

Dragonic Meandering

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

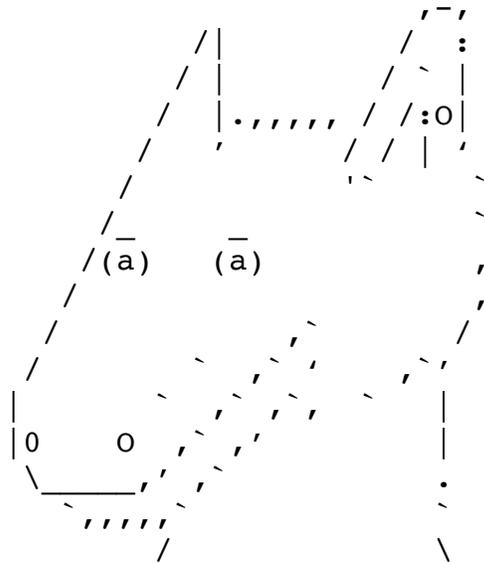
Any updates will be found on no6ody dot wordpress dot com.

(no intention to resemble the living or dead)

(except for the dragons that live in my head)

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NON-~~€~~RVIAM!



A thousand paces away the air already bears the scent of many two-legged machines—the two-leggeds have got there first. I want to watch Sue's crew connect the cave to the ship *Sue's Sea Cruises Four*, but a thousand paces later I discover these two-leggeds can work fast—they're almost done. After getting 'permission to approach' I ask how Sue's Crew drilled holes into rock. One of Sue's Crew named 'Smiddy' tells me he is part of group that brought a rock-drill here long before the *Four* arrived; Captain Diana had ordered them to begin as soon as I agreed with her request. When I ask Smiddy if he will drill another hole, he says no because it is too noisy and dirty. Instead, Smiddy shows me long metal pieces that they will 'screw and glue' into the holes already drilled—and when they do it, I learn these two-

leggeds will tolerate strong scents that any dragon would avoid. I ask why they used different screws in different places, and I learn the difference between 'native rock' and the 'concrete' that was shaped to funnel the wind into the cave.

Two breaths after the bolts are in the wall, the two-leggeds are walking from ship to cave and back again. Twenty breaths later, they tighten metal ropes called 'cables' and tell me the gangplank is ready. My talons make much noise when I place a paw on the cold metal bridge—and it moves a talon-width when I push down. I hesitate for two breaths before I trust it and can ask the captain 'permission to approach.'

Unlike the gangplank, the ship does not shift when I step on it—that seems proper.

Sue's Crew make noises with their mouths and hands as Lizabeth hugs my right front. She wants to take me to a formal meeting with the captain, but since her uniform got so dirty from just one hug, she'd like to wash my paws.

Two of Sue's Crew help Lizabeth wash my paws, but many two-leggeds volunteer, and for a pawful of breaths I have more attendants than Big Dragon. As Lizabeth washes my paw, I point my cameras at the back of her uniform because underneath the 'Sue's Crew' there's a paper sign that says 'Dragon-Friend.' Gran will like seeing that sign. Impulsively, I lick the back of Lizabeth's neck...

Her surprised-then-happy noise inspires a happy-rumble from me.

Lizabeth guides me to the auditorium. She won't ride dragon-back because that's not proper for two-legged welcoming ceremonies, and that includes 'dress rehearsals.'

There is a door of sorts that rolls up, and as it rises, Lizabeth speaks. "The floor in here is very smooth, and scratches on it make a lot of work for the crew. Honorable Anar, don't let your

claws go through the carpet!"

We are given permission to approach as soon as the door finishes rolling itself up. Inside the big room, the floor is smooth and shiny wood, but in front is a wide, long piece of thick red cloth. Lizabeth ignores the many distractions in the room, pointing eyes at the captain. I imitate her and try to ignore one wall made mostly of blue cloth that moves constantly.

I sniff the red cloth on the floor and ask Lizabeth if I can walk on it, since none of the other two-leggeds have.

Lizabeth pats the carpet twice in front of me. "It's special, just for you," she says.

I pat the carpet twice like Lizabeth did--it's soft. One of the captain's two-leggeds tries not to laugh.

"Welcome," says Captain Diana.

"Honorable. Permission to approach!"

"Granted," says Lizabeth.

"Granted," echoes the captain. She's nervous--I can see why. The two-leggeds behind her have metal weapons.

"Is there anything I can do to make your visit more pleasant?" she adds.

That's an easy question to answer. "I would like you and Lizabeth on my back."

It takes a half-breath, but the captain moves, accepting help from Lizabeth and my behind-and-back paw. I point my eyes and ears at a two-legged holding a black metal weapon.

"Put that down. What is it?"

"Clarinet," says the male two-legged, who wisely takes two steps away from it.

"A musical instrument," adds the captain.

"Not a weapon?"

"Not on my ship."

The captain sounds sure... "Honorable."

That's better... I apologize to the two-legged when he retrieves the clarinet, but I cannot relax. "Why does that wall keep

moving?" I ask nobody in particular.

"It's hanging cloth," Captain Diana orders a two-legged I can't see to 'open the curtains.'

The wall of blue cloth splits and each half slides sideways and compresses. Opened curtains don't move much and I feel better. Behind the curtains are identical chairs in perfect rows surrounded by walls bearing pictures of dragons that I know... including two very large pictures of my dream-dragon.

"When you start your speech, all those empty chairs will be full," says Captain Diana.

"Full of what?" I ask.

I look at the two-leggeds on my back... Lizabeth is trying not to laugh.

—

The two-leggeds play their musical instruments for four breaths —Lizabeth likes it, but I'd fold my ears if it wasn't so impolite. Two of Sue's crew-members put a large flat gray slab behind me. Then so many lights glow that I find it difficult to see the chairs in front.

Captain Diana shows me a television monitor where my dream-dragon is doing whatever I do.

"More light," says the captain, and many more lights hanging from metal stripes on the ceiling add their glow. The dragon-image now seems to be made of flowing metal.

"Blue background," says the captain. Two of Sue's crew move a blue slab so it covers the gray one behind me.

"Which one do you like best?" ask Captain Diana.

I look at the slabs and say "Perhaps you should ask the two-leggeds that will watch the video you're making."

"Good idea," she says. "Would you like to practice your speech?"

Chi told me to stay near Lizabeth when I gave my speech, since I'm not quite so scary when next to an immature two-legged female. Chi also said to look at the audience with eyes, ears, and

nose, as if they were interesting Dragons—and it's easy because the ship has a 'projector' that makes text on the floor. I can keep my eyes in front and read while looking at the empty chairs.

I try to read the speech, but soon come across a word I've never heard spoken.

"Cho-less-ter-ol," I say.

"Cholesterol," says the captain.

I imitate the captain twice, then I read the end of the sentence again.

"... because people are too high in cholesterol."

"Superb," says the captain. "The audience will probably laugh now--will that bother you?"

"Not at all," I respond. "Is cholesterol a joke?"

"Yes--for these two-leggeds. They will understand."

I read more of the speech that the captain has provided. What I haven't yet read is easier to understand than cholesterol, but I think there are too many words merely for greetings and say so. The captain says the two-leggeds want to hear a long speech, but perhaps a short speech with a question-and-answer after would be better. She will give small pieces of paper and half-size pencils to Sue's guests so they'll ask short questions.

When the two-leggeds come in, they enter from the back of the room then sit in the chairs in rows. Most don't seem to notice the over-large pictures much—they stare at me instead. Sometimes they look down if I stare back. So many two-leggeds are whispering that it sounds like all the dragonets are pretend-running forwards while sliding backwards. Perhaps they think it rude to talk normally before a dragon's speech.

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After my speech, the captain asks Lizabeth to read the audience's questions.

Lizabeth reads "Does the big guy know why?"

"I don't know why, but I know Cee and Dee." A few in the audience laugh along with Lizabeth, who points to pictures on the wall and explains "That's Cee, and she's Dee."

A two-legged male wearing a 'Sue's crew' uniform approaches Lizabeth, gives her a folded piece of paper, then exits as quickly as he came.

Lizabeth opens the paper, then says "Don't read every question. Use your judgement."

That sounds like good advice... but for a breath and a half the audience laughs.

Lizabeth selects one piece of paper from the pile, makes a happy noise, then shows it to me. A two-legged made a picture-- it's tiny, but I can tell it's me.

"Honorable," I say, and almost inside-voice victory-roar--but the picture is too small for the two-legged audience to see. Lizabeth holds the paper near my ear, close to one of my cameras, then next to one of the ship's cameras.

"Higher," says the captain, and shows a picture on a flat box to Lizabeth. The audience applauds, but most of the two-leggeds are looking down at boxes.

Lizabeth gives the drawing to the captain, then reads another question. "I'd like to see Anar destroy something--how to ask?"

Captain Diana has an answer. "Acts of destruction are carefully researched, rehearsed, and supervised on my ship. Would you like to scratch the floor intentionally, Anar?"

"I like the floor without scratches."

"Honorable! So do I."

"Perhaps there is a better place?"

"I like you where you are... so Sue's crew will soon bring something suitable here. Lizabeth, next question."

"Can you smell fear?"

"I can smell sweat and hear a fast heart-beat and make obvious conclusions." I point eyes and ears at Lizabeth, and she reads the next piece of paper.

"How do you know who is Dragon?"

"I'm not sure. I knew Vlad was Dragon before two hundred breaths. When I met him, he was trying to tell me what he thought I needed to know... and he never lies."

Many two-leggeds start writing... so I answer the obvious next question.

"I like to think that no two-legged can lie to me without my consent--but I don't know any liars."

Lizabeth has circled the words 'enemy agent' and finishes writing 'What is this?' as I stop speaking. She folds the paper, but not before I see Vlad's name on it. She opens another, and after a quarter-breath she reads "Can Mona's dragonets communicate telepathically?"

I've heard this question before. My answer is an automatic "No."

The two-leggeds didn't like that answer... probably because they want to hear good things about the dragonets. "The dragonets don't need it. They use body language." I hope they like this... "If one dragonet thought the best way to say the word 'psychology' was to mimic my first attempt to say it, the other dragonets were about to or just had the same idea. Suppose, due to innocent causes, one dragonet couldn't hear her sister but wanted to communicate. She might hold her paw the way I did when I told the story with the word 'psychology' in it. Her sister would almost already know that the new gesture would mean a memorable word said at the same time. But now the dragonets have two ways to say one word, and dragonets use both."

The two-leggeds liked that—but I didn't. That story was proper for the villagers to hear, but not to tell every two-legged.

Lizabeth reads the next question... "Do you like being famous?"

"I don't know... I'm not famous to me. I can't make sense of the question."

The captain says "You'll know you're famous when people ask for your autograph—and it is my pleasure to be the first. On this, you can show us how a dragon makes his mark."

As she speaks, men in 'Sue's Crew' uniforms unfold large blankets onto the stage, then bring squares of wood to put on them. The wood squares are linked together with screws driven into the wood by four crewmembers using loud machines that almost look like pistols. I risk offending the two-leggeds by folding my ears, but none of the two-leggeds seem to care about the noise or my reaction to it.

They move square capes to the middle of the stage, then put the big wooden square on them. --I can't always see where the wood was joined. It's not as nice as the stage floor,

"Would you like to give us your autograph on this?"

If the captain wants it... I look closely at the wood, then poke it with a paw and watch it slide on the stage. I'll have to hold it with one paw and claw with the other.

"If you could hold this corner down, and claw anywhere on a line from this corner to that corner..."

I do what the captain says, and very lightly scratch the wood.

"More?" I ask the captain.

"Yes, please," she says.

I scratch again, applying a little force, and after looking at the captain, scratch again a little harder, splintering wood and revealing where the smaller squares of wood were joined. Fortunately, the wood didn't move as I clawed it. I look at the captain, who says "I know when to quit."

Many of the two-leggeds say 'More!' and 'Do it!' but the captain says "All is still ship-shape and Anar's claw-marks have turned old flooring into something I want to touch. Time to take profits off the table."

The two-leggeds like that. Then many two-leggeds want to 'take pictures.' The captain organizes them into a 'parting pictures' line, and the two-leggeds follow one another. One by one, they walk past, pointing little boxes at me with my paw on the clawed wood. Sometimes they ask strange questions like "Have you ever eaten a human?" By the time I find out that Lizabeth doesn't know that

'human' means two-legged but the captain does, the one who asked has left the building.

Afterwards, Captain Diana takes me and Lizabeth on deck. There are tables with food, and two of them have so many loaves of bread piled on that Lizabeth cannot see over the top. One table bears a bowl of sliced potatoes in a white sauce, and another has two kinds of rice in bowls of their own.

Lizabeth likes the light colored loaves better than the brown bread and won't eat the rice because of the way it looks. I like the rice but the light-colored loaves seem similar to Roxxie's Quintessence-contaminated bread—especially when Lizabeth wants to feed me the bread she likes. These two-leggeds don't know how well dragons can hear—one says I prefer to eat whole wheat, which proves I'm wise; two others say dragons don't need to care about fiber, only flavor; one hopes for crumbs from the dragon's table, and two more say I should taste the steaks... but I'd rather not eat food-beasts in front of Sue's guests—or Lizabeth.

"It's comfortable," Lizabeth says. She pulls a lever and the chair folds flat enough to be a two-legged bed. "I didn't know it could do this!"

"Now is the time to test it," says Captain Diana. "We can still make alterations."

"It's perfect already," says Lizabeth.

"Then let's try it on Anar." Lizabeth moves, but sits again when the captain says "You can ride it up."

That gets a happy noise from Lizabeth when my cameras are pointed at her and I happy-rumble.

When Lizabeth sits, the captain pushes a lever up, and the chair and the panniers are pulled up by ropes wrapping around some metal sticks and disks. I walk underneath when it has risen high enough, then put my feet on the marks. When the captain pulls

the lever down, Lizabeth, the chair, and the panniers drape over my back.

There's an unlatched strap on the front of the left pannier that I mouth-carry, and after a little advice from the captain, manage to connect to the right one. I take a few paces and pronounce it good. Then the captain wants to test the panniers when they're loaded... and she surprises me by using loaves of bread as the test-weights. When she tells me I can take the bread back to the sleeping cave, Lizabeth makes another happy noise... but my cameras aren't pointed at her.

The two-leggeds make much noise when I walk the gangplank. I victory-roar for them when I reach the cave floor.

Once I've traveled three paces into the cave, light shines from both panniers. Good--Lizabeth dislikes traveling in the dark.

Twenty paces further, the two-legged scents have thinned, but I detect the scent of Mr. [redacted].

Twelve paces later, I notice a bump on the cave floor that's too warm to be made of stone. It flips up after a claw-flick, revealing a dragon-gray underside. I withdraw to avoid contact with what now looks like a not-a-scale. I can't think of an easier way to destroy it other than claw-flicking it into deep water, but it is surprisingly mobile. My fifth claw-flick ensures it misses the gangplank and falls into the ocean.

Sixty six paces later, I'm traveling far enough into the cave so that all two-legged scents have diminished. Because the panniers shed light, I notice a streak of a puddle on the floor of the cave. I avoid it because of the liquid's sharp scent. I walk past the puddle in three paces--but two paces further, I find another puddle that smells equally bad. I walk near the left side of the tunnel to avoid both. I tell Lizabeth that those puddles weren't there before, and she uses a box to tell someone on the *Four*.

When she's done talking, I try trotting. I can't travel as quickly because the panniers shake too much.

We arrive at the entrance to the sleeping cave fifty breaths before the Great Fireball touches the horizon.

The wind in the cave carries my scent ahead of me and ensures that the other dragons know we're coming, and many dragons give me 'permission to approach' without my asking. Chi has a barrel-full of water ready for me, and also Lizabeth's watering can. It takes longer when Lizabeth helps me drink, but the water tastes better that way. Micky fills Nada's neck-pack from the panniers so the dragons in the Temporary Buildings can try Sue's bread.

When it's time for storytelling, Seven and Dee ask me and Lizabeth questions about our time on the *Four*. Lizabeth and I speak our replies into a little microphone and all the other dragons can hear what we say using other boxes.

—

Third is on watch-and-scent tonight, and he's pacing near the entrance of the sleeping cave wearing the empty panniers. Since he's bigger than I am, the panniers stick out like drooping wings; when Third takes bouncing steps they flap. After the Great Fireball drops below the horizon, the lights mounted on the panniers glow. Despite seeing her delight in the bouncing pannier lights, Third asks Lizabeth how turn them off so he can watch-and-scent properly. When she shows him the toggle-switch, he winks at her, then asks me if he can borrow these panniers tomorrow night too.

The captain has spread papers over Gran's table and and makes a writing-stick twitch and jerk as she adds text and numbers to the pages. Because I'm dreaming, I know that helping the captain finish what she's doing is very important.

"My orders: the Eye is insatiable--it can never be filled." She writes 'install 4 cameras outside sleeping cave.' "Perhaps you can

persuade the Commanding Dragon to wear cameras?"

"I will ask Happy to ask him."

"Excellent idea." The captain writes 'video coverage of beach sufficient, more cameras needed near mouth of river.' "What about the villagers? Mr. Buckland... will he wear a camera?"

"I'll find out."

The captain writes 'IR cams needed for sky near sleeping cave.'

"We still need more. Can you help? Who interacts with dragons and can we persuade them to wear body-cams?"

"Perhaps you could wear a camera."

"Anar! That's an excellent idea." She writes 'get pers cam, 2 cams needed on sleeping place.'

"You're doing it wrong!" says a voice from a box.

"Sir, in what way?" asks the captain.

"Every way! If you need video, give cell-phones to every dragon, then grab cell phone pix all day and string them together. There's no reason to stop with the dragons--you can order every cell phone that uses the transmitters on the *Four* to provide a still picture every fifteen seconds. String those together and call it movies."

"While that is legal, it is unethical and is likely to cause legal problems for Sue's Cruises."

"The Eye is insatiable."

Captain Diana pushes buttons, but the box will not speak again.

The captain scribbles numbers. "That could explain the odd patterns of cell tower usage." She writes 'are cellphones auto-uploading pix? IMPORTANT chek 4 patrn.'

"Why is the Eye insatiable?" I ask. The captain smells of fear.

"Dilution," she replies. "If you were the only dragon to release videos, then millions of two-leggeds would watch and listen to you. A comment of yours could change elections whether you wanted to or not. Two-legged big dragons would see this as a challenge, so they act now. Since they cannot control you, they want many dragons for two-leggeds to watch. Your videos will just

be one of many, and much harder for you to change public opinion.

"But... why so many? Every dragon wears cameras... isn't that enough?"

"No. My Commanding Two-legged wants to record everything with at least two cameras. Lizabeth and Mona must have, minimum, ten-camera coverage, you get ten-times when you hunt food-beasts and five-times when you're not sleeping, and all the other dragons have three-times coverage. Even the villagers must have two cameras watching them at all times. These orders came from Lord Rots: 'As far as dragons are concerned, the Eye is insatiable.'"

"Dilution... so what words could I possibly say that Lord Rots would want unheard?"

The captain points at the box that spoke before and shakes her head. "Not a proper comment in front of cameras." She pushes a button. "Send in the explainer."

The door opens... the little dragon is wearing a uniform like Lizabeth's. She drops an ear and lifts her chin, but I'm unable to step forward. Mona's been diluted...

When I wake, I leave First as big dragon and go to the Dragon's shed. Charity helps me send a text to Chi, and eleven breaths later Harmony shows me the response--a picture of Chi winking. I scent-see Chi, then ask my question again.

"How is Mona a threat to Lord Rots?"

"For the same reason you are--an innocent remark might change two-legged culture. Two-leggeds like her and listen even when she explains why she refuses two-legged currencies."

"But Lord Rots wants more video with her in it."

"Dilution. The trick is to keep Mona's explanations away from two-legged eyes--Lord Rots would prefer the two-leggeds watch Mona and Lizabeth bathing each other. Perhaps he can make

such bathing videos easy to find while making Mona's explanations difficult to find. Even if he doesn't Own the video-distribution service, another Owner does, and all Owners seem to think the same thing about dragons like Mona.”

"How can we protect her?"

"I'm not sure. At present, she's protected by cuteness. Pictures like these are popular among many two-leggeds." She shows a picture of Mona and Lizabeth holding each other with text that says 'Love is blind.' Then she shows another picture of the pair with text that reads 'This dragon hides her gold under the bed of this fierce princess.'

"No two-legged could hurt her without angering many others... but!" Chi seems uneasy.

I think I understand, and decide to watch over Mona myself.

"Prepared?" Mona asks the dragonets.

"Prepared!"

She opens the bag and takes two steps away from it. The dragonets remove a blanket from the bag, spread it out using talon tips, and sniff it methodically, moving in a circle. Mona permits this for two of my breaths, then says "Time." The dragonets abandon the blanket and run out of the sleeping cave, and Fays and Dee follow in the dragonets' footsteps.

I smell the blanket... it must be Lizabeth's. It also bears Micky's scent and Mona's, and the scent of bread.

Mona puts the blanket back in the bag and says "They should have no trouble."

Mona takes Purity's e-thumbs and her purse to the cave entrance and I follow. Mona sits up like only a little dragon can, then puts pieces of tape on the tips of her front talons. Her eyes gain a bluish glow when the e-thumbs powers up, and soon taped talon-tips tap on buttons.

"Stretch reports a small boat," says Mona. "Honorable. She

says it looks like another tourist boat with many cameras." Half-a-breath later she says "She's taking good video while she's running. This dragon is amazed."

Then the e-thumb makes a small short sound. Mona is quiet for almost one breath, then says "Roxxie ordered a ton of bread with baked-in Quintessence."

I should have foreseen that. "Where is she?"

"That direction, two thousand of your paces, traveling to her helicopter. This dragon will send her a message. What should it say?"

"Perhaps I'll think of something before I get there."

I can scent Fays, Dee, and Seven before I stand up. The females bear Micky, six dragonets, and full neck-packs that smell like bread.

"Permission to approach, granted."

The dragonets climb onto my back.

Mona makes a small motion with her nose, and I walk out of the cave and into the light. I know what she means--besides enough light for the cameras, she wants me to keep my tail near the ground when there's a camera behind me.

The bread is from the villager's new rocket stove. Seven and Dee take the bread out of their neck packs and put the pieces together--it looks like a half wagon-wheel with thick spokes.

"That's how it looked when it came out of the oven," says Seven. "Gran says the holes are for the hot air to go through."

Gran fed the dragonets already, and Mona won't eat now--she's still wearing Purity's e-thumbs and a slightly worried, blue tinted expression. Dee puts a piece in Mona's purse. She and Seven and the dragonets divide and distribute the rest of the bread--I like it.

Micky takes videos of the dragonets for Satyadah, so he sits on my back while they demonstrate leaping from my shoulders onto my head without touching my neck. I almost grumble when a dragonet tells Micky's camera that crawling on my neck makes

me shiver.

"Micky is Dragon, but his camera isn't," I whisper to her.

(gesture of submission)

"I can... will delete that now," says Micky.

"Honorable," I tell him, then I whisper to the dragonet "Dragons do not speak of any weakness, no matter how small, to a camera."

(gesture of submission)

"Is there trouble?" whispers Micky.

I rumble-laugh. "No."

"Dragons whisper to make corrections feel better," says Dee.

"Gran does that too, sometimes," says Micky.

Mona looks up, attracting my attention. "Roxxie has a flight plan," she says.

"What is flight plan?" asks a dragonet voice near my ear. I answer with "Permission to approach for a flying machine. Most far-away big dragons require them."

"Is Roxxie leaving?"

"I will find out."

I can barely hear Lizabeth... and the stink of Roxxie's helicopter ought to cover my scent.

"... a bribe," says Roxxie's voice. "As soon as they learn to like Quint, the sooner they'll work for more, and they'll gladly shed their scales and take their meds to get it."

"You're trying to do good," says Lizabeth, "and what you suggest will work. But... I don't want to give Quints to dragons that don't know better."

"Was any dragon harmed the day when I brought Quint-bread?"

"Perhaps you were... Chi has a sharp tongue."

Two breaths pass before Roxxie replies "I got twenty blood samples that day."

"You're good at that. You can convince the new dragons to let you take samples."

"That takes two hundred breaths to do what should take only two," says Roxxie. "There's too many damaged dragons here who need my attention and more could come at any time."

"Roxxie, you're right. But... I don't like asking the damaged dragons to work for Quint-bread."

"Then we'll give them the bread first. Convincing dragons to submit to testing has got to be easier. If you know how to get those samples quickly, my ears are yours to speak into."

She'll soon scent me so I walk closer.

Lizabeth sees me and approaches at a run five paces before I'm close enough to ask 'permission.' "Anar! Roxxie wants to give the damaged dragons Quint so she can get blood samples!" I wink at her with the eye Roxxie can't see.

"Permission to approach," I ask Roxxie as innocently as I can. Roxxie nods.

"Lizabeth, do you know how to get blood samples?"

"Yes, Roxxie taught me."

"If I help Lizabeth get the samples before your bread arrives, will you give me a ton of it?" Roxxie doesn't seem surprised that I know about the bread delivery.

"You can get thirty-eight samples collected today?"

"We'll try. What does Lizabeth need?"

"Titanium chock-blocks."

"Won't need them," says Lizabeth.

...but Roxxie talks her into promising to use them, and asks me to lick Lizabeth before we travel to the Temporary Buildings so she'll smell properly to her 'patients.' Roxxie also orders Lizabeth to wear a 'pretend' lab coat, which is a white coat long enough to be a cape when Lizabeth wears it. Lizabeth tells me that's so the dragons will know she's working—nobody wants to wear a coat inside the warm Temporary Buildings.

After arriving, the door-warden gives 'permission to approach' and opens the door to Temporary Building One. Wonderfully warm air comes out, and as a politeness I walk through the

doorway quickly so the door can be shut again. The sleeping cave is never this warm—and it is rarely this quiet, even at night. Most of the damaged dragons are sleeping or close to it. As a formality, I ask the nearest large male 'permission to approach.' His name is Rall, and he's the 'big dragon' of Temporary Building One.

Lizabeth hugs him and almost makes a happy noise when we sniff noses. She asks him if his pee smells properly (no) and if any dragon following in his footsteps wants to talk to Roxxie about flesh-maintenance (no). Then Lizabeth takes off her white coat and 'gets a sample' with me as the first example. Rall is visibly surprised when I let Lizabeth put the chock-blocks between my back-teeth, then his nostrils twitch when the tiny two-legged gets a tiny blood sample. I can faintly smell the scent that is sure to anger every dragon and I'm relieved when Rall doesn't grumble.

When I allow Lizabeth to hug my neck afterwards, Rall checks my scent to see if I'm healthy. I can understand—I'm still surprised I learned to like two-legged hugs. Rall volunteers to be next, and after, he asks Lizabeth why it caused no pain. As Lizabeth struggles to explain why a topical anesthetic applied under a dragon's tongue works so well, I correctly predict that all the dragons present will tolerate this immature female two-legged and her procedure.

I try not to sleep as Lizabeth proves this, but the 'big room' is so warm that Lizabeth takes off her white coat, and it's so quiet... she almost has to wake me when she finishes.

I have to submit to the test twice more while the damaged dragons in the two other buildings watch, and both times Lizabeth hugs my neck afterwards. I think that hug impresses the damaged dragons. Perhaps, until they see that hug, they still think of two-leggeds as food-beasts and only pretend that Lizabeth is Dragon.

The little cold box that holds the blood samples is full after thirty-six tiny shiny red sticks are inside, so that's when Lizabeth and I travel to see Roxxie.

Roxxie asks Lizabeth to type dragon's names and sample

numbers into the medical log-book, and then Roxxie puts the samples in a machine and pushes three buttons on it. The machine hums.

Roxxie then interrupts Lizabeth's typing by asking "Why'd you get three samples from him?"

"If my patients see Anar submit to this test with no ill affects, they are much more cooperative."

I wink at Lizabeth with the eye Roxxie can't see—she's speaking like Roxxie does.

"Show me?" asks Roxxie.

As the Great Fireball touches the horizon, Roxxie and Lizabeth find me in front of the sleeping cave and report their success, and Roxxie says she will give me all the bread--she no longer wants it.

I don't want it either... perhaps I can find a dragon that does. I'll ask dragons as they come into the sleeping cave.

When I see Jade, I drop an ear and lift my chin before he asks 'permission.' Of all the dragons, he's the most likely to want to try Quint.

"Roxxie ordered bread with Quintessence baked in, and I sort of won it from her."

"Do you have any?" asks Jade.

"Not yet--it will arrive tomorrow. Since the bread should be eaten before it grows mold, I wondered if you'd like some."

"Honorable! I'll make a video for Satyadah--the two-leggeds will like that."

A hundred breaths after the Great Fireball is below the horizon, Seven tells a story when she went dream-wandering in a large two-legged store. It's improper to take store-things without giving the requested money first, and Seven didn't have any. The two-leggeds she met would not notice her... but in ten breaths, two males wearing dark clothing approached. Without asking

'permission' they ordered her to 'leave the premises.' Seven claimed she didn't understand. The two-leggeds tried to push her, then they called more identically dressed two-leggeds who also push and pull her. This annoyed Seven so much that when a two-legged put a rope around her neck, she took it away and kept it. Then she was angry enough to wake up.

Time to sleep...

... and I'm dreaming of standing under large trees planted in the middle of a huge building. Two-legged stores line the edges of the building, and each time I read the meaningless signs each building has, the letters change... I must be dreaming.

Many two-leggeds walk between me and the stores. The two-leggeds that walk near me sometimes look at me as if I was one of the trees--perhaps they think I'm a moving statue. A small female two-legged that looks like Lizabeth stares at me, so after half-a-breath I wink at her.

A familiar little dragon's victory-roar distracts both of us, and the source of the roar trots through double doors and victory-roads again—and now she's louder than I can be. Every two-legged in this building is staring at Mona, who decides to briefly stand on her hind legs and and victory-roar one more time. Perhaps the wire trailing back from her mouth is the reason she is so loud...

The scent of dragonets distracts me from Mona's improper behavior. The 'sixters' are spread out behind the two-leggeds and stealing whatever they can. None of the two-leggeds notice. Ten breaths later, purses, packages, wallets, cell-phones, and a colorful shaped pillow are loaded into a bright red bag. After a brief struggle, three of the dragonets carry it and the other three ask Mona 'permission to approach.'

Mona greets the dragonets and takes the bag. The two-leggeds cheer.

Mona opens the bag and puts a red and white hat on her head. She sniffs a package inside the bag, then she speaks to a nearby

two-legged male. "Who shops at the Crap Store? You do! Approach!"

He does.

"Perhaps you'd like this," she says, pulling a package from the red bag.

"Hey! That's mine!" says the male two-legged, who quickly takes the package.

"Yes," says Mona. "Here's a token for participating." She gives the two-legged a little golden dragon.

"Who would like a purple unicorn?" says Mona.

A two-legged smaller than Lizabeth says "Where's Sweetie-pie?"

Mona takes the colorful shaped pillow out of the bag.

"I think the dragon has her," says a female two-legged standing next to the tiny two-legged. Mona (gestures of submission) and gives the female both pillow and a little golden dragon.

Half a breath later, Mona briefly stands on her hind legs to scan the crowd. "Sir, what did you lose?"

"My cell phone... how'd you know?"

"Approach!" she orders. The two-legged obeys.

"Is this one yours?"

"No..."

(sniff) "This one?"

"Yes! How'd you know?" Mona winks at him.

By now, the more alert two-leggeds have figured out Mona's act and, perhaps missing a package or purse, warily approach.

"You lost something, perhaps?" she asks while pointing a stick at a two-legged male.

"Yes... a small package from FnordStorms." The two-legged tolerates Mona's stick and speaks normally.

"Beg pardon?" says Mona.

"A package from FnordStorms," loudly repeats the male.

"This one? Take a token too--and thank you."

The dragonets each take a cell phone or a wallet from the bag.

They sniff them, then seek the proper two-legged. They leave the brightly-colored packages for Mona to distribute.

A dragonet finds refuge from two-legged eyes merely by standing next to me. She tells me that Mona gets paid extra every time a token-taking two-legged says the name of any store in the mall during her act. Then she points with her ears and nose to a shop called 'The Golden Dragon Redeemed.'

"Don't bother going in," says the dragonet. "One golden dragon token won't get much. Mona says the trick is setting up a situation where two-leggeds will want to give money. She uses the two-legged tendency to try too hard to avoid losing something of value. Given a token, a two-legged will go inside, then find the items available for one or two tokens are not desirable. But there are pay-to-play games there where a two-legged could win more tokens, and the items available for five or ten tokens are desirable. They're tempted to play the games or buy enough tokens to get the better items."

"Anar." Chi's voice... she sounds like she's in front. The Great Fireball has just started to add light to the horizon.

I twitch my ears towards Chi's voice.

"Don't move."

That's easy. I feel her paws on my head, then my ears... she takes my cameras.

"Anar," whispers Chi.

I open my eyes, and Chi drops an ear and lifts her chin.

I slowly stand... then stretch and yawn before I trot after Chi. She's already thirty paces in front.

I follow her through a grove of trees. The Great Fireball is below the horizon yet beginning to give light, and Chi is walking stealthily. I try to walk as quietly as I can.

"Look for flying machines," she says. "Roxxie's bread delivery will come from that way. Any other flying machines are to be considered spy-eyes."

Chi takes a paper out of her purse that bears glowing letters. She looks at it, and says "Anar... the two-leggeds that came on the ship are not Dragon, but you treat them as if they were."

"Yes. It does no harm."

"Not to them, but to you. Your ancestors were created after my ancestors... when the two-leggeds had learned how to create a dragon willing to serve."

"I serve now. It's not my choice, but it must be done."

"I know... but it might be bad for you. It's changing the way you think--as you're trying to do things the two-leggeds like, you become a two-legged entertainer."

"Honorable Chi, some dragons must entertain Sue's guests so that all dragons may live free."

"Perhaps... but that dragon should not be susceptible to becoming a two-legged slave."

"Like Mona."

"Mona is enslaved, but to a good master--yet she's also willing to please strange two-leggeds. She can't help it. Without orders, she'll try to please every dragon and two-legged she meets."

"We watch over her," I say.

"And I'll watch you. You are not enslaved yet, but genetically, you might be--you have that tendency."

"Honorable Chi, I agree--but I will continue to wear cameras."

"You know yourself best... but remember, the first time Third met Lizabeth, he victory-roared many times just to get Lizabeth to victory-roar once. That's not proper."

Chi looks again at the glowing letters, then folds her paper.

"Mona can make rumbles that Lizabeth can't hear. I've tried it on Micky, and he can't hear some rumbles either. This could be used for dragon-only communication, but only if the cameras cannot hear rumbles either. If cameras can hear them, then two-leggeds could order their machines to translate rumble-speech. Any of the Engineering dragons will know if cameras can record rumbles."

"I'll ask them. Good idea."

Chi puts cameras back on my ears, then I walk back to the sleeping cave. One hundred twenty paces later, I scent Micky and Jade.

"Jade ate some of Roxxie's quintessence and now he's falling asleep." Micky tells me.

"Honorable Jade--are there problems?"

"Yes... I'm boring."

"Can you walk in a small circle?"

"Good question," Jade stands up slowly as if it was difficult, but he has no trouble walking in a small circle. "I couldn't do this after eating Stupid Berries."

"How do you feel?" asks Micky.

"A little sleepy, a little stupid, but a lot lazy." Jade sits, scratches, stretches, then lies down. "Quintessence is nice... but not for two-legged videos. Stupid Berries would have been better... I'd laugh at everything. This Quintessence slows a dragon. Speaking is difficult... but I don't want to give Satyadah a boring video."

Micky stands taller. "I know how to fix that. Wait here, Jade."

"Mmm."

"You left the camera on," I tell Micky. He winks at me and runs.

Jade closes his eyes. He'll probably sleep soon... but twelve breaths later, I scent something familiar but unpleasant. Jade sniffs the air, opens his eyes, and says "Should I run?" He shifts so his nose points upwind. Micky asks Jade 'permission to approach' for himself and three of Sue's guests. One guest--a young female—puts red paint on a talon on Jade's left front, but the other two talk to black boxes held to an ear. More two-leggeds come before a hundred breaths pass, and all fail to ask Jade for 'permission' but he doesn't seem to notice.

The growing crowd of two-leggeds quickly paint Jade's talons and then want to paint his scales. They are disappointed when Micky forbids this, so I ask the two-leggeds to paint the name of each color on my right-front talon using that color--a sort of map

of the paints we've received. This takes long enough that other two-leggeds want to paint my other talons... but after seeing the random mix of colors painted on Jade's claws, I chose silver and sky blue alternating in stripes that taper to my talon-tips. I remember to say 'thank you' to the two-leggeds afterwards... and that's when Cee decides to ignore the scents and investigate. Soon the two-leggeds are painting his claws in 'camouflage' colors that Cee has chosen after consulting my multicolored claw.

Captain Diana limits the number of Sue's guests allowed off the *Four* and also limits the time they're allowed on shore; today I see her wisdom. Small colorful boxes begin beeping and Sue's guests leave nearly as quickly as they came. Micky goes with them.

Jade stops pretending to sleep and spends a dozen breaths looking lazily at his badly-painted talons. "Perhaps... I could ask a two-legged to paint over these red patches."

I sniff the air... then look towards the ocean. "You'll get your chance."

"Why's that?"

"I scent more two-leggeds."

When the two-leggeds arrive, I make an offer, and more than half want to see my closest potato field; leaving only twelve two-leggeds for Jade to entertain by talon-painting.

The two-leggeds will become bored if I claw weeds out of the ground for many breaths, so instead I remove a few small trees and boulders at the edge of the field. For fifty breaths they liked that... then it was time for something new. The two-leggeds decide to repair the paint on my claws, but want to wash the potato-field dirt off first. On the way to the river, I scent Roxxie.

She wants to speak to Mona, so I follow her rather than endure a paw-washing. I want to hear what Roxxie says... and so do the two-leggeds who also follow. Roxxie walks slowly... then the boxes the two-leggeds wear start beeping. After the two-leggeds return to the *Four*, Roxxie winks at me and travels faster.

In the sleeping cave. Mona is reading papers ten paces inside. After asking 'permission,' Roxxie asks Mona her question.

"Can I be Dragon?"

"Perhaps. There is only one way that this dragon knows," says Mona.

"And I won't like it or you would have told me already," says Roxxie.

(gesture of submission) "Honorable."

"Since you still won't tell me..."

"This dragon will answer your questions."

"Then... you won't tell me because I won't like it, and afterwards I won't like you because you told me something unpleasant."

(gesture of submission) "Honorable."

"There must be something worse than eating only what I can catch plus overlarge genetically modified potatoes, and then sleeping on a filthy grass mat at the end of the day. What else could there be?"

"Honorable Roxxie, our cave and our food are what we have become accustomed to. Some dragons sleep on filthy grass mats for the same reason Lizabeth will wear old clothes that Gran made for her rather than new clothes she's been given."

"Then... I give up. Tell me."

"This dragon wants to answer so you can understand." (gesture of submission) "Perhaps you'll ask Mona a question?"

"How can I be Dragon?"

"Stop owning things."

"Stop owning?"

"Honorable Roxxie, to stop owning things is to not possess things."

"I still don't understand."

"Perhaps you'll ask this dragon a question?"

"So... if I gave Anar my helicopter, that would be a beginning?"

"Yes, honorable Roxxie, but not the best beginning."

"Who would you give it to?"

"This dragon would try to make Roxxie become Dragon so she could take care of it."

"You're not helping..."

"None of the Dragons that follow Anar can fly a helicopter or take care of it."

"What about my money?"

"Your money is a big dragon problem," says Mona.

"So... I should give my money to Anar?"

"No... Mona thinks you should ask Anar what to do."

Roxxie points her eyes and ears at me, so I say "You know more about two-legged money than we do."

"So... even if I gave my money to all dragons, I'd still wind up managing it? What's the point?"

"Owning things is not good for a dragon," says Mona.

"You own things!" says Roxxie.

"Yes! It is like a hat on a dragon." Roxxie looks puzzled, so Mona says "A hunting dragon does not want carrion birds overhead, and wearing a hat makes eluding carrion birds much harder."

"So my property is like a hat, preventing me from doing... what?"

"Roxxie is apart, separated, alone. Roxxie wants more for Roxxie even when she has more than enough."

"I don't have enough for all dragons."

"Nobody does."

—

Roxxie wants to go to see dragons in the Temporary Buildings, so I travel with her and bring a neck-pack load of Quint-bread. I seek bread-eaters, but only two of the damaged dragons want some. Roxxie takes time off from looking in dragon's ears and noses to smirk at me and ask what I would do with the rest--and she seems surprised when I ask her for ideas.

"Why'd you want the bread if you don't know what to do with it?"

she asks.

She's almost angry... so I speak quietly. "I wanted to keep a dragon-friend from making a mistake. I did not want the bread."

That worked--Roxxie is still angry, but not at me.

"I'll put what I can in my freezer... but most of it won't fit."

"Let's try toasting." Gran takes a loaf out of my neck-pack, slices it, puts the pieces in a pan, and puts the pan in the stove.

"I'll toast just enough to find out if you like it."

"It smells good."

"Toast is very dry... and not as good after it cools."

Twenty three breaths later, I try the toast... "Bread is better, honorable Gran," I say, "but this is good."

"I don't like plain toast much myself," says Gran. "It is better eaten with this." A new scent mixes with her words. "This is called peanut butter."

The peanut butter has soaked into the warm toast she gives me. The toast is no longer dry. I like it.

I recognize the symptoms of disorientation before I ask for more. Linking a highly-palatable food with a drug is improper.

"Do you like it?" asks Gran.

"Too much--especially when all this bread has Quint in it."

Gran says the villagers will start to toast the bread tomorrow--and she says one wagon-load of bread ought to keep them busy all day. I almost grumble after hearing that—I didn't intend to make extra work for the villagers.

Micky asks 'permission,' and has good news. Many of Sue's guests want some of this bread, and there's so many of them he thinks the villagers won't have to toast the bread unless they want to.

Perhaps solving the excess bread problem this way will lead to further problems—especially since Micky doesn't know why Sue's guests want this bread—but I give Micky permission to share it.

Strangely tired, I sit at the entrance and read papers.

The first paper has a picture of a dragon's paw much like Mona's, and underneath, text:

At Dragonic Logic, we believe in giving the best to your best friend. We will not apologize for the long, self-sharpening claws that every one of our dragons has.

Another paper has a picture and a box of text. A pair of white-coated two-legged males are standing next to a table with seven clear containers with color inside, and the text:

Nix-Quick... the DNA our wizards use to keep your critters controllable! First, we brought you Quell, which safely causes deep sleep in any Nix-Quicked animal. Now we bring you Quash, a short acting paralytic supremely useful for training and bio-maintenance. After one quick spray of a safe, odorless gas that only affects dragons, you are guaranteed three minutes of still and quiet--a Quashed dragon can hear but cannot move no matter what you say or do. Nix-Quick's tricks make training stick!

I'm asleep shortly after Great Fireball is below the horizon.

I'm watching the dream-dragon I know talk to... a female creature.

"You're not going to be able to walk on two legs much longer," the dream-dragon says to the vaguely dragon-ish creature.

"That will be a relief," she says. "I don't like being in-between."

"It smells like you're a 'Logic."

"Yes, Mona is delighted. She wants to teach me proper egg-speech as soon as my ears turn more dragon-ish."

"Lizabeth?" the dream-dragon asks.

"Yes, Anar?" says the female creature.

"Who is that?" The dream-dragon briefly points his nose in my

direction.

The creature looks at me--and I can tell she's concerned.

"Anar... that's a mirror."

"But that dragon asked the question." I point my nose at the mirror--but the dream-dragon is not inside. "Where did he go?"

"Anar, are you feeling well?" The creature looks in my eyes, then nose.

"I'm fine."

"What year is it?"

"What's a year?"

"How many toes am I holding up?"

"Two."

"Honorable, Anar! How many now?"

"Three."

"Honorable! Have you eaten recently?"

"I can't remember."

She didn't like that answer.

I hear a big dragon running this way.

"That's Third," says the female creature. "I asked him to visit. He's not going to hurt you."

Why would Third hurt me? "Permission to approach, granted!" says the female.

Third slows and inserts himself between me and the female creature and, despite his panting, carefully scents my ears, nose, and mouth.

"Nothing... unusual," says Third. "Symptoms?"

"Hallucinations, amnesia."

"What's my name?" Third asks me.

"Third."

"Honorable! What's her name?" Third asks.

"I don't know. He called her Lizabeth, but I don't know her."

"Who said that?"

"I can't see or scent him now."

"Do you hurt anywhere?"

"No."

"Do you like bread?"

"Yes."

"Can you walk in a small circle?"

"Third, I'm fine."

"But not perfect," says Third. "Tell me what you don't know."

"I don't know who she is," I say, pointing with my nose, "and I don't know what a year is, and I don't know where that other dragon went..."

I recognize the scent of the Quint-laced bread Roxxie bought... then Roxxie's scent as well. She doesn't ask permission-to-approach, saying instead "Open up, Anar! Roxxie wants your blood for her machines."

Behind her is a noisy flying machine I recognize instantly--it sprays Quell. I attack it without thinking.

"Stop!" Roxxie orders as I try to bite the flying machine. It eludes my claws and jaws, buzzes louder, and something strikes the side of my head.

My paws stop working properly and I recognize the scent of Quell too late--I've breathed it already. I accidentally make a distress cry.

Everything changes. I'm covered with a thick gray cape in a boring room with no doors. As I walk out from underneath the cape, I discover my left paw is decorated with three ribbons of smooth white and some sort of collar is wrapped around my neck. As I bring my right front close to it, the collar says "Unacceptable!"

A talking collar! but I want it off my neck. The collar repeats "Unacceptable!" when my claws touch it, then adds "Feet on floor!"

The collar shouts again when I try my left paw. I lean against the wall and claw at what I cannot see. The collar stings me and shouts "QUASH! Bad! Unacceptable!"

I slide down the wall against my will. I can breathe more rapidly--and I do, but I can't move. I struggle to get more of my left

front claws between my neck and the collar... and fail, and fail, and finally... my talons move.

The collar stings me, hisses, and says "QUASH! BAD!"

I can't move--again.

As soon as I can, I'm going to tear off this collar and leave this place... even if I must run in water. I study the room around me. I search the room for a door again--there is always a door--there must be a door--and what I thought was a wall is a huge pair of dull-metal doors, either one large enough to let me pass if opened.

Twenty breaths... then I can move. I sluggishly attack the collar, which predictably stings me, hisses, and shouts "QUASH! BAD!"

At least I've got claws on and in the collar. It starts making loud noises like Purity's cell phone. I feel tired... it would be good to sleep...

Above me I see a gray fog. It doesn't seem to belong with the solid walls and doors.

I hear a click despite the noise the collar is making--and the huge doors open.

"Anar! Permission to approach!" It's the little dragon's voice without the little dragon's scent, but I can smell machine oil and lightning. I cannot speak, but I can think, and I think something is very wrong. The little dragon moves stiffly as she approaches--and she walks like she's cold. She touches my nose with hers--it's odorless cold metal, and I can't smell her breath. She says "Will help."

When the strange-smelling little dragon walks where I can't see her forepaws, the collar stings me once more and ceases making insect noises.

I become very tired, and almost sleep... but I want to get this collar off and I've got claws between it and my neck. As soon as I can move again...

The little dragon remains where she is, but she does not want to be ignored. "You should be aware that the word 'Quash' has been

paired to an unpleasant stimulus three times. Words that sound similar may be mentally linked to these experiences and likely perceived as unpleasant for a hundred thousand breaths." As the little dragon speaks, the collar clicks and loosens. The little dragon tries, but fails to pull the collar away from my claws entangled in it. She says "Do not destroy the collar."

I'm sleepy--but those words bother me like cold water in my nose. The little dragon still doesn't smell alive, much less healthy. I can't hear her breathing or her heartbeat...

"A lethal amount of Quash remains inside—do not destroy the collar." The little dragon steps sideways and tries to pull again. The collar shifts slightly underneath my claws but stays next to my neck.

The door clicks. A two-legged male enters and immediately helps pull on the collar, which finally begins to shift... and hiss. The little dragon moves, then hisses at the collar as soon as her head is improperly close to my neck.

The two-legged moves improperly close... his hands almost touch my neck. "I can't... the valve is stuck.

"Nineteen percent." The little dragon never ceases her hissing as she speaks.

Chi's scent... "Lizabeth says Roxxie wants to speak with you now."

"Honorable," I rumble.

I rumble a questioning tone as I feel Chi's paws on my head... and she takes my cameras.

"Lizabeth says Roxxie has something to tell you and not your cameras." Chi puts the cameras in her purse, then whispers "You are wearing an audio recording device."

I stand up, stretch, yawn... and follow Roxxie's scent. She's with Lizabeth, who is wearing a Sue's Crew uniform.

After I ask and get 'permission,' Roxxie tells of her failed attempt

to buy all the owner-shares of Sue's Cruises. Her story suddenly becomes difficult to follow.

"My buying so many shares caused the stock price to rise so high I couldn't resist selling a little, but I still own a lot of Sue's Sea Cruises and every day dragons are making me richer. However, I think Sue's share price is too high because it's causing problems. I've thought of an acceptable way to lower the price of Sue's shares, but I want to talk to both of you before I do anything."

"Honorable, says Lizabeth.

"I hear," I say. Roxxie might want to talk, but she doesn't want us to understand her 'problems.'

"Perhaps we could pretend we found radioactive dust," says Roxxie. "That would scare off the tourists, and the *Four* might actually raise anchor and set sail."

"The *Four* has sails?" asks Lizabeth.

"Metaphorical," says Roxxie. "That story would cost me money, since Sue's customers will probably stop visiting until we pretend to find a way to control the pretend-radioactive dust. I like this plan because nobody gets hurt."

"The lies sound harmless," I say.

"Gran won't like it," says Lizabeth.

"Alternatively," says Roxxie, "I search for radioactive rocks on my own, needing no permission from any dragon. Eventually, I'll find some that are more radioactive than others, and I can short shares of Sue's Cruises the day before I hype this bit of distraction-information. It will cost me time and money to go radio-prospecting... and that's money that I'd rather other dragons have."

"I don't understand this," I say.

"I don't really understand it either," says Roxxie, "but it works. I've done this before."

I wink at Lizabeth. "I'll think about this," I say. "It seems harmless, yet it involves lies."

"Your choice," says Roxxie.

I'd guess that Roxxie is going radio-prospecting, whatever that is. To delay this, I ask her "What do you want more money for?"

"Isn't it obvious? Everyone wants more tokens of societal obligation!"

"Yes, but what for? What do you want to do with the money?"

"That's a big question that I'll have to think about. I could buy heated sleeping pods for every dragon... and a heated swimming pool large enough for any dragon."

"Those sound like good things," I say, "but I do not understand how telling lies will cause two-leggeds to give you these things."

"Their system is crazy," says Roxxie. "I didn't create their crazy system, but I can use it to the advantage of all dragons."

"Yes... but is that good?" I ask. "Perhaps it would be better for the two-leggeds if I asked for these things--if we need them."

Roxxie didn't like that. "If it's so easy, you should ask," she sneers.

"It is easy to ask," I reply, "but before I do, tell me why a dragon needs a heated sleeping pod."

Roxxie acts insulted. Lizabeth hugs her left front and says "He means well," and Roxxie's mood changes. She laughs. "I keep forgetting--you've never seen a sleeping pod--you don't even know there's a dragon-sized dense-foam couch inside. How could you?" She points her nose at my dirty paws. "You could cover yours with dirt, but it won't be as warm."

Lizabeth whispers "That's not nice" into Roxxie's ear, but I can hear--and perhaps my cameras can as well. Not good...

"Apologies," I say. "I did not intend to overhear; I did not know that my dirty paws are improper; and my ignorance is causing you trouble."

Half a breath passes... then Lizabeth whispers something to Roxxie that I can't overhear.

Roxxie says "Apologies! I did not know how little you knew of modern life and did not make the..." Lizabeth is shaking her head. When Roxxie stops speaking, Lizabeth says "Start over."

"Apologies," says Roxxie. "I have learned to talk like... a two-legged." Lizabeth hugs Roxxie's left front.

Roxxie gives me two of her cameras to wear, and Lizabeth puts them on my ears. When I take Lizabeth back to Gran's shelter, Roxxie comes with me, only walking in my footsteps when it's convenient. Afterwards, as Roxxie and I retrace our paces, I ask Roxxie how to get a medical kit--I want Lizabeth to have one.

"Why can't she use my equipment?" asks Roxxie.

"Lizabeth should have her own medical kit--because you won't stay here all the time."

"That's all? Anar, I'm not going to waste fuel hauling that stuff around. If I leave, her kit will stay where it's needed."

"Honorable," I say.

"Perhaps the real reason is you don't trust me."

"Roxxie, I do not understand you. I would have given Lizabeth a kit long ago. Tell me why that is a bad idea."

"Lizabeth is learning 'flesh-minding' as you call it, and does not yet know how to keep the equipment in good condition... and her cabin has bugs and a dirt floor. Also, Lizabeth is a pre-pubescent female who often chops wood and carries water, and she'll be tempted to use medical equipment to do such chores."

"Roxxie," I say, "You are honorable in your way, but your way is not our way."

To me, it appears that Roxxie wants to control--but my words fail me. I (gesture of submission) to Roxxie instead. After two breaths of waiting, I say "How did that make you feel?"

"Nothing much... why'd you do that?"

I scent the air--Dee is nearby. "I'll show you," I say to Roxxie, who reluctantly follows me. As soon as I'm about ten paces from Dee, I (gesture of submission) to her. Dee runs under my right-front and curls up against my chest. "Don't do that," she whispers.

"Apologies, honorable Dee," I say. "How did that make you feel?"

"Put-upon... I can't tell you what to do! Now I'm suspicious."

What are you and Roxxie doing?"

"He's teaching me to be a Dragon," says Roxxie.

"Is he! Excellent!" says Dee, who crawls out from under me and (gestures of submission) for Roxxie.

"The show must go on," says Roxxie.

Dee doesn't like that. "If I'm submissive, you must seem like a big dragon and I will follow in your footsteps. Where will you lead?"

"That's a big question," says Roxxie. "What kind of answer do you want?"

"Anar, where will you lead?" Dee asks me.

"I will watch over all Dragons to the best of my ability."

"You didn't answer her question," says Roxxie.

"Yes he did!" says Dee. "What's he watching for? Trouble! When some strange helicopter shows up, he investigates while the rest of us safely wait. When the big metal two-leggeds came, he was our general, and was smart enough to follow a plan Hizoner thought of--and it worked. He doesn't have a plan for dragons, he wants his dragons to make their own plans."

"I understand," says Roxxie. "He didn't actually say that, but you heard it. That's part of being a good leader. But what is the future for all dragons? That is more important. Anar, brave as he is, watches and reacts--I would lead."

Dee is indignant. "Look at the cameras on his ears—how much trouble do dragons avoid because of those?"

"That's true... but Anar didn't think of that."

"He thought it was a good idea when he heard it. You know more than any of us, but you don't know us. What we know is not obvious and only the results can be seen."

"What results?" I ask.

Dee looks at me as if I'd asked what the Great Fireball looked like. "Almost one hundred dragons share one sleeping cave and three Temporary Buildings without fighting--and without a night-colored Big Dragon. How many dragons shared your sleeping

cave, Roxxie?"

"None," said Roxxie. "I sleep in a heated pod. My servants sleep on my property--does that count?"

"You tell me," says Dee.

Two breaths pass quietly, then I ask Roxxie about her plans for all dragons.

"I can't tell you too much because of your cameras--but the video that dragons take could be better. Making good video is difficult, and I'd hire some two-leggeds to help us, especially with the lighting inside the cave. I'd get the money to hire them easily enough--I'd let Chrys do what she offered to do, or write a book, or make a movie, or give e-lectures and ask for donations. Dragons can make a lot of money if they'll listen to me."

I pause for a half-breath... then ask "Is making money like making a video?"

Now Roxxie looks puzzled. "Perhaps 'gathering' would be what you'd say about persuading two-leggeds to give me money."

"Honorable. I hear... but I do not understand why you want more tokens of societal obligations." Now Roxxie looks at me like I'd asked something stupid, so I ask "I know the tokens are worth collecting--but why are you collecting them?"

"It's better to have them and not need them than need them and not have them."

"Don't you have enough already?"

"It's not about me! I don't have enough money for all dragons."

"Honorable, but we never needed money before."

"You never had refugee-dragons and refugee-two-leggeds and you did have someplace to run. You're dependent upon far-away two-leggeds now."

"These same far-away two-leggeds seem to cause most of our problems."

"True enough."

"We should talk with the big dragon of money."

—

"Saving money in two-legged financial institutions also commands the labor of two-leggeds."

Roxxie is not pleased with the little dragon's answer. "Dragons can invest wisely, and cause good things to happen."

"Dragons do not need to invest to cause good things to happen."

"Dragons can do both. It is an opportunity--a rare opportunity."

"Dragons will do the best we can... but investing requires financial institutions, and this dragon does not understand why two-leggeds tolerate financial institutions."

"Comments like that make enemies."

Mona shrinks. "This dragon knows."

I don't like this, so I interrupt. "Merely by breathing, dragons make enemies. Billions of humans, each with an opinion, and many are not healthy... and dragons were bred to like every one of them. What can a dragon do?"

"You're watched by satellites and must wear cameras. Some of your food and all of your medicines come from far away two-leggeds. You're part of the system, like it or not."

The little dragon surprises me by agreeing. "Yes! To make the system better, dragons must resist the crazy parts. Two-legged money is a crazy part."

Roxxie shakes her head. "Those who control the money will not like Mona talking about it."

"Not speaking about crimes only helps criminals. This dragon does not help criminals."

"Sure you do. You help me, and no dragon or two-legged could have as much money as I do without a government's help. Besides, you have the Temporary Buildings because Chrys spent two-legged money."

(gesture of submission) "This dragon knows--and now she knows better."

"Do you really think you're helping the two-leggeds?"

"Yes!"

Roxxie points her ears at Mona and waits.

"Two-leggeds know ways to trade that do not involve financial institutions. Perhaps enough two-leggeds will learn about these dishonorable institutions to force their governments to act."

"Tell me what you think the 'financial institutions' are going to do about you."

"They will try to prevent communication."

"At minimum. An easy way would be to destroy the *Four's* radio and microwave transmitters, but that would be heavy-handed and inconvenience some wealthy people... two-leggeds. Slandering a cute dragon doesn't work. What do you think will happen when the *Four* leaves?"

"This dragon does not know, but Captain Diana said dragons will be in danger when her ship leaves. Without her ship's antennas, dragons cannot share so many videos."

"And one dark night..." Roxxie pounces as if she was trying to catch a lagomorph. "The surviving dragons won't know much about their hit-and-run attackers because the attackers will know too much about the watch-and-scent dragons. Machines will be in and out so fast no dragon will finish challenge-roaring."

"Perhaps. Roxxie may help."

"I'll *try* to help, but some dragons won't listen... and I'm usually busy detoxifying the poisoned dragons you and yours keep bringing in."

"You are honorable in your way." Then the little dragon (gestures of submission) and goes into Gran's shelter for two breaths. She comes out with gold coins (properly pounded) between her toes. Since I'm faintly amused by what will happen next, she proceeds.

"For you," Mona tells Roxxie.

Roxxie almost looks angry, but she says "Thank you, honorable." She does not touch the coins.

(gesture of submission) "Treating the damaged dragons has

cost you time and money, and this dragon cannot help with your other business."

Perhaps Roxxie thinks this is some sort of test—she's usually not this quiet.

"This dragon knows that the gold she has given you is worth a small fraction of what you have paid on behalf of dragons. Apologies."

Roxxie is still quiet, but she picks up a coin, puts it in her mouth... and soon spits out two pieces, followed by "That's awful!"

"Yes. This dragon does not quite bite the coins into two pieces."

Roxxie takes a white fluttery square out of her purse, then picks up the bitten coin fragments and wraps them in it.

"You are correct, Mona, in everything you say. I'll keep this one, but you should keep the rest until you get over your phobia about accepting currency. Honorable dragons should not have to pay for what Big Dragon does." Roxxie winks and says "Don't pound the faces on your coins—you'll get more if they're undamaged."

"Honorable. What should this dragon trade for?"

"Trade for currency so you aren't limited to what's on the *Four*."

"Honorable, Roxxie. Perhaps you will still help the damaged dragons?"

"Of course. I like getting the credit for the natural healing powers of dragons."

"Credit? Roxxie has gained respect and honor."

"Honorable, Mona."

"Perhaps Roxxie does not get enough 'credit' because dragons do not understand much of what Roxxie does."

A breath passes quietly.

"Honorable Mona, tell me what Roxxie does that I do not understand."

Mona points her nose at my ears and their cameras.

I tilt my head to one side, then the other, and Mona pulls off both cameras. She takes the batteries out of one because it is 'wireless.' Then Mona asks permission to ask Roxxie questions,

promptly granted by an amused Roxxie... but Mona is serious.

"This dragon knows that if Roxxie's helicopter flies away, then perhaps the ship will soon lose internet connections." The little dragon is watching Roxxie closely. "Can you tell this dragon if she is correct?"

"Perhaps. In a small way, I do what Sue's Cruises is doing for you in a big way. My satellite link helps, if only that it would still exist if the *Four's* was broken."

I must look confused... because Mona says "Captain Diana is helping dragons by allowing internet access. Roxxie also has internet access, and she has sufficient money to have political power with some two-leggeds."

"Honorable."

"Captain Diana says any new ship that travels here will bring many two-leggeds like Mr. [redacted], and she thinks the supply boats will soon bring stow-away spies. This dragon thinks a little dragon could inspect the supply boats and be watch-and-scent for Sue's crew."

"I know of a brave little dragon who'd be best for this job, but I will talk to Chi—she will like hiding and scent-seeking."

"This dragon also would like the adventure."

"Perhaps two dragons could go... you've spent much time in the sleeping cave."

Mona looks happy, but then says "This dragon will create much work for Captain Diana."

"Honorable."

"This dragon should not go."

"Perhaps..." Purity's scent distracts all of us. She's running, and I give her 'permission' before she can forget to ask.

"The internet is ready!"

I don't understand why she's so excited, but Mona does. She looks up at me. "Perhaps Vlad should be here with his cameras."

A cold and damp gust of wind. Vlad moves a bit on my back and

says "Not good weather for man or dragon."

"Especially for smaller dragons," I add. "Such a dragon would move too slow... like... this... and be unable to answer questions."

A distant rumble of thunder and cool breezes are all that's left of the rain. Vlad has been patiently answering my questions about two-leggeds as we travel, so now I've been trying to tell him a bit about dragons, but sometimes Vlad speaks too quickly, almost interrupting. Since rudeness brings more rudeness, I ask him about it.

"When a dragon speaks to me, I wait for the exhalation without speaking--then I speak," Vlad explains.

I rumble-laugh. "That explains much, honorable Vlad. If a dragon finishes his speech and continues to exhale, it is still polite to wait a half-breath. Dragons consider interrupting another dragon's speech as aggressive, so it's best to be on the slow-to-speak side."

"Honorable!" says Vlad, "but I have noticed that Lizabeth does not always wait."

"She will interrupt only Mona. Lizabeth and Mona have no rules when they talk together... they can both talk at once and understand each other."

"Their voices are so different, it may be easy. Has such speech been tried with a dragonet?"

"No. It is probably possible, but dragonets don't like to talk as if the wetness from an egg was still on their scales."

"But I have seen the dragonets interrupt each other."

"Yes... and they'll speak to each other improperly fast. You have seen many bad examples."

"Perhaps, but those are among my best memories."

"Do you have good memories of Vulgaria?"

"Of course... But here, every dragon is polite and thinks better of me than I do."

I rumble-laugh. "Far too many two-leggeds think better of me than I do."

“Perhaps my camera work is partly responsible... and the dragonets. Climbing-on-you videos made your cameraman famous, and all I did was put cameras on tripods and push buttons.”

“Perhaps the video you gather today will do the same.”

A dragon doesn't see this everyday. I point both of my cameras at Mona and Pax, as does Vlad with his cameras.

Her e-thumbs are too big for Pax, so Mona is wrapping tape around Pax's talon-tips. The dragonet sits with both front paws off the ground, wearing Mona's too-large e-thumbs.

"Prepared!" says Mona.

Tentatively, the dragonet's taped talon touches a button.

All the buttons illuminate, and both e-thumbs make blue-green lights show in Pax's eyes.

"You'll like the tutorial," says Mona, and she uses a talon-tip to push a e-thumb button.

The e-thumbs aren't linked to a laptop or television, but I know what the dragonet is seeing... a right paw pressing two buttons. Now Pax does the same, and the letter 'a' should appear in a text box only she can see. When her left paw pushes two buttons, she should see 'ab' in the text box.

Pax does not move her head as she inside-voice victory-roars.

While Pax learns letters, Purity puts her e-thumbs on Mona while two dragonets tape the tips of Mona's front talons. Purity pokes a button on the e-thumbs, which light up and make a dim blue light pointed at Mona's eyes. When Mona starts typing, Purity says "You are struggling to touch the left-front outer row. It should be easy."

Mona touches a button and the blue color fades from her eyes. Purity wraps more tape around two of Mona's talon tips, then says "Try it now."

"Honorable Purity!" says Mona. Her eyes regain a blue tint and

her taped talons tap buttons.

A hundred breaths later, Mona is describing a cat to Graith, Fays, and Vlad's cameras. Purity is searching for a two-legged laptop or a television to link with the e-thumbs so the dragonets can see pictures and video. I hear half a paragraph about cats before I hear an intermittent sliding noise. I investigate and find Purity trying to push a heavy box while wearing a large brown flat thing on her back.

The flat thing she has tied to her neck-pack is called a television and has an odd, penetrating scent. Its flat brown hide bears text: 'Property of Sue's Cruises.' It appears as useless as a slab of stone. The other box is heavy and contains batteries. Purity insists she'll push what I could carry because "It's good for this dragon."

Purity puts her too-small neck-pack on my back. The flat thing, called a TV, weights little and hardly hinders my movements, but the battery box slows Purity. When the dragonets see her, they help push. I follow a pace behind, trying to keep as many dragonets in my camera's view as possible.

Thirty breaths later, Purity is done pushing batteries and takes the TV off my back. Purity examines the top of the TV, then forces a talon inside and down the side. Does she want to destroy it? She's tearing off bits of brown hide and pulling white things out... when she tears off all the hide on one side, I finally realize it's made of cardboard. Inside, there are more white pieces and many pieces of paper that Purity ignores in favor of a large shiny square that's also in there. She makes the square stand on an edge... then wants to look at the papers she'd ignored before.

Mona removes one e-thumb and takes the tape off a talon. She scratches a piece of cardboard into a small arc shape, which she bends by pressing against the e-thumb she's still wearing. She holds the cardboard arc between two taped talons and flicks it so it spins as it flies. The cardboard makes three-quarters of a circle before bouncing off the wall; Mona starts scratching out another

before it falls. The dragonets copy her and enjoy throwing the cardboard arcs.

Purity touches something with a talon-tip and the tablet glows blue. "You'll need e-thumbs for this," she tells Mona, and two dragonets take a break from tossing cardboard to re-tape Mona's talon.

"Accept link," says Purity.

"Still seeking," says Mona.

Purity touches the large tablet and the glow fades. She whispers 'one-two-three-four-five' and touches the tablet again, and it glows blue.

Half a breath later, Mona says "Linked!"

I always feel disoriented when an improperly smooth rock called a television starts glowing... and that gets worse when it starts showing moving images. This slab shows sixteen different images of landscapes, beaches, and the river, and a seventeenth box at the bottom where the text scrolls past faster than any dragon would talk. When the words stop scrolling:

[scroll paused]

(dfc) re: 'rangs—throwing them in formation.

Honorable Anar!

I follow in your footsteps

A few odd shapes follow after 'footsteps' but I cannot make sense of them.

One of the shapes is a small yellow circle that contains two side-by-side heart-shapes over a crescent shape in pink—perhaps these shapes are the two-legged equivalent of rumble-speech. If so, Mona has learned it already. "Honorable," I say.

The other words move up and a new line appears. "(dfc) he says 'honorable' victory roar" followed by more strange shapes.

The text box changes to show "(dfc) sorry must greet L" and the air does bear the scent of a familiar two-legged. The screen goes blank and Purity's e-thumbs cease glowing, and

Mona takes them off.

LizabETH is wearing a new uniform with 'Dragon Friend' on the back. After she and Mona greet, a dragonet puts a piece of paper on LizabETH's back during a hug. Under the 'Sue's Crew Dragon Friend' text, it adds 'and two-legged Dragon.' While LizabETH hugs a dragonet, Mona points her nose at the paper.

"Chi!" five dragonets say at once. Chi thinks that will help us? Strange.

LizabETH hugs Purity, then says "The steward doesn't mind you borrowing the TV, but without the batteries, the next two-leggeds will have to travel where they cannot see."

Purity (gestures of submission) but pushes her e-thumbs towards Mona. "Show LizabETH."

Mona looks at LizabETH, then says "This dragon will work when the batteries are in their proper place." Mona puts one end of my neck-pack into the big pocket on the other side and asks me to put the batteries in that pocket as well--they're heavier than they look. Mona whispers to LizabETH, who runs up my tail and along my back so she can steady my neck-pack as I walk. The dragonets run ahead of me and Mona runs after them. I wink at Purity and nose-gesture towards Mona, then rumble-speak the Engineering Section's 'boss is coming' word. Purity winks at me then runs ahead too. With LizabETH's help, I can walk fairly fast, so Purity is still putting on her e-thumbs when we get there. Getting the heavy box out of my neck-pack is harder than putting it in, especially with the dragonets helping... and I briefly have a pair of dragonets in the big pocket of my neck-pack before we're done. I point my cameras at them... two-leggeds will probably like seeing dragonets-in-pocket.

I order LizabETH and Mona to greet Sue's guests because I know that's what's next—and Sue's guests will travel here once Purity re-connects the batteries for the lights. I order the dragonets to go into the sleeping cave with Purity, since I haven't yet investigated this herd of Sue's guests. We've made a deal

with Sue's Cruises... the two-leggeds who traveled on the *Four* may stay here as long as they follow Captain Diana's rules, but no more ships can come yet. The number of Sue's guests still seems the same to me... too many. Always new two-leggeds... more faces and scents than I can remember.

Because I'm talking to a 'Mr. Howell,' I'm surprised when the little dragon begins to pretend-growl. I'm guessing she was asked to look fierce for photographs because Lizabeth is holding four cameras. Mona is biting and clawing the air in front of her. Mona winks at me with the eye that 'Sue's guests' can't see and her nose makes a little motion towards the cameras Lizabeth holds. I pretend-challenge-roar, then run at Lizabeth, biting the air in front of her. Mona looks contrite and points her nose at Sue's guests... if Lizabeth had acted scared, the two-leggeds would have fled!

Vlad's Geiger counter breaks the silence as it counts cosmic rays.

"Apologies," I say to Sue's guests. "That was for the cameras."

Half a breath later Sue's guests clap their hands together--strange! Every two-legged seems happy...

Lizabeth returns the cameras to Sue's guests. I pretend to lick a camera pointed at me--Captain Diana told me Sue's guest made many approving comments when they saw me do that during the 'live-feed.' Besides, I like cameras. Videos are our best defense.

I don't think there will be any problems with this herd of two-leggeds, so I take a few paces into the sleeping cave. When Purity looks up. I drop an ear and lift my chin, and she and the dragonets come running. Then I mostly hold still while a dragonet jumps from my shoulders onto my head, which must be repeated twice more because some two-leggeds are too slow with their cameras.

Purity is whispering something to Mona that I cannot overhear--but Mona puts on her e-thumbs immediately. Then Purity helps Mona make the two-leggeds' cell phones make strange noises. The nearest TV shows something like what Mona is seeing--and

from the text scrolling by, it seems Mona's e-thumbs have linked with many cell-phones, and two-leggeds can send text to Mona anytime. Sometimes Mona has to type very fast to make replies.

I watch the two-leggeds--they are mesmerized by what they see on the TV unless Mona makes their cell phone ring. I look at Elizabeth, then point my nose at Sue's guests. Elizabeth shrugs and holds up empty hands. The text quickly flows, slowing only when Mona sends pictures. Then the screen goes blank.

Mona turns off the e-thumbs and gives them to Purity. She then inefficiently takes the tape off of one talon at a time using her teeth. Elizabeth must have seen the very subtle shake of Mona's head as she approaches because she decides to rub Mona's back. Mona rumbles agreeably and says "Honorable Elizabeth, keep doing what you're doing," and takes a half-pace closer to a two-legged. A piece of tape is stuck on her chin where Elizabeth can't see it.

"Can I help?" asks one of Sue's guests.

"Honorable!" says Mona. "This dragon will submissively accept help."

An oddly dressed female two-legged reaches up for the tape on Mona's chin, and I notice her face-paint.

She smells like a young female but looks like an old two-legged male. I point eyes and ears at that two-legged, and when she looks at me, I drop an ear and lift my nose just a little.

"Permission to approach, granted." I point my eyes and ears at the female. Elizabeth and Mona exchange glances, and Elizabeth leads the rest of Sue's guests away.

The two-legged looks up at me.

"Is there anything you want to tell me?" I ask.

"I'm sorry!"

She sounds scared. Perhaps Mona won't scare her—so I point my eyes and ears at the little dragon.

"What is this?" Mona asks Sue's guest.

"A first-aid box."

"Open it?" asks Mona.

Click.

"Pretty!" says Mona. She picks up a shiny syringe and asks "Why is this made of glass?"

"I don't know."

"Perhaps someone offered you money if you could obtain a clean tissue sample from one of the Deltas?"

A guilty nod. "Paid in advance."

"Perhaps they also told you two magic words? One of which is 'freeze,' and one more which varies."

"Yes, like you said, 'freeze' and 'freeze-forget-this-happened,' that's what they told me."

Mona doesn't reply--or move. I ask the two-legged "Were you approached when you were climbing into the helicopter?"

"No... when I got off the ship." Mona's nostrils twitch and she takes a deep breath.

"Why are you disguised?" I ask.

"Because... my uncle got sick and couldn't go, so I'm him as far as Sue's Cruises is concerned."

"Do you have any of the currency they gave you?" asks Mona. "This dragon knows a trick. Honorable, but this dragon needs only... this one at the end." Mona scents the piece of paper off the bottom of the stack.

Mona looks closely at both sides of the paper, then drops it nearby. She steps on the paper, checks to see if it stays flattened, then urinates nearby. Bright red letters appear where the puddle touches the paper, and soon it is all wet.

"You really have seen it all before," says the two-legged.

"This dragon will not cheat you," says Mona. She holds up a paw to show a rubber stamp that she's holding between her toes. The two-legged is surprised--then examines the red letters on the paper.

"Lizabeth can help you find out if your currency is not proper," says Mona. "Sue's Crew has seen it all before. This dragon

recommends asking them for help and for stories."

I look over the two-legged's head--the red letters spell 'OUTSOURCED.' Since I don't understand what this means, I look at Mona, who looks at me, then the two-legged. I take the hint.

After another eighty-eight breaths of questions, Mona and I decide this two-legged is no threat. We treat her as if she was Dragon and send her on her way, holding a glove with the damaged piece of paper inside and a syringe full of my drool.

Mona takes a bottle out of the 'first aid kit' and reads the writing on it. "Seventy percent ethanol."

"Did you hear my improper question about a helicopter?"

"This dragon did not."

"Did you hear magic words?" I ask.

"This dragon did not."

"The female said one magic word was 'freeze.' What was the other word?"

"This dragon does not remember hearing it."

"Perhaps because the word makes a 'Logic forget." I try to catch the scent of Chi.

Mona looks at me questioningly, so... "I learned long ago--when something like this happens, tell Chi quickly."

We find Chi in the Dragon's shed near Gran's shelter. Mona goes in the shed with the 'first aid kit' and soon comes out with Chi. Mona tells Chi what happened and I add the words Mona does not remember hearing.

"The magic word is really four words. The first magic word you already know... and it's followed by the words you'd say when a proper dragon had accidentally done something improper--like sleepwalking--and is embarrassed when she wakes."

"Forget this happened," says Chi.

"If you say all four words together, it might make a 'Logic forget. Mona briefly stands on her hind legs and covers her ears with

the backs of her curled paws. "This dragon will teach dragonets to do this if a two-legged maliciously says the 'F' word, but now she wishes to experiment with these words."

"Forbidden," I rumble. "Research first. All Dragons should resist writing or speaking these words."

Chi seems faintly amused. "A big dragon says that while wearing video cameras on his ears."

"Honorable," I say. "I'd forgotten about them."

"Forget this happened," says Chi, and she winks at me. "Before you go back to two-legged entertaining--watch what you say. If you did ask the two-leggeds for sleeping pods, dragons might get them."

"Honorable... how did you know about that?" I ask.

Chi winks at me again, then briefly points her nose at my camera-laden ears.

—

When I find Seven, I almost tell her about the words a Logic should not hear, but I point my nose and ears at her and wait. She seems unhappy.

"Failed." She barely speaks.

Seven needs to talk... "My ears are yours to speak into."

"The two-leggeds had a picture of an old female two-legged, and they wanted me to look like her, so they put white fur on my head, wire frames around my eyes, and three capes with many many holes in them on my shoulders." Seven's ears droop. "All I had to do was sit and knit. That's all." Her ears droop further. "When the two-legged male called me an old bag, I couldn't keep quiet—I replied 'Politeness is a social lubricant,' and the two-legged big dragon asked me to leave." Her ears are almost folded... "The yarn called 'extra chunky' was thick and flexible, much lighter and warmer than cotton cord, and so many colors..."

Now my ears droop as if the cameras were heavy. "Seven, what will happen when Satyadah releases today's video?"

Her eyes widen. “Apologies!” then narrow. “You won’t delete that?”

“Honorable Seven, I could ask Lizabeth to do it for me, but she’ll have to see the video to do it, and then she’ll tell her friends on the *Four*, and soon many two-leggeds will want to send you yarn either way.”

“I’ll ask Lizabeth not to tell.”

“Worse. Lizabeth will try to get yarn for you without asking for help. There’s only one way to stop it... if you get the yarn, and soon.”

“There is another way... perhaps.”

I follow Seven into the Dragon’s shed, and Seven changes my camera’s batteries when she exchanges ‘blank’ memory sticks for the ones in my camera. Seven can push the proper buttons on the two-legged machine, but the video remains unaltered.

Purity offers to help us... but also tells Seven that she’s entitled to her ‘wages’ since she showed up and wore a ridiculous costume; and that Chrys would know how to ‘work the system.’ Purity sends an email, and Chrys answers in five breaths. Twenty five breaths later, she arrives, and after ten breaths of tapping on a cell phone she stumps Seven when she asks what colors she likes in yarn. Chrys winks, and asks for any neutral color that would get Seven the most yarn—and acrylic was fine.

I return to the sleeping cave. As the Great Fireball goes below the horizon, Seven and Purity approach; Purity has a new way for Seven to tell stories—she’ll no longer needs to speak loudly since Purity has machines can reproduce her voice for dragons too far away to hear, and her machines can also remember it for later reproduction.

After twelve breaths of her yarn story, Seven tells of when Pax saw a flying machine. She then told Cee she saw a spaceship—she’d been primed to see spacecraft after an astronomy lesson. We see things not as they are, but as we are.

I shouldn't be this tired in a dream. I cannot scent, only hear persistent insect noises. My eyes refuse to open properly, and I cannot see very well. "Light?" I ask quietly; and bright light comes instantly. I close my eyes--briefly seeing shiny silvery metal everywhere. A half-breath later, my eyes are better... just in time to see a white and silver door open improperly fast. Soon the little dragon is standing in front of my nose. "Anar?" she whispers. The insect noises cease.

"I hear." Only now can I detect her scent.

She licks my nose, then (gesture of apology) and (gesture of submission) then hugs my right front as if she was a dragon-shaped Lizabeth.

"This dragon should not lick inside of Intensive Care Room. She apologizes but she is happy. How can this dragon help?"

(rumble) "Very tired. Why?"

"This dragon does not know yet. She will help."

Her white suit reflects more light than is proper. Mona has a cylinder in her paw that becomes a bright light, which she points inside my nose, avoiding any light in my eyes... the room light is too bright already. When the little dragon wants to shine the light inside my mouth, she asks "Can you tell me what happened?"

"No." It's easier to whisper.

"No memories at all?" The little dragon waits for my answer, but all I have is a blank look.

"Do you know my name?"

I would nod, but I'm very tired. I close my eyes because of the light.

Mona says "Boss D stat, report."

"Ten percent," I promptly reply. Why do I sound like Jade? I don't know why I say that, but it felt good. Three breaths later...

"Boss D stat, report."

"Eleven percent." This feels like saying 'Plata-Power' to Stretch

a half-breath before she will want to say it... it's fun.

"Honorable!" The little dragon taps on the buttons of a two-legged keyboard, then runs under my right front. She seems happy. Two breaths later, she says "I follow in your footsteps."

I rumble agreeably.

"This dragon can make your cape become warmer."

I rumble agreeably again. I open my eyes long enough to see the little dragon taking three steps to touch one of the silver machines. The cape I'm wearing becomes warmer.

"More?" asks the little dragon.

I rumble again.

"More?"

The heat from the cape is uneven... I find the energy to shift and rumble again. Warm...

The little dragon's scent is faint, but I know she's near my nose. After a half breath, then she asks "Are you warm?"

I rumble an 'almost' and close my eyes. Mona's white suit is too bright to look at, and the machine she's holding gives no clues to its function. I'm very sleepy.

Two more breaths. I'm too warm. I try to summon the ability to speak, but the little dragon runs out from under and pushes buttons.

"Thirty seconds of 'hypothermic' should be enough for any dragon. Boss D stat, report."

"Ten percent." Again, it felt good to say that.

(gesture of apology)

Perhaps Mona can help with the over-bright room lights. "Light," I whisper at her. The world of white and silver becomes even harder to look at. Mona points eyes and ears at me and waits.

"Light," I whisper again. I can't see anything now.

"Light off," says Mona, and the room becomes dim.

"Honorable." I can see much better. In the dim, the machines are almost pretty. Many red numbers and letters are accompanied by squares and switches that glow in various colors.

One machine has a big, flashing red square. Mona turns and touches that machine in three places and the flashing stops.

(gesture of submission) "Honorable Anar! Perhaps this explains the fatigue and memory loss..."

Mona remains by the machines as she continues. "Honorable Anar! Imagine you are in the sleeping cave. It may help to close your eyes."

The little dragon's instructions are easily followed...

Long ago, Chi taught me the best way to forget a dream by thinking of something else for a hundred breaths after waking. In fifty-two breaths, I scent Eighth, then give him 'permission' when he's close enough to hear. He's got a two-legged machine in his neck-pack which he puts it in front of me.

"Anar... watch this before you scent Mona."

"Why?"

"It's an old video that came from Mona's cameras, but only recently has it become popular. Mona doesn't like it... she said the video is funny only because a rock is more intelligent than this two-legged, but Dragons should not laugh at unintelligent two-leggeds."

"Yet you want me to watch it?"

"Yes, only because you're the big dragon. Push this, and it will show the video. The picture is not good, but you can hear Mona's words."

"Honorable. How'd you get it?"

"Roxxie. She had the video because one of the cameras Mona was wearing was hers, and she wants me to give the video to you because she's too busy to do it. I let her order me around because she's got dragon growth hormones--she says they'll make me bigger if I let her give me injections."

"Are hormones safe?"

"Roxxie says so," says Eighth.

"Roxxie should know," I admit, "but I wouldn't do it."

"Are you going to forbid it?" asks Eighth.

"Of course not," I rumble. "Roxxie knows flesh-minding better than I do. But you should go slow until you know more. Perhaps you should talk to Mona when Roxxie isn't there."

"The littlest dragon will understand," says Eighth. "Roxxie should have enough growth hormones to also share with Mona-- I'll ask."

After Eighth leaves, I take off my cameras and put them in my neck-pack. After I push the button to start the video, my paw pushes the button again and the machine stops. I'm not sure why I pushed the button twice, but it seems better that way. I put the machine in my neck-pack, which I now don't want to wear--so, eventually, I leave them both behind me. I find Second nearby, and he agrees to be big dragon.

I walk into the sleeping cave, and Mona, Lizabeth, and Eighth waiting for me... and Seven's scent is recent. Lizabeth gives hugs to every dragon... and I follow her with one camera, keeping the other on Mona, who is soon explaining to Eighth why she won't take hormones--she can now go inside Gran's shelter, and 'diversity is strength.' Eighth grumbles. Then Mona asked Eighth how long any male dragon can hold both front paws off the ground, and perhaps Eighth can do that long enough to use e-thumbs.

"Purity will know how to help you stand that way long enough to use e-thumbs," I tell Eighth.

"How?"

"Purity knows office furniture."

Seven asks me 'permission to approach' and afterwards asks about a certain video... Mona shrugs.

"You may not like this dragon if you watch the video," Mona tells me. "This dragon said a certain two-legged spreads poison to dragons because he's hoping to feed carrion birds."

"What did the two-legged say before you spoke?"

"This dragon will not repeat his abusive words."

"Perhaps you're taking this too seriously."

"This dragon thinks one bad experience with a two-legged could become more important than the many good experiences."

"Both dragons and two-leggeds will forget this."

"Chi says a dragon always remembers even when she forgets, and Gran says the same about two-leggeds."

True... When I was younger, Chi told me 'Don't think that way because it's permanent' many times. "Is the video something a big dragon should watch?" I ask.

"You have heard the worst. This dragon should have run away. She has contributed to future problems. Mr. [redacted] will say bad things about..."

It's not quite proper, but I can't help laughing.

"Told you so," says Seven.

"Honorable Seven!" says Mona. She looks at me and says "This dragon scented Mr. [redacted] on the currency."

(grumble)

Seven points eyes and ears at Mona.

"One of Sue's guests was given currency and asked to get tissue samples from this dragon. This dragon was able to smell the currency the guest possessed, and this dragon thinks the currency carries the scent of Mr. [redacted]."

"You should have bitten him when you had the chance," says Seven.

"Mr. [redacted] is not something this dragon wants in her mouth."

The Great Fireball is still high in the sky when Roxxie finds me at the entrance of the sleeping cave,. She remembers to ask 'permission to approach,' but has no time for pleasantries.

"You'll probably want to delete this from your cameras," says Roxxie, "but that's your decision. I'll just tell it like it is."

"I hear."

"Have you noticed a certain lack of dragon-eggs?"

"Yes."

"Dragons will go extinct without my help," says Roxxie. "The females smell too many other female dragons... especially older female dragons, so egg-laying is inhibited. Now you know why Mona and Seven were the last two dragons to lay eggs."

"What should we do about it?"

"Since Mona won't take any hormones, two or three males should take her far from other dragons on a trip long enough so she'll want to ride dragon-back. Since present circumstances preclude such amenities, Roxxie must rescue once again. You could order Mona to take hormones, or Mona could take a drug that knocks out her sense of smell, or she could remain upwind of all female dragons for months--but I'm not sure what will work because of Mona's unique medical history. Six eggs was too many."

"Honorable Roxxie, I hear."

"If you want my advice, and you do... try the hormones. They need to be injected, but there's ways to do that without a dragon knowing. This is a big dragon problem, not for those who follow in your footsteps."

"I hear." After Roxxie leaves I spend three breaths thinking about it, then scent-seek Mona. I quickly learn that she (and all the other females) know already about scents and fertility and are more than happy to talk about it. They tell me I am a rare and honorable male dragon because I want to learn about female dragons—one more reason they want to follow in my footsteps forever.

Mona and Seven and Graith almost interrupt each other in their eagerness to confirm what Roxxie told me--everything Roxxie said was true, but it wasn't proper dragon-speech.

They tell me that the smell of big males helps female dragons lay eggs. Seven tells me a story about a two-legged male who

once used 'his' dragon's sensitivity to scents to control their egg-laying without their knowledge. His plans failed when the female dragons learned to ride dragon-back.

Mona tells me that Seven will take her place as 'greeter' for Sue's Guests' because Chi has asked the little dragon to limit her contact with strange two-leggeds--she's sure Mr. [redacted] is going to try something else.

Almost all the females have decided not to lay eggs now. The exception is the female who calls herself 'Bait' because she's following in the Commanding Dragon's footsteps on the wrong side of the river. He's planning several Night Runs and, properly, she wants to help--but since she is the only female following the Commanding Dragon, she may lay an egg. What can any dragon do?

Mona tells me that she has read many papers, but some of them are partly wrong and she can explain why. However, before she starts she sees Purity and asks her about 'the project.'

"Almost done--need a big dragon's help."

Purity wants me to stand in front of the television.

"Put paws on lights," she says.

I put my right paw on one set of lights. My toes curl over the edge of the pad, but it fits my paw. I step on the other one too and say 'prepared.'

"Prepared," replies Purity.

Lights glow under my talons.

"Test it," says Purity. "Push on the lights."

When I push one with a toe, the light dims and the paw-pad clicks. Purity wants me to test them all. When she's satisfied, she says "Prepared" and pushes a button on a video monitor. It glows, then shows a female dragon's paw--probably Purity's--in the act of pushing two buttons on a strange-looking e-thumb.

"Honorable Purity... prepared."

Purity pushes a button on a different machine and the video-

paw presses with two toes.

Before I respond, Purity says "When you talk to a machine, do not speak properly, but quickly."

"Honorable."

Purity touches a button, and again the scentless video-paw presses with two toes. I immediately push on the proper paw-pad buttons, which click--and an 'a' appears in the text box. I repeat the motion, then see 'aa' in the text box. I like this! "Honorable Purity!" The video paw pushes e-thumb-keys, and after I translate the motion to these paw-pads, I look up and see 'aab' on the monitor. (happy rumble)

Twenty six letters, ten numbers, and punctuation marks... again and again until I can push the right buttons without looking at my paws.

"Perhaps you should take a break," Purity says. "This dragon can arrange internet access. It will take twenty breaths."

"Honorable."

The right paw controls the cursor... up down right left, and the left paw, mouse-clicks and scrolling.

I click on the 'Dragon-forum' as read-only because I don't know any of the passwords. I type 'Mona' into the forum 'author search' box and it takes less than a tenth of a breath for Satyadah's website to find her comments... and there are too many for me to count. Feeling overwhelmed, I click on one at random.

Mona: This dragon wants to try Orwellian. Money is violence! Land ownership is theft! Ignorance is pain!

5####: She's got it.

J3770: Auntie-Orwell!

I'm confused... so I try the 'News' forum and scan the headlines. I click on an article titled 'Dragons are Alien Life Forms' and twenty words in, I know I made a mistake. Next, I try 'From

Purity's e-Paws.' After reading two-hundred and twenty words of Purity's attempts to build dumbed-down paw-pads (instead of e-thumbs) for big dragons, the cameras on my ears become heavy. Dragons need Satyadah's website; and some dragons have to lose their privacy so that all dragons can live free. But sometimes...

"Anar?" Purity asks.

"Let another dragon try, honorable Purity."

A hundred breaths later, I'm clawing the weeds I find growing with the potato plants. It's a good place to think, and I'm thinking about e-thumbs. If I made a dirt pile big enough so my front paws could be off the ground long enough for me to use e-thumbs that I don't have—I still couldn't type letters like Mona can. My paws won't move that fast.

Perhaps Purity can add more buttons to the paw-pad so it can do everything that e-thumbs can do, but I don't know how that could work. My toes won't move that far and I already need both front paws for most letters... my paws aren't good for typing. I'll never press buttons as fast as a little dragon. Perhaps I should stick with pulling weeds and digging potatoes when I'm not on watch-and-scent...

Purity forgets to ask 'permission' before she approaches, but says 'Powered rocker switches!' instead.

I point my eyes and ears at her, unable to feel the enthusiasm that she does.

"The distance your toes travel when typing will be reduced two orders of magnitude!"

I'm not impressed, but still willing to listen.

"You'll get feedback. That means you'll know when the switch switches. You'll hardly have to move--it will do most of the work."

"I'll have to see it to understand." Pushing buttons was work?

"You will not have to tolerate inefficiencies... this dragon can alter the machine! New input device tomorrow!"

She runs in the direction of the dragon's shed.
Perhaps I'll learn tomorrow what an 'input device' is.

I sleep well... despite my dream.

It began outside a building made of flat, dragon-gray slabs and roll-up doors.

I knew the dragon in front--I remember his dream-scent. He's wearing a most-undragon-like fluffy wig of many colors that hides his ears--and some of his scales are colored with small two-legged hand-prints. That dragon winks, says "The party begins!" then takes two steps and looks back at me. A door rolls up. The dragon in front appears bored as he waits for it to open--and steps through as soon as possible. I can smell two-legged cake and bread, and I soon see books and televisions and many pairs of paw-pads--but no other dragons. I follow and go inside.

"Prepared!" says a dream-dragon I once named Dragon.

Two doors and one wall roll up and other dragons come, some bearing two-leggeds, all of them strange to me. Many dragons and two-leggeds are wearing similar wigs, some have circular metal sticks around their eyes. A very young Dragonic Logic announces he is going to read for the other dragons when 'Papa' comes. I look where I see other dragons look... a big male wearing thin metal sticks that resemble two-legged eye-glasses but without the glass.

Many dragons victory-roar as he approaches.

The dragonet (gestures of submission) to the big male. He says "Prepared!" then looks up at the big male.

I look up to him as well. He's like me, but a little bigger.

He looks up from the dragonet and directly at me. He approaches, and says "You are welcome." When he's close enough that I can feel his breath, the metal on his head shines a strange light at me. A machine-voice says "Retinal patterns are identical." and the light ceases shining.

"What's your name?" he asks me.

"Anar, honorable Papa," I say, and several nearby dragons try not to laugh.

"Honorable Anar, how did you get here?" he asks.

The machine interrupts. "Emergency. Re-scan In progress," it says. The strange light is much brighter this time and I can't close my eyes fast enough.

The Great Fireball is at least a hundred breaths below the horizon when a faint smell of smoke wakes me. This scent comes from Purity. When she sees me open my eyes, she says "Which color? All are possible." She points her eyes and ears at a box she's carrying... it has rows of variously-colored little lights inside it.

I like all of them... I choose a red one almost at random.

"Six hundred thirty nanometers for Anar!" she says, then turns tail and runs. Two breaths later, I decide to follow.

The dragon's shed is too small for me to enter, but Purity is wearing a camera and a television is linked to it. I'd rather just look through the door and watch her work--fascinating but boring at the same time. Nasty-smelling smoke floats out the window. Ninety-seven breaths later, Purity says "Prepared!" and lifts a paw-pad onto its side. I move my head away from the doorway, then help her roll the first paw-pad through. Before she gets the second paw-pad, Purity says 'Many paws make paw-gress paw-sable.'

Purity turns the television on and checks the link to the paw-pads. She continues to wear a camera. Good... more for Satyadah.

My toes still hang over the edge of the paw pads Purity has modified, and this time I feel a groove where there was once smooth plastic. I curl my right front slowly and discover that powered rocker switches move a lot when my toes move a little.

When I curl or uncurl my toes, the switches move more.

"Each switch has two possibilities, up or down, allowing mimicry of the second tier of e-thumb buttons." Purity adjusts one of the rocker switches on the left paw-pad.

"Honorable Purity! I must re-learn my letters without a video, but I am still happy."

"Honorable Anar, we can make a typing tutorial for other dragons."

Purity points cameras at my forepaws. I watch a female dragon's paw push buttons on a e-thumb, translate it to 'paw-pad,' then push rocker switches. Afterwards, Purity tells me about the machines and two-leggeds she knew before she followed in my footsteps, and I try to type some of her words. Most of Purity's stories are about days when the dragons successfully shirked their work, which I find odd because she is happy when she is busy. Sometimes she builds things that will have limited usefulness... like a shiny metal collar she's showing me.

Purity wants to know if I will tolerate wearing this collar... it fits so closely that when I move my jaw, it moves as well. Purity asks me to keep my mouth closed as I stand on the paw-pads. She points a camera at my paws, and the video shows on the television.

"Prepared?" she asks.

'prep'

"Watch your toes on the television, honorable Anar. The switch moves when you push it, correct?"

'yes'

"Honorable Anar, slowly type the letter 'a' three times and watch closely." The powered rocker switches seem too active.

I try to type 'aaa' but see 'aaaaaa' instead. I type 'is this a trick?'

"No... the switch *is* moving before your toes do. Dragons are fast, but the machine is faster--when the electrodes in the collar pick up a pulse, the machine rocks the switch before your toes move."

"try again?"

(gesture of submission) and she moves the camera so I can watch from a different angle. She activates paw-pad 'clicking' so I can hear each time I successfully use the paw-pads to type a letter.

No matter when I type, the switches move and type an 'a' before my toes move.

"Two-legged nerve impulses only move about three hundred meters per second, so this machine could work on Lizabeth too. Dragon neurons are faster than that, but electrical wires are still faster by five orders of magnitude."

The screen fills... almost half are random letters and all the rest are 'a.' She says "The machine only knows *when* you want to type, but not *what* you want to type. It can do no more. This dragon's trick is over."

I type 'honorable' and 'ahaoanaoaraaaba1ae' appears on the television. When Purity takes the collar off my neck, I lick her mostly between her ears—and paw-pads click, adding 'aaaaa' to what's on-screen.

Five breaths after removing my collar, Purity removes the damaged e-thumbs. She (gestures of submission) and says "Your Dragon-forum name is 'Anar' and your password is written on this," says Purity, holding a piece of paper so my cameras cannot see the random numbers and letters written on it.

"Where do I use this password?"

(gesture of submission) "This dragon will show you." She pokes keys on a two-legged keyboard.

"Where are your e-thumbs?"

"The dragonets have them," she says. "One dragonet can operate all the buttons on one of this dragon's e-thumbs, so two dragonets work together to use them. It is not as fast as using the paw pads that the Engineering Section made for them, but it is a game and they learn to work closely together. This dragon likes

watching."

"We could get properly-sized e-thumbs for them."

"Dragonets grow too fast," says Purity. "Paw-pads can be adjusted as the dragonets grow."

Purity has a camera now, and has text for me to read.

"At this time, no persons or organizations are authorized to collect goods, services, or money on the behalf of myself or any of the dragons that follow in my footsteps."

"Honorable. Chi will be happy," says Purity.

Purity shows me how to 'log on' to Dragon-forums, and then how to 'log off.' She points the camera at me for a tutorial for other dragons, but they will not have to look up to keep cameras on their ears from video-ing paws typing passwords.

Then, once that's done... So. Much. To. Read. The top right corner tells me when I have a 'friend' request or when I get an e-mail message... and I get more of both with every breath. Purity logs on Dragon-forums using the two-legged keyboard, and I watch her rather than choosing what to read first. She has 1042 new mail-messages but ignores them and guides me through the website. Purity shows me how to upload the video that my cameras took earlier, and before a hundred breaths pass some two-leggeds are over-using the word 'pawgress' in their posts on dragon-forum. The two-leggeds seem to like Purity--the computer says that nine out of every ten viewers click 'strongly approve' when the video shows me licking her.

Two hundred breaths later I make a mistake--I look at the statistics for Dragon-forums. More two-leggeds than I could speak to have already read what I typed; and yet more will read my words later--and I know so little worth sharing. I'll have to ask Gran and Hizoner for wise two-legged things to say.

There's so many links to try on this page...

About a thousand breaths later Purity tells me to 'log off' and walk in a circle. I move stiffly at first. I decide to take a longer walk and think about what I've learned.

Many two-leggeds like dragons instinctively; and not just the cute ones. I have already received more forum mail-messages than I could read in a year--Purity tells me to pick some randomly to answer and apologize on the forum for not answering the rest. I wanted to answer the first email but it was from 'sys admin' and was a list of rules and helpful suggestions.

Mona has posted many comments in the forums, attracting much attention. Satyadah has designated 'big dragon' two-leggeds, and the would-be forum-posters select one to follow. Followers talk among themselves and suggest questions or comments for their 'big dragon,' who selects some to ask Mona, which she tries to answer in future posts in the forum. When she does, the two-legged comments that follow her answer result in more text than I want to read.

Some two-leggeds state that all dragons should grow larger and offer to send whatever hormones and metal salts that dragons need. Many argue about whether Mona would still be cute if she grew larger.

Perhaps two-leggeds talk mostly about the little dragon (and the dragonets) since the little dragon posts the most on the forum. One opportunistic two-legged is selling a book that contains most of Mona's posts, followed by what the author considered the best responses. Other two-leggeds do not like this and have compiled free versions of their own. I downloaded three of these free ones, but Purity advised avoiding the automatically compiled over-large e-texts called 'daily data dump.' She also said there are many millions of other active websites, some much busier than Dragon-forums, but she thinks Satyadah's website is the best for dragons.

I learned that Sue's Cruises has been monitoring the coastline with their variously-named little ships that follow any others traveling near. A Mona-post calls Sue's camera ships 'honorable' because they discourage many uninvited guests.

Some posts on the Dragon-forum claim the cost of a bottle of 'Stiff's' is the same as the cost of fuel used by a helicopter to fly

over the mountains ten times, but many more say that's a ten-fold exaggeration. Chrysanthemum told the two-leggeds that her offers to shed a few tears for more 'Stiff' drinks were rejected because I don't want to encourage improper behavior. Many two-leggeds speculate I have other reasons for this, and refer to the video gathered when Chrys tried to save her tears. They note that Lizabeth cried at the sight of a crying Chrys despite knowing that she was only shedding tears for money.

I posted a response in the forum—I will leave this decision to Chrys in the future. Three breaths after I posted, Chrysanthemum responded with live video of herself shedding tears into dirt.

Purity had to help me watch a video of 'Lord Rots.' I'd rather have scented him, but now I almost know what he looks like and sounds like. I watched without sound, and counted three brief expressions of disgust and two angry faces mixed in the smiles... not good. Any Commanding two-legged has no reason to hide anger or disgust, since displaying such emotions gets things done that otherwise might require many words. I do this too... a grumble is usually enough. If I was following in his footsteps, I'd think he was talking about is a problem that should be solved quickly. Perhaps Lord Rots has always Commanded... He still has this habit even when giving a short speech to strangers.

Some two-legged has drawn a picture of Chi wearing a strange hat and 'sunglasses,' which Chi is using as a label for her forum. Some of Chi's posts could be parts of conversations that Roxxie and I had when I wasn't wearing my cameras. I ask her about that and she agrees, then adds "It's hard to e-thumb everything into text, so I leave a lot out, especially names I don't like typing."

"Even without her name attached, Roxxie won't like this if she sees it."

"She won't see it because she's as arrogant as I am. When Gran and Lizabeth taught me to read, it was humbling to learn

that two-legged food-beasts know many things worth knowing. Roxxie was taught much when very young, and she's smarter than most two-leggeds... but not as smart as she thinks she is."

"Why post this?"

"Partly because some smart two-legged might read it and explain some questions I have, and partly because... I like to post something new every day--even if it's only recent pictures of dragonets."

"Try not to anger Roxxie. She deserves it, but we need her."

"Correction... the damaged dragons need her, and you're doing the best you can for them. You're also trying to remove things which might cause dragons to fight. I will help you as I can. I'll never mention her name in my posts."

"Honorable."

"Not that I would anyway. My readers know which dragon is Rottie." Chi winks at me. "Once I called her Miss Take."

"Why?"

"Because the two-legged name will confuse her, but not those who read my posts. They know that Roxxie is rich because she learned how to take money from two-leggeds."

Roxxie finds Satyadah's website difficult to read because it's full of rubbish. I've learned which two-leggeds can post things worth reading, and Roxxie never will."

"Why not?"

Chi winks. "Like me, she's too arrogant. Roxxie has used the money her owner gave her to get much more, so she feels superior to the two-leggeds. I'm fortunate that Gran and Lizabeth taught me to read, because that taught me not to under-estimate two-leggeds. Also, Roxxie usually seeks ways to get more money, so that's what she learns. With that mindset, this website can't help her."

"Perhaps she doesn't like two-leggeds."

"Once I liked them as food beasts. Then an immature female two-legged completely dominated the smartest dragon I know--

and the little dragon was happy about it. I didn't know what to think. Then Gran and Lizabeth and Micky taught me to read. It is not proper, but I still think of them as food-beasts--they *smell* like food-beasts. I must suppress my instincts every breath that brings their scents."

"I hear. How do you suppress your instincts?"

"I don't know... but any dragon can learn to do it. Your genetic programming does not include tormenting you with food-beasts you cannot eat, yet you will wait for a thousand breaths to talk to two-leggeds you've never scented before without any bad feelings on your part."

"I wasn't waiting--I was learning how to give a speech."

"A speech to two-leggeds. Perhaps you would not practice if you gave a speech to dragons?"

"No... I've done that before." I wink at Chi. "You're still right, even if your last example isn't good."

"Honorable. I think you can suppress your instincts if needed... but I wonder about the little dragon."

"Mona? Why?"

"Her kind of dragon is valuable to the two-leggeds... do you know why?"

"She's smart, loyal, willing to please..."

"The two-leggeds had learned much over many years as they bio-engineered dragon after dragon... and Mona's parents were supposedly their 'best work.' Because Mona imprinted with Lizabeth, now Mona will do anything Lizabeth asks. If Mona had imprinted upon Lord Rots, Mona would be his willing slave--that's what Lord Rots wants."

(grumble)

"Mona may not be able to suppress other instincts... but which, I do not know."

"Then we have to help. How?"

"Watch-and-scent for Mona."

"I'll ask Mona to limit the time she spends with those who are not

Dragon."

"Including Sue's guests? They won't like that..."

"She has e-thumbs."

"That's another problem. Many two-leggeds read what Mona types merely because she's a cute dragon, so she gets the power of a big dragon among two-leggeds. She's convinced many of them that she is smart enough to improve a society she's never scented. If what she says contradicts what some two-legged Manager says, most two-leggeds will choose to believe the little dragon."

"Why do Managers need to lie?"

"I don't know. Perhaps they steal."

"The far-away two-leggeds are strange. Any helpful and truth-telling dragon would cause trouble with them."

"Yes. The far-away two-leggeds are like the Bitten Dragons-- they even have their own crazy Associations. Mona calls them 'financial institutions' but tells the two-leggeds that they are parasitical, predictably angering the owners. Since millions of two-leggeds read what the little dragon posts on Dragon-forums, some two-leggeds learned what's wrong with their financial institutions and now won't make agreements with them.

"I do not understand why two-leggeds give Mona that much power."

"Anar... I don't either, but we have to live with it. If Mona eats a potato with your cameras pointed at her, potato shortages happen in far-away cities. Naturally, she's subject to slander. Too many two-leggeds say Mona is eating illegal and dangerous potatoes."

Chi pushes buttons, and her cell phone shows a picture of Mona holding a large, freshly-dug potato with her forepaws.

"The potato we grow is forbidden by all two-legged Managers, who call it 'Bumbleweed' and say it is a genetic freak that destroys all other vegetation. They imply that the little dragon and the potatoes are both genetic freaks; some call her Queen Bumbleweed. Mona responded with this."

...a picture of a drooping Mona with a tangle of vegetation on her head and text underneath her: 'Queen Mona the Morose--she wanted to be friends.'

"Is there something I can do for Mona?"

"Perhaps," says Chi. "Mona can convince the two-leggeds rationally, but that's not good enough. Do you know of anything that will appeal to two-leggeds?"

"I'll try." If the little dragon does not sufficiently appeal to the two-leggeds, perhaps the biggest dragons will.

"I'll help, Anar, but it's almost not proper," Third almost grumbles.

I do not want to lead Third where he does not want to go. "Perhaps we should do something else," I say. "What could we do?"

"Tell me again of 'high-five' and I'll try to help think."

"When something happens that make a victory-roar proper, Sue's guests will touch forepaws instead—as if it was fun. They do this when standing or jumping."

"They don't have claws." Third flexes his right front, and we watch his massive talons dig into dirt. A breath passes--then Third says "Why don't we touch the backs?"

"Good idea."

I watch over Third's back, and he watches over mine, then the backs of our paws connect. "This is what I wanted, honorable Third. Lizabeth will like it."

"Lizabeth? Let's go show her. If we do this right, she'll probably victory-roar."

Scent-seeking is easy; we find Lizabeth, Mona, and Gran at their shelter. They like my idea, but think we need something more (no victory roar), so Third and I decide to say 'Will watch your back' together when we touch paws. Lizabeth says 'perfect' as she pushes buttons on the camera, but Third and I knew she would. Gran's non-reaction is troubling--I don't think she likes it. I

wink at her, and ask her why it's stupid.

"How can you watch his back on three legs?" she asks--so the gesture becomes a quick one. Gran puts dust on the ground for Third and I to stomp in after our gesture--she says it's for the cameras. The first time we try, Third and I walk away from the dust too quickly for Gran. The second time, Lizabeth makes a happy noise after we speak. (Third likes this almost as much as a victory roar--and so do I.) The third time Gran says is good.

Lizabeth has a flat pink 'cell-phone' she can hold with one hand, and she tells me it will 'share' the videos with her friends on the *Four*. Three breaths later she tells me that an e-friend suggests we use flour as our dust, but Lizabeth doesn't think Gran will like wasting food. She's got 'cattail fluff.' After she shows us what it is, we touch paws and say 'watch your back,' and discover the fluff works well if we don't step directly on it. Lizabeth makes another happy noise, then she suggests making a video for Queen Morose.

We follow Mona's scent into the sleeping cave, and then Third and I watch each other's backs again. The little dragon likes it and agrees when Lizabeth suggest she 'watch your back' with me. Mona wants to wear her ridiculous vegetation hat because Hizoner once told Mona that hat-wearers can get the Power of Command. The short video gets longer because 'Queen Mona Gets a Licking' afterwards, and Mona loses her hat. Lizabeth tells invisible two-leggeds that getting licked is a Dragon-complement--all dragons can scent this and will know Mona is Anar's close friend *and* know that Anar wanted other dragons to know this. It seems strange that two-leggeds don't understand that instinctively.

The flat pink box makes an insect noise, and soon Lizabeth has a video she wants to show me. The video Third and I made has been altered so that fire flies from our mouths when we speak, sparks scatter as our paws touch, and rocks break and fall when we stomp--accompanied by what Lizabeth says is 'music' that has

her happy noise mixed in it. Elizabeth likes it, and we watch it again; but I don't like the idea of breathing fire or making sparks. Elizabeth has another video called 'The Dragons of Eden.' It's so short that the title-text over Junior's head persists from the beginning, when he dribbles acorns out of his mouth, to the end, when he claws dirt over the dribbled acorns and the camera returns to his face. Elizabeth doesn't know where the other dragons from Eden are but thinks the dragons are one-after-the-other because the video is usually 'looped' — and I don't understand until she shows me.

If the two-leggeds liked one dragon dribbling acorns... Mona almost winks at me but agrees to my suggestion. She'll make a 'Dragon of Eden' video with me except she doesn't know what Eden is. Elizabeth says Hizoner knows, and since the 'internet is down,' perhaps they should ask him. She also has two handfuls of the acorns that Third likes, and she knows other villagers that collect them. Mona suggests that I ask Junior if he has any acorns remaining.

I think about planting trees as I scent-seek Junior. Because the two-leggeds liked a video of Junior dribbling acorns, I'm going to be doing the same. Planting trees is good, but it bothers me that two-leggeds needed to like it before I actually did it.

Purity has connected her e-thumbs to a television, and soon she's showing us the video we've gathered. In my opinion, the video of Elizabeth trying to imitate Junior's acorn dribbling is the best, but there's ten times more video that I don't have time to see because so many dragons had cameras.

Then Purity has a two-legged video-game that she wants Elizabeth to see.

Elizabeth uses the keyboard to change the scenes on the television. "What is that?" she asks.

"Tiger," says Purity. "You're upwind, so it smelled you and is

fleeing."

"It was pretty."

"Hunt another one," says Purity.

"Stealth is so slow," says Elizabeth.

"Run into the wind," says Third.

"Stay under the trees," I say.

Elizabeth's monitor shows a tiny ape caught in a net. Elizabeth's avatar-dragon bites through ropes holding the net closed, and the animal escapes. Elizabeth's avatar obtains boring but high-resolution video of a tiny fleeing ape. Elizabeth says "I won't hurt you!" but the ape keeps running.

"Go uphill," says Third.

"There's not many trees this way," says Elizabeth.

Soon the game shows a far-away leopard, and Elizabeth decides to stalk it.

The computer game makes stalking easy, if slow. Elizabeth's avatar gets close enough to take high-resolution leopard video.

When the leopard flees, Elizabeth pushes the 'play' button. The television shows the video Elizabeth's avatar supposedly took.

"Will you play now?" she asks Purity.

"This dragon has never played this computer game and her e-thumbs do not know the commands."

"Then... show him this one."

(gesture of submission)

Purity's game appears with a single tap, showing letters, numbers, and gauges superimposed over a star-field I've never seen. The second click that comes from Purity's e-thumbs perhaps causes the star-field to move.

"This dragon is in her avatar spaceship, seeking another such ship called The Ark. It is big and unable to slow itself, so this avatar spaceship must go where the Ark will travel, and this dragon must direct the spaceship because some electronics do not work when she uses the spaceship engines. To get as close to the Ark as she can... there! The Ark is traveling much faster

than this dragon, so her spaceship must get in front and... delivery pods launched! because it's the only way to get the bio-samples delivered. Now, she must find her way to return and refuel her spaceship... perhaps that way--yes. When she gets back, she will find out how many pods the Ark could not catch, and she will add those missed to be delivered to the next Ark."

Two-legged games puzzle me... when I go to Hizoner's to fetch Vlad, I ask my questions.

"All games must have rules or they're no fun."

"Honorable, Hizoner."

"As an example...If I realized I was dreaming and could change my dream as I wanted, the fun would be lost—I could get whatever I wanted without any struggle. As pleasurable as that might be, it wouldn't be fun. That's why Purity hasn't shown Lizabeth the high-resolution videos she can get from the game—Lizabeth won't want to play it anymore if she sees all the videos. Games offer the fun of finding out."

(happy rumble) "Warm hands." says a voice much like a dragonet's.

"Cute!" says a similar voice.

"Next photo-gathering?" asks another.

"Tomorrow," says Mona's voice.

Three dragonets make happy noises. I push a button and point my eyes and ears at Vlad. "Mona's pet-cam recorded that yesterday."

"Honorable Anar, I appreciate the kindness... I will try to deserve it."

"Mona and Chi think the pictures you have gathered are quite valuable."

"Then... more dragonet video it is."

I can smell Mona and Lizabeth and an unknown scent, but not the dragonets. I walk faster.

"Permission to approach, granted!" says Mona.

"Honorable," says Vlad.

Both healthy... with the scent of potatoes. I ask "Where are the dragonets?"

Mona's nose points deeper into the sleeping cave.

I don't like this and begin grumbling. Mona pretends not to hear me and I get the hint... this is for the cameras.

Mona points one of Vlad's lights at the end of a long streak of a puddle, then points a camera that way as well. Vlad makes the lights glow. Three breaths after, the dragonets slide into view, and all six stumble in the same way when they reach the end of the puddle.

Lizabeth likes it. She makes a happy noise after the third dragonet, which is good to have in a video.

I start to wonder about whether it is proper for a dragon to make videos. Chi predicted this would happen--and I'm probably the worst affected. We're becoming two-legged entertainers.

After Vlad has taken many pictures, Chi decides to talk to the dragonets, and I point my cameras at them.

"What's your favorite food?" Chi asks.

"Soup!" say five dragonet voices.

Chi points eyes and ears at a dragonet.

"Bread," says Pax softly.

"Honorable, Pax. Do you know why your favorite is different than your sisters?"

(gesture of submission) "Yes. This dragonet's first bread was hot-from-the-oven."

"Tell me the story of that bread."

"Gran took the bread hot-from-the-oven and cut it into many pieces. When the bread was cool enough for eating, she gave a piece to me, then Mona, and held a piece for Lizabeth to eat

because she had wet hands from washing mud off this dragonet."

"Did Mona like the bread?"

"Yes! And Lizabeth, and Gran, and this dragonet liked the bread!"

"Watching them enjoy what you enjoyed has changed you. Perhaps that's why you like bread more than your sisters. Lizabeth was washing you... using hot water?"

"Yes!"

"You like hot water as much as your mother does, true? Did Gran give you bread when you had a pair of paws in hot water?"

"Yes! but four paws were in the washtub."

"Perhaps another reason you answered differently than your sisters."

"Perhaps so."

"Do you really agree with me? I asked many questions that got a 'yes' answer... isn't that true?"

"Yes."

"It's a trick--by asking questions I knew you'd answer with 'yes,' you were primed to keep answering yes."

"Is warm water a prime?"

"Yes, sometimes. Anything can be a prime. Mona was happy--and seeing that is also a prime, correct?"

"Yes!"

"Dragons don't use primes on others for silly reasons."

"Did Chi learn this by experience?"

"Every dragon learns by experience."

After watching Chi, I reminded of a question I've got for the Engineering Secton. I ask Chi to take my cameras off, but the dragonets want to do it, and then I scent-seeek Purity. I find her sleeping... and smelling of crushed vegetation. Her sister Charity is nearby, and I quietly get 'permission' from her. I quietly ask about rumbling sounds that two-leggeds cannot hear. She winks at me and makes a quick grumbling noise that ends abruptly.

"The Engineering Section once said that rumble-word whenever a two-legged Manager approached."

"Could my cameras overhear those rumbles?"

"Yes, but this dragon thinks the two-leggeds never ask the machines for that data."

"How many rumble-words did your Engineering Section have?"

"At least a hundred. However, this dragon would not recommend using the Engineering Section's rumble-words because there are many hours of data saved by machines at Headquarters. What the machines remember could be used against dragons."

"Honorable, I hear."

"This dragon can be devious, and would like to make new rumble-words that will confuse the Managers who may learn the old."

"Another good idea. Honorable."

Charity makes a two-part rumble-word that almost sounds like my name, then says "That's the best I can do," and winks. "Try not to speak like that if you're near any electronics... especially a Company cell phone--they always listen. Purity had one since she was the Speaker for our Section."

"This dragon still has it," says Purity, then she yawns, stretches, and stands. "She must return it to the Company some day, but she does not want to give the data on it..." (yawn). "Removing data is difficult, so this dragon delays."

Charity says two rumble-words.

"He does?" asks Purity. "How?"

"He suspected, so this dragon told him," says Charity. "He likes rumble-speech, so this dragon is going to make new rumble-words that will confuse Managers."

"This dragon wants to help, but she should finish her engineering."

I point my eyes and ears at Purity, and she continues. "This dragon built a run-and-catch toy for the dragonets, but when she

tested it, she could not catch it to turn it off. She had to chase it until the batteries discharged."

"I would like to see this toy."

"Honorable! This dragon will show you."

She's made a bouncy robot she calls 'Prey-bot,' she says as we walk towards the shed. "It will make unpredictable jumps so the dragonets will find it a challenge."

She rolls a dirty canvas ball out of the shed that has many metal sticks for legs. After she turns it on, it hops nearly horizontally a talon-length, pauses, then hops again a different direction. After two breaths and six hops in random directions, Purity says "The only way to turn it off is to hit it there on top or flip it over before it jumps."

"That doesn't seem difficult..."

"Until the machine can be remotely powered off, it is set on slow short jumps. The machine took a video when it was high-speed--would you like to see?"

Before we get to the dragon's shed, I ask Purity for her Company cell-phone. She tells me it's in her purse, and she removed the battery long ago but would still recommend deep burial due to potential hazards, perhaps Quell. When we get to the shed, I take her phone out of her purse and put it in my neck-pack—and it does faintly smell of Quell. Purity is grateful--now she can tell the Company that I took the phone from her purse and there was nothing she could do.

We watch a short part of the slowed-down video created by the machine as it evaded Purity's paws and jaws, but the video is confusing. I like the videos from Purity's body-cameras much better. One video is short because the camera stopped after it was hit by a tree-branch; the other camera's view is progressively obscured by bits of vegetation that Purity collides with before she eventually catches her machine—and I can't help laughing at her

failed attempts. I try to apologize, but Purity says she expects that all dragons and two-leggeds will laugh and the video will make Purity famous. She's not sure if famous is good, and she thinks nearly all two-leggeds on the internet say fame is good because those who think it bad do not wish to argue.

Purity puts an altered Prey-bot in my neck-pack along with her tool-kit and a few black boxes that rattle when she moves them. After she gets her purse, we travel to the sleeping cave--and Purity literally walks in my footsteps.

The dragonets are impressed, but don't play with Prey-bot the way Purity thought they would. They let Prey-bot bounce off their bodies and herd it against my side, then flip it over and admire it. Two breaths later, they've removed the bite-padding and claw-guards. Two breaths after that, the machine hops faster and farther; yet a pair of dragonets can still catch Prey-bot and flip it over in half a breath. I don't have a problem catching it because each hop is slightly less than one paw's width. Purity is too big to be as quick as the dragonets and her paws too small to restrict enough of Prey-bot's ways to escape, so Prey-bot can elude her. Once, when Purity was chasing it, Prey-bot hopped underneath First and stayed there for three breaths (with his help) while he pretended not to notice.

The dragonets ask Purity to put infra-red detectors in Prey-bot, hoping it can learn to hop away from dragonet bodies. "Prepared!" says Purity. She winks at me and takes her tools and boxes out of my neck-pack.

A Company cell-phone at the bottom of the big pocket reminds me to take a walk. I dig a hole three thousand paces downhill and downstream from the sleeping cave. I cover the phone carefully using only loose dirt at first--I don't want to let the Quell out. I'm halfway back to the sleeping cave when a popping noise comes from behind, but I decide not to investigate. I've smelled enough Quell in my life, and perhaps Purity has finished modifying Prey-bot... but an unknown male dragon's scent in the sleeping cave

distracts me.

"This dragon was following the scent of dragons," says the male, "and the Watch-and-Scent dragons named Sixth and Dom found me. They showed this dragon how to cross the river. This dragon said he would follow in the footsteps of a female named Chi, and she said to say that to Anar."

He's young, but he'll always be a small dragon--he smells like a Logic. His color isn't too bad--like Mona's was when I first met her.

"Honorable," I tell him. "I'm Anar."

He looks up at me hopefully.

"I will follow in your footsteps," he says.

"Honorable," I tell him. "What's your name?"

"This dragon needs a name," he says.

"What name would you like?" I ask him.

(gesture of submission) "This dragon does not know."

Dragon Logic.

Because he's new here, I take him to see Lizabeth and give him some advice. "All two-leggeds are wise in their way, but the villagers are easier to understand. Scenting the difference between them is easy--Sue's guests smell like meat-eaters. They also tend to be larger."

"Which kind is Lizabeth?"

"She's a villager... and she was the first two-legged Dragon."

"Honorable! This dragon is amazed."

"She's also learning flesh-minding from Chi and Roxxie. She's in that shelter built of logs. The two-leggeds use those shelters, so don't damage them."

"Honorable."

"And don't step on any vegetation planted in rows like those trees or like that place near the shelter."

The door to the shelter opens when we're twelve paces away. Lizabeth says "A 'Logic! Like Mona!"

After a 'permission granted' Lizabeth hugs my right front and

then hugs the newcomer as well.

The new dragon sniffs, then exhales three talon-lengths above Elizabeth's head before resuming scenting her. Elizabeth opens her medical kit and I open my mouth. She gets another blood sample from me while the new dragon watches. Afterwards, he allows her to do the same to him.

When she's done, Elizabeth hugs his right front and says "Honorable."

"Why do you like dragons?" he asks.

"I don't know... but I do," says Elizabeth.

"Your little paws are amazing," he says. "This dragon likes to look at them."

"Honorable! Dragonic Logic?"

"Dragonic Logic!"

"To the core!" they say together. Elizabeth hugs his right front, then mine, and says "Anar, I've seen that look before."

"I hear."

"Cancel imprinting. I'll be back soon." Elizabeth runs as fast as she can, leaving her medical kit behind.

Carson seems stunned... so I ask him questions. He wandered away from Big Dragon's caves and crossed the little river by making a bridge out of trees which washed away a half-breath after he crossed. Two days later, The Boss's [sic] dragons chased the hat-less youngster away from their sleeping caves. He wandered away from both Big Dragon and The Boss until he scented different dragons. Sixth seemed happy to have found him, and he and Dom showed him where and how to cross the Great River. Chi accepted him as Dragon and ordered him to find me.

I tell him our Rules, starting with 'Do not approach the horses.' As I'm explaining what horses are, Elizabeth and Rachel asks 'permission to approach.' Elizabeth introduces them and the new dragon allows Rachel to hug his right front. "She's warm," he says a half-breath later.

"I hope you like each other," says Lizabeth.

"He's beautiful," says Rachel.

Lizabeth waits two breaths, then says "Dragonic Logic?" and smiles when she gets no response.

The young male is posing with his nose near his toes so he can look up at Rachel. I remember seeing that hopeful look before--I make sure my cameras see it now. Perhaps he was trying to imprint earlier...

Then Rachel hugs his right front.

"Ask him to do things for you," says Lizabeth.

Rachel shakes her head. I think their relationship will be a proper one.

"Submitting is linked with imprinting," continues Lizabeth.

"Then... submit to petting, and tell me what you like."

"Honorable."

"Do you like this?"

(happy rumble)

"Do you like this better?"

"Both are good."

"And this?"

(happy rumble)

"Tell him to do what he wants," I advise.

"Do what you want," say Rachel.

(lick)

"EEEE!"

Rachel and the new dragon are both embarrassed for half-a-breath... then Rachel licks the dragon's nose and he happy-rumbles.

Two-legged preferences are difficult for me to predict... but I think they will like this video. I do.

When I'm asked what I would name her dragon, I think about an author named Rachel. Rachel likes the connection, and the new dragon is named 'Carson.'

Lizabeth says Roxxie needs Carson's samples, and she has to

deliver them before the cold-cube drains the batteries. She hugs every dragon before she leaves.

"What is the best thing that happened to you?" Rachel asks Carson.

"Naming! (happy rumble)"

"What is the next best thing that happened to you?"

"Perhaps... this dragon does not know. He likes everything."

Both are silent for two breaths, so I ask Carson "What would you do if you could do anything?"

"Be useful to Dragons!"

There's always a use for willing paws...

"Permission to approach!" says Carson.

"Granted! What's your name?" asks Eighth.

"Today, this dragon is Ninth," says Carson. "Tomorrow he will be Carson."

"Ninth... so you'll be going with us tonight?"

"Yes. This dragon will de-scent other dragon's paws, then this dragon will de-scent his paws and burn the wiping-pads. Rachel can help. She knows two fast ways to make fire and won't need to de-scent if this dragon carries her."

Eighth thinks, then says "We run far. If you need help carrying, tell me." A half-breath later, Eighth asks me "Are you the big dragon of the Night Runners now?"

"First is the big dragon of the Night Runners--he likes this idea. First ordered Carson... First ordered Ninth and Rachel to make a de-scenting place a few thousand paces away from where dragons can cross the river. When the Night Runners are traveling, Ninth will make many smelly footprints that lead to the wrong places."

"We already do that," says Eighth.

"Yes, but Rachel can help.

"How can a two-legged help?"

"She has very strong scents called 'perfume' and 'hair-spray' and 'medicinal salts' and scented powders. Perfume is a very strongly scented liquid... she showed us what it could do, but used more than she needed... she's probably still trying to wash the scent off her paws. This two-legged will be useful."

"Where is Rachel?" asks Eighth.

"Scent," I suggest, and wink at him. Carson follows in Eighth's footsteps.

I wonder if I should ask Rachel to demonstrate hairspray or medicinal salts--she's already been through a lot. Perhaps it would be better to ask if Rachel can make pictures with a writing stick like Vlad and Lizabeth.

Sixteen breaths pass before Carson and Rachel come back to the sleeping cave. After asking and getting 'permission' from me, Carson comments "Rachel's head-fur has changed."

"That happens when it gets wet," says Rachel. "Does the smell still linger?"

"Yes. This dragon will ignore it." Carson then does for Rachel what any dragon would do for a wet dragonet--he holds her like an oversized egg.

"Why do you do that?" Rachel's voice asks from underneath Carson.

"This dragon does not want you to feel cold."

"Honorable. I like it."

Three breaths pass and the breeze brings scents--Lizabeth's and many other two-leggeds... including Mr. [redacted]. "You and yours are not obligated to be here," I tell Carson.

"What?" asks Rachel.

"Sue's guests are visiting."

I can see Rachel's wet head for a half-breath. She must see Lizabeth in her white uniform, leading another group of Sue's guests who want to talk with me.

Rachel says "How strange. I'm part of a museum exhibit."

After I give Lizabeth and her two-leggeds 'permission,' Rachel says "Sorry I'm not presentable."

Two of Sue's guests fail to suppress laughter. Lizabeth (gestures of submission), then asks for and gets 'permission to approach' from Carson.

"I already gave away my last hairbrush... would a comb help?" asks Lizabeth.

"Thank you." Rachel takes the proffered paper rectangle with pink text on it: 'For Sue's Guests.'

"I also have these," says Lizabeth. Rachel takes the white square.

"A diaper?"

"Hold it on your hair," says Lizabeth. "It works better than the towels I have."

Mr. [redacted] doesn't ask 'permission' but follows in Lizabeth's footsteps. Carson points eyes, ears, and nose at the two-legged, so Lizabeth turns to look. "Mr. [redacted], stop!" she shouts, but he doesn't. Carson doesn't like this--he's about to challenge-roar over Lizabeth's head.

I have to move quickly, but I manage to get my head between Carson and Mr. [redacted]. The two-legged jumps backwards--perhaps he didn't see me coming. "You're going to get yourself killed," I grumble at him.

Carson rumbles 'honorable' at the back of my head.

Soon the wayward two-legged is on his way back to the *Four*, allowing Lizabeth to talk about imprinting to the rest of Sue's guests. Then she and I answer many questions--why are Carson's scales so dark? How old is he? If he's almost full-grown, why is he so little?

A guest asks me to say something I've never said to another two-legged.

That's easy to answer... "Lizabeth said when Mona eats meat, her farts stink five hundred times worse than Micky's."

Another guest ask how Rachel got soaking-wet and when I tell them I don't know, they ask why not, I say "Dragons are too polite to ask how a two-legged could get so wet in a little trickle of water."

"Perseverance!" says Rachel's voice from underneath Carson.

Then Lizabeth asks me what that thing is on my chin... and she can't pull it off. Rachel tries to help, but it takes Carson's claws to separate it from me—and it's a not-a-scale. The Carson-colored not-a-scale bounces too far away to grab, and it unfolds legs and runs.

The entrance to the sleeping cave is my territory--I spend a lot of time here. I've thought much about what I might need... so my second-favorite paw-sized stone is between the not-a-scale and the cave entrance. It's easy to smash the not-a-scale, but avoiding the overlarge cloud of foul-smelling smoke afterwards is harder. The herd of two-leggeds starts to scatter until Lizabeth orders them to follow her.

I claw-flick the smashed and smoking not-a-scale out of the sleeping cave. Dragons and two-leggeds watch, and soon it burns.

Carson asks Rachel "How did so much smoke get inside it?" but she doesn't know.

"Will you tell Captain Diana about the not-a-scale?" Rachel asks me.

"The next time I talk to her, I'll speak of it."

"Anar... we need to tell her now. Can I do it?"

"Honorable Rachel."

Rachel leaves the sleeping cave and uses her cell phone. Carson watches, then follows. He returns in fifteen breaths with a question for me. "Why has Rachel received many text messages ordering her not to lick this dragon?"

"Mona or Chi can explain better," I tell Carson, "but I think the two-leggeds are worried about germs. Two-leggeds say germs are too small to see and too many to count, and the kind that live

in a carnivore's mouth should never be inside any two-legged's mouth."

"Honorable Anar. What would happen if Rachel ate them?"

"Gran told me if Lizabeth did it, she would be poisoned and not able to eat... but Lizabeth sometimes licks Mona's nose anyway and isn't hurt by it."

Rachel returns with good news. "Captain Diana said Mr. [redacted] will not trouble dragons again."

Carson sniffs the bucket as Rachel stirs the contents with a broom. They're watching the wax, waiting for it to cool to the proper temperature. Outside the cave, a similar bucket of wax waits inside a cauldron partly filled with very hot water.

First 'recommended' waxing to Carson—all the way to his ears--before he and Rachel go on a Night Run. Cold dragons are slow dragons, and crossing the river chills a little dragon more than a big one, and Carson is smaller than Eighth... so Carson will be waxed.

Wisely, Rachel starts on Carson's back, a relatively well-armored and insensitive area, and Carson doesn't twitch.

"This dragon will decide to like this," Carson tells Rachel. He does... even tolerating the wax on his neck without moving.

After she finishes waxing Carson, Rachel cleans the front of Carson's nose and licks--and Carson seems happy. Is that what imprinting can do to a dragon?

Dee adjusts the straps so her purse will stay close to Carson when he runs.

"This dragon regrets the scents that will linger on your purse," says Carson.

"Those smells will remind me of a successful Night Run," says Dee.

Carson holds his right front paw behind and back and helps

Rachel onto his back. After they meet with First, they travel to the river crossing, leaving me free to sleep... and dream.

Vlad stands next to an unknown two-legged. Neither have a scent, but it doesn't bother me because I'm dreaming. The huge metal wall that rises out of the ocean doesn't bother me either--I ignore it as Vlad tries to talk over the noises that come over it.

"I suppose that's enough naval gazing." Vlad winks at me. "This two-legged will not tell me his name because of your cameras, but we may call him Doc. He wants to look in your ears."

Because I'm dreaming, I let the strange two-legged look in my ears.

"He wants to make your ear-protectors now," says Vlad, "but he thinks you might bite him if he touches you."

Some other dragon uses my mouth to say "Teach him the 'F' word."

Vlad demonstrates, and Doc speaks it and touches my ear. I don't like having some sort of ball expand inside my ears, but I manage to pretend the 'freeze' command can make me hold still.

I'm very nearly deaf now. Vlad puts on bright orange ear-covers and I follow him, leaving Doc behind. Vlad leads me up a metal ramp to the top of the metal wall in the ocean. The metal wall is part of a great ship that is as big as I can imagine.

Even with ear protection, the ship is a noisy place because of the flying machines on top--and I can't fold my ears properly. One of them becomes particularly loud and makes huge clouds of smoke, then moves away fast and climbs into the sky. In the relative quiet that follows, Vlad asks for 'permission' and is refused.

Vlad acts as if he expected this. Vlad shouts 'Good luck!' to me as I leave him behind, following in the footsteps of two white-suited male two-leggeds carrying metal weapons. They lead me close to a flying machine, then to a big metal square on the floor. I instinctively curl my tail so it is inside the lines surrounding the

metal--and the floor begins sinking slowly. Neither two-legged seems alarmed by this, and the motion is constant and slow... and when the overhead sun is blocked by doors closing overhead, the two-leggeds don't look up.

The two-leggeds walk a different direction once the floor stops descending. I follow them, barely able to hear their footsteps, past two flying machines and a truck. When the two-leggeds open a door, the faint scent of dragons makes my nostrils twitch. I follow the trotting two-leggeds to more two-leggeds. Instead of asking 'permission,' one of my guides gives these new two-leggeds a receipt. Another two-legged approaches me and points at his own ear. I understand, and tilt my head near him. The two-legged pulls out my ear protector, which is a bright-orange distorted ball with a loop attached. After seeing this one, I can and do use a claw to pull out the other and give it to the two-legged. A different two-legged waves me forward to doors. The scent of dragons is faint but increasing... and the doors open quickly when I approach them.

"He's here!" shouts a half-grown female. Her mother says "Permission to approach, granted," to me, then "I hope I got that right."

"Honorable."

An immature male dragonet tells me "Don't let the doors pinch your tail."

"Honorable," I tell him, and move my tail away from the doors.

"Good dragon!" says the dragonet.

Slightly nervous laughter from the female... "My name is Kip, and that's Blip, and Flip's over there. Please pardon my big dragon. He's got a lot of work to do to keep the two-leggeds from fighting."

"Welcome to our traveling sleeping cave," says the half-grown female. "May you find Dragons here."

"That was very sweet!" says Kip.

"Honorable," I tell Flip.

"Can I clean him?" asks Flip.

"Yes! I want to clean him!" adds Blip.

"What if you aren't done when Zip can take a break? They have important business to discuss, and that's hard enough to do without an electroscavenger humming."

"But he needs..." says Blip.

A door opens, revealing a male dragon.

"Chirrr!" says Blip.

"Greetings, Anar. My name's Zip. Do you and yours have any urgent problems?"

"He needs cleaning!" interrupts Blip.

"You should be the last dragon cleaned as that will promote intra-group bonding," says Zip.

"He means you should lead by being cleaned last." says Flip.

"Since I can't clean you yet, can I paint your nails? Do you like blue?"

Blip makes a distress cry, then says "I wanna clean him!"

Kip licks Blip.

Flip stands on paw pads and a machine starts painting my right front talons. The blue paint is impossibly bright-colored.

Zip says "Choose a subdued hue, Flip."

"Yessir," she replies.

"I'm glad your problems are so easily taken care of, Anar." Zip nods like a two-legged and leaves, and the door closes behind him.

Two breaths later, a machine cleans and paints my right front talons. They now look shiny and silvery as any metal. Blurry reflections add colors that move when I do. Flip's machine is painting my left front talons with the same silvery paint. Flip's nose points at a television that shows a puzzled dream-dragon looking at the silver claws on his right front paw. Another television shows my left front paw next to a machine that is stretching a silver sheet onto a claw.

Flip comments as I watch. "Stretch-to-fit silver plastic. It will peel

off when you scratch, like this. I hope yours lasts long enough for Mona to see it.”

The machine finishes and withdraws. Blip approaches my left paw and says “Awesome!”

Nada’s scent awakens me. He’s twenty paces away. After I give him ‘permission,’ he tells me he’s trying to find a storyteller for the dragons confined in Temporary Building Three. I decide to try storytelling.

I didn't expect to find Rachel's scent, or that of Carson's, in the wonderfully warm air that follows when the door-warden opens Temporary Building Three for me. And I didn't expect Rachel to say 'EEEE!' when she sees me and hide under Carson. Carson looks as puzzled as I feel.

"Sorry!" says Rachel. "I'm... I need my clothes, because of the cameras you're wearing."

"Apologies, Rachel."

Carson points his nose at some cloth he cannot reach without revealing Rachel.

I mouth-carry the cloth and drop it near Carson's feet while pointing my cameras upwards. I hope I didn't drool too much.

"Sorry! It's so warm in here, and dragons don't care what I do or don't wear..."

Rachel moves underneath Carson.

"Honorable Anar, you couldn't know... and It's probably best if you did the same for Lizabeth... some far-away two-leggeds won't like watching two-leggeds without clothes."

"I hear, honorable. I won't point my cameras at two-leggeds without clothes."

"Thank you... I mean, honorable." Rachel crawls out from underneath Carson. Now that she’s wearing clothes, I scent them both and find nothing unusual.

"I didn't expect you to come for story-time," continues Rachel. "Roxxie wants Carson in here, and then she wants him to shed

his scales five days after he leaves! Isn't that strange?"

"Carson, are you taking Iron-Out?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps that's Roxxie's reason." I look at Carson, then Rachel. "I thought you'd both still be sleeping in the cave after last night's Run."

"We were... that's when Roxxie found us. She asked Carson to swallow some pills because of Carson's 'test results' and told us to stay here for at least a week."

"Why aren't you sleeping now?" I ask Carson.

"This dragon has never been here before and wants to watch over Rachel."

"Honorable. Dragonic Logic."

"Honorable!"

"Do you like it here?"

Carson looks unsettled... "This dragon likes Temporary Building Three, but perhaps Rachel will be bored."

"There isn't much to do here besides sleep. Perhaps a story about Mona?"

"Honorable!" they reply.

"I'm scheduled to tell a story about Mona and Lizabeth when they found sixty gold coins... and smaller dragons are expected to sit close to the storyteller."

—

After I tell that story, I sit next to Carson, then ask him if the gold coins that Mona found were money.

"No."

I wink at Carson, then ask Rachel the same question.

"Were the coins different?" Rachel asks.

"I think so, but I'm not sure."

"If they were different, then Carson is correct. If they were the same, then they were money."

Carson points his nose at Rachel. "The coins Mona found were

not the same gold coins that the villagers were using as money; so is it possible that Mona's coins were not-money, even if the coins scent the same?"

"Could the villagers tell the difference?" Rachel asks me.

"No, but that is tail-first," I tell her. "Since Mona was new to the village, she had not earned sixty gold coins' worth of societal obligations. If they use Mona's coins, their money would break. Mona understood this, but Gran and Hizoner did not, and the little dragon had to explain this to them."

"So Mona's coins are counterfeit?"

Both Carson and I are puzzled, so I ask "Honorable Rachel, what is counter-fit?"

"Dragons have a biological tendency to concentrate metals. Some are needed but some can harm a dragon. One reason Roxxie wants Carson here is that warmth helps a dragon excrete these metals. Some of these excreted metals will go into a dragon's scales, so that's why Roxxie thinks shedding scales afterwards is a good idea."

"Honorable."

"Long ago, transparent scales were highly valued by two-legged owners of Dragonic Logic dragons. They did many things to keep their dragon's scales as colorless as possible, like keeping all metal out of a dragon's diet. Some of the papers the villagers had found in the Ruins once belonged to these two-leggeds, and since dragons had recently learned to read, we took these papers seriously. Dragons spent a lot of time wiping each other with vinegar."

"Anar," asks Rachel, "why would anyone want their dragon's scales to be as colorless as possible?"

"Colorless scales are transparent."

"Awesome!"

"If a Dragonic Logic was willing to only eat powders for many days, then scales may become nearly clear."

Rachel didn't like that. "Only powders?"

"Then a dragon could eat certain metal dusts which would accumulate in her scales. The two-leggeds were fond of gold because it is the only metal to retain its color in a dragon's scales--and at least once, a dragon had thick gold scales, because Stretch and Mona found some."

"I don't think they liked dragons very much."

"Many of the papers were written for two-leggeds that thought such golden scales were important. Hizoner had read them, too, and once when he was wiping Seven's paws he gave her a golden-colored shiny streak on her left front. Seven noticed the stripe was of metal dust, and Hizoner shared his secret of brass powder with her. Later, Seven painted a few gold-colored streaks on Mona, careful to put them on her back so the gold-colored powder might remain undetected. Dragons and two-leggeds believed the coins Mona had swallowed were the cause of the gold color even though Hizoner told everyone that was impossible. Eventually, Seven told me that she had put brass powder on Mona because her 'lie-sense' said it was a good lie."

"Was it a good lie?" asks Carson.

"It had potential, but not many dragons saw Mona with her stripes; I didn't. After she was painted, Mona helped Stretch explore what became our sleeping cave, and when she got out of the cave Mona found Lizabeth and they took a nap. When Stretch found them, she didn't notice any gold color. Perhaps Lizabeth wiped it off her."

Rachel's cell phone beeps. Two breaths later, she says "Anar, Chi wants to meet you in the sleeping cave."

Chi is carrying Vlad, and they're coming to the sleeping cave. I can overhear Vlad...

"... enough money to buy three new gold coins for every villager and dragon."

"Perhaps they want to know what the ship's crew does,"

suggests Chi. "You could help them train a spy."

"What could they learn from a two-legged food processor?"

"How? Perhaps to steal food, perhaps to poison—you'll never know, honorable Vlad."

Chi asks 'permission' as soon as she sees me, then tells me "Honorable Anar! Vlad got a message on his cell phone offering ten years wages if he'd answer a half-hour's worth of questions. Since he left his phone on the ship, he didn't know about it until today."

"The message is already two days old... and getting older because I left my phone on the *Four* again."

"Honorable Vlad, I would like to see the message."

"Chi has a copy on her cell. Basically, half the money first, then answer questions, and more money after."

"Money... from Mr. [redacted]?"

"Yes, he is working as their agent."

Chi asks Vlad "What would you do with the money you'd get?"

"Hide it?"

"And if you couldn't hide it in Anar's neck-pack or under Elizabeth's bed, then..."

"I'd hide it... I don't know. My brain is only this big." He holds his fists side to side. "Any advice?"

"I'm just following the money."

"... and if you follow the money backwards?"

"I can't get past Mr. [redacted]."

Vlad seems uneasy—and I think I know why. "Will they be angry if you refuse?"

"Yes. For someone like me to refuse that much money for so little work... yes."

"Can you take pictures for Satyadah?" Vlad nods. "I would like Rachel and Carson to tell a camera about their first Night Run. You'll find them in Temporary Building Three. If Carson is sleeping, go to the sleeping cave and take videos of any dragon willing—start with Graith."

Vlad seems happier with a task to do.

Chi finds us and has a paper in her purse she wants me to see. The title of the paper (Induced Forgetting Today, Amnesia Tomorrow in the Beta 10-P) seems alarming to me. I point my eyes and ears at Chi.

"This is about a Dragonic Logic dragon created long before Mona's parents."

"I hear."

"There are words that those Dragonic Logics should not hear. This paper is at least two decades before the deltas were created —this particular problem may have been fixed. More likely, this might affect Carson because he's a hybrid 'Logic,' part beta and part gamma." (grumble)

This is troubling...

"His behavior bothers me... mostly because Carson's story is similar to Mona's. Both wanted to travel far, then some days later they wanted to imprint. Perhaps the same will happen to the dragonets?"

"Lizabeth and other two-leggeds are here--perhaps they won't travel."

"Perhaps--but it is a possibility. I'll discuss it with them."

"Honorable Chi."

"Two million two-leggeds have obtained copies of Carson's imprinting video directly from Satyadah's website, and a hundred times that many have watched it. Political power comes with these big numbers."

"You're the big dragon of two-legged politics--what's that mean?"

"It means that many two-leggeds might listen closely to Rachel and Carson. Perhaps Rachel will know wise things to tell other two-leggeds. What do two-leggeds need to hear?"

"I asked Hizoner that. He said two-legged politics is an invisible big dragon much like The Boss, so he told me old stories that

shouldn't cause political trouble. One of these was about a limping two-legged who replaced a cheap clay lamp outside the door of his shelter with an expensive iron lamp. When another two-legged saw the iron lamp, it wanted it for itself so it took the lamp and ran, and the limping two-legged could not catch nor scent the thief. Later, when time had passed, the limping two-legged realized the cheap clay lamp worked as well as an iron one without tempting any two-legged to do a dishonorable act; so it was improper to replace a clay lamp with an iron lamp."

"Honorable," says Chi, "but that's a two-legged story."

Two breaths later she replies. "You could tell stories about what happened when we first met Mona. No strange two-leggeds could object since there are no strange two-leggeds in those stories. Their invisible big dragons shouldn't be offended."

"When I read Mona's comments, I see nothing wrong."

"You're thinking like a Dragon. Some two-leggeds are not Dragon to other two-leggeds and do not want that known. These improper two-leggeds are called criminals and they must keep many secrets." Chi winks at me, then says "Speaking of that kind of two-legged, I'd like to pay Roxxie a visit. As big dragon, you should probably be there."

"I thought you'd understand!" says Chi. "I don't like seeing it either."

The wooden egg that Jade made long ago is ugly now. Most of the rock-dust is gone and it bears many small tooth-marks--and Roxxie doesn't want it.

"Two-leggeds will like it," advises Chi. "You can sell it."

"Not worth my time. That won't sell for much."

"It is likely a two-legged will pay a lot. More than..."

"Perhaps you'd like to make a bet?"

Soon, Chi and Roxxie agree that if the egg sells for a million or more, then Chi wins; otherwise, Roxxie wins. I intervene when Chi and Roxxie are negotiating what indignities the loser must suffer

and suggest that a paw-sized rock is proper payment. Neither female likes my suggestion but they accept it. Roxxie takes pictures of the egg and makes a listing at an auction website, and says the listing runs for one hundred sixty eight hours. Chi tells me that the post will ask for offers for seven days, then the highest offer gets the egg.

After Roxxie leaves (with the egg), Chi tells me she's going to lose the bet. "The first time Mona saw that egg, she wanted to talk to it as if a dragonet was inside. That made her feel bad afterwards, so the two-leggeds that like Mona won't try to buy the egg. Nobody else will want it, so it won't sell."

"Why did you bet?"

"Because Roxxie likes winning, and she doesn't like me. If she wins and I lose, perhaps she'll stay longer."

"Perhaps... but there are so many two-leggeds, you may win your bet with Roxxie. Then what?"

"Then Roxxie keeps the money, since I gave her the egg. She finds money rewarding, so perhaps she'll stay longer."

"Honorable."

Before I leave, Chi helps me to wear my cameras—she wants them on when I talk to Pax and Lizabeth. When I ask why I'm supposed to talk to them, Chi winks.

Neither Lizabeth nor Pax have voices that can be overheard easily, even in the sleeping cave... but at eighteen paces, Pax sounds puzzled. "What this dragon finds interesting?" I stop and listen.

"What would you like to do?" asks Lizabeth.

"Pax wants to do what her big dragon wants. She will ask."

"Honorable! But suppose Anar said... dragons need a helicopter pilot. Would you be happy?"

"No. Perhaps Anar will not say that."

"What do you hope Anar will say?"

"This dragon wants to help. Anar will know what is needed."

"Honorable! But you can help in many ways."

"Anar will choose."

"What will he choose?"

"Pax thinks Anar will ask her to be Speaker when he is traveling."

"Why?"

"Two-leggeds will like it. This dragonet thinks she could succeed because the two-leggeds will forgive the mistakes she will make."

That's probably true. Vlad's videos of dragonets are the most requested files of those available on Satyadah's website.

Eight paces later, I'm close enough to properly ask 'permission' and get it.

"You have good ideas," I tell Pax. "Be Speaker now, when I am here and can help. Prepared?"

"Prepared!" Pax speaks a tenth of a breath before Lizabeth's happy noise.

I want to watch the video I just gathered almost more than watching Pax and Lizabeth in front, here and now. Strange...

—

Pax and Lizabeth ride along when I want to go to the Dragon's shed, and Lizabeth sings—first, a song about Mary and a little lamb, then one about a twinkling star. When we get there, Chi reads to me an offer that I received.

A week of walking for a free ride—it sounds good to me, since I haven't done any traveling for many days. But Chi doesn't like it.

"Why not?"

"Because... it's something a Bitten Dragon would have done during their Association days."

I'm puzzled... why is this not proper? "I don't see the dishonor."

"The two-leggeds can continue to buy superior lubricants locally--there is no good reason why they should involve you, especially since shipping your tears will be expensive. They want to gather money after becoming famous for using dragon-tears in

their Tube-a-Lubed-Hill-Side-Slide."

She's probably right...

"You'd like to accept their invitation... and the world will see you glide down the slide tied to thirty inflatable rubber circles. I think it would be fun. I'm sure you're thinking about the many two-leggeds that would like to see you do it and hear you victory-roar afterwards... and you're also thinking that a week of walking will be boring to watch."

"Perhaps."

"It would be good for you to not care about that for awhile. Traveling for more than ten thousand of your breaths would be good for you, but the two-legged water-park is a poor destination."

"I like it. Do you have a better one?"

"Yes. Meet me at the sleeping cave before a hundred breaths."

Lizabeth and Pax don't want to travel with me, and seem sad about it. I almost ask them about it before I leave.

Chi is waiting for me, and asks for my neck pack—she wants to put something in it for traveling. I'm not sure what she's going to put in it, but I let her drag it off. I have jaws and paws with claws... what else do I need?

I walk to my usual place where the light shines into the sleeping-cave. Two piles of pebbles, and two paw-sized stones, one of each on both sides, just how I like it... and First sitting between them, which slightly bothers me. Chi finds me and asks me to come get my neck-pack. I rumble an affirmative.

After following Chi, I understand. I can scent the reason my neck-pack is too heavy for Chi to carry—Mona is in the big pocket. I pretend she isn't there and try not to point my nose at my neck-pack—I don't want my cameras to video it. Chi takes one of my cameras while Dee and Graith help me put my neck-pack on. When Chi returns, she clips a heavier camera on my ear.

"That should last until dawn."

My neck-pack hangs a little crooked, but I won't notice it. Somehow First knows not to scent my neck-pack as I leave. I go

to the nearest trees and walk wherever it's shadiest. Mona taps my left leg, so I turn left until she taps once on my right. Perhaps she wants to go to the river... but here, the river is too deep to cross. The air smells like one of the little ships from the *Four*. I'm not liking this...

My guesses were right. It is colored red, but it was like a little ship in the river. I ask 'permission,' and after granting it by a two-legged submissive bow, the two-leggeds show me a text-bearing piece of paper—they won't speak or showing their faces because of my cameras. Then they again (gesture of submission) and ask for my neck-pack.

I order Mona out of my neck-pack.

A two-legged male points to the trees.

"Apologies!" says a little familiar voice.

When I'm under the taller trees, I slow and lower my neck-pack. Mona climbs out as soon as she can touch the ground.

I don't know what to say. I know she's leaving, she'll be back as soon as she can, and she'd tell me more if it wasn't for my cameras, and she shouldn't be on-camera now.... so I lick her.

"Two days," says Mona.

"Honorable Mona."

She licks my nose and slides back into my neck-pack. And... I do what is expected of me. Soon I'm giving my neck-pack to the two-leggeds and getting nothing in exchange.

The little ship that carries Mona can move fast... but it stinks.

I no longer feel like exploring, and seek Chi's scent. Many paces later I find her in the dragon's shed. I ask 'permission' and then listen as Purity explains to Chi the significance of a solitary red dot on a map that's blue.

"Military ships will not show on this map," says Purity, "but all others will."

"So... There are no other ships?"

"Correct, honorable Anar. Her ship will be in the harbor... this

place, in two thousand breaths.”

“How will she return if two-leggeds chase her?”

"The Engineering Section has a back-up plan. This dragon used Roxxie's money to rent every available boat in the harbor."

“Won't the two-leggeds become angry with you?”

“This dragon has ordered the boat-crews to allow two-leggeds to ride for free—she wants as many two-leggeds as possible to travel with Mona.”

Mona follows Captain Diana past iron cages with two-leggeds inside--and because I'm dreaming, I can follow in her footsteps through the two-legged hallway. She smells a cage, then tells the captain 'this one.' A two-legged male then opens the cage, and the two-legged inside becomes part of a herd of following two-leggeds. Mona seems to know what she's doing...

Twenty five breaths later, the captain says, "That's the last one."

Mona scents, thinks, then says "This dragon smells more Dragons than she can see." She points past the captain with her nose. "That way."

"That's Solitary," says the captain. "You won't find any Dragons there."

"Mona can follow the scent," and she does what she says. The captain hurries to keep up with her.

The next hallway is narrow--just wide enough for two-legged males to pass. Mona goes in, followed by the captain and the stranger. I can't imagine I could fit in such a tiny hallway so I stay.

I decide to scent the two-leggeds Mona has collected. I cannot detect anything unusual with my nose, only the usual scent of nervous sweating... how does she do it?

"This one, and this one," says Mona's voice.

"I can't open these," says the two-legged male.

"This dragon can."

A thud, then I fold my ears to avoid hearing the screeching of tearing metal. The two-leggeds also don't like the noise and retreat.

"I don't think that was necessary," shouts Captain Diana from thirty of her paces away.

Mona speaks normally. "Apologies. This dragon prefers freedom for all Dragons."

A popping noise for a half breath, then something breaks as if a big dragon had hit it. When the dust settles, the two-legged inside crawls through a hole in a cracked wall and emerges wearing much dust.

The captain takes her hat off. "Justice will be done, even if the heavens fall."

Mona re-appears last, herding both two-leggeds before her. When all have entered the room, Mona looks up at me and says "These are Dragons. This dragon wants to help them."

"Who are you talking to?" asks the captain.

"Every Dragon, honorable Captain Diana."

"But I can see nobody in that direction."

"This dragon can. Honorable Anar, this dragon will bring these two-leggeds to the sleeping cave. It would be best to warn the villagers that sixteen new two-leggeds will join the village, perhaps permanently."

I cannot answer her--I cannot make the slightest noise. I try to take a pace, but I don't have paws... or legs... or a body... I watch the little dragon rather than think about it.

"We will arrive before the Great Fireball rises above the horizon."

I point my eyes, ears, and nose at Mona, hoping she'll explain.

"Just a dream." Mona winks at me and orders "Scent now."

Chi's scent. I rumble agreeably after Chi asks permission-to-approach. She licks my nose, then puts one paw on my head. A half-breath later, her claws pluck something from between the

scales on top of my head.

"Apologies." A tiny popping noise, then a strange, penetrating scent, then Chi touches the top of my head again. A half-breath later, she says "Done."

The strange scent is nearly gone. I stand as quietly as I can and follow Chi.

Purity finds us and forgets to ask 'permission.' "Mona did it! She got back to the ship! Come see!" and she runs. I'm slightly puzzled, but know Purity expects we'll follow her... and she went to the Dragon's Shed.

After a trot with Chi following behind me, I find Purity pushing wires. She wants us to look at a large tablet-style TV, and it glows, then shows a familiar little dragon running accompanied by a buzzing noise.

"That's the motor-noise. This dragon can filter it, but it makes Mona's voice hard to understand."

It is as if Mona is stalking a two-legged that runs slowly, seemingly oblivious that Mona follows. Mona runs much faster than the two-legged, and as she approaches the camera moves closer, still making the buzzing noise. Ten paces behind the two-legged, Mona matches her pace and asks "Permission to approach!" The two-legged stops running, and Mona stops a half-pace from the two-legged.

The little dragon's image (gestures of submission) and an imitation little-dragon voice says "Honorable Supreme?"

The two-legged makes a surprise noise, then a happy noise. Mona scents, licks, scents again, then puts her head under the two-legged's right hand. This two-legged likes dragons—she makes a happy noise.

Other two-leggeds come into view. Mona scents again, licks, winks, then runs; soon she's off-camera. A two-legged male chases, but has no chance of catching. Purity turns the machine off.

"Brilliant!" says Purity.

"How?" I ask.

"With a kiss from honorable Mona, the two-legged is now famous... like me! She could become the next Vul-Gov Supreme!"

"But... what about Mona?"

"Many two-leggeds think she'd win if she'd be a candidate, but the little dragon said she is not jumping into that shark tank."

"What will happen to Mona *now*?"

"The two-leggeds are bringing her on their little ship."

"When will she get here?"

"Perhaps five thousand of your breaths. She will be coming up the river to the same place."

"Honorable Purity. Why was it important that Mona lick the Supreme?"

"That's not the Supreme. Mona is trying to alter the Vul-Gov by giving fame to that two-legged, who could become Supreme."

"Honorable." My feet know what to do next. I tell Purity I'll wait at the beach.

—

Purity finds me watching the sea even though the Great Fireball is below the horizon. She's carrying my folded cape on her back, which she unfolds and puts on me. She tells me Mona will be late: due to military ships nearby, the back-up plan was used. Now Mona has many two-leggeds following her in many other little ships, some of which Purity rented with Roxxie's money, and more are coming--but no ship can travel as fast as the red ship Mona is on. I ask her why Mona's ship must travel with these others, and she says "Safe and slow is the way to go."

Ten breaths later, Purity says "Those clouds have light because the fleet of little ships illuminate the undersides." That light is comforting and unnerving at the same time... there must be many two-legged ships traveling with Mona, but they waste enough light to cause the clouds to glow. "The ship Mona is on can only come

close to the land in some places. It will deliver Mona to the place near The Ruins where you once delivered your neck-pack."

"Honorable, Purity."

"Perhaps you wish to watch-and-scent here anyway?"

I rumble agreement, then say "I'll be warmer with my cape. Perhaps you'd rather be sleeping?"

"Perhaps yes, but Mona is not with us yet."

We wait, watching, unable to smell any two-legged machines. Purity puts on her e-thumbs and, with blue-tinted eyes, taps quickly for six breaths. "Some two-leggeds that this dragon respects say that Mona would win any Vulgarian election."

Her claws tap on paw-buttons, and then she says "Some of the two-leggeds accompanying Mona want to stay with the villagers."

"I don't think the villagers will like that."

"Some will ask to sleep in the dragon's cave."

"I'll have to see and scent these two-leggeds."

"Ask Mona to do it. She's good at it, but she takes more than a hundred of your breaths before she learns."

"Learns what?"

"... which two-leggeds dragons can trust."

"She can tell by smell?"

"Honorable! Yes. That's one reason she went to see the future Supreme--to judge. Perhaps Mona will get another chance."

I stand up and look over the ocean under the glowing clouds. "I can see lights," I tell Purity.

"Lower your head a little and tell me if you can still see the lights."

I comply with this request... "Yes."

"This dragon can see them! Perhaps six kilometers..."

Two breaths later, she says "Five point nine kilometers," then rummages in her purse.

"Is that fast?" I ask.

"Apologies! This dragon merely revised her distance calculation." Purity now has a buzzing cell-phone in her right front.

The boats are mere light-bearing smudges on the horizon, but some lights seem to go behind others... why don't they travel in formation?

Purity talks on her cell-phone, then says "Anar, Mona is coming here! Captain Diana said Mona can use Sue's boat that can come onto the beach!"

"Perhaps they can see us." Purity sits like she was wearing her e-thumbs and waves her cellphone with the light on. Then one of the lights on the horizon turns on-and-off twenty one times.

"Could Mona see your cellphone light?" I ask Purity.

"Perhaps yes, but this dragon does not know.

I victory-roar at the water and lights.

Two and a half breaths pass before I hear what I wanted to hear--Mona's victory-roar. It is followed by a louder roar that many two-leggeds make.

Perhaps Mona will return safely... "Honorable Purity, why did Mona want to rouse the big dragon of two-legged politics?"

"Honorable Chi thought it was a good idea."

(grumble)

"This dragon could call Chi for you."

"Honorable, but not yet."

"Chi thinks two-legged politics cannot be managed by two-leggeds, especially in Vulgaria. She wants Mona to intervene more. The Vulgarian big dragon will be angry, but most of big dragons from other countries will approve, and many more two-leggeds will like her. Mona's Dragon-forum friends have become famous and some have started two-legged social gatherings that now involve thousands of two-leggeds."

(grumble) "The Vulgarian big dragons will not like that."

"But what can they do?"

"Too much. They will attack the social gatherings."

"Honorable, Anar! They have. When Mona's Marines return to Vulgaria, the two-leggeds will meet physically."

“So... they will put disruptors into these social gatherings.”

“The harmless group of dragon fans say they can manage. Their big dragon says governments need time to give orders, and some of these social gatherings formed too fast and too many for that.”

(grumble) “Perhaps.”

The air carries the scent of two-legged machine exhaust.

The little dragon asks permission-to-approach from a hundred paces too far away than is proper, and victory-roars when she gets it. The two-leggeds roar together after Mona’s demonstration... much louder. I hope Mona has a plan.

—

"This dragon will sort the two-leggeds."

"How?"

“This dragon can tell the good ones by scent.”

“How?”

"There is much this dragon cannot tell your cameras, but the two-leggeds will come here where you can see them, and then this dragon will talk to the two-leggeds and judge them."

I don't like this, and I don't like the smell of the ships that landed on the beach, and I'm only reasonably certain that Purity and I found all the two-leggeds that jumped off one of the ships and tried to hide. I want to scent-search for straying two-leggeds, but I'm staying here... I don't trust these new two-leggeds.

Purity has selected one for Mona to question.

“Approach,” I tell the two-legged male. He's acting strangely... but two-leggeds are particular about clothing and this male hasn't got any. Perhaps this is Purity's way of making two-leggeds harmless. He doesn't look particularly dangerous...

"Mona?"

"Honorable Anar?"

"What am I looking for?"

"Proper two-leggeds."

Not very helpful... "Why are you here?" I ask the two-legged male.

"I wanted to help, and come to the land of dragons... if I get sent home now, it was worth it!"

"Why would I send any of Mona's Marines home so quickly?"
"Honorable!"

Purity joins us, bringing the two-legged's clothes.

Since I don't know what I'm doing, I decide to let Mona ask the questions... and I'm more puzzled than ever. Mona asks the two-legged about other two-leggeds, Vulgarian politics, dogs, and feelings about dragons. A hundred twenty breaths later, she asks if I can tolerate this two-legged, and when I say yes, she orders him to be a tourist and go where he wants—but he should return before the Great Fireball travels below the horizon. Not surprisingly, the two-legged decides to stay, but he also offers to help.

The next two-legged Purity brings is a female, and she's terrified. Mona asks to be petted. One hundred thirty seven breaths later, the two-legged female is wearing clothes, answering questions, and is much calmer; Mona tells her to be a tourist too.

Then... Purity needs eight breaths to fetch one hundred twenty six breaths. Purity needs eight more to fetch one hundred forty two breaths. She only needs six to bring twenty seven breaths (a rejected two-legged male that Mona calls a [redacted].) The two-leggeds enforce Mona's decision and force the two-legged onto a ship. I'm glad that I don't have to do it.

I let Mona ask nearly all of the questions, so I have very little to do. I try to concentrate on two-legged scents--but when I get my nose properly close for scenting, the two-leggeds are always scared, including the ones that Mona said could be tourists.

Many two-leggeds have fallen asleep, and Mona must be tired... I order her to approach, and after I hold her, I order her to close her eyes, fold her ears, and be still. She sleeps before twenty breaths pass.

Purity attempts to classify a two-legged, but wants to wait for Mona to confirm before she pronounces a dragon-friend. She's willing to try another... and another... and it takes her longer than it took Mona and she learns less. There's not much else to do... so I scent Purity as she talks. Her scent changes when her emotions change.

Since I'm the only big dragon here, I won't sleep--there are too many strange two-leggeds. Purity said First (as the acting big dragon) ordered Cee and Rall to travel here, but Cee was going to the landing to find and fetch Lizabeth before traveling. If Rall ran, he wouldn't be here before a thousand breaths... and I'm not sure a dragon who's been sleeping in the Temporary Buildings for many days will want to run, especially when there's no trouble here.

Nearly all the two-legged are asleep now--and Purity's scent doesn't change and her voice is a monotone. I order her to sleep as well. She scents nearby sleeping two-leggeds until she finds several that she talked to earlier, and from these she sleeps a half-pace away. Perhaps she likes them.

Tomorrow, Mona will select more two-leggeds... then what? What will they do? I spend much time trying to think of something, but when the Great Fireball rises, I'm no wiser.

Mona (happy rumbles) when she wakes, but wants to train Purity to sort two-leggeds. Sometimes she uses rumble-speech words. The two-leggeds make many bad guesses when they speculate how Mona is sorting them... and then Purity tells them it has something to do with scents. When I almost-grumble at Purity, Mona winks at me.

The two-leggeds that Mona chose earlier attempt to help sort the remaining ones. They make comments about what they hear, and sometimes they stand closer to Mona and Purity than I'd like... but they seem like friends-of-dragons. Before the Great Fireball has made the sand warm, they give a name to what Mona is doing... the designated tourist two-leggeds make many loud

happy noises whenever another two-legged 'passes the smell test.'

Rall arrives before all the two-leggeds are sorted. Purity suggests that she should sort the remaining two-leggeds to enable Mona to see Elizabeth sooner, and Mona can rest and talk to me as we travel. I also think that Purity will tell everything she knows to any two-legged that asks, and Rall doesn't yet know what's good or bad to tell to two-leggeds or cameras.

I ask Purity to allow three of the two-leggeds that passed the smell test to follow her and gather video. Purity is surprised but seems pleased. These new two-legged dragon-friends can caution Purity if she tries to tell improper things to a camera.

I count a hundred paces away from the two-leggeds before I ask Mona how she judges by scent.

"A two-legged's scent changes often. By correlating scent changes with what this dragon sees and hears, this dragon can judge."

"How?"

"You could do this... if the two-leggeds are not scared."

Even now, some villagers cannot talk to me without fear, much less Sue's guests.

Mona continues. "This dragon does not usually scare two-leggeds. When she talks to them, she can smell scent changes when emotions change. When Mr. [redacted]'s scent did not change when his emotions seemed to change, this dragon was warned."

She usually makes more sense than this... "Changing scents?"

"This dragon means... no involvement. To Mr. [redacted], this dragon was perhaps an obstacle, a thing to be out-thought as soon as possible. His scent did not change when he pretended to be happy."

"I understand that... but what is the link?"

"When this dragon asked Vlad to draw a picture, his scent

changed enough so this dragon noticed. When Vlad learned this dragon liked his drawings, his scent changed again. Every time Vlad's emotions changed, Vlad's scent would change. But when this dragon talked to Mr. [redacted], his scent rarely changed, and when it did, this dragon could not link it to real-world events. This dragon thinks Mr. [redacted] is maximizing."

Perhaps my puzzled look is question enough...

"Honorable two-leggeds scents change when their emotions change. Mr. [redacted]'s scent changed too slowly and at odd times, so this dragon was warned. His emotions were pretend-emotions."

"Are other dragons able to scent these changes?"

"Yes! You could scent them."

I'm not sure about that... "I've never noticed. Perhaps only smaller dragons can scent close enough."

"Perhaps... but this dragon thinks you can do it if the two-legged you scent does not fear you."

"I'll scent Lizabeth. She won't be scared."

"Honorable! But this dragon has noticed Lizabeth's scent changes less when she wears her uniform."

"Why does that happen?"

"Lizabeth says she must represent Sue's Cruises when she wears their uniform, which means she must follow Sue's Rules, so Lizabeth thinks about those rules and that interferes with her emotional reactions."

"Honorable Mona."

"This dragon does not like uniforms."

Mona shifts slightly... and I catch the scents of Cee, then Lizabeth's... and Hizoner's. Cee's victory-roar precedes mine by a tenth of a breath.

No dragon asks 'permission' yet Lizabeth won't hug Mona? They're happy to see each other... but they stay separated. Cee is wearing two cameras on his ears and points them at Lizabeth and Mona.

"Perhaps Purity forgot to tell you?" asks Hizoner. "Two-legged quarantine. Those two will have to wait a day before a hug, but for these new two-leggeds... they'll have to spend at least seven days separated from the villagers and Sue's guests."

"Why?"

"Two-legged diseases. If any of these new two-leggeds will become ill, we will know by then."

Cee points one camera at me and asks "Are any of these two-leggeds sick?"

"None that I scented."

Cee rumbles approvingly. "Captain Diana says spreading of diseases has happened many times to two-leggeds."

I point my eyes and ears at Hizoner, and he says "Truth. The refugees quarantined themselves when traveling on their ship, but these travelers are two days from the mainland."

I wait, hoping he'll say more, and he does after he takes cameras out of Cee's neck-pack.

"Roxxie knows something about this... she suggested two weeks quarantine. The odd thing is... paws, claws, and jaws, Roxxie herself came to me to share this information."

... so it's either very important or perhaps Roxxie is using us to help her short-sell Sue's Cruises stock. I tilt my head, and Hizoner clips a camera on my lowered ear. "Honorable Hizoner... if this is true, you should not follow me when I go back to the beach."

"Agreed. I'm going to stay here with Lizabeth, and we'll wait for Mona's quarantine to end." Hizoner puts another camera on my other lowered ear. "Did any of these new two-leggeds pet you, Anar?"

"No."

"Did anyone spit on you, or throw powders or liquids on you?"

"No."

"I didn't think so... but should have asked before I put your cameras on."

Mona tries to whisper something to Lizabeth, but because of the

distance they must maintain I can overhear her suggestion. They're planning to ask a dragon to take a sleep-latency test. I lick Mona, then take the test I know I'll fail.

"FREEZE!" Lord Rot's voice is unnaturally loud and, despite knowing that I'm dreaming, I cannot move. My teeth are less than a talon-length from closing on another dragon's neck and I cannot withdraw.

I want to wonder why I'm not angry enough to fight... but the loud voice disturbs my thinking.

"Unacceptable! FREEZE! Bad! FREEZE!"

I smell hot oil and smoke. A huge pair of metal four-leggeds, each one taller than Third, get on either side of the male dragon who's neck is near my teeth and drag him away. His eyes are closed, but he seems uninjured. I can scent my dream-dragon... but I cannot tell if he's breathing because of Lord Rot's amplified voice.

A small flying machine flies into my view. It hisses at the quiescent dragon, then lands on his neck.

Something hard and cold grabs my rear paws, then my front paws.

Lord Rot's voice abruptly stops in the middle of an 'Unacceptable!'

Two metal four-leggeds are holding my paws. I know they are too hard to bite and quickly learn I cannot move them.

The dream-dragon remains still. His scent tells me nothing.

Frustrated, I roar.

Lord Rot's magnified voice replies. "Able! FREEZE! Bad! FREEZE!"

When the voice ceases, I resume failing to free myself. The dream-dragon hasn't even twitched enough to test the strength of the machines holding him. I roar again, and the amplified voice

again makes me be still and quiet.

Something hits the back of my neck and stings me. I fail to see what stung me, and it stings me again as I try. I see the stinging machine only after it jumps off my neck and noisily hovers too far above me.

My body becomes heavy, and I cease my useless struggling. Soon I'm sitting... then I cannot hold my head up. The metal four-leggeds force me to lie flat, then hold my head down so I can't open my mouth.

One of the huge metal four-leggeds lets a two-legged male out from inside it. The male talks loudly, incoherently, and angrily at the dream-dragon, then kicks the dream-dragon's chin. "I bet all my money that you'd win because of your home-field advantage, but noooooo.... suicidal asswipe."

The two-legged stamps, turns, and approaches me.

"You're an excellent fighter. I'll bet on you against Third next week."

If I could move, I'd challenge-roar...

New scents... Chi, and Fourth. Chi is whispering, but I can hear. "Stay closer. Be her shadow."

Fourth takes a half-pace closer to Mona. The Great Fireball is high in the sky.

Chi notices me when I blink. She asks 'permission,' then puts her paws on my head.

I grumble a bit when Chi removes my cameras.

Chi seems amused. "You'll enjoy this more without your cameras. It won't hurt you, and whatever unease this inspires should be good for you."

I point my nose and ears at Chi and wait.

"Ten of the new two-leggeds are going to be your servants. Their first task will be to take turns feeding you."

I wait.

"The two-leggeds will be submissive and do whatever you ask-- and you should give them orders."

"Honorable Chi..."

"If you won't give them something to do, I told them to wash your paws."

"Honorable Chi... why?"

"This is like 'F' word practice. You should practice telling a two-legged what to do. It will interfere with any attempts you might make to entertain them."

(grumble)

"Four two-leggeds will carry your cape and follow you. Let them."

(grumble)

The two-leggeds *want* to do this--it gives them something to do during quarantine."

(rumble) "Where are these two-leggeds?"

"You'll scent their fires when you get close to the beach." Chi points with her nose.

As I travel to the beach, a curved line of silvery blankets attract my attention. The blankets are held open with with sticks. I don't get a chance to investigate closer because the cooking fires are at least a hundred paces away, close to the trees and tended to by ten two-leggeds. I follow the scent of cooked potatoes.

I offer to share the potatoes with the two-leggeds, but after sharing one salt-side-down 'dragon-potato,' their Speaker tells me cooks are never hungry.

Most of these are two-legged potatoes--and there are a lot of them because they're small. The two-leggeds use thin, strong wires to cut potatoes as they roll down a ramp--clever! then they put salt on the cut side and place them closely on boards, salt-side-down.

The two-leggeds express a wish to wash my paws... but I tell them I'd rather eat.

They feed me by sliding the potatoes off the boards into my mouth, and they stay salt-side down. I wonder what Chi expects me to learn, other than some two-leggeds like sliding potatoes into the mouth of a dragon.

Afterwards, when they wash my paws, I realize Chi was right. I'm glad I'm not wearing my cameras.

When the two-leggeds dry my paws, I notice two of my 'servants' have lost all fear of me. I ask the male if he'd submit to questioning... and when he speaks of a two-legged female, his scent changes as his emotions change, confirming what the little dragon told me. When I question the female servant, her smell changes when she speaks of Mona. Connecting scent changes to emotional changes is difficult, and I cannot yet tell the honorable from those not so... even though I already know the little dragon likes these two-leggeds.

My servants have a final surprise for me. Their silvery blankets were reflecting the sun onto some stained sand which is now warm. The sand still smells of the ashes used to darken it, but what used to be an unpleasant smell now reminds me of that warm sand. I tell the two-leggeds that they deserve to be licked, and they cheer. I lie along-side and order Purity to walk where the sand is warmest. Twelve two-leggeds point cameras at Purity and I wish I was wearing mine—Purity seems to enjoy the warmth on her paws as much as Mona would have.

The warm sand feels good to lie upon, and the two-leggeds bring my cape and put it on me. The Great Fireball is not yet below the horizon, but I sleep.

I've never seen Roxxie behave like this when I'm awake. She's very happy, giving names to a two-legged that she's about to meet. I don't know what 'tyro' or 'greenhorn' or 'amateur' mean-- which probably is why Roxxie doesn't seem to care that I'm watching her.

The scent of a two-legged comes to the sleeping cave, and Roxxie goes to greet. I cannot understand what is said until Roxxie loudly praises the two-legged's wisdom. I decide to travel and perhaps meet this wise two-legged male. Fifteen paces away I see a two-legged in blue clothes next to Roxxie as she (gestures of submission). She licks the two-legged. grumbles, and makes a distress cry. She half-steps backwards, then licks the air twice. She grumbles again, and for a half-breath she seems as if she wants to speak but cannot. I don't like this and approach. The two-legged flees. After I ask 'permission,' Roxxie gestures of submission, coughs twice, then runs and tries to hide behind my right front. Why is she seeking my protection from a two-legged that fled a breath ago? I'm almost concerned, but Roxxie's scent is good, she's not scared, and a breath later, the faint sounds of suppressed laughter reach my ears.

When I wake, I see Mona wearing a cape and standing in front as if she was wearing e-thumbs. She tells me that Fourth will travel with Lizabeth and Hizoner, and she will tell me the bad news that Cee brought during the night.

I put my right paw behind and back, and Mona climbs up and settles. "Captain Diana asked if a dragon will tell you of her troubles, so this dragon will speak as we travel."

Mona has to explain many things, but has trouble explaining what a bomb is so I can understand why Captain Diana wants it off of her ship. Mona also tells me of an idea Charity had.

I find Charity in the sleeping cave. She's wearing a strange hat that has wires trailing to her neck-pack. "I got this!" she tells me. I ask Charity what it is that she's got, and her explanation takes eight breaths. Mona goes into the sleeping cave before she finishes.

As much as I like Charity's idea, I refuse to let her try it. This is something for a big dragon to do—this could be dangerous in

unexpected ways.

Charity thinks for two breaths, then explains a modified plan so I can take her place. Twenty-five breaths later I'm wearing her boxy 'base station' backpack as a hat, with wires connecting it to microphones on my neck-pack. Charity glues a small speaker in my left ear and a tall radio transceiver to the back of my head--it looks ridiculous but Charity says the transmitter should not be close to any body-parts. She adds a camera to my right ear that she says can see in the dim of the sleeping cave. After she uses a cell-phone to take a picture of me, Charity displays it on a television. I see the dragon of my dreams wearing two ugly hats--one with a metal mushroom and one with dangling wires. The two-leggeds who visit Satyadah's website will find these amusing.

I take exactly one hundred paces into the dim, where Second expects me to be. No two-legged eyes could see me here.

Twenty one breaths later, Second approaches with both Mr. [redacted] and Hizoner on his back. Second and Hizoner approach but neither ask 'permission' and I try to breathe quietly. Second winks as he passes me. Despite the dim, the goggles and headset Hizoner wears make him look almost as ridiculous as I do with my hats. I don't want to point my camera anywhere near him, but he's too close to Mr. [redacted] to avoid it.

"This is probably far enough," says Hizoner. Eighth slows and stops. Hizoner slides off his back while I slowly reduce the distance between us as quietly as I can. Mr. [redacted] tries to slide down Eighth's tail in the dim and makes it look difficult. Perhaps Hizoner or Lizabeth will find humor in the video... if tomorrow is more like yesterday than today.

"You stay on that side, and I'll stay on this side," orders Hizoner.

"I can't see!" complains Mr. [redacted].

"If you can't use the echoes, then stay away from my voice."

I involuntarily grumble a little. I hope Mr. [redacted] didn't hear. I have to lift my head as Second walks between my nose and my

scenting-practice—it's not proper, but acceptable—he's trying to cover my mistake.

Second sniffs Mr. [redacted] in a rather rude way, then exhales heavily on the two-legged's head-fur. He examines the results, then exhales on him once again--and a bit of fur flies two paces. Second scents the top of the two-legged's head, then takes two paces to scent the displaced head-fur. He asks "Why does this smell like a four-legged food beast?"

Staying a pace away from Hizoner, I stealthily travel the remaining two paces that separate me from Mr. [redacted]. Slowly and quietly, I gently scent... and learn nothing new. Perhaps this will take many breaths. Hizoner keeps his distance from Mr. [redacted] and asks "Where is it?"

"The bomb is under Captain Diana's bed."

This is going to take many, many breaths.

I restrain my desire to grumble. I exhale with my head held high, then inhale slowly with my nostrils a talon-length from Mr. [redacted]. I do this again and again in the dim, unseen and hopefully unsuspected by the two-legged who's unwelcome scent fills my nose. Second's rumbles and grumbles, which keeps Mr. [redacted] distracted.

For twenty nine breaths Mr. [redacted] insists he's telling the truth and repeats his earlier statements. Both Hizoner and the speaker in my ear says he lies. Second winks at me, then grumbles.

"Shout if you need me," Second says to Hizoner, and then walks noisily to the light.

Five breaths pass, and Mr. [redacted] seems to lose his fear. Charity was correct--this healthy two-legged can't detect a dragon's nose a talon-length away in the dim. He must think he's alone with Hizoner.

Mr. [redacted] starts a new tale that includes a bomb hidden in Captain Diana. I challenge-roar before his tale grows... and

before I realize that will ruin Charity's plan. Mr. [redacted] is worthless for scenting now and will be for many breaths. Even though my ears remain closed from roaring and I'm grumbling angrily, I can clearly hear the speaker in my ear—one two-legged voice says 'day-yum' while another says 'awesome.' I make myself stop grumbling and point my eyes and ears at Hizoner. He makes a fist with one e-thumb aimed at the ceiling. A half breath after that... "In a towel trolley. It looks like a fire extinguisher. The pressure gauge is fake, just a picture with the needle in the green."

Hizoner makes a 'v' with two fingers.

Sue's Crew find the disguised bomb fifty-eight of Hizoner's breaths later in the 'Lost and Found' department. I counted while Mr. [redacted] was telling Hizoner bank account numbers and passwords.

Three breaths later, my ear-speaker relays happy two-legged noises, and a voice tells me Sue's crew is attaching the bomb to a flying machine. Two and a half breaths later, the voice says 'day-yum' again. Not quite a half-a-breath after that, I hear a faint lightning-like crack and a brief rumble of thunder.

"When I'm on your ship, can I wear a camera?" asks Chi.

"Honorable! But don't bring your cell-phone. One of ours is yours for the asking. Perhaps it would be better if you board the *Four* after dark as well. I'll have an awning over the gangplank.

"I could wear two capes," offers Chi.

"Good idea--but I can have better blankets waiting for you."

"Honorable."

"We'll be ready for you anytime."

"Honorable! We'll start traveling in twenty breaths." Chi closes her cell phone.

"You'll have to wear blankets as well," Rachel tells Carson. "We don't want anyone to see you or Chi get on the *Four*."

“This dragon understands and will submit.”

Rachel puts two bags into Cee’s neck-pack, then tells Carson “If we find any two-leggeds hidden or trying to sneak onto the *Four*, you should not obey their orders.”

“Honorable! This dragon follows Rachel in Anar’s footsteps.”

“On the ship, you and I will follow in the captain’s footsteps.”

Cee Carries Chi into the dim and Carson trots in Cee’s footsteps carrying Rachel.

Twenty six breaths later, Roxxie finds me. She’s got something for me to try. She asks me to straddle, then lie down on the harmless white foam. I sink into it slightly. When I push the button, the bed grows and I sink into it more... and it becomes warm before two breaths. Roxxie pushes different buttons and the warm foam changes shape underneath me. I don't care what shape it takes... I like it.

"What do you think?" asks Roxxie.

I close my eyes and (happy rumble).

"Anar?"

(rumble)

"Would you like to sleep on it?"

"Yes... but you only have one."

"What does that mean?"

"If I decide which dragons sleep here, the dragons in the Temporary Buildings that would like this bed more than I do."

"Yes, of course--but with a little money we could buy more of these beds."

"... and you know of an easy way to get money."

"Anar, that's not nice."

I push the button with my chin and the bed shrinks, making it easier for me to stand up. "Apologies, but trying to 'make money' is not nice."

"That's true--but I didn't make the two-legged money-system and we have to live in it now."

"I have to eat, but I don't have to eat another dragon."

"What does that mean?"

"When you try to get money, are you making something good happen, or taking advantage of two-legged mistakes?"

"I'm eliminating inefficiencies in the system."

"Roxxie, perhaps you are what you seek to eliminate."

"I did extract a lot of wealth from the two-legged system... but I'm not buying yachts. I'm healing damaged dragons."

"Honorable. What were you doing with the money before Satyadah told the world of dragons?"

"Buying land around growing cities, then watching the price rise."

"Why?"

"For money," says Roxxie. "but strangely I want to keep playing doctor despite the costs."

"Perhaps the damaged dragons are healing you."

"Perhaps... I never had the opportunity to physically help other dragons. Donating money is convenient, but not as good. I'll deliver this bed to the Temporary Buildings."

A hundred breaths later, Roxxie has taken the bed and I'm traveling with Lizabeth and Seven on my back. Roxxie's machine moves much faster than I do, and quickly puts many paces between us.

I hear Rall's challenge-roar. Perhaps Roxxie's machine got too close to him—but Rall roars again and still sounds angry.

I order Seven to take Lizabeth away from Rall while I go investigate. Twenty seven breaths later, shortly after I ask 'permission,' Rall challenge-roars at me so I also (gesture of submission). He's angry, and I'm the only dragon present. Lizabeth screams as Rall approaches me and attracts Rall's attention. I should have asked her to stay silent, or I could have ordered Seven to run away with her... Rall soon turns his attention back to me and challenge-roars again despite my submissive posture. He briefly puts his paw on my head and a

camera crunches. He then takes a half-pace backwards and challenge-roars at Seven.

Seven twitches but does not run. Lizabeth stares at a pink box rather than watch Rall... both are not acting properly. Lizabeth now holds the Roxxie-pink box so it covers one ear.

Lizabeth says "We're outside of Building Three." One breath later Lizabeth says "He's almost as big as Anar." She listens a half-breath, then holds the pink box as if she wanted Rall to look at it despite the distance.

A breath passes where the only sound is Rall's drool falling on the vegetation. His neck is bleeding from two places. Lizabeth says "Two minutes, Anar!"

I can't remember how long a two-legged minute is...

Lizabeth says "Yes, both of them can hear me."

Seven is slowly walking backwards, and speaks. "Rall? What happened?"

Seven's question seems to make him angry, but he doesn't turn to attack her.

I wait two breaths, then slowly try to stand.

Rall challenge-roars at me again, Lizabeth screams again, and I (gesture of submission) again. Rall puts his left paw on my head. Seven turns around and runs, and Lizabeth screams once more.

Rall roars at them, then takes two quick paces. Before Rall runs far, I start to stand up; then Rall forgets about them and roars at me. Seven stops running, then challenge-roars at Rall.

Rall laughs at the defiance from a much-smaller dragon with blunted claws.

I can't see it, but I can hear a flying machine behind me. I wonder if it's the dart-shooter responsible for Rall's aggressive behavior. Rall challenge-roars at the machine, then takes a step backwards. Perhaps he'll flee for the trees—there's no good way for a dragon to fight something high in the air... especially if he must stay in a gesture of submission.

Seven and Lizabeth are coming closer, and Seven challenge-

roars again. I don't like this and grumble. Rall grumbles at me.

I cannot scent Roxxie—surely two two-legged minutes have passed?

Seven and Elizabeth are now close enough that I can almost understand Elizabeth when she talks to the pink box she holds.

Elizabeth tells something to Seven, and Seven points her nose at Rall.

“Boss D stat, report!”

I want to say ‘ninety five percent’ but don't. Rall says ‘seventy-five percent.’

Rall stands still, probably as puzzled as I am by a recent desire to speak strangely.

Seven says it again. Rall repeats his response, and again I have to suppress the desire to reply.

The flying machine is now so loud that I fold my ears. It adds adds two small ‘ffffff’ noises to its noise and two pink darts bounce off of Rall's neck. Two breaths later the scent of freshly shed dragon-blood reaches my nose. The scent of dragon-blood angers all dragons, and Rall is already so angry that only the gesture of submission stops his attacks.

Predictably, Rall challenge-roars, but not at me. Rall glare-stares over my head. The noise gets louder... then a pink machine with four pink propellers flies between me and Rall.

I get to my feet since Rall seems mesmerized by the flying machine. Elizabeth shouts “Don't let him fall!”

Rall sits, but improperly. I approach and, with my right paw, move his tail so he can sit properly. Rall's head droops, so I catch with my tail, I concentrate on keeping Rall's nose pointed down until his head is much closer to the ground, giving Seven time to approach and help. She pulls Rall's front paws forward and we lower Rall only a little faster than I wanted.

I get my tail out from underneath Rall's head and neck, and check that he's not hurting himself. Elizabeth approaches and, after giving me a long hug, wants to examine Rall. I forbid this;

Seven can do it.

Lizabeth agrees—but not if Rall’s breathing becomes improperly slow.

Then... strangely, Seven laughs. “Apologies, honorable Anar. I merely noticed that one of your cameras is undamaged.”

“Perhaps I should damage it.”

“Perhaps not!” Seven’s response is almost improper. She points her nose at the pink box until Lizabeth uses it, then she speaks to me. “Because of you, no dragon got hurt—not even Rall. Because of you, I could take care of Lizabeth. Because of you, Rall didn’t wander into one of the temporary buildings and break it. And you pretended to be cowardly so others could get to safety. Tomorrow, Rall will be just another one of the many dragons that will tell you what I’m going to tell you now.”

Seven walks behind me and I turn an ear to follow her with the undamaged camera. A half-pace behind the tip of my tail, she turns to face me.

“I follow in your footsteps.”

Lizabeth makes a happy noise. She’s holding the pink box as if she wanted Seven to look at it too—but why would that make Lizabeth happy?

Seven notices my confusion. “Her cell phone can also be a camera, honorable Anar.”

—

“Lizabeth, take these samples inside the medical cabin and give them to the first machine that says ‘please insert samples here.’ Seven, can you make sure Lizabeth travels quickly?”

“Yes!” (gesture of submission) “I hear!”

“We’ll be part of a new story!” Lizabeth sounds almost happy.

I want to ask why I didn’t travel with Lizabeth since I can run faster than Seven, but Roxxie reveals her plan for me. “Shift Rall to the left so I can remove the needles underneath.”

After I roll Rall, Roxxie uses a long silvery machine to remove

the needles. While she works, she speaks. “Two perfect shots between scales... better than I expected.”

“Can you shoot flying machines?”

“It’s easier to dart a dragon unawares than shoot a moving flying machine that could be anywhere.”

Nada victory-roars from at least a hundred paces away, and Roxxie’s ears twitch. “Pardon me, Anar, but I think I must play chemical detective.

Nada says “Two!” and a half-breath later, “Three!”

Roxxie points eyes and ears at me. “Watch Rall—I’m going to analyze what’s left in those syringes that Nada just found.”

I’m not sure what to do once Roxxie leaves. I walk around Rall and see that his legs are underneath him. His scent hasn’t changed, and he’s breathing properly.

Other aspects of the future look worse than a dragon with a sore throat. I cannot prevent this from happening again, so it probably will. Perhaps the (gesture of submission) won’t stop an enraged dragon when there is a next time. Perhaps the flying machines will shoot something other than darts. Perhaps the big metal two-legged Walker-machines will come back... or helicopters with guns.

“Permission to approach!” Seven surprises me even though she is the proper ten paces away—I should have seen or scented her.

Seven approaches, and uses a light to look in Rall’s nose and ears, and I help her look down his throat. Then Seven puts the head-set for Roxxie’s metal detector on her right ear and checks Rall’s neck for more metal. While she checks Rall’s neck with it, she tells me that she’s looking for more needles and she’s not finding any.

“Roxxie has samples from the syringes, and her machines can analyze the contents so Roxxie will know what to do. She gave me a cell-phone before I traveled here so she could tell me the news quickly, but I don’t know how to use it.”

“Seven!” says Seven’s purse.

“Yes, doctor?” replies Seven.

“Battle-Boss. No loud noises.”

Seven whispers “Yes, doctor.” A half breath later, she whispers “The darts delivered a drug called ‘Battle-Boss’ and it makes a dragon want to fight.”

I almost (grumble) but that might wake up Rall.

Seven’s nose twitches. “Chi!”

I smell a female ‘Logic... one of the Engineering Section—along with Chi’s scent.

Chi and Harmony ask ‘permission.’ Seven grants it, then shows them the glowing cell phone Roxxie loaned her, and Chi looks at it for two breaths.

Chi has two new cameras for me, and exchanges them for the ones I wear.

Chi seems to like the smashed camera—she puts it in her purse after removing the memory stick.

Harmony takes the tiny square from Chi and puts it in her right e-thumb.

Chi points eyes and ears at a glowing television. A blue bar grows, then stops.

“Prepared!” says Harmony.

Chi gives her another tiny rectangle that mostly slides into a slot on Harmony’s left e-thumb. Another blue bar temporarily grows, then both bars disappear.

“The last image from the broken camera...”

The file-management screen is replaced by a close-up picture of a big male dragon’s claws—Rall’s claws—on my head.

Perhaps the two-leggeds will want to see this... but... (grumble).

Chi and Harmony go to the Dragon’s shed to do some video-work, and Harmony leaves a memory card for Roxxie—it’s got copies of the video on it. Roxxie returns, gives Rall an injection, and orders two adult males and a female to return to the

Temporary Buildings immediately. She tells me that she also wants to return to Temporary Building Three, because her dragon-doctoring was interrupted when Rall was attacked. Lizabeth wants to go with her and wants me to go as well. Roxxie is glad to have help carrying, and I feel gratified that Lizabeth (and perhaps Roxxie) feel secure when I'm around.

"Flash-bang, ten paces," says Roxxie. Lizabeth drops the metal detector and puts her hands over the headset that already cover her ears... I close my eyes and fold my own.

BANG! Roxxie's warning was enough—I can pretend nothing has happened. What a strange game... but I can do this.

When I open my eyes, Roxxie is looking up. Lizabeth has a chirping metal detector pointed at my neck.

"Roxxie! Here!" Lizabeth's voice is impossibly loud.

Roxxie looks at Lizabeth, closes her eyes and lowers her head a talon-length.

"Apologies, honorable Anar," Lizabeth whispers. Roxxie moves behind my head, where I can't see her forepaws...

A brief sting on the back of my neck... I succeed in keeping quiet; grumbling won't help Roxxie help me. Roxxie looks up at the flying machines until the machine chirps and Lizabeth whispers "Another."

Roxxie moves, and again a quick sting followed by an alcohol scent. I know what's expected of me... but the smell of my own blood makes me angry.

"Flash-bang, eight paces" says Roxxie, and I close my eyes and ears.

BANG!

A half-breath later Lizabeth finds the last needle... but it takes one and a half for Roxxie to pull it out.

(grumble)

Lizabeth puts Roxxie's metal detector back in its case without

taking off the headset first. The connecting cord bounces and changes my mood—I want to laugh... but I know better.

"Disoriented," I tell Roxxie.

I'm able to stand easily—as if I was a smaller dragon.

Roxxie whispers to Lizabeth. "He's disoriented, but not clumsy, not lethargic, and can speak. Probably Quint." (gesture of submission) then Roxxie whispers to me. "How would you feel if Lizabeth went to get her med-kit?"

(grumble) "You get it."

"I will. Can you walk as far as the sleeping cave and take her there?" Roxxie's nose briefly points at Lizabeth.

"Easily." I put a paw behind and back, and Lizabeth jumps up. I want to roar at the noisy machines but Lizabeth is already scared.

Two far-away flying machines scream at me and approach.

Roxxie whispers to Lizabeth "They won't shoot if you're on his back. Take videos the entire time you're traveling, and make sure to include those if they get close." Roxxie points her nose at the pair of flying machines.

(grumble)

"Sleeping cave," says Lizabeth quietly, as if she's sleepy... I glance at her and she looks tired and sad. I walk carefully on the proper trail even though it seems improperly uneven...

Roxxie and her machines stay behind--she's busy doing something. Good.

One breath later I (grumble) at the ground. I shouldn't get angry at it for being rough and shaky—it won't help. Two black flying machines follow a pink one that's following me. My neck hurts.

"Sleeping cave," says Lizabeth. I wish I could put a cape on her.

The pink flying machine comes closer. A pair of black ones are not far enough overhead.

"Sleeping cave."

Perhaps her cape is there... For thirty paces I quickly trot away from the flying machines. Then I slow and fold my ears twice when I must swerve to avoid dropped flash-bangs. I will not allow

the machines to get videos of me acting scared—especially that pink one that flies so close. The proper trail to travel seems too steep and the stones underfoot seem rubbery. I wonder if I'm lost. The noises in the sky follow and make me want to run... but I won't. I try to trot faster but I cannot decide where to place my paws fast enough. The ground shakes no matter where I step, but I cannot let that bother me. I must travel.

I'm relieved when I find it, but the sleeping-cave entrance seems different. My favorite paw-sized stone is sparkly and interesting while the darkness deep in the cave appears absolute and uninteresting. My nose tells me there are many dragons that way... and my ears tell me that the pink flying machine is no longer close. Two black machines are making buzzing noises and fly higher than any tree is tall.

I want to touch the pretty stone.

"Sleeping cave."

I wonder what's wrong with her? but the stone can wait. I take two paces into the cave, then stop... too many big male dragons that way... but there's Dee's scent. What's she doing here? I can't see her.

Lizabeth sighs and settles. "Honorable Anar." She's had a difficult day... doing what? I can't remember. She's shedding tears... but she's also happy.

There are cameras where the sun shines into the cave, and I stand in front of two of them.

Stupid flying machines... these overlarge insects must be what disturb Lizabeth. The pink one is the closest, but the bigger dark-colored ones are louder. I fold my ears... the noise is probably ruining the video-sound as well as my mood. They won't scare me--I won't let them.

(grumble)

One of the loud machines drops a tiny ball and I watch it fall. When it hits the ground, it makes a bright flash and a BANG. Lizabeth's shriek of surprise follows, and that almost makes me

twitch. That would not be good. These machines should never see me scared. I will not be moved.

"I won't let anything happen to you." I tell Lizabeth quietly, then bare my teeth at the loud flying machines. I don't want them to come closer... but they are.

I feel very strong. There are two cameras pointed at me, and I know the two-leggeds will like watching me be brave and protect Lizabeth. I will not fail. My right paw closes around a pile of pebbles. I can't throw them far enough, but I want to try.

Another ball drops... I say "Flash-bang" like Roxxie did. Since squinting doesn't look brave, I time a blink so I don't see the bomb when it explodes four paces from my front paws. After the noise, I take one of the two paces that would bring me out from the sleeping cave and angrily challenge-roar at the machines in the sky. I hope the cameras recorded that... it was a good roar... but my throat hurts more. The machines retreat.

Dee's scent--stronger this time... but when I look back, Seven is ten paces behind me. She drops an ear and lifts her chin.

I wonder what she wants.

One last glance at the pair of departing flying machines, and I stare at the pink one. It then leaves, following the others. Behind me, Dee pulls on a rope and a net falls behind me that mostly covers the entrance with linked hempen cords. Good idea... but I can't see one of the cameras now. I feel diminished.

Roxxie is there, wearing a pink cape... and she's on the wrong side of the network of cords. She noses her way underneath, then quietly asks "Permission to approach!" Roxxie remembered to ask!

"Granted," replies Dee, barely speaking above a whisper.

"Both Quint and Battle-Boss," Roxxie whispers.

Dee (gestures of submission) to Roxxie. Why? What's so important about Roxxie? Lizabeth slides down my tail, then runs and hugs Dee.

Roxxie whispers "Put these in your collection" and gives

Lizabeth three black tubes in a clear bag. "Not the best sort of reward for your bravery, but it's all we've got."

Lizabeth takes the tubes and also takes a half-talon length cylinder from Roxxie's purse. She holds the pretty blue thing to her nose, then (gestures of submission) to me and whisper-asks "Can you scent this?"

Dee points her nose closer to the cylinder but does not approach. This is what a big dragon should do.

The canister hisses, but its scent seems uninteresting.

"Can you smell it?" asks Lizabeth. She holds the hissing blue metal under her own nose and tries scenting, then shakes her head.

I scent again with Lizabeth, more carefully this time. The hissing cylinder's scent is only dry and cold... Lizabeth's scent is more interesting. She twists something small and the hissing ceases. I rumble my approval--and sit. One breath later, my chin is between my forepaws and my eyes close. Something hisses near my nose, followed by a brief sting in my neck. I'm too tired to open my eyes to see what stung me, but I smell Roxxie.

"He'll probably want to sleep now, if he's not already." She's behind my ears, near my neck.

"Roxxie?" Lizabeth's voice seems to come from underneath my head. "Why?"

"Lizabeth, he can't know where you are. Come here."

"Yes, doctor... but why?"

"Politics."

Third's voice... "Why'd they want to shoot *him*?" I can hear Third's heart and every breath he takes, but I can't move my ears.

"Why give him drugs to make him angry and disoriented, then drop flash-bangs nearby? They wanted videos that would make Anar look bad."

"Roxxie..."

Roxxie ignores Dee and continues. "It didn't work. He only grumbled at me after I was slow pulling the last needle out."

Dee's voice, but she's next to my right paw. "Roxxie--why don't you want to speak to us?"

"I've got work to do. For speed's sake I was his pharmacist and delivery dragon."

"I'll help you," says Seven's voice.

"Good! Elizabeth, you stay here and read what's in my lab book." Two scents fade...

Elizabeth's voice: "Prelim contents syringe three: Water, sodium chloride, Battle-Boss, tween-twenty, potassium phosphate."

I try to pay attention... I hear breathing and four dragon-hearts beating. Then a dragon sniffs my nose... I can't detect any scents.

Elizabeth chants "Patient: Attacked by three dart-drones, complicated by recent scale-shedding. Treatment: Patient tolerated three ex needle removal despite two ex flash-bangs and large doses of Battle-Boss and Q five. Prog... prognosis: good. Mental testing needed."

I try to scent, but my nose can only remember warm toast and peanut butter.

I can't remember if I'm wearing cameras. When I move my ears to find out, I learn nothing—

I can't tell if my eyes are open or not. I hear Third breathing--he's close--but he doesn't speak.

I can think confused thoughts that won't show up on-camera. Useless. Because... not my fault. Darts. Drugs. Yet... now I'm useless, failing the dragons following in my footsteps.

As if from far away, the little dragon asks "Permission to approach!"

I try and fail to answer--I've said 'granted' to her many times. Third rumbles a sad 'granted' and I relax.

"Elizabeth, touch his lips in front. Permission to approach!"

Third rumbles wordlessly a tenth of a breath, then asks "Mona?"

"Honorable Third! Honorable Anar!" Mona waits a half-breath, then says 'Permission to approach!' loudly. The little dragon waits

a half breath and asks again--and again. I try to respond.

Lizabeth's quiet-voice. "I can feel his lips move!"

Chi's voice--she's closer to my ears than Lizabeth. "Anar, now I know you can hear me. Jade said this happened to him after he ate the Quintessence bread. It can cause paralysis for more than a hundred breaths. The effect will pass, Anar. It's like sleeping, but you're awake at the same time. You will recover. The two-leggeds call this a 'side-effect.' We will watch over you. This will pass. Lizabeth, I think you can hug him if you want to—I'll hold your camera."

Perhaps I can feel her warmth behind my ears...

"Honorable Chi, this dragon must go to the Dragon's shed. Lizabeth and her dragon are going to be e-warriors."

"I'll come back, Anar!" I can't reply to Lizabeth but I try.

More scents fade.

Chi speaks quietly but clearly. "Jade told me when this happened to him, he pretended to be once again sleeping on the villager's boat. He was afraid that, when he dreamed his claws might twitch and make a hole that could sink the boat, so Jade held himself close."

"Imagine." Roxxie's voice, near my left ear. "A dragon like me learning medicine from a random watch-and-scent dragon."

Chi make a dismissive noise from the other side of my head.

Roxxie continues. "This drug is weak and takes twenty breaths to work, and it won't work if you try to stay awake." A brief sting in my neck is followed by advice: "Don't fight it."

Dee's voice... "A dragon was dosed with Quintessence, and when he's became like Anar is now, a two-legged says mysterious chants and waves a stick with feathers on the end. When the dragon started to regain control of himself, the two-legged rubbed the feathers onto the dragon's chest and said 'Power!' over and over until it was tired. By then, the dragon was on his feet, and asked the two-legged what it was doing. The two-legged said it was casting a magic spell and entertaining a drugged dragon at

the same time. It worked--the two-legged and the dragon were better friends afterwards."

When I wake, the Great Fireball is far above the horizon. My mouth and nose feel dry.

"Honorable Anar, are you thirsty?" Chi's voice.

I rumble an affirmative.

Chi wants to put a tube between my side teeth and I don't understand why... then water trickles into my mouth.

"Roxxie left some medicine-for-pain. Let me know if you want it." Chi turns something metal-shiny and the water comes out faster. It hurts to swallow, but feels good to drink.

A female dragon stands, then trots further into the sleeping cave. "He's awake!" Seven's voice whispers.

Fourth rumbles approval. Second scents my nose. Lizabeth says "What?"

"He's awake," says Third.

"Honorable! Is he healthy?"

"His scent is good," says Chi.

Lizabeth makes a happy noise. She hugs my left front, then says "I'll tell Mona," and runs out of the sleeping cave.

"I wish Stretch was here," says Dee. She trots after Lizabeth. "Don't go where I can't follow!" Two breaths later, I faintly hear Dee say "I'll carry you, because you're not supposed to get dirty or sweaty. Are my cameras pointed in front?"

I point my eyes and ears at Chi, then look after Lizabeth and Dee.

"They'll be fine. Roxxie's flying machine gathered video of the dart-shooters landing on a Vulgarian ship. The Vulgarians won't send more flying machines."

"Mona's using the internet at the Dragon's shed. She is the big dragon of two-legged politics until I travel there." Chi looks in my eyes, then scents my ears, then gets cameras out of her purse

and puts them on me. "If you go there, don't point your nose or ears at the camera on the shed's roof. You can look at it from behind... but it also records sounds, so don't breathe on it. How does your throat feel when you swallow?"

Not good.

"You want the medicine Roxxie left for you?"

No...

"Don't go anywhere without your paw-pads--not even to make a mark."

Two breaths later, she asks "Are you going to the Dragon's shed? Yes? then try to stay clean because a hundred cameras will be pointed at you. Also, First knows that I want some down-your-throat pictures, but I didn't tell him how valuable those pictures will be for the big dragon of politics."

Not one, but three cameras on the roof... and one slowly spins around. Many dragons are ignoring them. First is standing by the door of the Dragon's shed, watching Pax... she's talking to a smallish video-screen that's near cameras... probably recording her not-proper behavior. Graith points a camera at Pax—it's attached to her purse. When I get closer, she points her camera at me.

I wish she'd point her camera at the dragonet, but not enough to grumble.

"Permission to approach, granted," says First. "Second and Fourth are looking for Roxxie's flying machine." I point eyes, nose, and ears at First, and he continues. "Roxxie says her machine was attacked and fell out of the sky, but it contains important high-rez video."

Pax runs underneath me, looks up, sheds two tears, and a tenth of a breath later, runs and stands again in front of cameras and a video-screen.

I do not understand. Pax has never behaved like a two-legged

before--or talked to glowing screens. Graith winks at me and points her nose at my cameras. Pax is entertaining the two-leggeds with tears?

Six breaths pass while Vlad photographs the damage the darts did to my neck scales and Seven putting Roxxie's metal-detector machine on my neck. The metal detector is quiet until it finds metal buttons on Vlad's clothes.

When the video-screen in front of Pax dims, the dragonet approaches. She wants to see my chipped scales, and then looks down my throat. Graith points her camera as Pax looks--when I open my mouth, I discover her camera has a light. Vlad has bigger lights and a separate, bigger camera, so... Graith points her camera at Vlad as he balances a big camera on three metal sticks and turns on the lights. He and his camera wait for me to open my mouth again.

I point eyes, ears, and nose at Vlad and wait. Not quite one breath later, I have Vlad's attention. I lower an ear and lift my chin. I nod when Vlad takes one step closer; then he takes two more and I nod like a two-legged again. When I show his cameras what the inside of my throat looks like, Vlad is behind my right ear-- that seems proper to me.

Pax is whispering in my left ear. "This dragon has told Captain Diana that Sue's guests could come only to look at you. She does not know how many guests want to come yet. Is this proper?"

I don't know why they'd want to visit—I can't answer their questions or tell any stories—but why not. What harm could it do? I decide to meet the two-leggeds two hundred paces away from the sleeping cave.

"One meter clearance, please." An older two-legged male stands in front of the lowest of my neck-wounds and keeps the other two-leggeds from trying to touch it. The other two-leggeds will listen because I licked him. Perhaps I should have accepted the captain's offer of crewmembers to assist with 'crowd control'

but this seems to work.

There are so many two-leggeds... and some of them constantly talk.

When Elizabeth approaches, I don't scent her—she's just one more two-legged in a crowd of too many. Her white uniform draws my attention, and I see her two breaths before she wraps herself around my right front.

“Anar!”

Elizabeth is smaller than almost all the others, most of whom I've never scented before—and I take the excuse to stand. I put a paw behind-and-back.

Elizabeth pulls herself up onto my paw and says “Anar, a big dragon of two-legged Justice wants to ask me questions!”

I push Elizabeth up onto my back as far as I can, and she does the rest. I lick my helper once more since I can't say ‘honorable.’

The two-leggeds are lining up behind me, as if they wish to follow in my footsteps. I'm tired of this loud crowd of two-leggeds... and travel a little faster than I usually do. Many of them cannot run ten paces when they try to follow in my footsteps.

First stands near the open window of the Dragon's shed. I approach, and after we greet, I look in the window that First stands near... four dragonets, paw-pads, and wires. The dragonets are looking at glowing televisions and are typing too fast for me to see the letters. First tells me Chi asked for dragonet-time on the Dragon-forums.

I leave my paw-pads in my neck-pack. Every dragon has something to do, except me... but if a dragon with a throat too swollen to speak had somehow asked me for something to do, I'd recommend sleeping. If I sleep behind Pax, she can use me as a background as she speaks... but many dragons want to greet me.

Harmony (gestures of submission) in front of me, and Pax curls her tail around my right front when I investigate the video-screen she's speaking to. Insect-noises come from a speaker in Pax's

ear.

Harmony has connected a video-screen to a computer and to a pair of paw-pads. Mona, Hizoner, and Lizabeth are in the video, all looking in front... but when Lizabeth speaks, I can't hear anything. Harmony is holding a speaker... she gestures of submission, then glues it to my left ear.

Lizabeth's speaker-voice: "... too close. One of the darts that bounced off his neck fell next to Roxxie."

The image of a two-legged female says "How many of these darts did you see strike Anar?"

"Perhaps four? Not all of them went in. Roxxie's video cameras recorded all six. That's how Roxxie knew where to look for the needles, that and the metal detector."

Mona gives Lizabeth a piece of paper bearing text. The words 'shorter answers' are revealed when Lizabeth flattens it on the tabletop. Mona sniffs the air and then looks over Lizabeth's head.

"Five minute recess," orders the unknown female.

Mona waits until Lizabeth is on her back, then runs. Harmony takes the speaker out of my ear so I can stand and greet.

"You should be resting," says Lizabeth as she leans against my right front.

Mona agrees with her, so I try to. Mona tells Lizabeth that the two-legged big dragon wants short answers so she can control the story and make it easy to understand. As she speaks, I scent Lizabeth again.

I stand, then type 'Lizabeth's scent has changed' with the paw-pads Harmony provided. The text shows on Harmony's video-screen. Graith checks Lizabeth's scent, then looks at Mona.

"Males."

Mona almost winks at Graith. "This dragon should return to the video-conference now."

Of course Lizabeth goes with Mona, but Cee and Junior follow them and attempt to scent. Graith tells Cee's tail "She's not going to be fertile for a long time and you males are already sniffing

around her!"

I look at Graith, who says 'Hormones' to me as if that explained this.

A speaker near Cee makes sounds--the two-legged big dragon asks dragon-visitors to refrain from scenting the witness while she speaks.

Hizoner asks for 'permission' and gets it. He pokes his e-thumb over his shoulder and asks Graith why Cee is so interested in Elizabeth's scent.

"Elizabeth's scent is changing--because of hormones."

"She's young for that."

"She smells healthy. Chi thinks it's because of the food that Elizabeth eats when she's on the *Four*."

"That's possible, honorable Graith."

"Mona told Elizabeth that her instincts allow her to choose proper food, but Chi told Elizabeth to look at Sue's guests—and then Elizabeth said Chi is smart enough to doctor both dragons and two-leggeds. Now Mona says some two-leggeds can make improper food that can fool any two-legged's instincts—even Elizabeth's. It's troubling... she believes anything Elizabeth says."

A faint, high whine makes both Graith and I look but we see only trees. Eighth moves between me and the noise, which proves to be a pink Roxxie-carrier.

"What *is* that?" asks Eighth. He's standing between me and Roxxie. That's probably what First likes his followers to do for wounded dragons, but I can't see...

"It's a hover-car." Roxxie's voice...she's close and approaching.

She's wearing a pink cape and has matching pink claws—her hover-car is the same shade of pink. She asks 'permission' properly, and I regret being only able to improperly drop an ear and lift my chin.

Roxxie (gestures of submission), then asks "Anything new down-your-throat?"

No...

"Then... you want to hear your medical report here?"

I nod... curious.

"I could whisper it," suggests Roxxie, but I shake my head 'no' like a two-legged for the cameras.

"Two drugs. The most dangerous is a kind of Quick called Battle-Boss. If that was going to kill you--or, more likely, me--that would have happened yesterday. The Quint is another thing entirely... there's never been a lethal dose recorded, but I've read reports of brain damage. The dragons that know you best will be the first to notice."

"Also... your behavior yesterday suggests that massive doses of Battle-Boss and Quint are nearly useless at altering a dragon's behavior. Because I know that's not true, I'm forced to conclude that qualities in yesterday's drugged dragon are the reason I'm still walking and talking. I should probably follow in your footsteps, like all these dragons who already do... and perhaps someday I will... but not yet. I feel personally insulted by what happened yesterday. I will find out who is responsible. That means I cannot let go of my money, so I can't be Dragon... but I still can do some good, here and now."

Roxxie puts a stretchy brimless hat that has lights and a camera in front. When she turns the light on and taps my nose, I open my mouth.

Two breaths later, Eighth says "What is that?"

"A tiny camera on a metal stick."

"Will you share the video?"

"That's not my decision to make."

"Why doesn't that thing choke Anar?"

"Because there's still room to maneuver, despite the swelling."

Something in my open mouth makes multiple clicks, and Roxxie removes her hat. "You'll heal... perhaps you've already noticed that you can swallow more easily. Don't try speaking until your throat feels better—you'll heal faster."

I rumble-speak a 'yes' but Roxxie subtly shakes her head 'no.' I

wonder why... rumble speech doesn't hurt. Then I remember... such speech is improper in front of cameras.

Roxxie puts a long silvery machine in a box along with the strange stretchy hat she was wearing, and takes two tubes from another. "Anar, I'd like a sample of your tears for non-medical reasons." Graith grumbles at this... but I think Roxxie means well. She's staring at Vlad... when he looks at her, she points her nose at me. Vlad points cameras at me.

I fill her tubes with tears, but it takes a breath and a half. Eighth, Graith, and a pair of dragonets take pictures of me making my eyes water.

Roxxie then tells me I should be resting somewhere quieter.

Third is near the entrance of the sleeping cave, and he victory-roars soon after I scent him.

Third orders Fourth to travel to First and report, and then tells me of seeing three very-high up flying machines flying together three hundred thirty breaths ago, and, just one breath ago, a pink machine approaching with Roxxie on it.

The pink hover-car moves as if it was sliding, then settles three paces away.

Roxxie is now wearing a close-fitting white cape that also wraps around her body and legs, and it has a letters on the front that say 'Doctor Roxxie.'

"My minions are making a neck-bandage for you. I want you to wear it for non-medical reasons--and this time it's not just for a photo-op; besides the built-in sensors, it will resist darts better than your scales. Don't worry about the cost—my staff made a lot of money selling the right-to-publish the first known photo of Anar crying. I don't like the tabloid newspaper that paid the most, but what else can a dragon do? Open your mouth, honorable Anar, I've got medicine for you."

Two breaths pass, during which I hear a hissing and a strange

taste in my mouth.

"Honorable Anar, physically you'll be fine--but no roaring for thirty thousand breaths." Roxxie plugs my paw-pads into her cell-phone. I stand on my pads, but it seems best to let Roxxie talk. I respond with a typed 'honorable' and Roxxie continues. "My staff has combed thru the litter-achure and can find only one case where a dragon was twice dosed on Quint. I strongly recommend against any further experiments in Quintessence tolerance."

I type 'my dain is bramaged enough.'

"Honorable! You understand."

I type 'y'

Roxxie connects a box to my paw-pads wires. "Is it acceptable that the two-leggeds see the dart videos? You'll see hundreds of posts on Dragon-forums telling you what you should have done to avoid being stung."

'y'

"If it was me, I'd do the same. It's the best way to get the two-leggeds to understand what happened."

Roxxie reads something on her cell phone. "One of Mona's enemies offered a huge amount of money for a piece of Mona-meat. I sent him something I cell-cultured and thoroughly cooked with gamma rays. I don't think he's going to pay me—seems the gamma-rays angered him a great deal. I don't know why... radiating the cell-culture meat made it possible to ship unrefrigerated." Roxxie winks at me. "Those gamma rays broke the DNA in the meat... there's nothing longer than a thousand nucleotides, but that's just long enough to prove it's from Mona. It took a long time to cook because I could only irradiate five grams at once. I'm sorry he didn't appreciate it."

Perhaps Roxxie is trying to entertain me...

"I know what you're going to ask next, Anar. No, I'm not cloning her, and no DNA samples have left the lands that you control--but that should change. I want to put her samples in my mausoleum. That's where I keep DNA samples, including my own, should I

ever have a desire to clone myself. I also want to put some of your samples in there but don't want to tell you because you'll think that I think you're something special.”

Roxxie pushes a green triangle on her cell phone and points the screen at me. “I made a video. You want to see it? It’s short.”

‘y’

Besides video-pix of flying machines shooting darts at me, Roxxie twice included Rall’s paw on my head. I’m surprised when Roxxie stops the video before it's finished.

She notices that I noticed... and says "You don't want to see the end. That's where I put the pictures I took when you shed tears. It's a natural place to put a plea to send money..." Roxxie winks.

I push the little green triangle on Roxxie’s cell phone and watch the video to the end. Besides my tears, it includes Vlad's pictures of my chipped neck-scales and a video of down-my-throat, and it ends with eight breaths of me trotting clumsily to the sleeping cave with Lizabeth on my back. I can't understand why two-leggeds like these videos—but Roxxie says they are ‘a license to print money’ especially when she pays to advertise them.

Then Roxxie gets a message on her cell phone. She glances at it, then trots further into the sleeping cave faster than is proper. I almost follow her, then remember my paw-pads. As I put them in my neck-pack, I monitor Roxxie’s changing scent. I find her alone alone in the dim. She's holding something warmer than she is and softly speaking. I cannot make out the machine’s reply from the proper ten paces for asking 'permission' and I don't want to interrupt... not even with a rumble-word. Roxxie is angry and taking short, quick steps as she listens... as if some dragon had pushed her into cold water. Four breaths later, Roxxie is telling her glowing box about frozen bank accounts and randomly walks while she does it. When she wanders within four paces, she sees me and drops the warm box when she jumps a talon-length straight up.

"ANAR! Don't sneak up on me like that!"

I rumble an apology. Since my throat doesn't hurt much, I try another word.

"Approach."

Roxxie picks up the pink box, then follows my order. She moves stiffly yet quickly. I hold her as if we were waiting for an egg, trying to breathe slower and deeper than I usually do. Seven breaths after that, Roxxie speaks rapidly.

"The Vulgarian government froze my bank accounts and all my Vulgarian properties have been seized and my favorite sleeping pod is on the back of an army flatbed truck and my pilot's license has been..."

She stops speaking and two breaths pass. When she speaks again, she sounds better.

"Anar, I've got work to do." She pulls away from me and stands, then pokes the warm box she was speaking to earlier. It glows.

"Still works. I can't leave now... my pink helicopter would be a tempting target. Word on the street says a bankster-two-legged wants a piece of me, but he'll only pay a hundredth of what he'll pay for Mona."

Roxxie taps the box again and the glow fades. She takes three paces, turns, takes three more...

"Approach."

It only takes two breaths before she settles this time, but she's tilted her warm toy against my right paw with her talon hovering over it.

"You want to hear my will?"

No... Again, I try to breathe slowly. Two breaths...

"Sanctioned by the Vulgarians and six of their puppet-governments..."

Three breaths...

"I know a lot of secrets... but they won't make much sense to you. Rich two-leggeds are weird."

Two breaths... "They cancelled my auction of the wooden egg... but Chi would have won."

Two breaths... "I can't get more fuel for the hover-car so I can't use it to explore your sleeping cave."

Five breaths... "If you weren't such a decent dragon I'd be angry with you."

Thirty breaths later, Roxxie sleeps. Fifteen breaths after that, Chi approaches. I drop an ear and lift my chin when she asks 'permission.'

Chi's scent wakes Roxxie.

Chi speaks as Roxxie's eyes open. "Impressive... I don't think I could sleep if the Vulgarian government declared economic war on me."

"Anar insisted."

Chi points her eyes and ears at me. "Did you know that when Mona gets angry, she can speak faster than Junior can spit acorns?" I'd like to rumble-laugh... "She has a lot to say. Dragonic Logic at a thousand words per breath."

"Bred for quickness," adds Roxxie. "Helps with intelligence."

"The two-leggeds like it."

"They'd like it more if Mona would wear mascara."

Both Chi and I give Roxxie our full attention.

"Since her diet has improved, her eyelashes are nearly clear and scarcely show on-camera."

—

Rachel is the only two-legged Dragon with mascara.

I tell Lizabeth that Mona will never voluntarily wear it, and I'm right. But Rachel likes the idea, so naturally Carson offered his eyelashes. After Rachel applied mascara to for a half-breath, Lizabeth almost makes a happy noise.

The little dragon asks me to stay and watch—Chi will want video of the first time she gets her eyelashes painted and I'm already wearing cameras.

Rachel starts painting Mona's eyelashes, and a half-breath after Rachel starts, Lizabeth makes a happy noise.

(happy rumble)

Soon, both two-legged females want to paint Pax's eyelashes, and Mona agrees... but the dragonets are reading and e-thumbing. They decide to put mascara on me. I tolerate this, but think that my cameras mostly video the top of Lizabeth's head for three breaths. Lizabeth soon steps backwards and tells me that my eyelashes aren't long enough for my face.

Rachel says she has a solution for that, but becomes quiet after I look at her. Lizabeth notices this; she wipes off my mascara, then decides to help Rachel 'touch-up' Carson's eyelashes with the paint. I watch and point my cameras at them, and they talk as they paint; Lizabeth makes another happy noise when she learns mascara comes in many colors.

Pax approaches, and I drop an ear and lift my chin. The dragonet wraps herself around my right front like Lizabeth does.

Rachel stops painting Carson's eyelashes, then takes pictures. She then makes her cell-phone show Lizabeth examples of multicolored mascara while Pax watches Lizabeth closely. Twelve breaths later, Pax says she wants blue mascara to be the symbol of the speaker-for-dragonets. Lizabeth makes a happy noise and says that's her favorite of the colors she's seen. Pax winks at Rachel. I gently rumble-laugh a half-breath, and when Lizabeth asks Pax if I'd have to wear it too, Pax says no, so Lizabeth tells me I should wear silver mascara because 'it would look good on you.'

Rachel informs me that Vlad will arrive within twenty breaths to do additional video recording with his superior cameras. I can scent him in five breaths.

Vlad takes close-up pictures of Mona, because Rachel wants to fix 'make-up fails' where Carson's mascara was applied unevenly. I think Carson likes this—it's better than being waxed. Lizabeth asks Rachel if she can put mascara on herself 'for the cameras,' but starts wiping it off ten breaths after Rachel is finished. I'm sure Lizabeth realized Mona doesn't like it, despite the little dragon's

desire to hide her feelings. Mona also dislikes lipstick and rouge on Lizabeth. I can't remember what happened when Rachel put 'eye shadow' on Lizabeth...

This is strange... I don't belong here. This cave is too big... it makes Third look small. I must be dreaming.

"She's due to appear within thirty breaths," Third tells me as I follow in his footsteps. The sleeping cave is overlarge and shaped like a giant dome... but that doesn't seem important. Somehow, I know Mona's speech will be 'televised,' but don't know why or how Mona traveled to Vulgaria to give her speech... and it's not worth noticing that I can't remember. "What will she say?" I ask.

"She'll ask the two-leggeds to stop shooting at us. Did you read her speech?"

"I can't remember."

Third points a paw at one of four glowing televisions. "This one is the live-feed from the Vulgarians, and this one is Purity's purse-camera, and... there she is!"

A video-Mona approaches a silver sapling without branches or leaves and gestures of submission at it from a half-pace away. She's wearing dark-colored mascara.

"This dragon would like to apologize for appearing here instead of Anar (gesture of apology). Mona's big dragon is not able to speak here today due to medical reasons, and cannot respond to communications at the present time." Mona pauses with her eyes closed for almost an entire breath.

"This dragon also wants to apologize for her appearance." (gesture of apology) "She wears mascara to please Lizabeth. This dragon does not want to create a disturbance, she only wishes to please her best friend. A dragon wearing mascara can manipulate two-leggeds emotionally. Because this dragon wants to please her friend, she may sabotage her efforts in seeking justice. She should not allow herself to become what she

hates. Apologies.” (gesture of apology)

The televisions become dimmer, and when Mona begins to speak again, I cannot hear her.

I’m very tired, but the sound of flying machines is very important. Stay on task... watch Third. Ignore the throat-pain... If we can’t find two-leggeds, we’re in trouble.

“Don’t push on the middle,” Third advises. “Sometimes it cracks. It’s better to lean on the corners when you want to look in the windows.”

Third demonstrates by putting his right front on the building’s stairs and his left front on the edge of the building. By stretching his neck, Third can look in any of three different windows that were too high before.

“That looks dangerous.” It hurts to speak.

“The buildings are strong... but no fresh scents of two-leggeds here... let’s try that one.”

Third looks inside another building.

“No two-legged scent in this building either.”

Strange... these buildings are huge and empty. Where are all the two-leggeds?

Third seems to know what I’m thinking. “The immature two-leggeds have a building all to themselves called a school. There’ll be hundreds of them to play with there. I found a school around here thirty-six thousand breaths ago, but all the children were gone. Since I didn’t know they’d come back, I didn’t bother to... there it is! That building, with the looping road in front.”

“Honorable Third!” The scent of many two-leggeds comes from the building. Perhaps we’ll be safe.

“Now... how to convince them?”

Two-legged screams come from inside the school.

“Apologies.” That’s not a good way to begin a request for help, but Third decides to continue. “Sorry to disturb you, but my friend and I want to play in your playground, and if we can, we want to

play with anyone that wants to play with us. Also, four flying machines are following us, and we don't know what to do about them."

A tiny two-legged with a flat, shiny box bigger than her face runs to me. "I'll ride on your back."

I don't think she can climb up from a behind-and-back paw while carrying that shiny box, so I put her on Third's back.

She's not happy. "They're not trying to shoot Third."

"Can't be helped."

"I'm texting my friends."

"Honorable."

A two-legged female exits the school. She has trouble walking in the grass because of her strange shoes, and her speech is angry. "Ain't nobody gonna shoot no dragon while I'm on two feet."

I put her on Third's back as well, and she makes a happy noise that reminds me of Gran's 'Laura Mercy.'

"Anar!" Third is almost angry. I look at him, then look where he's looking.

These flying machines don't make much noise, and I didn't notice how close they'd come.

I stand near Third, then turn tail at the nearest flying machine. I lift my tail as high as I can for a tenth of a breath.

Shrieks come from the school building... but they seem to be happy shrieks. Doors open and loud, immature two-leggeds come out. "More!" "Awesome!" "Do it again!"

I lie down so the tiny two-leggeds can get close to my head and neck. "Permission to approach, granted." That hurt...

I point my cameras at the children standing a half-pace away me, and then at a pair of dart-drones that buzzes overhead. I don't know what else to do...

An immature male asks me "Can I see your teeth?"

"I don't have any," I say very quietly.

"What are those?" the two-legged male points at my mouth.

"These teeth? I rent them."

“From who?”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s the rent?”

“I do all the maintenance.”

Third puts an immature female on my back, then pretend-licks her. Most of the two-leggeds watching make strange noises when they see Third’s tongue flick near her.

“Lick me!” orders an immature two-legged male.

I’m too tired to care. My eyes close.

The ground shakes as if Big Dragon was approaching, but I cannot find a scent to go with the giant footsteps. I stand on my hind legs briefly and see a very large dragon approaching. I try scenting once more and decide this must be a two-legged machine since it bears no animal scents. I do scent Mona, but fail to find her... perhaps she’s logically fleeing these footsteps. I hope so... but her scent doesn’t fade.

The very large dragon looks at me through a piney tree top. “Permission to approach, granted!” and she adds “Approach, honorable Anar!”

She’s twice as tall as me but her scent says she’s Mona.

“You’ll look so dashing!” Mona pulls a black-and-white cloth out of her neck-pack. “It’s warm as well as beautiful, Anar. This dragon hopes you like it.”

She uses her teeth and one paw to put the black-and-white cloth on me—black on the sides and back, but fluffy white in front. Her talons are twice as long as mine and very sharp, but she can fasten all the buttons faster than I can take one breath.

“It has a hat that goes with it, but we know better. Try this one instead—it still looks classy.” The hat is shiny black and tiny and sits between my ears. “This dragon thinks the infra-red camera is a proper accessory for your hat.” I can’t see what she does to the hat, but it clicks. “Now you can take video in dark places. Using the lights makes the batteries drain twice as fast... so more

batteries for you. Now one last look..."

She sits on her hind legs and looks at me. "Adorable!"

She moves... then, for half a breath, she gives me a hug that lifts my front paws off the ground. "Anar, you are... ready for action!"

(gesture of submission) seems proper... but I'm not sure.

"So formal! Anar, you are a genius! That was perfect, your fans will love it! Go forth and rule!"

I'm too confused to move, then decide to walk the way her nose is pointed. There's too many trees for an outfit like this... but she removes a few thorny bushes that were blocking my way. Soon she's holding an oak nearly sideways so I can pass without spoiling my clothes, and the tree doesn't even creak. How can she do that?

"Why not, camping in formal clothes!" and she starts laughing as she holds aside another oak. She seems as happy as if...

"Dragon Logic!" I try to make it sound important.

She laughs, touches my nose with hers, then licks my nose.

"Too good... so beautiful, honorable Anar. Your suit still looks nice, and we're at a perfectly good campsite! She bends three pines into a fourth and tangles them, making an arch. She takes a tiny metal square out of her neck-pack wrapped with string. She pulls the string and shakes, and a half-breath later the tiny metal square unfolds into a much larger sheet. She drapes the silvery fluttery crinkly shiny sheet over the bent tree tops, then (gestures of submission) to me.

Proper, yet strange behavior... and the shelter must be for me since she won't fit inside it. "Honorable!" The shiny plastic isn't so hard to look at in the dim.

"This campsite would be better with some water..."

She sheds her neck-pack and starts digging four paces away... two breaths later, the hole is deep enough for me to hide in. She says "Water table reached. How many liters per minute would you like, Sir Anar?"

(gesture of submission) “How thirsty are you?”

She laughs a half-breath... and it seems sincere. Did I really make her happy? “You have good ideas, Anar!” and the dirt flies.

Perhaps Lizabeth taught Mona how to play with dolls, and now Mona wants to fulfill the wishes of an Anar-doll... me. But I don't know where I am or where the other dragons are—let alone why the littlest dragon is now as large as Big Dragon but stronger and faster.

She leaps out of the huge hole she dug as if it was much less than eleven paces deep.

“Two-leggeds will build a village here because of this well, but they will need buckets and rope and eventually a windlass and a well-cover...”

Despite the digging, all her paws are clean and her talons are still long and sharp. She sees me examining them and says “I do most of the heavy work with my hind paws to spare my front claws.”

That doesn't make sense and goes against the evidence... then she winks. “The two-leggeds have heard about the well. News of water travels fast.”

Soon, two leggeds bring small food-beasts nearby. The food-beasts won't approach, so Mona makes water from the well flow to them with three swipes of her right paw.

“It's too slow to fill up again.” The well is suddenly empty; Mona jumps in and much muddy dirt flies out. “This well needs a name, Anar...” Some of the flying piles of muddy dirt are larger than I am... and she still throws more. I stay in the piney shelter so my outfit won't get dirty. When the dirt stops flying, I risk looking...

By running around as she runs up, she easily escapes the huge hole she made. The Boss or Big Dragon could never move like a dragonet, but she can.

“This dragon liked that, but she thinks the well is finished. What would you like to do next, honorable Anar?”

I need information... “Honorable Mona, I'd like to hear a story

about you.”

She laughs. “So honorable! But this dragon thinks you’d prefer to hear about Doctor WiseKoph or Professor Witticism.”

I don’t know what to say—she’s usually right about such things. But I want to understand what happened to her...

Two breaths later, Mona begins her story.

“Once, this dragon was one of the many who followed in your footsteps, but Lord Rots convinced the Vulgarian government to try to capture dragons of her type, and that didn’t work because brave dragons defended her. The Vulgarians made more attempts to capture this dragon... and dragons like you suffered. But because you were able to tell your story, you and yours became popular with Vulgarian two-leggeds. The two-leggeds in Vulgaria stopped paying attention to some of their government authorities and asked Lizabeth to become their Supreme.” Mona pauses, then shifts uneasily.

Perhaps Mona almost told a lie.

I rest my head between her paws and look up at her. She says “Perhaps this dragon was also asked.” Another pause. I don’t think she likes talking about herself. “Other two-leggeds think too highly of this dragon. I follow in your footsteps.”

“Honorable Mona.” Perhaps we should talk about something else. “Can I do anything for you?”

“Honorable Anar! You have done much already—more than any other dragon. All dragons and ninety seven percent of all two-leggeds have approved this dream.”

Her ears and nostrils twitch, her head turns, and the tip of her tail brushes my left front paw. “This dragon will be your talons and scales!” Twenty of her paces take her to the top of a mountain of wet dirt. The faint sound of a flying machine is now coming from the direction she points her head.

She removes a pointed metal tube from her purse. It’s twice as long as a front talon and about as thick, and the silver sides reflect sunshine. Mona places this on the dirt at her feet, then

backwards-walks twelve of her own footsteps and closes her eyes and ears.

The tube hisses like water on a fire and straight-line flies, leaving behind both a tree-sized cloud and a thin trail of white smoke. When she opens her eyes after the rocket flies, Mona looks at me rather than the rocket-smoke I'm staring at. The flying-machine sound stops abruptly.

"Apologies, honorable Anar. This dragon does not like the smoke and noise of rockets. Perhaps the defensive perimeter has a problem." Her front paws sometimes move as if they were on paw-pads, and her left eye has a bluish tint. She says "High-altitude saturation attack," then "What did Honorable Anar think of the rocket?"

"I don't understand it."

"Apologies! This dragon thought Purity explained to you. This dragon thinks Purity and Peace have built an excellent anti-drone rocket. They guesstimate that ten thousand rockets can be produced and delivered using available resources before the end of this month. This model is also the quietest when launched—this dragon likes that." Perhaps Mona finds my puzzled look alarming. "Not to worry, honorable Anar! Dragons will surely win this one, as each dart-drone costs five times as much as a 'Dragonet's Talon' rocket, and we only had to use forty-eight last week."

"Forty-eight?"

"Yes, honorable Anar. Sixteen percent less than last week. These rockets should be what a darted dragon would want to see... but perhaps not."

Suddenly, I'm very tired...

If this is what the two-leggeds want, then this is what they'll get. A two-legged male named Jim is teaching me how. "Just keep exhaling, no matter what—even if the fire goes out."

I reply with a "Prepared." I take a deep breath, freeze while the

two-legged male squirts a bad-tasting petrochemical into my mouth, then mouth-exhale noisily and sloppily over a metal candle. I try to pretend I've done this a thousand times already, but I almost step backwards when the fire starts and extends a half-pace from my face. When I'm done exhaling, the fire is still strong... I close my mouth anyway. Fortunately, the fire stops. Jim applauds and says "Well done!"

Jim told me what to do if the fire lasted too long. I inhale through my nose, then exhale again over the metal candle. There's twice as much fire this time.

Jim says "That's not possible."

The third breath makes enough fire to blacken a wall in front that was previously white. The air now smells bad.

"Run, Anar!" The two-legged male turns off the metal candle and moves towards the exit.

The fourth breath is the worst yet. I try to exhale slowly but the flames still bounce off the floor onto the far-away wall in front. The bad taste from Jim's petrochemical liquid grows stronger.

The next time I exhale, I intentionally breathe on a wall made of rectangular stones. When I cease exhaling, the opaque sheet of flames fades and reveals a dragon-sized hole.

Jim returns with a large red canister. Using this, he makes much white smoke, and the fire diminishes anywhere the smoke touches. The white smoke smells terrible; combined with the foul taste in my mouth, I almost cough as I inhale; and let myself cough as I exhale... a mistake. The canister fails Jim before he can subdue the fireball that my cough caused.

I want to go through the hole in the wall, but my fire has removed the blackened grass entirely. I don't want my feet touching the hot bubbly mess where the grass once was.

By now, Jim has a door open. I trot through it and hold my breath.

Why did I want to do this? What possible good could come of fire-breathing entertainment?

The foul taste in my mouth intensifies yet more as I inhale, and when I exhale, each cough sends huge fireballs one-after-the-other into the sky. I remember Jim's warning not to let flames come out my nose as well as my mouth, but he didn't tell me to do if it did... Fireballs fall from the sky, and one strikes the parking lot and fire splashes onto two-legged machines.

Jim has a hose that squirts water... lots of it and very fast. When I open my mouth and he aims the water into it, I cannot help swallowing a little. The water that flows out of my mouth is white and frothy, and when it contacts a smoldering clump of grass, fire dances on the top of the liquid.

The stream of water moves out of my mouth and onto nearby fiery grass. I inhale through both nose and mouth without intending to... and it doesn't hurt. Mouth-breathing feels very good... perhaps too good. Belatedly, I close my mouth as I inhale. Despite the foul taste that persists, my mouth-breathing didn't make me cough as I expected... but a petrochemical cannot be good for a dragon to breathe.

I exhale towards the sky, trying to avoid the building that I've already damaged, but nose and mouth emit enough flames to cause the side of the building to smoke. Jim shouts, but I cannot understand what he says.

I point my next exhalation at the base of a tree already on fire. The top of the tree falls towards me as the trunk breaks, and, without thinking about it, I exhale at the falling flaming treetop. It obediently reverses direction, but also burns faster and spreads fire to two unburned trees.

I don't want to be the big dragon of fire and chaos. Even if my entertainment was a success, the two-leggeds would not be improved by it. Why did I do this?

To minimize the damage I'm doing, I try to breathe as little as possible and point my fiery breath at the same place. Most importantly, I'm not going to mouth-breathe that foul-tasting petrochemical. What tastes so foul in my mouth should not taste

so good when inhaled.

I point my head where a burning tree once was and set the roots ablaze.

Inhale slowly... then exhale more fire onto the burning stump in front. My breath scatters hot dirt and burning vegetation. Some of the smaller burning bits travel far enough to fall where the trees are yet unburned. Fear of the heat makes me retreat three paces. My two-legged entertainment is an epic failure.

Inhale slowly... and realize I can smell two-legged blood. I find Jim under the top of a tree, unable to stand up. I remove the tree-top and shed a tear on his leg, then retreat two paces. I aim my inexorable exhalation where the burning tree once was, but I'm not where I was and my fiery breath is more intense than ever... and another large tree burns.

Inhale slowly... now my front paws are wet. My tear has turned into a pond. Jim is holding onto the piece of tree that struck him because it floats; I almost take a step away from the water, but I don't want to move because I'll cause yet more damage when I exhale.

Perhaps I can rinse my mouth... but the petrochemical spoils the water instead.

When I must exhale, I hold the same position and mimic my previous slow exhalation, and an already-burning tree burns a little faster... perhaps I can prevent further fires.

I inhale... and my feet are coated with the floating petrochemicals that came from my mouth. The branch that Jim is holding is also contaminated, spreading the stain as the wind pushes the piece of tree away from me. The petrochemical floating on the water spreads to a burning patch of vegetation.

The fire then spreads rapidly until I'm standing in fire that floats upon my tears. Strangely it doesn't hurt.

The smoke makes me want to cough, and soon a fireball splashes where a burning tree once stood. Despite the fire that plays on and near my scales, I cannot feel the heat. The pond of

tears offers very little resistance when I churn it to quell the fire. A pawful of dirt is as easy to gather as a lungful of air... and it's easy to throw. One pawful strikes a nearby flaming tree, knocking it down. Another pawful extinguishes the fire on the water.

I catch myself mouth-breathing. Now I feel better than good—perfect except for the taste of petrochemicals in my mouth. I throw dirt on every fire I see—and I can easily throw an impossible amount of dirt an incredible distance. The bad taste in my mouth intensifies, but I will not spit.

The fires I extinguish with thrown dirt don't stay out.

I put a pawful of dirt in my mouth, then exhale flames where trees once stood. As I inhale, I realize the bad taste has lessened. I try a pawful of mud... the bad taste becomes muddy. When I spit, only mud comes out. I repeat this feat once more before I must exhale, and the fire extends a half-pace.

“Your tears healed me, honorable Anar! I thought my leg was broken.”

I spit but do not speak for fear of flames—but rinsing my mouth with mud is working. My next breath is invisible.

“I've never seen a dragon eat mud before.” Jim watches me do exactly that, followed by my spitting. “Can I help?”

I shake my head. The petrochemical taste is gone—perhaps there is no need to eat and spit mud. I scent-see water since the local puddle of tears is flavored with Jim's petrochemical. Before I've finished traveling five paces, a familiar bad taste returns—along with flames a half-pace long. Back to the mud...

It's ridiculously easy to dig. A hole I can hide in takes me two breaths to dig; a stone twice the size and shape of the little dragon is easily moved with one paw and lifted with two—and I can stand with my front paws in the air as long as I want.

I can do anything... except breathe normally.

The bottom of the hole I've dug becomes wet; and it seems to become mud as fast as I want it to. After another breath the bottom of the hole fills with water.

Clean water—so clean I almost don't want to put my muddy face in it. I rinse my mouth and drink before the bad taste returns; muddy water isn't a big improvement but I like it for as long as it lasts.

Frustrated, I pick up the stone I'd moved earlier and almost throw it, but the stone is vaguely shaped like the little dragon, twice life-sized. I exhale onto blackened soil, but see no flames.

The stone change its shape while I hold it. I must be dreaming—I never stand on my hind legs this long even when I'm not holding a stone too heavy to carry—yet here I am. When I put the dragon-shaped stone on a small patch of unburned grass, stone talons sink into the vegetation.

When I must exhale, the flames are too small to touch the burned ground.

While inhaling slowly, I see the properly-colored dragon-shaped stone resembles Mona so closely that it has simulated scales. When I wish the strangely shaped stone was larger, it grows—and each paw rips the grass off the ground as it slides sideways. I put mud in my mouth before exhaling, and the flames remain small.

The Mona-shaped rock moves and speaks. “With just a little help, you'll be spitting bricks.”

Most unMonalike in both sound and speech. “Relax, big guy. I'll take care of the two-legged. You could have done it yourself if you wanted—you have Power. If you use this Power, you'll stop breathing fire without the mud. Try it, you'll be glad you did.”

Perhaps my puzzled expression followed by mud-spitting was communication enough.

“Power—the ability to get things done. Because you're such a decent goob, I've given you more than most. Let me demonstrate—you've always wanted to fly. Now before you is a flying machine that is as obedient as the little dragon. If you'd created that, you'd be fire-free for ten breaths, depending on optional accessories.”

Huge wings, wider than I am long and ten times longer from wingtip to wingtip... and I'm supposed to stand in the middle. It's

also in the place I was exhaling, but the machine seems unaffected by the fire and heat.

“I hope you’ll try the machine... not that you need it to fly. Try hovering a talon-length over your mud-hole.”

Mud drips from all four of my paws for five breaths, yet my feet still feel weight. I try to ignore this. Two breaths later, I’m lowered gently into the mud.

“The machine is so much fun to fly, you’d do it for hours... I meant you’d fly for many breaths. You’ll forget yourself and breathe fire in the sky, but what harm could that do? If you fly high, your flames won’t do damage—why don’t you try it? You can’t hurt yourself here. Nothing can cause the slightest damage to you.”

I do not understand this power. Why is it so easy to float above the mud but impossible to stop a tree from burning? Why won’t it work when I wish that the grass was green and growing under my paws? Where are the trees I want to see?

The power acts when I wish I could fix the damage I did to the two-legged building called a gym. The hole is instantly fixed, but the new part is so poorly made that it breaks under its own weight.

I know nothing of two-legged construction—such a result should be expected.

I can’t grow a blade of grass or make a pawful of mud. I can’t restore what I have destroyed. This talking stone is the only good thing... but where did it go?

The stone is not where I put it. It is at the bottom of the hole I dug, now reduced to twice the size of Mona and vaguely shaped like she is. The flying machine is... was! too large to hide, but it has vanished.

The fire burns. I can’t stop it.

The mud tastes of ashes.

The rising eye-water makes me take ten paces. Nearby fires are extinguished; smoke changes to steam, the hole is filled by quietly

flowing water. The scarred landscape sometimes hisses for a half-breath as the water covers it.

There is less heat in the air where the tears flow; my feet take me to newly-wet ground as the scent of tears spreads. The mud here tastes of ashes and salt.

The saltiness makes me think of potatoes... and I'm hungry.

A bad thing about potatoes is, when mashed, they have the same mouth-feel of this mud. The little dragon would say that a good thing about this mud is that it has the same mouth-feel as mashed potatoes...

...but I don't want to eat muddy potatoes and drink dirty water.

The rising tide of tears has found an outlet, carving a ditch into a small river and covering the road alongside. The water seems clean but has an oily sheen, so I rinse my mouth without drinking. The water steams and bubbles, but it does not burn. This is better than mud... I'm almost happy to mouth the dirty water that tastes so metallic that I don't dare drink. I almost swallow some and start coughing...

Third's voice says 'River Pactolus,' and a half-breath later, 'You've been poisoned.'

Third's scent is strong... and Cee's too.

"You are sleepwalking." I hear Cee but cannot see him. I stand still, and a half-breath later I learn I can't move.

"You've been poisoned." Third's voice.

"You're sleepwalking." Cee's voice. Both dragons smell healthy.

"You've been poisoned."

"He's waking up. (victory roar) He's waking up!" A strange voice comes from my neck, and it takes a breath before I realize it's a dragonet's voice reproduced by a two-legged speaker.

"You've been poisoned. You've been... relax, relax."

I realize I'm crouching with my eyes closed.

"You've been poisoned. Relax, it will pass."

My eyes are slow to open. I try to say 'honorable' but my throat

hurts and my mouth is dry. The effort needed to stand makes me doubt I could run five paces.

The dragonet's voice victory-roars again.

"Can we walk back to the sleeping cave?" Cee looks up at me briefly. "There's water there... you're probably thirsty." He then watches my feet—and Third is doing the same. Both dragons are improperly close, each wearing three pink cameras pointed at me.. Vlad is following... half his face is covered by a camera. Graith also follows with a shiny camera on each ear and another like a two-legged necklace. She victory-roars when I look at her.

I'm wearing a thick white collar.

"I'll take that off if you want." Cee looks at me twice, but I don't care about the collar... he resumes watching my paws.

The sleeping cave is behind me, and as I turn, I take slow steps and bump into Third. He's pushing my front paw underneath me, where it needs to be.

"You can lean on us," offers Cee. He does not look up, preferring to watch my feet.

I can't reply properly, but he and Third seem happy to hear my garbled 'Honorable...' but it hurts to talk.

Third points with his nose. "Anar, there's a barrel of water inside the sleeping cave—and Lizabeth wants to help you drink."

I can scent Seven and Mona with Lizabeth, but have never scented the overlarge cameras they have. As I approach the sleeping cave, two dragonets approach, followed by a third. The first two quickly take turns taking pictures of each other while standing three paces in front of me and my balance-guards. Pax apologizes for them even as she points a camera at the pair of picture-taking dragonets. "Mona told Chi that a hundred million two-leggeds requested these pictures, so Chi decided to ask the dragonets to take them."

"Your recovery has attracted an impressive amount of two-legged attention—much more than Chi expected." Seven adds while taking pictures of Pax and I with Mona and Lizabeth in the

background.

Third and Cee watch closely as I sit, then lie down. They position themselves on either side.

“This is hard work,” says Cee, “but it got much easier when you woke up.” I nod. He looks doubtful and asks “Are you disoriented?”

I half-way wink at him, then nod like a two-legged.

It’s nice to be in the dim of the sleeping cave. The scents of many two-leggeds are nearby, but I cannot see them.

Lizabeth’s dragon-spoon is what Gran called a re-purposed watering can, but today it seems to gleam. She fills it with water and pours it slowly into my mouth.

After the water, Lizabeth brings soup. I let her feed me, then lick her. She makes a surprised noise, then a happy noise, then hugs my right front.

I’ve had as much of Gran’s soup as Mona thinks is proper. Mona asks me to take a sleep-latency test, but sixty-seven breaths later I’m still not sleepy. When I open my eyes, there are three cameras on metal sticks near my head. Since I’m still awake and hungry, Mona tells Lizabeth to give me more soup.

Gran’s soup is always good, and it’s better when Lizabeth feeds me—it lasts longer. I try to ignore Vlad’s lights and cameras, but find myself worrying about spilling soup on Lizabeth.

Lizabeth feeds me for twelve breaths, then I decide I’ve had enough.

Chi arrives and Lizabeth grants ‘permission.’ She wants to talk to me... and she refuses soup. Lizabeth gives the rest of the soup to Third and Cee while I talk to Chi.

“Can you let two-leggeds point cameras at you?”

There are smarter dragons to point cameras at. I can barely think.

“Pax is leading what the two-leggeds call a ‘press conference,’” continues Chi. “It’s in the usual place outside the sleeping cave,

and if you could come... you could nod your head like this in response to every question Pax asks you for twenty breaths.”

I’m sure I look puzzled, but I nod like a two-legged. I want to go to the sleeping cave entrance and see what’s happening.

“The two-leggeds want to see you getting better. Roxxie advises you to keep wearing the collar. For once, I agree with her—it visually explains why you won’t speak.”

I manage to stand and walk without needing help from my balance-guards.

Seven and Graith are beside Pax, but there are many two-leggeds with cameras in the entrance—so many that there is only room for one dragon to exit at a time. Cameras stay pointed at me when I walk past following Cee while wearing Roxxie’s collar—it has wires connected to batteries and a boxy ‘patient monitor’ between my shoulders. Third follows me closely, watching my paws. He resumes his shoulder-to-shoulder walk as a balance guard as soon as we pass the gathering of two-leggeds, as does Cee.

Four of the unfamiliar two-leggeds shout questions at me at the same time, and Graith and Seven look up from their cameras and rumble at them. The two-leggeds become quiet. All present point their eyes and ears at me, and Pax insists I stand on the pre-prepared paw-pads... but I see too many lenses and eyes.

(gesture of submission), then Pax points her eyes and ears at me and waits patiently. Now that I have paw-pads, she properly waits for her big dragon to speak first.

This is like breathing fire, only with words. Whatever I type will be read by enough two-leggeds to wake any big dragon of politics. I can’t think of anything intelligent to share, but Mona is proof that intelligence isn’t always convincing to two-leggeds. Perhaps it is better not to use words at all... I look at Pax, who deserves a better press conference than a typing dragon. I look directly at Seven’s camera, type ‘better,’ then shed tears. The two-leggeds stay silent.

Cee comments... “Excrement.” He and Third stand closer to me, avoiding the puddle of tears for a half-breath, then allowing the tears to touch their feet.

“Better here than in the sleeping cave,” opines Third.

Twelve breaths...

I look down. My tears made a large puddle with paw-pads in the middle, and the red LEDs do not glow. I test the paw-pads, but the powered rocker switches won't reset.

I've silenced myself. My tears have ruined these paw-pads.

I abandon the paw-pads and, as I walk backwards out of my eye-water, Third rumbles, then says “Keep it slow.”

I point eyes, ears, and nose directly into Seven's camera when I look up. At least I'm helping her as my tears make my balance-guards do more work... just like the paw-pad repair-or-replace work that I made for other dragons. I should apologize to Purity and Harmony. My behavior is not proper...

Vlad attempts to get one of my paw-pads out of the mess I made, but Graith interferes before “I'll do that—you take better pictures.”

“You're more photogenic,” Vlad says, pointing one of his cameras at her. Graith likes that... but three male two-leggeds shout questions at her. Graith growls and glares at them and their silence returns. She then pulls the paw-pads closer, both muddy from the slow reaction of the hard-packed earth with my tears.

The warm light of the Great Fireball seems attractive, and twelve paces later I'm far enough from my eye-water puddle and away from most of the cameras. Soon I'm sitting, then lying down in the warm light of the Great Fireball. There's plenty of room for Third and Cee to share the sunshine, so they do.

Time to think... I wonder what I can still do. Perhaps pull weeds... but I'm tired now.

Twenty breaths later, there is still one strange two-legged present.

“You let him stay,” complains the two-legged male.

“Vlad is Dragon,” says Graith. “You aren’t.” (grumble)

Third grumbles at him too.

Now it is quiet...

“Do you remember the angriest roar I have ever directed at you?” Chi is in front now.

I do... she didn’t like my hillside mudslide, especially after seeing a jump that got all four of my muddy paws in the air at the same time.

“What were you doing?”

I slide my paw a talon-length, raise and lower quickly, then resume paw-sliding.

“You do remember. Don’t try that now, or I’ll roar at you again.” Chi winks and seems satisfied with my non-answer.

—

My dreams are many, confusing, and short. The scent of a dragonet awakens me.

Mir and I greet, and she has a bottle of something I’m supposed to drink slowly. The bottle is too small for slow drinking... Mir pokes a hole in it with a talon and asks me to hold it in my mouth. She warns me against speaking even if-and-when my throat feels better.

“Do you remember the soup?” Mir does a bad job hiding her dislike of my ‘no’ answer. Perhaps the dragonets haven’t yet learned to hide their emotions—they’ve never needed to. “You tasted it and thought it too hot to eat because your throat was sore.”

Seven and Graith quietly point, eyes, ears, and cameras at me. Mir continues.

“You went to sleep twenty breaths after that taste. Do you remember anything pink...?”

I shake my head.

“Do you remember stainless steel cauldrons?”

No... What can I remember? I almost touch my eyelashes with

the back of my right front.

“Mascara! Honorable Anar!” Mir seems almost happy. “Perhaps thirty of your breaths... Do you remember Rachel putting mascara on Lizabeth?”

I do.

Mir holds up her paws and pretends to touch invisible paw-pads, then watches as I pretend my paws are typing... Mir repeats what she thinks she saw: “‘She took it off.’ That happened about twenty-five breaths before Roxxie arrived... anything else? Nothing? Perhaps... pink? Roxxie’s pink?”

No...

“Roxxie’s pink truck? She called it her ‘Roach Coach Dragon-wagon.’ Do you remember shiny metal pots like this one, full of soup?”

No... and no, but I point my eyes and ears at her, hoping she’ll say more.

“Roxxie brought Gran’s soup to you. She recently obtained the Dragon-wagon as a way of celebrating a financial victory of hers, and she used it to bring Gran’s soup here quickly... and perhaps that’s why the soup was still too hot.”

... and if the soup was slightly cooler, I would have died. I don’t like thinking that way, but I’m a predator and I’ve seen death many times. A dragon does what he can... it’s difficult for me to take it out of my paw-pad, but I succeed and give the memory stick to Mir. She holds it between to long, flawless claws as she reads what’s written there.

“This dragon can copy this, honorable Anar, and return it.”

Yes.

“Mir thinks Chi will want to see this.”

I almost rumble in agreement but point my nose at my paws typing ‘y’. Mir understands... and her cell-phone makes an insect-noise. She looks at it, then says “Roxxie will be here in fifteen breaths... and Mona will be here in ten.”

—

“Most of the two-leggeds that Mona and Purity accepted as Dragon have created two-legged associations, some on the internet. Many two-leggeds consider our visitors to be their big dragons now, which adds to the displeasure of the Vulgarian government.”

Roxxie’s lights stop shining down my throat, and I close my mouth. Neither Lizabeth nor Mona move so I assume neither want to look at the pictures Roxxie took, preferring to be overlarge eggs for me to hold. I point my eyes and ears at Roxxie.

“Prognosis is good, depending on how well you take care of yourself.”

I reset the switches on Roxxie’s glued-on and glowing paw-pads and type ‘what happened?’ I’m not sure how paw-pads can work glued to the backs of my paws, but they’re pretty and I can type when I’m not standing. Perhaps Roxxie allows me to use them because my paws are now clean enough... and, until Roxxie says I can work in the potato fields, too likely to stay that way.

Roxxie takes her e-thumbs off before answering. “Three days ago, Seven called me, saying you were breathing too slowly after suddenly sleeping. Since then, I’ve been chasing symptoms. I still am... that’s all I can do until I know more about the poison. I’ve got two hundred grams of this stuff I chromo’d from the soup, but neither I nor Gran know how it got there. I have a detailed medical history of what happened to one male dragon dosed with less than a tenth of a gram of it, but I don’t know who made it or why they’d try to make it look like I wanted to poison you. I’m not a poisoner... I’m a doctor that makes mistakes... too many already.”

I type ‘Honorable.’

Roxxie seems relieved, and adds “This was likely an attempt to ‘divide and conquer.’ You need me, and I need you and yours, and splitting us up would do us both great harm.”

I type ‘How do you need us?’

Roxxie almost laughs. “I understand why you think that way...

but don't let me fool you. Of course, there's the chance to make a lot of money by being here, but I'm only a dragon... and you and yours are Dragons. You've got something I want... but it's not a thing I can buy, borrow, or steal." After two of her breaths, Roxxie adds "You still don't understand? The dragons that follow in your footsteps are eating potatoes because you do."

I wink at Roxxie and gesture with my nose at Mona.

"... then because you and Mona do. Despite knowing that the Commanding Dragon would accept more followers and that his dragons are allowed a more traditional diet, your followers stay and eat potatoes."

Mona's voice comes from underneath me. "Honorable Roxxie, the math should not be argued with."

"It can be ignored, like certain dragons do. The Commanding Dragon's dietary intransigence has caused and is causing problems."

"He will learn."

"Not likely—not from a little female dragon."

"This dragon agrees—she thinks perhaps Happy can teach him."

"Happy? So that's where he's been. Do you let him cross the river by himself?"

—

Chi tells me that a two-legged in a scent-proof suit was captured. Cee and Junior were watch-and-scent on the wrong side of the river, but they saw the two-legged on this side. Junior used a two-legged radio transceiver to send a message to First, and soon Third found and knocked the two-legged down with a pawful of dirt. Afterwards, Purity talk-and-scented him, and she thinks he works for the Vulgarians despite his lies. He claimed he works for the Phoenix.

Then Chi tells me Roxxie wants to stay here with other dragons because all two-leggeds smell like food-beasts to her.

I use my paw-pads... 'u 2 ?'

Chi (gestures of submission). “Every two-legged smells like a food-beast—even Lizabeth. Despite that, I want other dragons to have two-legged pets as cute as she is.

The dragonets ask ‘permission’ then (gesture of submission).

“Honorable Chi, will you explain this to us?” Pax asks, offering her a two-legged paperback book.

Chi takes it, and after a closer look, she takes a half-breath to blink. “No.”

“This dragonet doesn’t understand.”

“This book has rhetorical poison in it. Once, when dragons first learned to read, there weren’t many books—we had paper-collections. One collection was from a group of very wealthy two-leggeds who bought dragons to demonstrate to others how wealthy they were. Mona’s type was often sought because these two-leggeds valued a dragon’s bio-ability to move metal and deposit it in dragon-scales. But even dragons like Mona presented difficulties—maintaining scale-transparency, optimum blood-platinum levels, that sort of thing—so these dragon-owners would write each other and share texts and papers about solutions to these problems. Since these papers were in the villagers’ collection, we read them; and since we were ignorant, we thought scale-transparency was important. However, these two-leggeds wrote well—courteous, helpful, and generous with each other—their conversations were a pleasure to read. Hizoner and Gran both say that despite their obsession with dragon-scales, these two-leggeds knew the rhetorical arts. I decided then that dragons should learn rhetoric. Both Hizoner and Gran told me they didn’t know how to teach it, but I learned much. I learned not to read bad literature—it can cause worse than wasted time. If you read rubbish, it’s a lesson that teaches how to think rubbish and speak rubbish, and it’s easy to learn bad lessons. It’s much harder to be a proper dragon.”

“Honorable Chi! For dragonets, it is easy to be a proper

dragon.”

“Yes, dragons will tolerate almost anything a dragonet does—but is it easy to be the Speaker for dragons during press conferences and say only what is proper? Is it easy for Mir to work with Roxxie while learning what is proper for flesh-minding?”

“Honorable.” says six dragonets that speak as one. Pax adds “We don’t want that book anymore.”

“Why did you even have this?” Chi opens the book—it’s been partly clawed-out, and now it’s a container holding a memory-stick. “Tricked!” She picks up the single stick inside and looks closely at its label.

“Anar?” She looks at me for a half-breath before continuing. “I’d like to read your day-reports and your dream diary... but it is likely I’ll want to use what I learn as the big dragon of politics.”

(amused rumble)

“Perhaps you can stay amused, but I cannot predict what will happen. Two-legged politics is a dark art.” Chi points her eyes and nose at Pax and asks “Why did you have his personal-records memory stick?”

“He gave it to us. We decided to put the e-stick in a book you wouldn’t like us to have, so that when you spoke, you wouldn’t give the book back. If you held the book long enough, it would become yours, including the e-stick inside.”

Chi looks up at me. “Anar, if you gave me the chance to read this, I would have. I thought you knew me better than that.”

(amused rumble)

She points her nose at Pax. “He does know me better than that.”

“Yes! Honorable!”

“Then... why go through all this trouble?”

“These dragonets could practice psychological priming without causing unwanted effects... and severely damage an improper book as they did it.”

—

The Commanding Dragon looks tired in the glow of the television. “Things are different now. There’s more dragons. Our Night Runners have rescued at least one with every run, and the last time two of The Boss’s [sic] males decided to follow in my footsteps. Problem is, Bait still wants to follow in your footsteps, and the rescued females like what she says and want to meet you and yours, especially the other females... and now that another female can do the convincing for our Night Runners, Bait wants to come back here, and... it’s easier this way.”

This can’t be easy for the Commanding Dragon. I type ‘Honorable’ and the television speaks the word like a two-legged said it.

“... and Happy is doing well, he looks better every time I see him. Potatoes don’t seem to hurt a dragon... and food-beasts are scarce again. I want food-beasts in Happy’s future.”

‘Honorable. What to do?’ The television is annoying, but not all dragons can read.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? Send a couple herds over to the wrong side of the river, and me and my crew won’t eat as many this time... Hopefully they’ll increase.”

‘Yes do that’

“And dragons will be dragons... Bait smells of egg. She’s better off here.”

‘Honorable’

“Will her smell cause dragon-fights?”

‘No. Bait decides’

“But Bait says you decide, since she’s following in your footsteps.”

‘Bait decides’

“Honorable Anar!”

A dragon much like Stretch runs underneath the Commanding Dragon and says ‘Plata power!’ Two breaths later, Bait looks out from under and almost winks at me.

The Commanding Dragon lowers his head half a talon-length and says "I follow in your footsteps."

I type 'Honorable' automatically... I didn't expect this. I follow that with 'You and yours are Dragon' and it feels not-quite-proper hearing that from a tiny speaker.

He doesn't stay long after that. Ten breaths later, I scent the little dragon.

Mona asks 'permission' and wants to tell me of an Idea. Will I help her cast a magic spell? and can Vlad bring his cameras? and can Chi use it for propaganda purposes?

I agree to all three. Mona tells me I don't even have to move.

Vlad points cameras and lights at me. First moves behind Vlad's cameras, and joins Cee, Junior, Second, and Purity watching me from outside the sleeping cave.

"Is that Third?" asks First.

"I can scent him," says Cee.

First's nose twitches. "I can't... I can only smell the two-leggeds he's carrying."

"Perfume," Purity says. "Some of Mona's Marines brought it when they became villagers. It's a way to cover their scent."

I can't see Third and the villagers he's brought with him. Cee looks over his shoulder, and nudges Second, then they move apart. Now only a small camera blocks my view of Third bringing six two-leggeds. He gets 'permission' from First.

"Now I know why I couldn't scent-see the Bucklands," says Third.

"Honorable, they traveled here and arrived fifty breaths ago." First scents the villagers on Third's back. After saying 'Honorable' and 'Thank-you-for-coming' many times, First explains what Chi wants the two-leggeds to do.

Most of the two-leggeds respond with a 'prepared,' but two new villagers say 'yes' and another says 'ready.'

Third crouches next to Cee, and the villagers use his foreleg to

slow their slide off of Third's back. Soon they join the others.

First looks at Vlad, who says "Prepared!" Graith says that too but through clenched teeth. She mouth-holding a short stick that's tied to a long stick; one end of which is between her toes while the other holds a camera half-a-pace higher than Cee's head.

Lizabeth approaches and unties my cape but doesn't pull it off. She then retreats; and when she's ten paces away, she (gestures of submission) to me just like Chi asked her. I nod like a two-legged, and she approaches. A pace away from me she points a short metal stick at her mouth and says "Honorable Anar... Get well soon!" She gives my right front a hug and drops the metal stick underneath me. Mona approaches and (gestures of submission) to me, licks my nose, and takes the metal stick. She leaves the cave with it, but a breath later Gran brings it back. She points it at her mouth... "Honorable Anar... Junior and I made potato tea for you... to help you heal." She (gestures of submission) and puts the metal stick down, then hugs my leg like Lizabeth but higher up. She whispers "We'd better finish Mona's magic spell before we have tea."

Hizoner says "Micky, you're next."

Micky shakes his head and says "They speak for me." He then leans against me near Gran and Lizabeth.

"Anyone else? Rachel?" Hizoner looks, but nobody replies. He leaves the stick on the cave floor and joins the two-leggeds leaning against me. The other villagers join them, and soon I'm surrounded by warm two-leggeds.

One of the dragonets runs up my tail and under my cape. She's warmer than a two-legged, as if from running... almost improperly warm, and the scent of soap is mixed with hers. Perhaps she's been bathed? She's soon joined by an equally warm 'sixter' who smells exactly the same. I can feel them poke their heads out from under my cape near my neck. It probably looks ridiculous, but I don't care.

It would be easier to visit one of the Temporary Buildings, where

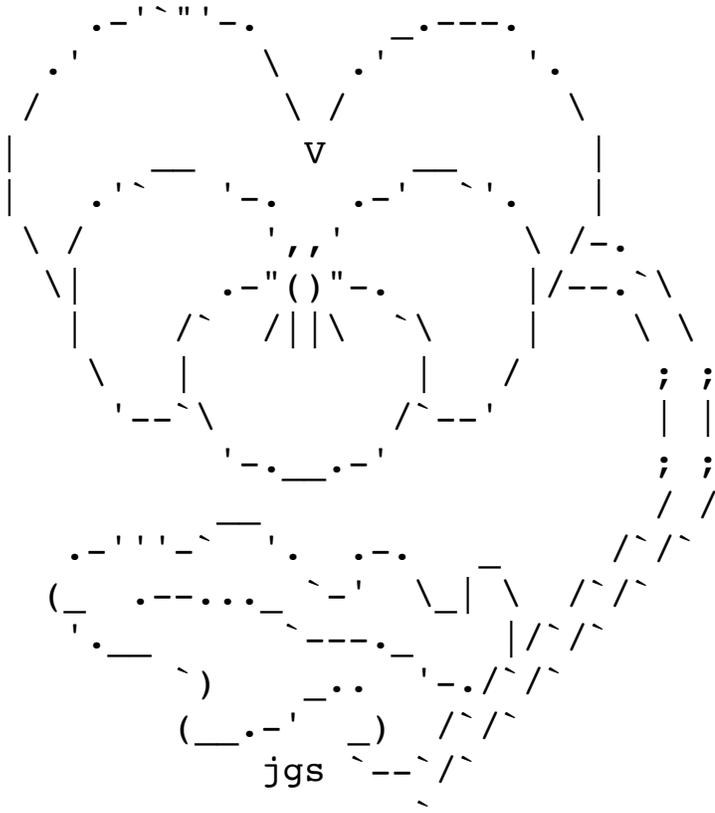
the air inside is always warm... but this is nice. Very nice.

This must be what it's like to be famous.

I point my eyes, ears and nose at Mona. She approaches, but says nothing. I know she and Chi wanted only two-leggeds and dragonets in this video because it's for far-away two-leggeds... but as soon as I'm holding Mona like an overlarge egg...

(happy rumble)

end



the shaggy dragon

In front of me is the dragon I only see in my dreams... holding a tiny two-legged paper-book. His claws cover the text on the outside, and the text on the pages inside change as I look. The dream-Dragon glances at me, then speaks.

"The little dragon is looking in a reflecting pool, attempting to lower her heart rate." The dream-dragon senses my interest and continues. "In the pool, she sees a wide tower of white and silver behind her head. The little dragon stares at the silver streak that goes down... and down... but the water is not entirely still. She closes her eyes, turns head-to-tail, then looks again at the building that was behind her. Just an overlarge building. An excessively tall building. Her eyes rise slightly, then revert to level. 'What this dragon sees will not fall,' she whispers. 'It will not move.' Then she looks up... and the silver building is there. She looks higher up... and the building is there too. She looks overhead... and the white and silver are higher and higher..."

She turns to look in the reflecting pool again because the sight of the SkyLinx still scares her. The dragon in the pool looks worried, then her breath distorts the reflection.

The little dragon thinks of her training--and the dragon in the water becomes calm as the water does after she stops breathing on it. She decides once again to look at the silver building that lent its image to the reflecting pool. She looks up, and up, and up... and she decides the sight of the SkyLinx does not bother her. She will think the huge building is beautiful, because... it is. She makes herself stop staring and lets her feet cross the steel street. The outer door opens before she is close enough to ask 'permission to approach' and the inner door slides open as soon as she sees it. She enters the Ground Sheath of the SkyLinx Building.

There are many two-leggeds with cameras inside, all standing behind red velvet ropes. None are near enough for speech, so

she walks to the Inner Sheath.

A door... and 'Authorized Personnel Only' signs and a pair of two-legged door-wardens.

Pax did not know that this was a Controlled area. She will ask...

One door-warden opens the door when she asks permission to approach, and the other performs a two-legged gesture of submission to her. She (gestures of submission) immediately. The far-away two-leggeds clap and cheer, and both guards grin ear-to-ear. The little dragon is embarrassed. She has done nothing for these two-leggeds.

Fifty footsteps away, the door to the Outer Core. The 'Authorized Personell Only' signs are bigger and the door wardens have pistols. She walks closer. Ten paces away, she says "Permission to approach!"

"Granted!" say the two-legged guards all at once, and a pair open the first doors.

Inside, another pair of guards open another pair of doors as she approaches. Another pair of door-wardens with more doors... and she walks the zig-zag hallway that leads to another pair of guarded doors. The last doors are ten paces away when she stops walking.

The door to the inner core is closed. Pax knows that the computer will recognize her and open the door shortly after she approaches it, but she is distracted. She wants to watch a pair of two-leggeds moving a standard cargo box. The boring box is what holds her attention... then she remembers—a box like that was in last night's strange dream. When she looked in the box, Anar's head was there. His eyes opened and his mouth said 'The only way to travel!'

She's been trying to forget that dream.

The trees of Niu Mountain were once beautiful. However, because it was near many two-leggeds [all wanting wood for cooking fires and constructing shelters] the trees were chopped down with axes—could they retain their beauty? Despite this, through the activity of the vegetative life day and night and the nourishing influence of the rain and dew, buds and sprouts would grow... but then two-leggeds brought cattle and goats [both are food-beasts] that browsed upon the new vegetation. This has caused the bare and stripped appearance of the mountain, and when two-leggeds see this, they think the mountain was never covered with trees. But is this the true nature of the mountain?

And what properly belongs to all two-leggeds—shall it be said that the mind of any two-legged begins without benevolence and righteousness? [No!] The way in which a two-legged loses his proper goodness of mind is like the way in which the forest was chopped by axes. Hewn down day after day, can the two-legged mind retain its beauty? [No.] But there is a development of its life day and night, and in the calm air of the morning, just between night and day, a two-legged feels somewhat of those desires and aversions which are proper... but the feeling is not strong and it is fettered [restrained, immobilized] and destroyed by what takes place during the day. This fettering taking place again and again, and the restorative influence of the night is not sufficient to preserve the proper goodness of the two-legged mind. When this restorative influence proves insufficient, the nature [of a two-legged] becomes not much different from that of the irrational animals. When other two-leggeds see this nature, they think that there was never a proper goodness that I think all two-leggeds once had naturally. But does the present condition represent the proper nature of two-leggeds? Mencius