a nervous laugh.

"I will do what I can," I tell him, "but I cannot speak for Third."

"Nothing bad," says Dom. "Some dragons will help you." Seven is walking back and forth behind Dom.

"I need no other dragons help if I can cross the river."

"Can't be done!" says Dom. "No dragon has ever crossed the Great River."

"Is that so?" I say. Seven makes a peculiar noise, and Dom looks back at her.

"That is the way it is. How is the female?" Dom asks Third.

"She is much better," says Third.

"Honorable of you to ask," and I wink at Seven and Third when Dom cannot see me. Seven makes another strange noise.

"That is good," says Dom. "I have never before seen any dragon become so sick from breathing a little dust--not even the females. Now, I believe Anar has something to ask you."

"I certainly do," I say. "We must discuss hunting as soon as your dragonic resource director assigns a rest period for you." Seven laughs softly and Dom wanders off.

"Where does that... honorable... dragon go?" I ask Third.

"He goes to a hill where a dragon can see far up and down the river," says Third. Then he says "I don't think his nose works,"

very quietly.

"I think that a dragon cannot hunt," I say very quietly.

"I think that a dragon is ill," says Seven, a little too loudly.

Fifth and Sixth are on watch-and-scent when the darkness comes. I enter the sleeping cave. I find Graith and tell her that my conduct earlier was not proper for a dragon, and that it will not happen again. Graith seems very pleased, but I do not understand why.

That evening, I hear Eighth tell Graith and a few others the story of the Flathead Dragons and the Rock of Rule--except when the four dragons tried to lift the Emperor's talons, every dragon tried to help and the Emperor was humbled. I like his story. Perhaps Eighth also has a lie-sense.

In the morning, Seven is able to walk properly. She follows me and listens as I speak to First about traveling further north and about food-beasts. Dom brings four unfamiliar dragons to the sleeping cave, and I tell him that three dragons who followed me have gone herd-hunting. I go to Dom's hill to see what can be seen, and Seven follows. I can see Rex near the river, walking slowly to the path of three dragons traveling north. I can also see many food-beasts on the wrong side of the Great River.

"When you travel, Graith and probably Fays will follow in your footsteps," says Seven. "No male has ever apologized to those females before."

"Where will I lead them?" I ask Seven. "Upriver there is nothing. We cannot cross. The Boss is downriver, and that way is the burned land and Big Dragon."

"Then we will go to the nothing," says Seven. "Together, we will succeed."

That evening, the dragons that First had ordered to hunt

brought back a small herd of food-beasts and spoke of finding more burned land. First and I decide that we will travel tomorrow, before all the food-beasts are gone.

Sixth finds me. "Chi!"

Chi tells me of a place where the river can be crossed--we ran right past it. She also has bad news of the little dragon.

"The little dragon was hunting a kind of two-legged food-beast. A tiny immature female beast, only this tall, approaches the little dragon and talks to her, and the little dragon stopped hunting and the food-beasts ran away. Afterwards, she seemed healthy but would not hunt, or eat, or sleep. She wanted to find the little food-beast again. We find the tiny beast in a too-small shelter built of logs... and now the little dragon thinks that this tiny beast is a big dragon. She carries it around on her back, and does anything the little beast commands, and protects the little beast and the beast family. Strangest of all, the little dragon is happy. She is so happy that when I watched her and her tiny two-legged, I was happy too.

"The tiny two-legged says that the little dragon's name is Mona, so that is what the little dragon now calls herself."

For another two hundred breaths, Chi speaks of talking two-legged food-beasts that can count and make shelters out of tree trunks and grass, and of the trees planted in rows, and that she's learning to read. First and Second check Chi's scent to see if she is ill.

When the Great Fireball brightens the sky, I travel south. Many dragons follow me besides First and his dragons. Chi rides on my back under my cape, and tells me more about the two-leggeds and guides me to the river crossing.

The river is wide where Chi walks into the Great River tail-first. Soon, Graith follows Chi, but she walks as properly as she can.

The rock dust washes off of her paws and body, and every dragon can see that her coloring is too dark, but no dragon mentions it. I decide that I will cross as Chi does.

The cold water is not deep, but the bottom is soft and my rear paws stick in it. If I stand still, my paws sink. When I lift one hind-paw, the other quickly sinks deeper. Because of this, I stumble when I climb back onto the riverbank, and my cape gets wet.

Seven tries crossing the river. She wins all her fights with the mud and roars "VICTORY!" when she crosses. I roar back... and run into the river. I try to run fast, but I move slower and slower because of the water and soft mud sucking at my feet. Soon, I am stuck... a little more than half-way across. I struggle to get my right front paw free. The other paws sink in even deeper, but I succeed. I bite my cape and throw it into the river, and step on it with my free paw. Then I struggle to free my left front, and my right front sinks but much less. Soon I have two paws on my cape... three... then four. Chi and Seven run through the water to me with branches in their mouths. and I run off my underwater cape for six paces before the mud stops me again. I stop struggling and crouch in the cold water, using my belly to stop me from sinking more into the mud. I am able to free my right front and quickly step on the branches that Chi and Seven bring. Graith and Fays and other females bring more branches, and soon I am out of the river. I tell the females that I know of a trap for a big black dragon, and they laugh. I am tired and cold, and I stand where the Great Fireball is warm.

Chi brings a few saplings into the river, and pushes them in the river-bottom where my cape is, then finishes crossing the river quickly. Soon, I can see a line of big dragons with branches in their mouths entering the river, and where a dragon drops, then tramples the branches into the river-bottom mud, Chi pushes a long branch or a small tree into the river-bottom. The females and I bring branches to Seven, and she tramples them into the mud. All the dragons cross when Chi's trail of branches leads to my

cape and then to the trail Seven is making.

The Great Fireball is low in the sky when the last dragon crosses the river. Chi feels cold when I hold her. Seven thinks to rescue my cape before I think of forbidding it, but she finds only small fractions. After Seven gets out of the river, Third holds her against his chest like a female dragon holds an egg.

I choose a sleeping place that is far from the river and the two-legged trails. I say "You and yours are Dragon" thirty-five times. I send the smaller dragons to hunt first, and I pretend not to notice when Eighth follows Graith and Fays. Third says he'll chase a few food-beasts across the Great River for the dusty dragons. Chi covers me with branches and orders me to go to sleep.

I dream that I'm stuck in the Great River. A little dragons head asks 'permission' and approaches as if the water was almost too deep for her—but I know it isn't. She looks at me, says "You're doing it wrong," and then "You're making a lot of trouble for the other dragons."

Chi wakes me before the Great Fireball has warmed the sky.

"I want to travel to the little dragon," Chi whispers. "She cannot leave her two-leggeds."

"(grumble)"

"If you want to go with me, you have to go now," whispers Chi, "or every dragon here will follow you."

"Sleeping caves first," I whisper.

"Our dragons can cross the river again and go to the Dusty Dragon's sleeping cave if it rains," whispers Chi.

"Many dragons... following us," I tell Chi.

"I knew some would," says Chi, "but I did not think that all the

dragons would."

The dragons decide to discuss these problems: The Boss may come hunting dragons; the only known sleeping cave is not good; and whatever happened to the little dragon may happen to other dragons.

I suggest that some dragons stay at the river crossing and watch-and-scent; and that if Rex or Dom should come, I hope that all their dust washes away. Graith and Fays find this very funny. I ask if some dragons would like to explore and seek sleeping caves, and add that I will walk to the talking two-legged village that Chi knows and seek the little dragon. Any who follow me must not hunt the two-leggeds or the horses--whatever they are. Chi will tell us when she sees one.

Most dragons follow me, but some explore, and some stay by the river with Graith and Fays. Chi guides me down a two-legged trail, and I walk slowly so the smaller dragons do not have to trot. Chi takes us to The Ruins, where dragons can do as they wish. Chi shows us the mostly-burned log house that the little dragon liked, then shows us The Vault, which the two-leggeds told her is empty. Near The Vault, Second finds a hole with the little dragon's scent, and he and I start digging there.

Chi asks if we will save papers if we find them.

"What are papers?" I ask her.

"Papers are like large leaves. Like these..." Chi opens a box. "They're gone! Lizabeth and Mona... I'm going to see if the little dragon will follow me here. I don't want you and all the other dragons traveling to the two-legged shelters. The two-leggeds have never seen a dragon bigger than I am, and you'll scare them.

"I could go," says Seven, and she looks at me. "I'm not much bigger than Chi."

"Good idea," says Chi. "We'll get the two-leggeds used to big

dragons a little at a time."

"Do as you wish," I tell them.

the little dragon

Once again, Chi smells the little dragon all over, and looks in her mouth and ears. "I can't find anything wrong with you. Tell me one more time--did you eat?"

"Nothing today," she says once more.

"What did you drink?"

"Water," she says again.

Chi grumbles. "Perhaps the water was bad."

"Imprinting is not complete," she says again, trying to be helpful.

"What is imprinting?" Chi asks once more.

"Imprinting is... not complete," she says again. (gesture of submission)

"Are you hungry?" asks Chi.

"Not yet," she answers.

"That's not good. Can you hunt?" asks Chi.

"This dragon thinks so," she answers.

"Good," says Chi. "Show me."

She tries, but after a few paces she lays down. "Hunting is difficult when a dragon is not hungry."

"The Great Fireball will dim in one thousand breaths. Perhaps you should sleep now."

She considers this, then says "Imprinting is not complete."

"I follow in your footsteps," says Chi.

She does not understand. (gesture of submission)

"You must be the big dragon," says Chi. (gesture of submission)

She stands up, then wanders uphill, back where she saw the

two-legged food-beasts. When she picks up their scent, she looks back... and watching Chi's twitching nostrils bothers her. She stops.

"Hunt one of the two-leggeds," suggests Chi.

"No," she says quickly. "No hunting." She is trying to scent a certain two-legged, and Chi follows her. She finds the scent and follows it to a shelter built of logs. She can hear the beasts, but even though she walks around the shelter twice, she cannot see how the food-beasts got inside. "Where is the pretty one?" she asks the shelter.

"Here I am," says a familiar voice. "He won't let me out."

"Is there a dragon in there?" asks Chi. "I cannot smell anything but food-beasts."

A strange noise comes from inside the shelter.

"Imprinting is not complete," she says, and lays down. Chi lays down next to her. "The cold is coming," says Chi. "Ignore the talking food-beasts."

"This may be a sleeping place," says the little dragon.

Chi gets up and pulls over a pine tree, then breaks off branches. The little dragon does the same.

"Don't hurt Daddy's trees!" says an angry food-beast from a new opening in the shelter of logs.

(gesture of apology)

Chi laughs. "I've never seen a dragon apologize to a food-beast before."

She hears angry shrieking from inside the shelter and a square opening appears. She thinks she sees her little two-legged friend inside before the larger food-beast closes the opening. "Imprinting is not complete!" she says, and claws at the place where there the opening was. Thin wood pieces splinter, the food-beasts shout, and she can see inside.

"Where is the pretty one?" she asks very quietly, even though she can see the tiny, beautiful two-legged food-beast.

"Here I am!" says the little one.

"Can you come out?" she asks.

"No!" shouts the other two-legged. "Go away and stop bothering us!"

The little dragon's vision becomes blurry, and a large drop of water falls from each eye.

"See what you did?" says her little friend. "You made her cry, you big meanie!" There is a brief struggle, and her little two-legged friend jumps to the opening, climbs on her head, grabs her ears, and sits on her nose. The little dragon is happy.

Chi laughs again. "You should have opened your mouth first," Chi says gleefully.

She laughs too. "This is my pretty hat," the little dragon says, as she carefully puts the tiny beast on the ground. She wants to look at and smell her two-legged friend. "You are pretty!" says the little dragon.

"So are you!" says the little two-legged. "My name's Lizabeth."

"Pretty Lizabeth! This one doesn't have a good name," says the little dragon.

"Why not?" asks Lizabeth.

"Once, some dragons named me Burntbrain. Is that a good name?"

"No."

"You could give me a name," she says.

"Are you a girl dragon or a boy dragon?" asks Lizabeth.

"This dragon is a little dragon," she says.

Chi laughs. "She is a girl dragon."

"Your name is Mona!"

It is nearly dark when adult two-leggeds arrive. The two-legged who was angry, named Micky, is on her back. Pretty Lizabeth grabs her front left paw, and the dragon named Mona lets herself be pulled forward by two tiny hands on two talons. Chi laughs as the little dragon limps behind Lizabeth on three legs.

The two-leggeds talk while the dragons make sleeping nests and branch blankets, sparing the trees that are planted in rows and not stepping on the vegetation that is planted in the same way.

"I will have to stop Anar before he finds us," says Chi. "He does not know about talking two-leggeds or their trees."

"Thank you," she says.

"What does that mean?" asks Chi.

"It almost means honorable. It's manners," says the little dragon named Mona. "It's important to Lizabeth."

"Who is the big dragon... you or Lissabeth?"

"Lizabeth," says the little dragon named Mona.

"How do you feel now?" Chi asks.

"Sad, tired, and hungry," she says.

Chi grumbles. "Hungry is good."

A head appears in the shelter opening. The little dragon listens.

"Mona. Come here, Mona," whispers Lizabeth. The little dragon shakes free of her branch-blanket and moves.

"Mona, where are you?" whispers Lizabeth.

"Here," she whispers.

"Come closer, Mona. Closer. Now hold still." Lizabeth climbs on her head and holds on to her ears.

"Imprinting complete," she whispers, as the little dragon named Mona carefully lowers tiny Lizabeth to the ground.

The little dragon does not want to have a bad dream when holding littler Lizabeth, so she will not sleep; but another two-legged orders Lizabeth back into the shelter before five hundred breaths. A hundred twenty breaths later, three strange two-leggeds get too close to the shelter, so she chases them away. After that, she went hunting and ate the first four-legged food-beast she found. Despite being very tired, she washed her paws and jaws very carefully before returning as Energy Ball brightens the sky. She sees three flat things rather like large leaves that

smell of the strange two-leggeds, and she mouth-carries them back to the shelter of logs.

Chi and an old female two-legged are talking, but Chi stops to sniff her all over. Elizabeth comes out of the shelter and climbs on her back.

"You've eaten... good. You look tired," says Chi.

"Mona is tired," she says.

"You can call me Gran, like everybody else," says the old two-legged female.

"Did you find those by Daddy's trees?" asks Elizabeth.

"Mona found them near the trees planted in rows. What are they?"

"Bags," says Gran, who puts two of the bags inside one, then holds the bag open so the dragon named Mona can see the other wrinkled bags inside. "I suppose you are good for something."

"Mona is good for nothing but sleeping."

"Can you remember the scents on these bags?" asks Gran.

"Mona can remember."

"I can also remember," says Chi.

"What did you do, Mona?" asks Elizabeth.

"She chased away some fruit thieves," says Gran, "and now she needs a nap."

"Mona, you're a hero!" says Elizabeth.

She lets Elizabeth pick a sunny spot for the 'hero' dragon. The dragon named Mona sleeps while Elizabeth polishes her scales. She is happy.

She wakes when Energy Ball is high in the sky, and finds Elizabeth, Micky and Chi looking at something. "You will like this!" says Chi, who is very excited. "It's almost a one to one! Each squiggle usually means one sound, and when you put them together, it makes words!" Chi shows her a squiggle and says "Ahh. Mon-ahh." The two-leggeds and Chi take turns helping her

learn the sounds. When Lizabeth wanders away, the dragon named Mona follows her reluctantly.

"I have to weed the garden," says Lizabeth. "You can't help, because you aren't allowed in there."

"This dragon will help," she says, but she doesn't know weed or garden. Lizabeth says she will show her, and Mona wants her to ride on her back even though the distance is only twenty steps. The dragon named Mona walks around the 'vegetable garden' planted in rows. Lizabeth tells her which plants are weeds, and she claws them out of the ground. Lizabeth has to pull the ones the dragon cannot reach.

The dragon asks, but Lizabeth does not know of any caves, so then the little dragon is ordered to tell of Big Dragon's sleeping caves. Then Lizabeth has to see if her dragon can fit through the opening called a 'door' in the two-legged's shelter. (Yes.) Gran tells Lizabeth to take the dragons to Hizoner's barn to see if they scare the horses. When the little dragon does not understand how the logs go through each other at the corners. Gran tells Lizabeth to take the dragons to The Ruins.

At first, Chi does not want to go. She has found a book on irrigation with pictures. "There is much about vegetation, but look--this is how to move water!"

"Why is that important?" asks Lizabeth.

"A wet cave could be a dry one," says Chi. "I found a wet cave."

"There is a sleeping cave already," says the little dragon, "if we do not scare the horses."

"What are horses?" asks Chi.

Some of the horses are bigger than the little dragon, and many can run faster than Chi can. Horses don't like dragons, not even a little dragon who walks slowly with a tiny two-legged on her back; so Lizabeth takes the dragons to The Ruins rather than bother Hizoner.

"Do the horses talk?" asks the little dragon.

"Not like we do. Horses talk with their ears and eyes because they don't have words," replies Elizabeth.

The Ruins have no shelters fit for a dragon. She finds a mostly-burned shelter built of logs that she can take apart to see how the notched logs fit together. Chi finds half a book that Elizabeth says it's trashy fiction. The little dragon and Elizabeth help Chi look for more books. When Elizabeth tires of this, she takes the little dragon and Chi to see the Vault.

Elizabeth explains that once there was a bank here, and the 'people' put their precious things inside the Vault. Neither dragon understands, especially when they see the Vault. It is a lumpy wall made of 'metal' that Chi's claws could not scratch. Elizabeth says there is a secret way to open the metal wall, but nobody knows how to do it.

"Two-leggeds did very strange things," says Chi.

"Where will you put your half-book when you are sleeping?" asks Elizabeth. "If I could, I would let you keep it in the Vault."

"I want to keep it, but you are honorable."

The dragon called Mona has nothing that she would want on the wrong side of a metal wall.

"There might be gold or jewels in there," says Elizabeth. "Great treasures were once in the Vault, but Gran says it's common knowledge that the Vault is empty, and the treasures stolen."

"A treasure to this dragon is a sleeping cave," says Chi. "Is the Vault like a sleeping cave?"

"I think so, if you could open it... but ask Gran."

"I will. I think Gran is very wise," says Chi.

"Gran thinks so too," says Elizabeth. "She's right, and she knows it."

Elizabeth decides it is time to 'go home,' and Chi stays to look for a sleeping cave and more books. The dragon called Mona does not carry Elizabeth through the closely spaced trees in the forest--

she follows in her footsteps.

Lizabeth asks Gran if she knows some stories about the Vault, and she does and will tell her the little dragon while she works. The little dragon learns how to turn the handle on the fruit-press made of metal and wood, and Lizabeth drinks some of the juice that comes out when the little dragon turns the press-handle. The dragon called Mona does not like apple juice and does not like drinking from a cup. While the little dragon and Lizabeth move bushels of apples and buckets of fruit pulp, Gran tells of The Vault.

"My mother told me stories about the Un-Natural Bank that used to be there... but you probably want to know what's in the Vault, which is either nothing or the dead, depending on who you believe. When the Great Fire started, people did crazy things... and many people went to the Vault to get their treasures. When they opened the Vault, they found it empty. My mother didn't know exactly what happened after that, but she said 'Justice was done when all else burned.' The empty Vault was filled with... with..."

"Prey?" asks the little dragon.

"Just so," says Gran. "Cannibal two-legged predators turned into prey."

While Lizabeth does her chores and 'eats dinner,' Gran sends the little dragon to The Ruins mouth-carrying a bag for Chi to put her treasures in.

Everything that Chi has found smells boring and dusty, but the little dragon likes looking at the letters and pictures on the papers and pieces of metal that Chi has collected. Chi will only put the metal treasures into the bag.

"I wish Lizabeth was here," says Chi. "She could carry these." Chi puts the papers she collected into a box that she can close, and mouth-carries the bag back to 'home.'

Gran asks both dragons to enter the shelter. Chi has difficulty getting through the small opening. Both dragons move slowly once inside the shelter, as there is not much room now.

The shelter and even Lizabeth herself faintly smell of the stinky plants and other vegetation, but the little dragon says nothing and sits very still. Lizabeth climbs onto the table.

Chi empties the bag onto the table.

Gran immediately picks up a battered golden disk from the pile of metal items. "Around here, one of these is worth a horse."

"Is it worth a sleeping cave?" asks Chi.

"Perhaps," says Gran. "I'll ask around."

"A penny!" says Lizabeth, who picks up a round reddish disk. "I searched there a thousand times and never found one."

"You do not move boulders and big metal boxes when you search," says Chi.

"You paid for this with your claws," says Lizabeth.

"To spare your claws, you should buy a digging bar," says Gran. "You could dig a sleeping cave, and when you find more gold coins..."

"I cannot dig a sleeping cave for twenty big dragons before there is rain."

"Laura Mercy," says Gran.

Chi tells the long story about The Boss ordering his Gatherer-dragons to herd all the food-beasts south, and of the gathering of the wild and exiled dragons and running across the burned lands to the Great River, and how a little dragon floated across the Great River on two trees so she could chase food-beasts to the hungry dragons who waited. She (Chi) could cross that way too, but since the big males could not float on trees, they went upriver to find another way. Gran is quiet for two breaths, but then says "In for a penny, in for a gold piece," and brings a piece of paper to the dragons.

"This is a... picture of the river," says Gran. "Here is where we

are now."

"This is a one-to-one?" asks Chi.

"Yes. We are here, and the hills, that way, are represented by these squiggles. The Great River, that way, is represented here, by this thick line. But here, this is a shallow place in the Great River.

"Shallow place?" asks Chi.

"It is the only place I know of where a horse can usually cross without swimming. You could cross there."

"How many of your footsteps is the distance?" asks Chi.

"I don't know... it is about ten thousand of these. All the people... two-leggeds use these. We call this length a meter. It is like a standardized footstep. On the map, one thousand meters is one-to-one with this mark." Gran points to a thin rectangle on the paper.

"I can travel that far in the morning," says Chi. "I will cross the river when Energy Ball is high, and find Anar and tell him of the shallow place. But we have no sleeping caves."

The dragon named Mona tells Lizabeth that she does not dare sleep inside that night because sometimes she walks when she dreams. Near the orchard she shows Lizabeth how a little dragon can turn a branch-pile into a branch-blanket, and Lizabeth adds more branches before the tiny two-legged goes to the shelter.

She is wakened by a smells she cannot identify, and she sees a strange glow where there should be darkness. She smells strange two-leggeds. She slips free of her branch-blanket as quietly as a little dragon can. She hides when the glow and smells come closer.

Five two-leggeds. One of the two-leggeds has a glow kept far away from its body. The little dragon wonders why the other beasts have metal sticks. She watches the two-leggeds to see what they will do next.

The two-leggeds stop at her branch pile, and leave part of the glow in the branches. When the herd of beasts wander away, she smells smoke. She moves.

The two-legged beasts are pitifully slow. She runs to the side of her branch pile farthest from the fire, then throws pawfuls of branches at the two-leggeds until none are standing. Then she roars at them, so Chi will know she won a battle, and maybe Gran will come and tell her what to do about the growing fire and smoke. Faintly, she can hear Elizabeth calling her, but she cannot come now. She roars at the two-leggeds when one starts to move.

Chi brings Gran on her back. Gran tells the dragon named Mona what to do. "First, take those swords-- no, let me do it. (uff) This part is very sharp so touch it only here."

"What does a little dragon do about fire?" she asks.

"Leave it be for now. It's hard enough to see out here."

"You are very brave, Gran," says the little dragon. "This dragon will not stand so close."

"What is this?" says Chi.

"That's a very nice lantern. Thank you, gentlemen, for bringing an old woman and her pets some light for a dark evening. Now you might want to leave, because my pets are hungry."

"We can eat them?" asks Chi. "I can still catch them."

"Not this time."

"What about this one that didn't run away?"

"We'll have to see if he recovers," says Gran.

"You can put the fire out now," says Gran, after she made the lantern glow with a bit of fiery branch. "Breathing fine, pupils are the same size... he's going to have a head-ache when he wakes up. Gran finds things that the sleeping one has hidden in his clothing, and shows them to the dragons. "Gold earring... three gold pieces... a knife... a whistle..."

"What is put the fire out now?" asks the little dragon. But the strange two-legged is waking up, and Gran has to ask it

questions. The little dragon does not understand much of what is said, but eventually Gran gives the two-legged some of the treasures that she took from it before it leaves. Then Gran shows her how to kick a little dirt on the fire, which soon stops glowing. Gran tells her to get her nose away from it because it is still hot, and then Gran puts dried grasses there. The smell of smoke becomes strong again, then Gran kicks more dirt on the fire-place.

Back at the house, Gran shows Lizabeth and Micky the swords and lantern, and Lizabeth asks her dragon to tell what happened, and the little dragon does. When Lizabeth asks the little dragon to tell her story again, she tries but her voice gets softer and she says 'imprinting is complete' and 'I follow in your footsteps' and (gestures of submission) many times.

Gran tells Lizabeth and Micky to let their tired dragon-hero get some sleep.

When she wakes in the morning by the orchard, she knows Chi is far away and the little dragon cannot follow. Gran tells Lizabeth that many people will visit this morning. Lizabeth asks the little dragon if she would like to visit The Ruins again; the little dragon asks if she may mouth-carry a bag for the treasures they will find.

Lizabeth decides that any treasures at The Ruins must be buried, and the little dragon suggests they dig on the other side of the Vault. At first, the digging is easy, but soon the little dragon and Lizabeth are searching for a digging bar. Then Lizabeth wants to know if the dragon named Mona can lift a metal box called a 'safe.' She cannot, but she can move it. Lizabeth wants to see what is inside, so the little dragon pushes the metal box to a high place and pushes it off. Then she pushes a big rock and it falls on the box, opening it.

The little dragon is tired but happy. Lizabeth can get treasures out of the metal box, so both are happy. Most of the treasures are made of paper but some are metal. The little dragon asks, and Lizabeth will carry Chi's papers to the shelter with her treasures.

Lizabeth writes 'Lizabeth and Mona' with a black rock inside the box so Chi will know who took her papers. The little dragon wonders which will prove to be the better treasures.

There are eight other two-leggeds inside the log shelter with Gran and Micky, so the little dragon stays outside with their treasures. After twenty breaths she looks in the little opening. All the two-leggeds inside move away except for Lizabeth, who climbs on her head and the little dragon gently puts her on the ground. Then they look at what they brought home. Lizabeth takes nearly everything out of the bag, then puts the dragon named Mona's paw on top of what's left.

Lizabeth searches for something to read to the little dragon from their treasures, but before twenty breaths all the humans come out of the shelter and want to talk to Lizabeth and her little dragon. Gran looks at the little dragon, and then closes her mouth, so the little dragon does as Gran does, and speaks only once when Lizabeth asks what her name is. Before most of the two-leggeds leave, Lizabeth gives each some of their 'currency' treasures; they thank her for the 'butt-wipe' and laugh.

One male who did not leave was named Hizoner, and Gran talks about a little dragon sleeping in his barn. Gran whisper-asks the little dragon if she can smell any person that she cannot see, and the little dragon whispers yes. Hizoner talks about the lack of rain and lack of hay for the winter. Gran asks again, and this time the little dragon cannot smell anyone she cannot see. Lizabeth hugs her left front paw and says she is proud of her dragon, and Gran says that Mona did very well. The little dragon does not understand but is happy anyway.

Gran takes all of Chi's paper treasures and puts them inside the shelter, and a little dragon follows in her footsteps. Lizabeth carries the bag that the dragon was standing on. Gran asks the dragon named Mona to tell her if she smells any of the two-leggeds that she chased away, and to tell her if any two-legged scents come close to the 'cabin.' Then Gran closes the door and

empties the bag onto the table.

The dragon sees three pieces of paper rolled up. Gran tears the paper, and twenty gold coins spill out of each one. The little dragon looks at Gran and waits for an explanation, but Gran looks at Hizoner and waits.

"I'd pound the faces off of them, if I was you," says Hizoner, "and I wouldn't spend them too quick."

"Why not?" asks Lizabeth.

"When people think you have a lot of gold, some folks turn flatterer, some folks turn thief, and some folks beg, but everybody feels the strain," says Hizoner.

"I'm thinking a big barn or two," says Gran.

"What for?" asks Hizoner.

"Her friends," says Gran. "At least twenty more dragons, all of them bigger than this one."

"Laud a Mercy," says Hizoner.

"Hungry dragons," continues Gran. "Seems they ate up all the game on the far side of the river, and that big fire last week didn't help them one bit."

"I don't mean to offend..."

"Not to worry," says Gran. "Most dragons think people are too small to eat, and would rather eat the moose, boars, horses, and cows."

"Horses?" asks Hizoner.

"Yes," says Gran. "That's one reason Chi is going to fetch them, so she can tell them not to eat your horses, not to step on the log houses, and not to break any vegetation that is planted in rows, especially trees."

"Gran, why?" asks Hizoner. "Why us? Why bring huge carnivores to our village?"

"Look at those two," says Gran, and both two-leggeds stare at Lizabeth, who is now almost sleeping on her dragon. "Do you think I had anything to do with that?"

"Did you do it?" asks Hizoner.

"Lizabeth did it," whispers the dragon named Mona. "Imprinting is complete."

"What is imprinting?" asks Hizoner.

"This dragon does not know," whispers the little dragon.

"What will you do with your gold?" asks Hizoner.

"Gran is the big dragon now," whispers the little dragon.

"How could I possibly say no to her?" asks Gran. "She chased the Apsky boys off when they went fruit-thieving, then the next night, she got four swords and a lantern from a raiding party without getting hurt or eating anyone."

"How'd you know it was the Apsky boys?" asks Lizabeth.

"They didn't come to see the dragon today."

"And you didn't smell the fruit thieves again," says Lizabeth to me.

"Mona has not smelled their scents for twelve thousand breaths."

"See how smart she is? If Chi was here, what would she say?" asks Gran.

"Chi would say she has not smelled their scents for eleven thousand two hundred breaths."

"What would I say?"

"You do not know already?" says the little dragon. "Perhaps two and a half to one of mine... thirty thousand breaths."

"I see," says Hizoner. "I have always associated intelligence with curiosity... why don't you ask more questions?"

"Gran and Lizabeth are the big dragons."

"You can be the big dragon for questions," says Lizabeth. The little dragon looks at Gran.

"Ask your questions always," says Gran. "It will be an honor to answer them."

"Where is a big barn or two?" asks the little dragon.

"We will build them for you," says Hizoner. "That will take at least a month, depending on how big."

"You will do this? Why?"

"Because you will give us gold. We use gold for money."

"What is money?"

"Money is a one-to-one," says Gran. "One coin is worth one horse. Twenty horses are worth twenty coins."

"Where were the horses before Lizabeth found the coins?" asks the little dragon.

"Money is supposed to be a one-to-one," says Hizoner, "but sometimes it fails. Sometimes, a coin is lost, or a girl and her dragon find coins, or more horses are born."

"And the coins you use already--how many are those?"

"I don't know... but no one has more coins than you do."

The little dragon has an idea. "How many two-leggeds are in the village?" she asks.

"Ninety-seven," says Hizoner.

"The money belongs to ninety-seven," says the dragon named Mona. "If Gran and Lizabeth add the coins to the money, then all ninety-seven should share."

"I can assure you," says Hizoner. "anyone would spend the coins without a second thought."

"A Dragon would not do that. This dragon can think of only one good way to add the coins to the money."

Lizabeth and the little dragon go to seven shelters in the village. At each 'house,' Lizabeth gives each person a half-coin bearing the marks of her dragon's teeth, and tells the story of finding the gold and the little dragon's wish to share.

Every villager thanks her, and often give Lizabeth gifts of food. The little dragon decides she likes bread and almost likes potatoes, but does not like pie (except for the crust). One villager (Mr. Buckland) wants to know what Lizabeth and the dragon named Mona will do with the rest of the gold, but they do not know. Lizabeth is keeping the little pieces of coins that weren't bitten in half properly, and the dragon named Mona accidentally swallowed the first gold coin that she tried to bite-in-half.

Much later, when the villagers leave, Lizabeth helps her make a nest and branch-blanket. However, once her branch-blanket becomes warm, the little dragon is hungry and cannot sleep. Investigating the scent of a lantern seems better than not sleeping to the little dragon, and she finds Gran looking at the papers. The little dragon tells Gran she is hungry, but does not know where to hunt. Lizabeth gives her a piece of bread, and the little dragon is not hungry anymore. Gran asks about dragon-jokes, and does not understand why a little bread is enough for a big dragon. Lizabeth goes back to sleeping inside and Gran brings the lantern and walks with the little dragon outside. Before she can lie down at the sleeping place, the little dragon is hungry again. Gran tells her where to hunt. Afterwards, the dragon named Mona returns to Gran's shelter and washes very carefully in the creek nearby, even though the water is cold. She then covers herself with her branches as best she can.

That night, she dreams that Big Dragon attacks, and she cannot move. "Become as stone!" she screams, when it seems that she cannot live one breath longer... but before the great jaws close on her, she *changes*. Looking behind her, she sees stones that look like dragons, a very big one and a little one. The big one tips forward as the ground crumbles beneath its front paws, its head striking the ground a half-pace behind the little one. As it crashes, it makes a great cloud of dust that hides its demise. She wants to look at the little stone dragon again, but she cannot see it. There is too much dust in the air that she cannot taste or smell.

When the little dragon wakes, her branch-blanket is intact.

Gran is sleeping, and Lizabeth and Micky are whispering and making 'pancakes,' which she likes. When the children eat, they

look at one of Chi's papers that Gran left on the table. There is a 'picture' of a dragon on it, according to Lizabeth and Micky. Micky reads the words. "Our exclusive Bio-Metal Fusion means the strongest bones and scales! Only from Dragonic Logic!" Lizabeth shows her how the dragon was drawn on the paper. The little dragon understands it as a one-to-one, but does not like the paper dragon's distorted face. Micky and Lizabeth understand when the dragon named Mona tries to smile at them.

When Gran wakes, the children and dragon go outside. The little dragon scents Hizoner, and the dragon called Mona walks slowly with the children on her back. Hizoner is wearing what Lizabeth calls a 'witching hat' and she asks him "Can we come with you?"

"You're working your own magic," says Hizoner.

"We're going to the Apsky place later, and we could use your help," says Lizabeth.

"I'll go to the Apsky place with you, but I'd like to check in with Gran first. I've got something..."

"What is magic?" asks the little dragon, who has improperly spoken like a big dragon. She cannot (gesture of submission) because of the children on her back.

"I don't really know," says Hizoner. "If my magic works today, the Apsky boys might become dragon-friends. Magic keeps the tribe... keeps the two-leggeds together--from fighting with each other."

"Then magic is when I say that Micky is a proper little dragon," she says.

"Yes," says Hizoner.

"Thank you," says Micky.

"Hold this," says Hizoner. "These two don't seem to be interested in this little book I found."

"For the Love of Dragons," says Micky.

"May I, pretty please, borrow that book? Was that magic?" asks Lizabeth.

"Might as well be," says Hizoner.

Gran has the stove going again, and the little dragon sits near it. Gran and Hizoner tell what they read the book, but soon the children and the little dragon do not understand them.

"According to this book, dragons don't have amylase in their saliva, but they can eat starches anyway. Do you know what that means?" asks Gran.

Hizoner shakes his head. "Starches are in potatoes and bread, and saliva is spit, but amylase... I don't know."

"The book recommends up to eighty-five percent starches for improved coloring, and up to ninety-three percent starches if you feed dragons fortified dry food."

"What's wrong with Mona's color?" asks Hizoner.

"It doesn't say--there's a few pages missing. They do go on and on about getting iron out of dragon-food. Here it says that white gold gives inconsistent results--then about pellets versus powders.

"The more we learn, the less we know," says Hizoner.

"What is a proper little dragon?" Micky whispers in the little dragon's ear.

"Little dragons obey and answer questions," she whispers back.

"Am I a proper little dragon?" whispers Lizabeth.

"You are a big dragon," whispers the little dragon.

"What do big dragons do?" whispers Lizabeth.

"They do what they think best," whispers the little dragon.

"If you were a big dragon, what would you do?" whispers Micky.

The pretend-big dragon and the two children visit another seven groups of villagers, giving half-coins to all two-leggeds. This pretend big dragon does not leave magic unfinished.

Four of the people-herds already know the story of the bitten coins--and have bread to feed to the dragon. Then the pretend big dragon decides to visit Gran because the children are hungry.

When they get there, the pretend-big dragon wants the children to sit by the warm stove.

"That is the best place for little ones to sit," says the pretend big dragon.

"This is," says Lizabeth. "You sit there."

"That is why you are a big dragon, and this one is pretend big dragon." she says. "The little dragon does not know enough."

"You can be the big dragon of magic and money," says Micky, and Lizabeth agrees.

Gran has an Idea. Gran wraps a string around various parts of the little dragon, then measures the string, and then tells Lizabeth what to write, but Gran will not explain her Idea to the little dragon or to the children. After 'lunch,' the children and the little dragon complete the bitten-coin magic. Micky says the whole village has been Mona-tized.

They arrive at the shelter about five hundred breaths before Energy Ball will cease to warm. The little dragon has never seen so many two-leggeds in one place. With Lizabeth on her back, the dragon called Mona tries to answer questions, sings a song, counts to twenty, and writes 'A' on the ground. Perhaps the two-leggeds are easy to entertain.

The dragon called Mona is asked why she shared the gold, but Gran explains for her. "If she shares, the whole village feels a little richer, and we learn a little bit about what's really inside that dragon's heart. If she spent it, then she gets our stuff and we get a little gold--not good for us, and not good for her, according to her dragon instincts. I think she's right, but a couple days ago, I would'a laughed."

"Mona for banker!" says a male she does not know. Other two-leggeds laugh.

"Don't laugh," says Gran. "Maybe she is smarter than us. Would any of you have done as she did? If so, I'm fortunate to be in your village. If the gold would have stayed in your pockets, you're just

like me."

Then Gran has a job for the little dragon to do--stand still. Elizabeth asks the little dragon to close her eyes, and they put something dry and slithery on her back.

"I don't know if she can work the buttons," says Elizabeth.

"Please lift this paw, and curl your claws."

"We should dye it," says Gran.

"Now do this paw that way, please... you can open your eyes!" says Elizabeth. "Do you feel warmer?"

"Yes," says the little dragon.

"What's her suit made out of?" asks Micky.

"Canvas," says Gran. "Mister Buckland donated it, and the Sewing club... Mona, you do not need to be still anymore."

The little dragon does not know what to do, so Elizabeth walks with her. The little dragon wonders if suits belong on dragons.

"Do you like it?" asks Elizabeth.

"Mona does not know," says the little dragon.

"Do you want me to take the suit off?" asks Elizabeth.

"No," says the little dragon. "The suit is warm."

Some of the villagers make noises-of-approval after her words.

"We can change it," says Elizabeth.

"Is the little dragon now a canvas dragon?" she asks.

She is still wearing her suit when Energy Ball is below the horizon. Elizabeth, Micky, and several other children chase the little white dragon around the shelter. "You have to let Mona start first," Elizabeth tells the other children, "because if you get close, Mona always lets you catch her."

Several of the villagers ask the dragon to bite coins that they are already using for money. The coins are small, and the dragon named Mona has to ask for help. When the little dragon accidentally swallows one, Elizabeth gives three of the gold coin-fragments that were not money, restoring the one-to-one. Some

villagers want to trade gold-for-gold for the 'Lizabeth's-bits,' but nobody has a scale to weigh fractions of a coin. Another two-legged wants to know where a little dragon defecates. Lizabeth says 'In your bed' before the little dragon named Mona can answer, and the two-leggeds laugh.

"Already got it," says Gran, who holds up a small clipped circle of gold.

"What was it?" asks a villager.

"One of these," says Gran, holding up a larger coin.

Hizoner puts on his witching hat, and Lizabeth makes a happy noise. "That's hard to believe," Hizoner says.

"I'm telling the truth," says Gran.

"Mona," says Hizoner, "have you swallowed any coins?"

"Yes," says the little dragon named Mona.

"When?" asks Hizoner.

"First time, twelve thousand eight hundred breaths before. Second time, eighty seven breaths before."

"Was it one like this?" asks Gran.

"Yes."

"How big was the fraction you swallowed?" asks Hizoner.

"As big as two of the largest pieces that Lizabeth has now," says the little dragon.

"Lizabeth?" asks Gran.

"That's true," says Lizabeth, and she shows the gold pieces she has. Hizoner picks up two pieces, and says "Was the piece you swallowed twelve thousand eight hundred breaths ago bigger than both of these?"

"Yes," says the little dragon named Mona.

"Did it weigh more than both of these?"

"Mona does not know."

Hizoner takes off his witching hat. "I have heard only the truth."

The little dragon think that Micky and Lizabeth want to have

adventures. She carries them around and around the shelter until Lizabeth says she feels the cold. The children help her enter the shelter without tearing her suit. The little dragon tells Gran that she likes the suit.

"Good!" says Gran. Then Gran shows the little dragon and the children seven gold pieces. "Our neighbors like bitten coins so much they spent these instead!" The little dragon doesn't understand, but Gran and Lizabeth and Micky are happy.

"Not only that... but look here." Gran has a pile of papers and books. "All the folks 'round here loaned me books and papers about dragons."

Lizabeth looks at the papers, one by one, and the little dragon looks too. She sees many words she cannot read, and many pictures that make no sense at all, even some that Lizabeth says are pictures of dragons.

"This one is like your suit, except gray," says Lizabeth. Except for head and paws, a white dragon is covered in something very dark gray with two small white stripes that join at the front of the dragon's throat and go between the front legs. "It says... 'formal suit.'"

"Mona thinks her suit is better."

"Me, too. This one's Giant Bunny. These are the long ears, and the dragon must be holding his real tail... I don't think that dragon has a tail. That's sad. This one is... Fairy Princess."

"Does that dragon have a tail?"

"I can't see one," says Lizabeth. "Maybe all these clothes belonged to a tail-less dragon."

"Lizabeth, can I borrow your dragon for a moment?" asks Hizoner.

"Sure. What are you going to do?"

"I'm not--you are. Read this word to her," says Hizoner.

"Mona... freeze," says Lizabeth. "Can you move now? Can you? Mona, UNFREEZE! Mona, be yourself again! I'm sorry!" I'll never do it again!"

"What is wrong?" asks the little dragon.

"You're not mad at me?" asks Lizabeth.

"No," says the dragon named Mona.

"When hot-waxing your dragon, be sure to use the fre... 'F' word command as most dragons will twitch involuntarily," reads Hizoner.

"Not Mona," says Lizabeth. "I don't think those people liked dragons much. All these costumes are stupid, and hot-waxing sounds stupider."

"I can only hope you and I are wrong about that," says Hizoner, "but I think you're right."

"I've got another command for Mona," says Gran. "Lizabeth, can you read this?"

"Can... kel..."

"Cancel," says Gran.

"Cancel... imprinting. What does that mean?"

Gran reads. "If a Dragonic Logic dragon should encounter a non-intended bonding partner, the 'cancel imprinting' command will reverse the process temporarily. The desired imprinting should proceed within twenty-four hours. After that period, an unimprinted dragon will never complete the process."

"What's that mean?" asks Lizabeth.

"I don't know," says Gran.

"Ignorant here," says Hizoner.

"Are you changed?" Lizabeth asks the dragon named Mona.

"Already, Lizabeth said the little dragon can be a big dragon."

"So... big dragons cannot be imprinted?" asks Gran.

"This dragon does not know. Big dragons do what they think best," says the little dragon. "Little dragons follow orders and answer questions."

"I understood every word and still don't understand," says Gran. "Are the little dragons slaves?"

"No. If a big dragon is abusive, little dragons cannot fight. The little dragons can walk away or follow another big dragon."

"Are there any middle dragons, not big or small?" asks Hizoner.

"No... but some dragons are both big and little. This little dragon is a big dragon in magic and money and questions."

"And a big dragon in explaining big dragons!" says Lizabeth.

When Gran and Hizoner are finished reading the papers, Hizoner begins to walk to his shelter. The little dragon knows that two-leggeds cannot see when it is dim-dark and offers to carry Hizoner home.

"I'd like the company, but I think I'm too heavy for you to carry."

"Mona can," says the little dragon.

Soon the dragon named Mona learns that a dragon in a white suit scares the horses. Hizoner must walk the rest of the way.

In her dream, she is looking upon many tail-less dragons that wear strange costumes and sing and dance for a big group of unhappy two-leggeds. They throw little rocks at the dragons.

"Cancel imprinting!" snarls the dragon named Mona from somewhere above. Then the other dragons laugh and herd the two-leggeds, and roar at any that dare to throw more rocks. When the biggest dragon asks the two-leggeds to sing, it sounds so bad that many dragons tell them to stop. The two-leggeds cannot dance, either.

Her nose wakes the dragon called Mona--she smells bread! Her branch-blanket is intact. The little dragon shakes free of her branch-blanket and goes to the shelter--Lizabeth will be happy that the little dragon has learned how to dream.

Gran sleeps, so Lizabeth and Mona take turns quietly reading to each other.

The little dragon looks out the shelter door and sees a immature

male two-legged running on the trail to Gran's shelter carrying five big pieces of bread. When the two-legged sees her, it makes a funny noise and stops.

"Greetings," says the little dragon.

"Can... can I talk to Gran?"

"She is still sleeping," says the dragon named Mona.

"But the bread is hot *now*," says the two-legged, perhaps improperly loud. "That's when it tastes the best."

But Gran is awake now.

The dragon named Mona decides that this two-legged tells the truth after it gives her four of the five pieces of bread. Gran sends the strange two-legged home with two jugs of not-done cider. The dragon named Mona wonders if the money is dying.

Lizabeth and Micky want to light a fire for the little dragon because it's educational, so after they take the suit off the dragon, Gran sets Lizabeth to work with flint and steel while Micky uses a bow-drill. The little dragon likes the bow-drill, and Micky shows her 'dog-bane' weed, and how to peel fibers off of it for bowstrings, and tells her to wash after working with the weed.

Lizabeth has a fire, and they all put sticks in it. The children teach the little dragon about fire, and soon the dragon called Mona can mouth-carry a flaming branch. The dragon named Mona learns that fire always burns up, and it lets the wind tell it which way is up, and upwind dragons are unburned dragons. Despite the smoke, the little dragon smells a human approaching. Mister Buckland wants to see what became of the sailcloth, and the children show him the suit, and put it on the dragon for a few minutes. Gran wants to know if there is anything they can do for Mister Buckland, and he says that the deer are eating everything in his garden, even the tomatoes. Could the dragon named Mona help?

The little dragon wants to hunt the deer *now*, but Mister Buckland says the deer only come at night when he sleeps. The dragon named Mona does not understand. Lizabeth asks if Mona

can hunt anyway, and Mister Buckland agrees.

The little dragon soon finds four food-beasts that left their scents in Mister Buckland's garden. Since she is not hungry, she herds them, and since the food-beasts do not seem properly scared of dragons, the herding is easy for one dragon. She herds them back to Mister Buckland's place because she does not know what else to do. When she smells Chi and Seven, she chases the food-beasts in their direction, then she roars. Both dragons victory-roar back after making the kills.

The dragons decide to give one of the food-beasts to Mister Buckland, who is delighted to eat 'dragon-food.'

After washing herself, the little dragon wants to go back to Gran's shelter. The other dragons follow and ask many questions.

"You smell healthy, but your color is lighter. How do you feel?" asks Chi.

"The little dragon is healthy and happy to see her friends."

"Are you still imprinted?" asks Chi.

"This dragon does not know."

"You smell of smoke," says Chi. "Was there a fire?"

"Yes. The two-leggeds made a little fire for a little dragon. This dragon will teach you."

"Are the two-leggeds that smart?" asks Seven.

"Each two-legged by itself is wise, but the bigger the herd, the stupider they act."

"What is that?" asks Chi. The little dragon looks around Chi and sees her suit is spread out over two of the trees planted in rows.

"That is a suit. It is like a cape, but it also covers a dragon's legs." The little dragon stops because Seven is laughing happily.

"Can you... can you safely walk into the Great River when you wear your suit?" asks Seven.

"This dragon has never tried."

Seven and Chi want to see the little dragon wear her suit, and assist her in putting it on even though it is wet. Seven is

fascinated by the buttons, and puts pegs through buttonholes even after the little dragon takes off her wet suit and stands in the warm light of Energy Ball. Lizabeth comes running out of the shelter and, after hugs for all, the dragon called Mona wants the tiny two-legged to climb on her back.

"We washed your suit because Gran said that you got it dirty inside and out, and she thinks you need washing before you wear your suit again, but you already got it dirty," says Lizabeth.

"How can this dragon fix it?" asks the little dragon.

Gran cannot help with the washing because she's cooking some food-beast that Mr. Buckland sent over. Lizabeth and the little dragon teach Seven and Chi about fire as they heat water in Gran's biggest washtub. The first tubful of water becomes dirty when all three dragons discover that they like the way the warm water feels on their paws, and some spills onto the fire, nearly putting it out. Seven quickly braids up some grass, wraps it around the kettle's handle, and mouth-carries it to the nearby creek for clean water--but when Seven returns, the children, Chi, and the little dragon have added many branches to the fire and it is too big and hot to put a kettle on. Then the little dragon gets her paws dirty when she throws dirt upon the too-big fire. Perhaps they can do the washing tomorrow.

The little dragon wants to see Anar, but she does not want to leave her two-leggeds unguarded. Chi explains that Anar has thirty three dragons following in his footsteps at the moment and cannot come here. Lizabeth says perhaps all the dragons should come and tell stories around a big fire, and the little dragon thinks that Lizabeth is very wise. When asked, Gran says "Laura Mercy" but asks if the dragons can get their firewood from that one place she'd like to have cleared. Chi asks if the humans will stay away from the other dragons in case of imprinting. Gran agrees, and Seven runs to the Ruins. Chi says that she will read papers and protect the shelter with Gran, Lizabeth and Micky. The dragon

named Mona runs to The Ruins.

The little dragon is amazed at the damage the dragons have wreaked upon The Ruins. Many dragons, including Anar, are standing near a tall square stone that seems to be the only thing left in one piece, but even that has a big round hole in it. The little dragon realizes that the square stone is where The Vault was. All the dragons are very quiet, and the little dragon listens. She can barely hear a voice of a female dragon as if it was far away. Anar rubs his chin on her back, but is very quiet. The little dragon can hear the far-away dragon say 'nothing' and 'nothing yet' over and over, and the sounds seem to be coming from a small round hole at the bottom of a big hole. The sounds get fainter and fainter. Anar moves his head closer to the little round hole and says "Come back" in a big voice. The far-away dragon voice agrees. Anar gestures at the hole, then pushes her in that direction with his nose. The little dragon looks down the hole and sees white things on the bottom--probably bones, but crushed. She waits, and hears footsteps. A female dragon enters from a place the little dragon cannot see. The female puts one fore-paw on one side of the hole, and the other paw on the other side of the hole, and starts climbing up, pressing her paws, head, and back against the sides of the hole. The little dragon is amazed again.

When the female's head appears, all the dragons victory-roar, including the dragon named Mona. A big male she does not know helps the female out of the hole, and the little dragon sees deep scratches on her head and back. The big male dragon asks for a report, and the female spits out some little golden things she had in her mouth and says "Nothing to see and weak scents I cannot identify. The tunnel seems very like the one the Dusty Dragons use, but bigger and less wind."

"Did you hear an echo?"

"None. The cave is very straight and very long.

"Is it big enough?"

"Easily."

"How many paces?"

"At least four hundred--I had trouble counting because I was walking backwards."

The big male nods, and the female runs to the little dragon, and asks "You're the little dragon who first crossed the Great River?"

"Perhaps," says the little dragon. (gesture of submission) "This dragon knows little."

(gesture of submission) "I follow in your footsteps!" says the female. "That was so brave! I would never have thought to try it if I didn't know your story!"

"What are these things, Stretch?" asks a big male.

"I don't know," says the female, "but there are a lot of them around the pile of bones." She points her nose at Mona. "How did you know two trees would work?"

"One tree was too few, and three was too many."

"That's excellent!" the female says. Anar winks at the little dragon over the female's head.

"This dragon has seen that color before. Perhaps I could examine one?"

"Of course! I'll get some!" The female named Stretch searches and finds four of the golden things, which she mouth-carries to the little dragon. "They have no taste," says Stretch.

"These are like dragon scales made of gold," says the dragon named Mona.

"What is gold?" asks the big male.

"Gold is a kind of metal that the two-leggeds use. They like it, perhaps too much." The little dragon gives the gold pieces back to Stretch, who lets them fall to the ground.

"What is gold good for?" asks the big male.

"I do not know," says the little dragon. "The two-leggeds use pieces of it to keep track of their obligations."

A big dragon whose scent she recognizes gently brushes his chin on her back and whispers "Burntbrain wasn't a good name,

was it? I think the light of the Great Fireball makes a dragon smarter."

"Cee!"

"The Dusty Dragons found us," says Cee. "But when hunting for them, I met a dragon named Graith. She told me all about Anar and Seven and Fays, and helped Junior and I across the Great River. We follow in Anar's footsteps now."

Energy Ball is low in the sky when Anar and Seven lead the dragons back to the two-legged's shelter, but they stop before they arrive. The little dragon and Chi go to the shelter and find that many villagers there already. Gran says that three villagers want deer-removal service and one wants help removing a dead tree that may fall on his shelter... but now is the time for a bonfire and stories. The little dragon takes a flaming branch with her to teach the dragons about fire, and Chi does the same. Soon some dragons are gathered around the bonfire. Other dragons bring more dead trees to put on the fire and to make new fires.

Anar watches the dragons play with fire for one hundred breaths, then gently noses the little dragon forward and asks her to tell about imprinting. The little dragon stands between two fires and loudly tells her story of meeting pretty Lizabeth. The dragons ask her to tell more, so she tells of Chi finding and helping her complete imprinting, and about potatoes and bread and pancakes and piecrust, and then about the apple press, and of papers that sometimes confuse both dragons and two-leggeds. The dragons want more, so she speaks of Hizoner, and the horses, and of Chi and the one-to-one map, and of the Sewing Club and the warm suit they made for her. 'More!' say the dragons. The little dragon speaks of the coins that she and Lizabeth found, and of the bitten-coin magic, and of entertaining the two-leggeds, and of being a pretend big dragon. 'More!' shout the dragons, but the little dragon is tired, and some dragons cannot hear her tell of the

'freeze' command and the 'cancel imprinting' command. So Chi tells more stories of the little dragon, expanding some of the stories that the little dragon already told, and adding the stories of chasing off the Apsky boys and repeating what Gran tells her about the raiding party and the deer-hunting for Mister Buckland. Seven tells the story of how the little dragon crossed the Great River, and of all the food-beasts the little dragon chased to her friends on the other side. Eighth then tells the story when Mona was a pretend-Emperor's Third Male Spawn. Anar tells of finding the little dragon sleeping in a branch-blanket she made herself, and of teaching her how to herd food-beasts. He speaks of her bravery as a dragon in a tree, and of capes that she discovered how to make. Then Junior tells when Cee caught her roaring at their herd of food-beasts, and how he and Cee thought she was ill when they first met because the little dragon didn't even know what a hat was--but he and Cee learned the truth about hats from the little dragon.

Some dragons want to see the little dragon in her suit, so Chi and Gran and Lizabeth help her put the suit on. The dragons victory-roar and humans cheer together.

Many of the dragons wish to sleep now, and some dragons go branch-collecting. Soon, big piles of leafy branches are near the bonfires. The little dragon asks to help, but when she is on Second's back, he will only trot slowly around and around the bonfires. Many dragons laugh, then they follow, then victory-roar again and again.

The next morning, Stretch wants to go explore the tunnels again with a fire so she can travel faster and farther, but neither Anar nor Chi like the look of the scratches on her back and head. "Once more will tear your scales," says Chi. Stretch wants to go anyway, but Chi say that a dragon with a bloody back cannot climb up no matter how hard she tries. The little dragon asks if

Stretch can hold onto a tree long enough to not touch the ground for ten breaths--and Anar laughs. "That would require a smaller dragon," he says. "Do you know of any brave little dragons?"

The little dragon goes to ask Gran about traveling with fire, and because the lantern is nearly empty, both humans and dragons start looking for big, dead pine trees. When Stretch finds one, Anar pushes it over. Gran shows the dragons what 'fatwood' is. Anar demonstrates how fast a big dragon can destroy a half-rotted tree trunk. The dragons collect all the fatwood that they find, putting the little pieces in bags and mouth-carrying the big pieces. Once back at the shelter, Gran splits the end of an oak branch with a hatchet, and asks the little dragon to twist the branch and hatchet in different directions. When the split opens wide enough, Gran puts the handle of her skillet in the split and nods, and the little dragon removes the hatchet. Gran puts some small pieces of fatwood in the skillet, and soon the dragon named Mona learns how to comfortably mouth-carry the flaming skillet. "This dragon will wash Gran's skillet later," she says around the branch.

The dragons can hear the distress cries of a food-beast, and one of the dragons on watch-and-scent goes to investigate. The little dragon smells a horse and Hizoner. Hizoner is running and quickly finds Gran.

"Three masts, maybe twenty guns, no other ships," he says. "It might go upriver."

Gran is still for half a breath, then says "I can't shout loud enough for all the dragons to hear."

The little dragon puts her branch skillet down three paces from the fire, and asks every small dragon to approach Gran and say 'Cancel Imprinting' to her if Anar does not. Gran is talking to Anar, who has his eyes closed.

"A gun can throw an iron rock at least two thousand of your paces. The rock is about this big... as big as a two-legged head,

and heavy for its size, and travels fast. Very dangerous."

"Cancel imprinting. Tell me of their eyes," asks Anar.

"They are humans who cannot see better than a dragon, but might have a spy-glass... a thing that helps them to see for a long distance. With a spy-glass, a two-legged on the ship could see a two-legged on the beach."

"Beach?"

"South of here, maybe two or three thousand of your paces, you will find the Great River gets so wide that no eyes can see the other side. The sandy place where the water and land touch we call the beach."

"Cancel imprinting. Their ears?" asks Anar.

"Not as good as a dragon's ears, not as good as a dragon's nose, but they have artificial teeth called swords that a two-legged can swing very fast. These swords are sharp all along the edge, and are longer than your claws. Cancel imprinting."

"Cancel imprinting."

"They may have pistols," says Hizoner. "which are small guns that throw small metal pieces very very fast."

"Are the two-leggeds on that ship like villagers?" asks Anar.

"I don't know yet," says Gran, "but the two-leggeds on that ship are probably responsible for that raiding party that Mona defeated. Probably not good two-leggeds."

"(grumble) All dragons, stealth, as First sometimes says. He will know about stealth. How many two-leggeds are on that ship?"

"Less than one hundred," says Hizoner.

"What would you do?" asks Anar.

"I would ask Gran for a cup of vinegar," says Hizoner. "Then I'd ask the ladies of the Sewing Club how many dragon-suits they could make from the sails on that ship, because dragons might ask them about it. I'm serious about the vinegar, Gran--the stronger, the better, and a potful of water."

"How soon until you expect trouble?" asks Anar.

"The ship must come closer to the land, and that will take... two

thousand of your breaths, at least. If the guns are used, you will see a puff of smoke before dragon ears can hear or the thrown rocks arrive. And... Anar, will you let me wipe your nose?"

Anar looks at the little dragon.

(gesture of submission)

"What must I do?" asks Anar.

"I'm not sure," says Hizoner. "I read that when dragons are exposed to some kinds of dust, it is bad for them. One cure they suggest is to wipe with vinegar, which is harmless... see? I'm going to wipe this around your nose."

"You may try."

"It works! This is iron acetate, and it doesn't belong on dragons. Can you endure the scent for a long time?"

After a few minutes of wiping, Hizoner gets an idea. Soon, he blows a mist off of the vinegar using two tubes. Anar breathes in a little of the mist slowly, then exhales forcefully onto the ground. Hizoner makes more mist, and Anar inhales more of it this time, and exhales forcefully onto the ground again. The third time Anar does this, he inhales all the mist and the ground becomes a little darker where he exhales. The fourth time, Hizoner holds his hands over part of the little dragon's nose, and she blows and the tubes make mist. Anar chases all of it--and sneezes twice. Then Hizoner wipes Anar's nose.

"That's enough for now," says Anar.

"Your nose looks better!" says Chi. "The inside is much lighter."

"I think I can smell vinegar," says Anar. "Seven, perhaps you should chase the vapors with your nose."

"Cancel imprinting!" says Seven.

"There is no scent of Stretch," says the little dragon.

Anar tells the little dragon, Cee, and Junior to stay with Gran

and Lizabeth and Micky. Seventh and Eighth stay on watch-and-scent. Seven is chasing vapors with Hizoner. Chi goes to the beach with Anar and Third and two other dragons. The rest of the dragons go to The Ruins. First takes a bag of fatwood chips and the skillet wedged in a branch, and Second takes the biggest piece of fatwood.

Cee and Junior want to hear about 'imprinting' and crossing the Great River on floating trees, and after the little dragon tells her story, they tell of The Boss ordering them to go food-beast gathering with eight other dragons, and how they all ran upriver because of the fire. "If I knew about fire then, I think ten dragons could have defeated it," says Cee, and winks. Hizoner is wiping Seven's paws, and must not have seen Cee wink, because he talks of dragons making fire-breaks along ridge-lines, and then of 'back-fires,' and all the dragons are thoughtful when he finishes.

Seven's front paws are now a little bit lighter than the rest of her. Seven looks at the little dragon, and says "Permission to approach!"

"Granted," says the little dragon, who is puzzled. Seven takes the ball of fluff that Hizoner has been wiping her paws with, and holds it in front, and looks in the little dragon's eyes.

"It is harmless," says Hizoner, "but I don't think Mona needs it."

"Mona does not need it, Hizoner. This is for the rest of the dragons... if Mona allows."

"This dragon does not understand, but will follow in your footsteps."

Seven wipes the vinegary fluff-ball in a line from shoulder to tail over and over again, then asks Hizoner why Mona's color is different.

"She once swallowed metal by accident," says Hizoner. "Don't wipe too hard--that gold layer is very thin."

Then Seven wipes Mona's other side. The little dragon looks, and there is a reddish-golden stripe where Seven wiped the fluff-ball.

"Racing stripes," says Seven.

"I think I'll be watch-and-scent," says Cee, and he winks at her. "Those two dragons are laughing too much to be of any use."

"I want to make racing stripes," says Lizabeth.

"Soon," says the little dragon. "Seven is doing a magic spell--when she is finished, then (gesture of submission)."

"What is magic?" asks Seven.

"This dragon does not know--but it keeps the two-leggeds from fighting."

"That is a job for a big dragon," says Seven.

"Mona is a big dragon of magic!" says Lizabeth.

"You are very smart," says Seven. "Cancel imprinting."

"Cancel imprinting!" Lizabeth shouts happily.

The little dragon can hear running dragons, and smells Second and Third.

"First wants... little dragon... and Seven... The Ruins!" says Third.

As Third helps the little dragon get on Second's back, she hears Junior ask Cee why those dragons weren't happy to see Mona's racing stripes. When they arrive at The Ruins, the little dragon can smell a dragon's blood. There is a broken-branched tree partly sticking out of the hole where The Vault was, and Second follows Third there. The smell becomes stronger.

"The dragon named Stretch is down there, wounded, and she won't answer or hold onto the tree so we can get her out," says First.

The little dragon looks down the hole and cannot see Stretch. "Are you hurt?" she asks.

"No!" says Stretch's voice. "I couldn't come down slow enough, and my fire fell off and went out. Can you bring me fire?"

First orders the little dragon to see if Stretch is hurt. The little dragon thinks First is angry.

First and Third lift the tree most of the way out of the hole. The little dragon holds tightly onto the trunk and, eyes closed tightly because of falling bits of bark, is lowered into the darkness.

Stretch retreats tail-first into the darkness and will not let the little dragon approach. The little dragon almost asks First for fire, but she thinks that First will forbid it until Stretch is out of the hole. The little dragon tells First that Stretch does not appear to have serious wounds because she can walk backwards quickly, then tells where Stretch is now. First says to bring Stretch back. The little dragon says she will try.

The dragon named Mona finds some of the dropped fire, and carries it and the sand that it rests upon away from the light. When the little dragon thinks First cannot see her, she blows gently upon the spilled fire and some of it starts to glow. Stretch comes a little closer. The dragon named Mona goes back to the light, and tells First that there is hope. The little dragon picks up some of the fatwood pieces and makes a little pile in the light where First can see it, and holding two pieces between her toes, she returns to the glowing spilled fire. The little dragon crushes one piece of wood and puts little pieces on the glowing parts and blows until there is fire. When Stretch comes close, the dragon named Mona winks at her, then tells First that Stretch is close enough to hear anything he wants to say.

First orders Stretch to come out of the hole. Stretch is picking up pieces of wood and will not answer. When Stretch takes the pieces of wood that the little dragon made into a pile, the dragon named Mona can see bloody scrapes on Stretch's head and back and tail.

"You win," says the little dragon. "This dragon cannot stop you, and you have fire. Now, can you..."

"Quiet!" shouts Stretch. "I thought you were a better dragon than that! Dragons need a sleeping cave, and you speak of winning!" Stretch makes a fire on a flat rock tangled into a branch, and she mouth-carries the rock-and-branch into the darkness.

The little dragon looks at First, and says "Perhaps this one can help Stretch stay out of trouble."

"Wait," says First.

First says Seven's blunted claws will not allow her to climb down the way Stretch did, and Seven's paws and back would scrape the sides of the hole if First and Third tried to lower her with the broken tree. First puts the skillet-branch and a bag of fatwood pieces onto the broken tree while Second holds it crooked. Then First and Second lower the broken tree down to the little dragon. She takes the skillet-branch and bag and soon catches up to Stretch even though she must run in the dark. But Stretch will not stop walking, even though the little dragon offers her the branch-skillet. She tries again.

"A little dragon sometimes..."

"Quiet!" shouts Stretch, and the fire drops off of the rock-and-branch and goes out.

The little dragon cannot see Stretch very well, but she thinks Stretch is angry.

The little dragon blows on the spilled fire, then puts more pieces of crushed wood around the glowing parts and makes a fire again. Then the dragon named Mona puts fatwood chips in Gran's skillet, and makes fire there. She puts the branch bearing the flaming skillet in Stretch's mouth. Then she mouth-carries the bag of wood pieces and Stretch's rock-and-branch and waits.

Stretch puts the flaming skillet down. "You may speak freely."

The little dragon drops her burdens and says (gesture of apology) "This dragon spoke to you of winning, but her words and your reply were for First to hear.

"For First? Why? Perhaps... now I feel stupid."

"You said what First needed to hear, honorable Stretch, in a way that he could hear. For now, sleeping caves first."

"Yes, wise one, sleeping caves first," Stretch adds "Perhaps you should carry the fire."

The dragons pick up their burdens and Stretch follows in the

little dragon's footsteps. Perhaps her magic spell worked.

The little dragon learns scents associated with 'ocean' before the cave ends in a cliff that is too steep to climb. The little dragon looks carefully at what land she can see despite the noisy birds that swoop all around the dragons. Then the little dragon adds a piece of wood to Gran's flaming skillet.

"Leave a mark," says Stretch, who urinates outside the cave.

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

"Perhaps other dragons can find this place that way. Now we must go back. This is no good."

"You must carry the fire," says the little dragon. "First will order me up, and he should not be tempted to order me to bring the branch-skillet."

The wind blows behind them now, and Stretch can almost trot without losing the fire. Stretch seems pleased with this and says 'Plata-Power' around the branch.

First is waiting when the little dragon can look up.

She drops the rock-branch and bag and says "Ocean."

"Come up," says First.

The little dragon holds the tree and up she goes.

"Report," says First.

"Stretch is not seriously injured. That cave is two thousand of your paces long, goes this way, and ends in a cliff over ocean." The little dragon winks at First. "The cliff goes at least four paces up."

"Eight paces!" says Stretch.

"Eight paces," says the little dragon.

"I could have climbed four!" says Stretch.

"Wait," says First.

"I've got four Plata-Power paws and a flaming skillet!" says Stretch.

"The little dragon says Stretch will run out of fatwood soon, and

that there is more cave to explore."

"That problem is easy. Step aside one breath, Stretch," says First, and when she does, he throws the big piece of fatwood in the hole. It breaks into little pieces.

"Honorable!" says Stretch.

First orders the little dragon to go to the shelter. Junior and Eighth are there, talking with Micky. Eighth points his nose at the little dragon and briefly half-closes his eyes.

Mona could almost lick the back of Lizabeth's neck before Lizabeth knows she's there. After they greet, Lizabeth says "Gran and Cee have gone 'tree-dropping.' They'll probably find more fatwood once Cee pushes that old snag away from Mr. Buckland's cabin." Lizabeth pets Mona for twenty-three happy breaths, then Lizabeth curls up next to the little dragon. The little dragon decides to sleep too.

The little dragon dreams she is watching a little dragon running from Big Dragon. The little dragon thinks she will probably not going to get to the river crossing before Big Dragon catches her, so she runs first to the left, then right, then she jumps onto a large boulder in the river, and from there jumps to another boulder. Big Dragon approaches with his huge mouth open and puts one paw into the river. As he reaches for the little dragon, that paw slipped. When Big Dragon is distracted, the little dragon jumps from boulder to boulder to riverbank and runs her fastest to the river crossing. When she gets there, twenty paces ahead of Big Dragon, she leaps over three paces of water before she splashes.

The smell of smoke wakes the little dragon. Smoke... and mud... dragon's blood! and Stretch! and soon Stretch drops the branch-skillet and a bag inside the shelter.

"Honorable," says the little dragon.

"I found a small way out," says Stretch quickly, "and still more to explore. Two big dragons could make the small way bigger before dark. You could have gotten out easily, but I had to struggle."

Then Stretch leaves at a run.

"Who was that dirty dragon?" asks Lizabeth. "What happened to her?"

"Stretch has been searching for a sleeping cave. Perhaps she succeeded."

"Stretch will clean up easier than this skillet will," said Gran.

"This dragon will try."

"Soap and sand isn't going to work," said Gran. "The skillet is ruined for pancakes. Let's give this one to honorable Stretch."

"Yes! ... but Mona will miss pancakes."

"I'll buy a new skillet," said Gran. "I can also take the swords to the blacksmith, if you don't mind, Mona."

"Do what you wish," says the little dragon.

"Thank you, honorable Mona. Now, look at those two and tell me what you think," says Gran.

The little dragon sees Micky watching Junior use his bow-drill to make fire. "This dragon likes what she sees."

"So do I," says Gran. "But they've been... I can't explain."

"Cancel imprinting?" asks the little dragon.

"That's what I mean," says Gran. "But... it didn't seem to do you or Lizabeth any harm."

The little dragon can hear a few far-away dragons roar together. "They sound happy," she says.

"Who does?" asks Gran.

"This dragon heard other dragons victory-roar."

"... that sound happy. Yes."

"This dragon will protect you, and be your ears."

"Honorable Mona."

"This two-legged will protect you, and be your ears," says Lizabeth.

Gran smiles. "This two-legged thinks you should take naps more often."

"Permission to approach!"

"Granted," says Junior. "You don't have to be formal."

(gesture of apology)

"You still remember!" says Junior.

"I will not forget," says the little dragon.

"Do you want to learn the important stuff that Micky is teaching me?" asks Junior.

"Yes," says the little dragon. "Perhaps Micky is tired? You have to take care of two-leggeds, because they aren't as strong as dragons. Is it succeeding?"

"What are you asking?" says Junior.

"The... meeting of the minds. Have you achieved that?"

"No... what is meeting of the minds?"

"Imprinting. Has it happened?" asks the little dragon.

"No! How would I know?"

"If you were Micky's best friend, and took him with you everywhere, that would be as if imprinting had happened. Who could tell the difference?"

"Me!" says Micky.

"And me!" says Junior.

"If imprinting did not happen," says the dragon named Mona, "this dragon would have eaten Micky. (gesture of apology) Because this dragon could not hunt during imprinting, talking food-beasts became known to dragons. Because of imprinting, food-beasts became two-legged friends. We have wise ones and bread and fires and a good sleeping cave and papers to read."

The little dragon is sure that Junior and Micky will be better friends now. She likes being a big dragon in magic when her spells work.

Two days later, the dragon named Mona and Chi are inside the shelter hearing the wind and rain. Lizabeth has been teaching the dragons how to read, but Lizabeth is tired now. The little dragon and Chi are discussing the two-leggeds on the ship that is now moving upriver. The little dragon and Chi can smell the two-leggeds that Mona once defeated by throwing branches at them... and many others. as well.

"I think that ship is a bad place for two-leggeds," says Chi. "They cannot do anything productive on a ship, so the two-leggeds must live like carrion birds."

"Some two-leggeds are just bad," whispers Lizabeth.

"How many bad two-leggeds do you know?" asks Chi.

"Besides the Apsky boys... none."

"And the Apsky boys aren't bad," says Chi, "or Gran would say so."

"Perhaps a black dragon is bad," says the dragon named Mona.

"Even a black dragon could be good," said Chi. "If Hizoner could spend a million breaths cleaning, and wiping his nose every day, then... maybe, perhaps, possibly... a good dragon could come out."

"I like that," whispers Lizabeth.

Anar asks the little dragon if she can think of a way to get the strange two-leggeds away from the big guns on the ship. She cannot, but Gran and Hizoner can.

The dragon named Mona is wearing her suit.

"Hello! Can you talk?" the little dragon shouts at the ship.

"It wants to know if we can talk," said a two-legged on the ship.

"Can you tell this dragon tales of far-away places?" shouts the little dragon. "Sometimes, just to hear another voice..."

"Are there other dragons here?" asks another two-legged from the ship.

"There was one other, but she was old," said the little dragon. "Are you hungry? This one can catch a food-beast for you."

"Can you?"

"Yes, and this dragon will run!"

The little dragon runs into the forest, and picks one of the food-beasts that Anar and Cee have killed. She carries the food-beast to the riverside near the ship, careful not to get any blood on her suit. "This dragon will get another--this is for you and yours," she tells the two-leggeds. The little dragon runs into the forest again, and returns with another slain food-beast. Many two-leggeds are on the bank of the river, examining the first food-beast and making fires. "Still more two-leggeds? Then I must get another," says the little dragon. "This dragon will run."

"That would be good," says one of the two-leggeds that is cutting the first food-beast with a sword.

The little dragon once more pretends to hunt and brings back another food-beast. Many two-leggeds are on the riverbank, and they are making three fires and a bloody mess.

"How do you catch them so fast with not a drop on your clothes?" asks a two-legged with a hat on.

"This dragon is superior predator," she says. "The food-beasts do no trouble."

"Where'd you get clothes?"

"The villagers made clothes for this dragon after she chased strange two-leggeds away. Those two-leggeds now scent the air, even if this dragon cannot see them. Apologies to them--this dragon caused wounds."

"They are cowards! Cowards! Come out and apologize to this dragon... what is your name?"

"The old dragon used to call me 'little one,' and the villagers call me 'big dragon.'"

"They call me Captain, and you can too," says the two-legged

with a big hat.

"Yes, Captain," says the little dragon.

The Captain shouts many words at the two-leggeds on the ship that the little dragon does not understand. Five two-leggeds climb down the sides of the ship and get into a little ship, which they make move with pieces of wood in the water. The two-leggeds are strangely reluctant to leave the little ship when they reach the shore.

"This dragon cannot gesture of apology because this suit would get dirty."

"Say something, you horrible little men!" shouts the Captain.

"I cannot gesture of apology because I do not know how," says a two-legged that her nose remembers.

"Apology accepted!" says the little dragon, perhaps too loudly.

"Now you may eat with the others!"

The little dragon then investigates the little ship, and drags it partly out of the water so she can properly inspect it. When she puts a paw inside, she lets her talons poke holes in the bottom. She hears the two-leggeds murmur. "Stop that!" shouts the Captain.

The little dragon jumps away from the little ship and acts sad. "Apologies!" Two big tears drop to the ground. "This dragon did not know it would break," she says, and lets more tears fall.

"Tell me, Big Dragon, if you have ever seen metal like this in the villager's hands?" asks the Captain.

"Yes," says the little dragon. "That is gold. The villagers have tiny gold pieces, not a big, pretty piece like yours. There is another place where I have seen gold--a place the villagers do not know about."

"Why not?"

"They have not asked this dragon, and this place was found twelve thousand breaths... found yesterday."

Some of the strange two-leggeds want to go to this place where there is gold *now*, but the Captain says they are to wait for him to

finish eating. The little dragon waits, then the two-leggeds follow in the little dragon's footsteps to The Ruins. The little dragon counts thirteen two-leggeds with no swords or pistols that walk in a group between the dragon and ten other two-leggeds. One of the thirteen runs away where there are many broken trees, and the Captain order two with swords and pistols to chase him.

As they travel, the dragon called Mona tells the two-leggeds a story about uncovering The Vault. She says she was trying to get inside it, but couldn't do much but scratch and bend the metal. Then she says she decided to break into The Vault by digging, and as she was throwing boulders out of her way part of The Vault rose out of the ground and she had to jump off. The metal parts are now underneath, she says, and there is a deep hole where The Vault was; and despite seeing the gold there were no good smells.

At The Ruins, the two-leggeds quickly find the gold that is near the hole. Some of the two-leggeds say they can see gold at the bottom of the hole in the pile of crushed bones. The Captain sends four two-leggeds with pistols and swords plus six of the other two-leggeds back to the ship for lanterns and grappling hooks and rope.

"Run!" shouts the Captain. "Big dragon is chasing you!" The two-leggeds run faster.

"This dragon likes chasing games and will not bite," say the little dragon hopefully--but the two-leggeds say nothing.

Then the two-leggeds and the little dragon wait. Most of the two-leggeds search for more gold, and the two-leggeds with swords and pistols watch. One of the watchers asks the little dragon to move boulders and broken trees and the little dragon agrees. Her suit becomes dirty when she moves a broken tree, so she pretends to become dismayed and cries again, then she sulks. The two-leggeds continue searching.

The Captain sends a pair of two-leggeds with swords and pistols back to the ship. When the pair are out of sight, the little

dragon decides that the two-leggeds are divided enough.

"This dragon must get her digging suit," she says to the Captain. "When this one wears her digging suit, she is stronger."

"This I must see," said the Captain. "How can a suit make you stronger?"

"This one will show you, and this one will hurry," says the little dragon as she runs.

She stops running when the little dragon sees Anar—then she follows in his footsteps, but not closely.

"I put my digging suit on," says Anar. "Don't use pistols. The dragons behind you will not like that."

Chi tells the little dragon and Lizabeth about her adventures on the ship. She found three two-leggeds trapped in a nest of iron that she could break open. Chi scent-tracked two others who were hiding in barrels. Chi says many barrels and boxes have scents she does not know, and she found many papers. The little dragon does not understand how Chi got on the ship, and Chi tells how Second and Third used grappling hooks that they had taken from the two-leggeds to pull the ship close. Lizabeth and the dragon named Mona do not know what grappling hooks are, but Gran says the meeting is about to begin.

Lizabeth is disappointed, because Hizoner is not wearing his witching hat; her restlessness grows at the names and statements. The little dragon takes her to Second and Third, who also do not want to listen to formal two-legged talk and are lying in the fading light of Energy Ball. Third asks Lizabeth if the villagers can make an axe for a big dragon, because log-notching would be much faster if he could do it. The little dragon begins to tell Third about paw-axes, but Second asks the little dragon if she should be listening to the two-leggeds. The little dragon does not know. Lizabeth orders her to go listen.

Soon, Anar asks her which of the two-leggeds had swords and

pistols, and the little dragon's nose remembers and she selects them out of the herd. Then Anar asks her what she thinks about the ship's two-leggeds.

"They're like Gran's skillet," she says. "This dragon abused the skillet by burning fatwood in it, and the skillet is ruined for pancakes. These two-leggeds are ruined by living on that ship. This one does not know how to fix a skillet ruined by abuse, and does not know how to fix a ruined two-legged. Perhaps Gran or Hizoner know this." Then Anar asks her to tell Third that all roaring dragons should be two hundred paces further away.

Lizabeth is holding onto Third's ear and attempting to victory-roar. Third is holding his head up as high as he can and occasionally demonstrating a proper victory-roar as encouragement. He winks at the little dragon as she finishes repeating Anar's message.

"Would you like to catch Lizabeth this time?" Third asks.

"Show me how you do it," says the little dragon.

"Perhaps tomorrow. The light is wrong right now," says Third, who makes it easy for Lizabeth to hold his ear when she jumps off his head.

"My turn," says Second. The little dragon helps Lizabeth climb onto Second's head. Before she goes back to listen, Third orders her to climb on his head--then winks.

Epilogue

Near the river crossing, there is a sunny place without vegetation that smells of vinegar and yesterday's dragons. Many of the rocks bear brown stains.

On a large flat rock nearest the river, there is a painted sunset with a dragon's ear in the foreground. There is writing that says 'Iron acetate upon stone, by Lizabeth.'

"Hizoner wrote that," says Lizabeth.

The little dragon decides she does not understand art, but likes it anyway. She begins to push the stone to the river. Anar sees this, winks at her, and tells her not to ruin her new suit; he then puts the stone in the little ship, careful not to ruin the painted sunset. The little dragon puts the paddles next to the stone and lets the little ship float down the Great River. The little dragon thinks she can get to the river crossing before the little boat does, but if she fails, she thinks a watch-and-scent dragon will see it.

Chi has a bag of cotton seeds that smell faintly of vinegar for her to carry to the village, and Seven has more. Lizabeth holds the bag as she rides on Mona's back because cotton seeds are ruined by dragon drool.

The little dragon can see the boat when she gets to the river crossing, but must wait for the Great River to bring it closer. When it does, the little dragon gets the little ship and brings it to Lizabeth, who climbs in behind the flat rock. Then the little dragon pushes the little ship across the Great River. The little ship and her new suit make it easy for the little dragon to keep her head above water even in places that are almost too deep for her.

Fays helps her get the painted stone out, and Lizabeth puts six jugs of vinegar in the little ship. Fays puts a big bag of cotton over the jugs, and the dragon named Mona tells Lizabeth that she

must not sit on the bag when Mona is paddling; she must stay in the bottom of the little ship.

"I follow in your footsteps!" says Lizabeth.

"So cute!" says Fays. "You're lucky to have her, Mona!"

"Lizabeth has Mona," she says. "This dragon is a little dragon."

"And you must be the big dragon?" asks Fays.

"No... but I love dragons!" Lizabeth hugs Fays.

"We love you too, cute beast!" says Fays.

The trip upstream does not take long. The dragon named Mona has 'kayak' paddles and likes making the little ship move quickly.

The little dragon dreams of Graith and Seven talking.

"I volunteered for the river-crossing watch-and-scent because I hoped to see Rex or Dom need my help to cross the river," says Graith. "I got my wish yesterday. I was so happy! I told Dom that he had to crouch in the water until only his head remained above it, and then to follow me exactly or the Ferocious Underwater Dragon may come to fight him. It was so hard to keep from laughing... but I think he believed every word."

"You must be a good storyteller," says Seven.

"Perhaps Dom will believe anything," says Graith. They both laugh.

"He got three paws in the water, then one paw got stuck," says Graith. "I told him to get out of the river, and he did. Then I told him about Anar running into the river, and he tried it--ran right into the river, but not very fast, and he got stuck in ten paces. Then I told him he was forgetting to crouch until only his head was above water. But Dom was able to follow me without needing any branches under his feet until he got stuck again near the riverbank."

"Perhaps," says Seven. "he didn't get stuck because he's

smaller."

"It got all that dust off of him, just like Anar said. I had to make two trips mouth-carrying branches to get dusty-headed Dom and his muddy feet out of the river. Then I told him to wash his head, and he did!" The dragons laugh together.

"Dom's De-Dusting," says Seven, and the dragons laugh again.

When the little dragon wakes, she remembers that Graith told this story while Seven was once again wiping iron acetate off of her. The little dragon will ask Graith to re-tell the story--she has questions.

Anar examines the iron glove intently. "That should work."

"I'll try it," says Third. He curls his toes, and four sword blades swing silently and do not clash together.

"Excellent!" says Third, who then swings the swords against a fallen log. Third makes the swords cut a notch in the log by repeatedly curling his toes. "I won't bend it again, doing this," he says, "but it's not as much fun as slashing off branches."

"If we line the hole with two or three layers of canvas, it will work," says Gran.

"The water will not leak out?" asks Chi.

"As long as dragon claws do not make holes in it, it will leak slowly--it will take thousands of my breaths," says Gran. "The water will be cold by then. Some of the water will not leak out, and might become smelly unless it is removed.

"Acceptable... but can the hole be big enough for Third?" asks Chi.

"Yes... but we don't have enough canvas for a hole bigger than that," says Gran.

"As much as I'd like a hot bath," says Chi, "perhaps suits for the smaller dragons would be better. Heating the water will not be

easy."

"Suits it is," says Gran. "Dragons are practical animals."

Lizabeth: Can you tell me a scary story? With your witching hat?

Hizoner: Yes... why?

Lizabeth: You always tell nice stories, but never scary ones.

Hizoner: If you're sure... My witching hat makes me a big dragon of stories! This one is sort of true, and sort of scary, but because you want to know everything there is about dragons, you need to hear it.

Once, there were giants. Sometimes giants are bigger than anyone else because they grow that way, and sometimes because a stupid and arrogant man uses a secret way to make all the other hominids smaller. Stupidity and Arrogance were such giants. They used money to poison the other people, and then poisoned themselves with more money. They bought many animals; and because they owned so much land, these animals could travel days without finding cleverly placed obstacles that prevented further traveling. The giants kept buying more land and animals, and soon they had unicorns and mammoths and dragons on the other side of the Great River.

Lizabeth: Where did they buy dragons?

Hizoner: I don't really know... I can say names like Dragonic Logic and Plata-Power and Big Boss D, but I don't know what the names mean.

It seems the giants liked dragons--they bought many kinds of dragons. You and I know of a smart dragon that can deposit metal in her scales, but other dragons can run all night or grow into big fighting dragons. They bought body armor for the fighting dragons, and they bought special paw-covers for dragons that could run all night, and they bought liquids that could be poured over the backs of dragons like Mona and set on fire--at least once, the giants tried it to find out how long the dragon could

stand it. They bought silly costumes for dragons to wear, and asked them to sing and dance. They bought colored waxes to waterproof their dragons, and rarely asked whether the dragon liked the colors or the scents. The dragons were bred to be obedient, loyal, and submissive, and so they were. The dragons never complained... not even when hunted by giants wearing scentless metal suits and tazer-guns, and not when the giants ate dragon's eggs, and not when asked to fight with robots. The dragons would not fight other dragons, so the giants devised ways to trick dragons into fighting each other.

Lizabeth: Why were they so mean to the dragons?

Hizoner: I don't know--but they weren't always mean. Who could be mean to loyal servants like dragons that always obeyed--even when asked to eat corn starch mixed with gold dust--or asked to jump into the ocean?

Lizabeth: Dragons can't swim!

Hizoner: Especially not with golden scales! But suppose there was a big net just under the water that the dragon didn't know about--and if the dragon did not obey instantly, the net was removed!

Lizabeth: That's mean!

Hizoner: I think so too. But the giants could buy as many new dragons as they liked and often didn't care about dragon abuse because they were 'improving the breed.' Still, some dragons played with and watched over the giant's children, and some of the giant's children learned to love their dragons. A lucky dragon might have very nice toys, and some dragons even had their own dragons; but no dragon owned themselves. I think Mona's type of dragon was the smallest and usually treated pretty well.

Sometimes a dragon like Mona got to go to fancy parties and show everyone their gold scales; but sometimes, especially at these parties, a dragon might be ordered to wear fire to keep a tray of biscuits warm, or to cry so the giants could drink fresh dragon tears.

Lizabeth: Did the fire make the dragons cry?

Hizoner: No. I think they were just created that way. You can ask Mona to cry for you.

Lizabeth: No.

Hizoner: Good answer. A better answer would be 'only if needed, not wanted.' You have to know these things, just in case.

Lizabeth: Like when Mona cried for the Captain!

Hizoner: Yes. She cried so the Captain would think Mona was stupid but honest, and it was easy to trick him after that. The dragons didn't have to break anyone or anything except for one boat--and Mona was supposed to do that.

Lizabeth: Her suit got dirty.

Hizoner: Yes, her suit got dirty--but it was still beautiful.

Lizabeth: What happened to the giants?

Hizoner: They were locked in The Vault with bags of golden dragonscales. The giants probably found this to be very funny, because they had a secret door out of the vault--it was likely the way they emptied The Vault in the first place. They took the bags of dragonscales with them as they went down a ladder. I don't know if the ladder broke, or perhaps the giant on the top slipped and fell on the other giant and the servants; because when I got there, Stretch and Mona had walked all over the gold and bones many times.

Lizabeth: It doesn't matter.

Hizoner: Nope. The giants had a pretty metal wagon that's still there. Stretch and Mona both ignored it. They probably thought it was only a rock.

—

"Are you awake?" Chi asks.

It takes a half-breath, but I reply. "I hear."

"The little one... she smells of her first egg... but she doesn't want to. She will not let that happen."

"Mona?"

"Yes. She thinks... too many dragons. I think my stories of the Great Hungry scared her."

"She's going to break her own egg?"

"Yes."

"Is she ill?" I ask.

"No," says Chi.

"I want to talk to her. Where is she?"

"Open your eyes."

"Why do you not smell like a dragon?" I ask.

"Our experiment with soap, water, and solvents was successful," replies the little dragon.

"If you want to talk about eggs, I want to hear."

"This dragon has calculated that all the food-beasts will be eaten in twenty thousand days if there are no fires, big storms, or new dragons."

"I hear."

"If dragons lay eggs, then all the food-beasts are eaten sooner."

"Yet... you work to hide dragon-scents so the Night Runners can rescue more dragons--usually female dragons."

"This dragon does not know why she does this, but Mona must if she is Dragon."

"It's dragon potential."

"What is dragon potential?" asks the little dragon.

"I do not know yet, but I like what I have seen."

"I know what to do," says Chi. "I will plant vegetation like the two-leggeds, and another dragon will learn to eat bread and pancakes and potatoes. Did you calculate for that?"

(gesture of submission) "No, honorable Chi."

"I can do this also. I can ask other dragons, and some will follow."

"Honorable," says the little dragon. "If enough dragons follow you, perhaps..."

"The fate of all dragons should not depend upon a little dragon breaking her egg," I say. "This is a problem for the big dragon."

Once again, the little dragon dreams she is watching a little dragon running from Big Dragon. Again, the little dragon does not run straight, and she jumps from the riverbank to a boulder,, and again Big Dragon is slow to follow. She reaches the river crossing, turns and leaps over ten paces of water, and after she splashes she runs in the water of the Great River as best as she can.

"Cover," orders Anar's voice. The little dragon stops and covers her ears and closes her eyes, but still hears loud gun noise. The water to her left makes a big splash. She opens her eyes and sees a big cloud of blue-gray smoke--and behind her, Big Dragon stops trying to bite without getting his paws wet. The little dragon shouts "You have been poisoned!" to Big Dragon. "Poisoned! Do you understand?"

Big Dragon does not respond.

"We have bread!" shouts the little dragon, turning to shout at him. "Bread can cure a poisoned dragon!" She starts walking backwards as Big Dragon puts a paw in the Great River.

"Cover," says Anar's voice. The cannon seems louder this time. When she opens her eyes again, a tree twenty paces away is broken as if a very big invisible dragon hit it. Big Dragon watches her with his paws on the riverbank.

"We can wipe your nose!" shouts the little dragon. "We have vinegar!"

She walks backwards and shouts "You'll starve if you do not listen!" Somehow she knows all the dragons are on her side of the Great River. The little dragon stops, then walks forwards two steps. "Eating dragons is poison!" Perhaps the little dragon is pretending to cry—she does not know. "You have more metal than is good for you!" Big Dragon watches but does not move or speak.

The little dragon awakens with a wet face.

The dragon named Mona thinks she may speak of this dream

with dragons and two-leggeds. If so, the story will be better if Big Dragon either listens or flees. She does not like thinking of any dragon stuck in the Great River's mud, and she will not tell a lie that makes murderers out of perfectly good imaginary dragons.

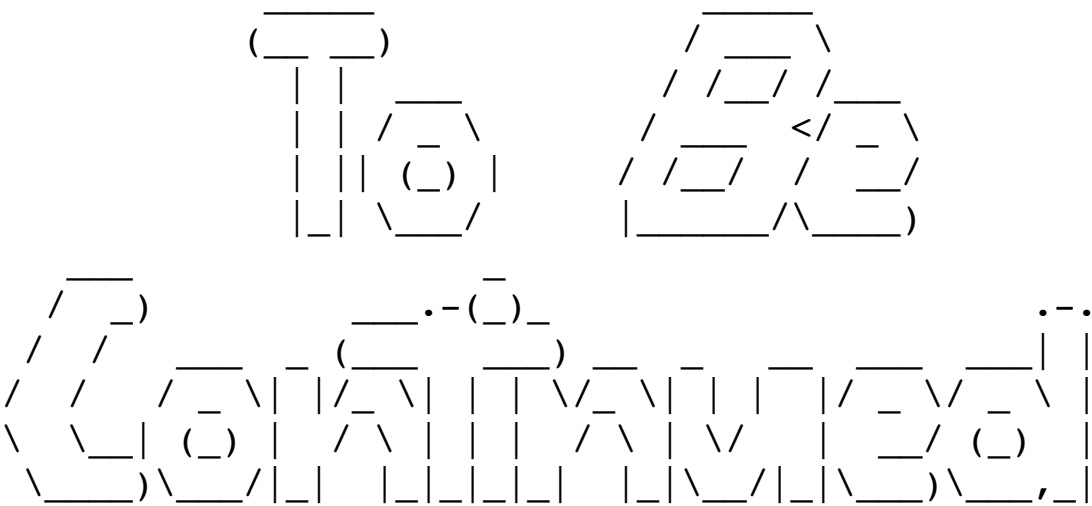
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NON \$€RVIAM!



shackle-free dragonic philosophy

Very late one evening, two dragons split a pawful of stinkleberries. They fed the stinkleberries to each other carefully to avoid stains. Soon, they fell asleep. In the morning, both of the dragons were quite tired and found it pleasant to do no more than open their eyes. Their heads were pointed further into the cave, and the sunshine warmed their backs, and neither Nrem nor Rem were fully awake. Somehow, Rem spoke.

"What are those two large lumps I see in front of me?" he asked.

"What lumps?" asked Nrem.

"Ahead of us. Can't you see them?"

"Those big dark things blocking the sunlight?"

"Yes. I think one of them just moved."

"Perhaps it had an itch."

Speaking of itching made Rem itchy (with scarcely the energy to scratch).

"Perhaps you have discovered something," said Nrem. "That one moved."

"Shadows," said Rem.

"Shadows," said Nrem.

"Big things making shadows," said Rem. "I wonder what they are?"

"Scentless," said Nrem, "So nothing."

"Honorable," said Rem. "For two-three breaths, I thought I'd have to turn my head and look. It was harshing my buzz."

[illegible]