

broken. "

"What can this dragon do?" Sounds like another female--smaller than Chi.

"When I first met you," said Chi's voice, "I told you that every Big Dragon has ugly hats or one-pawed laws for all who follow? The dragon that Third carried to us is from the Bitten Dragons. They have no big dragons, but have their hats in bitten paws and crazy laws. His paw will heal, but his stories need help. He's going to be Disoriented--probably worse than any other dragon."

"Do Bitten Dragons follow in the footsteps of The Boss?"

"No. Jade had wandered into The Boss's [sic] territory when the Night Runners found him. Remember how Seven talked after you and Anar rescued her? Jade is worse... you'll understand every word he says, but he's aggressive, competitive... and rude. Dee says that two Bitten Dragons cannot share a large cave without many rules."

"Why was he wandering shelterless?"

"He's been wandering since he's been bitten. He's lucky that the Night Runners scented him before The Boss or his followers did."

"This dragon will do what she can," says the little dragon.

"Honorable Mona," says Chi.

When I hear footsteps, I quit pretending to sleep. Now I can match the smell to the dragon that Chi was talking to--a small female. Some of her scales are golden shiny instead of a regular gray. I pretend I don't notice.

"You and yours are Dragon," said the little female, and she lowers her head and body for half-a-breath.

"Honorable," I say, after her two-step submissive dance. She smells good. "I'm Jade."

"This dragon is named Mona. This dragon will help you if she can, and answer your questions."

"Honorable," I say. "Where can a dragon get something to drink instead of water?"

"What would you like to drink?" Mona the semi-shiny asks me.

"Blood," I tell her.

"What can this dragon do?"

"Nevermind." She won't be able to carry a big food-beast--and I'll probably owe somebody something.

"How can this dragon help?" says Mona.

"My paw hurts. Can you help that?"

"No... But Hizoner can. He is bringing medicine."

"Nothing to do but wait, then."

"Honorable Jade, is it possible that you have been trained not to ask proper questions?"

What an inquisitive little dragon... with a sharp tongue too. "No. Is such training even possible?" I ask her.

"This dragon knows there are dragons that wish to try."

"Do tell," I say.

"When I was younger, I walked away from Big Dragon and his many rules, even rules about questions."

"I've heard of him," I tell her.

"Hizoner is coming," says Mona.

"Relax--Anar made me promise not to hurt the two-leggeds."

"Honorable," says Mona, who again does her two-step submissive dance for half-a-breath.

A male two-legged carrying a gray thing walks slowly into the room and says "You and yours are Dragon. My name is..."

"Hizoner," I say.

"Excellent. Then let's have a look at your paw, underneath," says the two-legged. With a mouth like that, I'm going to have a hard time keeping my promise. Three breaths later, the two-legged opens the gray thing and takes out a strange shiny stone that seems to be made out of water.

"This is a medicine," says Hizoner. "I want to put it on your paw..."

"This dragon will do it," says Mona. "Perhaps Jade does not yet trust two-leggeds."

She got that right. Mona holds the shiny stone with her front paws, slowly tilts it, and a tiny amount of a liquid falls on a small cut on my upturned paw. Then she looks at me and says 'My ears are yours to speak into.'

"What should I say?" I ask her.

"Did it hurt?" she asks me.

"No..." Perhaps my paw isn't quite so sore. "Try again," I say, and wink at her. The medicine stings a little, then the pain diminishes. Mona stops pouring medicine four times and looks at me, but I say nothing. My paw still looks terrible, but it begins to feel better. When I see Hizoner put the shiny stone inside the opening gray thing, I feel compelled to ask "How many dragon-hours do you want for that?" even though it bothers me to ask a two-legged.

"You don't need to give dragon-hours," says Mona. "If your paw hurts again, we can use it."

"How many dragon-hours do I owe already?"

"Little dragons do not decide such things."

That's the truth. "So, what do you do for fun around these parts?"

"This dragon can tell you stories," says Mona. "Perhaps yes?"

This sounds like a scam. I don't like dragons that perform without an agreement... especially since it would be her word against mine. "Honorable, but not yet."

"What would you like to do?"

Jade knows what will be fun for Jade. "I would like a piece of tree trunk about the same size as my paw, but I cannot pay."

"I will get it for you," says Mona.

I can't believe it--the dragon is actually running, even though I owe.

Mona has been very helpful, but I stop her before we finished grinding the edges off the piece of wood. Even without an agreement, I feel like I owe her something--so I don't want her to be the first to see when I'm finished. I think the flesh-minder might be a better choice.

"Now, if I had some small white stones--several different ones," I say, and the little dragon runs to find some. When she brings them back, I can almost see the heat I feel coming from her--she's been running even when out of my sight. I roll a boulder over

the stones and make powders, then mix the powders until the color looks right.

"Now," I say, "We want to find a female dragon to test it on."

"This dragon will test it on."

I'm going to have to spread around some dragon-excrement. "You're too young." To my relief, she asks no questions, but offers to help.

"This dragon will find a proper dragon, but she does not know what is proper."

This could be tricky... it would be better if she was far away before I put rock dust on the wood. "You have done much... are you tired?"

"Mona can still run," says the little one.

Other dragons need Egging much, much more than this one. I pick up the wood with my left paw and start rubbing the edges on the wall. "I think we should have another white stone before we can finish," I tell her, piling up the poop. "It must be much whiter than any of these." That will keep her busy.

"This dragon will seek," says Mona, and off she runs. I work one-pawed but as fast as I can, and soon the wood is an egg shape. I lick it, then roll it in the rock dust. When it is completely covered, I mouth-carry the wooden egg and try to leave... but the little dragon runs in before I get past Anar's dirt pile near the cave entrance with two bright white stones between her toes. To add to my troubles, Anar himself follows her in.

"That?" asks Mona as I take the egg out of my mouth. My teeth have left marks on the surface, so I put more rock dust on the wooden egg until it looks perfect again.

"I think the color is wrong," I say, and roll a boulder upon one of the stones that Mona brought i.

"The color is fine," says Anar. "Why did you make that?"

"I don't like it," I say as I rub the white rock dust on the wood, adding streaks that do not belong on good eggs.

"That does not look right," says Mona, who is staring at the wooden egg.

"Jade... why?" asks Anar, again.

The little dragon moves slightly closer to the wooden egg, so I put a paw upon it.

"Just a little harmless entertainment," I say. "It's just wood and rock dust."

"I don't like rock dust," says Anar. What a bully!

The things I must do... I pick up the wooden egg and start to lick it. Mona makes a cry of distress and Anar shouts "STOP!" and takes the wooden egg from me. He can move surprisingly fast for a big dragon.

"The little dragon would like to see what Jade made," says Mona.

Anar holds the wooden egg in front of Mona. She grabs it with both paws, then holds it against her chest. I distress-cry, mostly without meaning to.

"Give it to me," says Anar. Mona obeys instantly, but two tears fall on the wooden egg, making streaky dark spots. Anar hides the egg behind him, then examines the little dragon. Soon he's holding Mona as if she were an egg.

"Jade, please tell me about wooden eggs," says Anar.

"Many Bitten female dragons have them," I say.

"Jade, tell me what you know of wooden eggs." says Anar.

"Many female dragons like wooden eggs." I say.

"Jade."

"They do! Ask Mona if she liked it! But... the first time a female dragon has a wooden

egg, she will sometimes act foolishly."

"This dragon wants..." said Mona, from somewhere under Anar. "The little dragon should not talk to wooden eggs."

Anar shifts a rear paw and I hear a crunching noise--I think my dragon-hours have depreciated to zero.

"Did you want Mona to hold the wooden egg and talk to it?" Anar asks me.

"No," I tell him. "Not Mona."

"Why not Mona?"

"Mona is too young. The egg will affect her too much." At least the last part is true...

Anar rumbles a bit, then says "Perhaps this is a sort of nasty trick--too nasty to play on a nice dragon like Mona?"

I cannot say anything. Time passes slowly.

"Has Jade's tongue turned dark?" asks Mona, from somewhere under Anar.

"No," says Anar.

"Do Bitten Dragons have wooden eggs?" asks Mona.

"Some females do," I say.

"Do the females lay eggs of their own?" asks Mona.

"Not usually," I tell her.

"Are the Bitten Dragon females harmed by this?" asks Anar.

"Not really," I tell him.

"Jade," says Anar.

"The females enjoy it! ... sometimes too much. Sometimes... many days pass before a female will hunt."

"Anar," says the little dragon, "wooden eggs are a kind of hat."

"I understand," rumbled the big dragon. "The females cannot learn of their potential."

"Perhaps it is a hat for males, too," says Mona.

"The wooden egg had no effect on me," says Anar.

"Perhaps, if this dragon was holding a wooden egg and talking to it, you would want to hold her the way you are now--the same way the little dragon would hold an egg."

Anar grumbles--then laughs gently as he lets the little dragon go. "Jade, isn't she smart?"

I have to agree with him, and not just because he's much bigger--but it bothers me that I lost an argument with a dragon who obviously sleeps in the dirt. "Most Bitten Dragons have jobs and don't spend all their time talking to wooden eggs!" I say... too loudly.

"Females with real eggs wouldn't go to jobs," says Anar.

He's right... sometimes Egged females also stop working for dragon-hours. "Then the males would have to pay all the rent, and that's not proper!" I say.

"What is rent?" asks Mona.

"Rent is what one dragon must do for a bigger dragon," says Anar.

"For owners," I tell him.

"What is owners?" asks Mona.

"Like Anar. This is his sleeping cave. He could ask other dragons for dragon-hours..." I cannot finish because Anar is trying not to laugh.

"Such a crazy Idea!" Anar says. "Why should I demand dragon-hours from dragons

that want to share this big sleeping cave?"

I don't know how to answer him.

"This dragon owns Energy Ball!" says Mona. "Rent is every dragon must take care of every other dragon."

I'm not sure what Energy Ball is, but I say "That's not how it works," to her.

"Tell us how it works," asks Mona, as she nearly flattens herself on the cave-floor for half-a-breath.

"It's just rules that the owners make," I tell her.

"This dragon has no dragon-hours, no rent, and no owners, and could not understand?"

"Not just that," I tell her.

"This dragon can help you."

"How?" I ask.

"This dragon does not know yet. Perhaps we can break your training to not ask questions," says Mona. She talks like a big dragon even when Anar is listening. "Chi says he is aggressive and competitive," she says to Anar.

"Perhaps," says Anar, "but you should not repeat what Chi says."

The little dragon makes a strange, almost pretty gesture in front of Anar.

"Bitten Dragons are aggressive and competitive and proud of it!" I say. "Bitten Dragons work hard and are rich! We don't sleep in the dirt or piles of vegetation!"

"Jade," says Anar, "you are welcome here, where all dragons know that you and yours are Dragon even if they have yet to know your scent. But every dragon here is far from the sleeping caves that they know well. This way of life is new for all dragons, and dragons require a short time to adapt. That time is called the Disorientation, and every dragon here must endure it."

"It is nothing compared to this," I say, holding up my Bitten paw.

"It can be worse than that," says Anar, "especially for aggressive and competitive dragons who don't ask proper questions."

"This dragon can help," says Mona. "This dragon will tell you about hats."

"This dragon will pull vegetation out of the ground again," says Anar. "Be nice to each other."

"My ears are yours to speak into," I say to Mona, and I sound dejected even to myself.

Mona crawls under my left paw and curls up against my chest for a half-a-breath. "Anar is not angry with you."

Mona then paces back and forth in front of me. "A dragon wearing a hat cannot see the carrion birds that will fly over the head of every dragon, and sometimes forgets that the birds are there. But The Boss can see the carrion birds, so he always knows where the dragons are. A hat covers a dragon's ears, interfering with hearing and hiding a way dragons communicate. The Boss says all dragons must wear hats or he will punish any dragon without a hat. So, all dragons who follow The Boss learn to care about hats.

"Stupid dragons," I say.

"Not stupid dragons," says Mona. "The Boss is big, strong, and violent. He controls the feeding grounds, so many dragons follow him and obey his rules. Dragons wear hats because of fear and for food."

"Fear?"

"If a dragon will not wear a hat, The Boss will kill and eat them."

"I've heard that, and I don't believe it," I say, but I don't sound very confident.

"This dragon once lived where Big Dragon rules, another strong and violent dragon like The Boss. This dragon was told that the left paws are evil and the source of all filth. The little dragon believed. This dragon saw Big Dragon kill and eat rule-breaking dragons. When this dragon wandered far from Big Dragon, other dragons taught her that the Law of the Left was stupid."

"I see where this is going," I tell her. "But Bitten Dragons do not have big dragons enforcing stupid Laws."

"This dragon does not know Bitten Dragons, but wooden eggs are not good."

"If Bitten Dragons did not have wooden eggs, there would be too many dragons!"

"This one understands, honorable Jade. Do owners have wooden eggs?" asks Mona.

"I don't know."

"Other dragons are coming soon," says Mona. "If you will be nice to them, then this dragon thinks you will be helped too."

I move my bitten paw a little. "I'm not going to be starting any fights."

"This dragon wants you to take care of the other dragons. Will you try?"

"What can I do?" I'm puzzled.

"Listen to them and help them if you think you can."

"You want me to give them advice? Fine. Will this reduce my debt?"

"No," says Mona, and she licks my nose. "You have no debt here."

"Then why should I do it?"

The little dragon gently licks my injured paw, then says "This dragon thinks it will help you. Listen to them closely, then try to help them."

"Suppose I can't help?"

Mona licks my other paw, then says "Then do not hurt them. This dragon will help you." The little dragon curls up against my chest. "You should repeat the 'you and yours' whenever you hear it," she whispers to me.

Other dragons come into the cave. Mona goes to greet the other dragons--her friends. She seems quite popular, and I'm glad I have her scent all over me--her friends like me already. I say the 'you and yours' many times. A group of females gather around my injured paw, and insist on examining it--so I lie on my side, undignified, while the occasional big male looks over the female's heads. Even though I tell them Chi did it already, two of the females take turns shedding tears on my paw. Then I see Third looming over all the other dragons. Third winks at me and says 'Jade has a way with the females' to a big male who's following him. Many dragons laugh.

Then Chi comes to visit... and she's mouth-carrying a dripping-wet wooden egg that I thought Anar had crushed. It doesn't stop her from examining my paw. All the females stop talking when Chi gives the wooden egg to me. The wave of silence spreads, even to dragons far away. I don't know what to say... but Mona does.

"Every dragon here remembers either the false Law of the Left or the Rule of Hats. Jade remembers false eggs and competitiveness and aggression. Jade is learning."

"Yes," says Chi, "now Jade is learning that he cannot be mean to Mona." Some

dragons laugh. I'm starting to get angry... then Mona curls up against my chest.

"Agree with Chi," says Mona to me. I won't.

"It's true," says Mona. "This dragon smells of eggs, so Chi says you would tolerate her crawling onto your back."

Mona crawls on my back and says 'Dragon Logic.' Mona then yawns and relaxes as if she was preparing to sleep. She says "Tell the other dragons about wooden eggs. Mona wants to hear."

What a strange little dragon. She yawns again, and her eyes close.

The little dragon just ordered me around like I was in debt to her. Then my mouth moves as if it belonged to another dragon, giving away for free what could be dragon-hours for me.

"The Bitten Dragons... many females have eggs like this one. They like to hold them. Since wooden eggs are hard, as eggs are when they are about to hatch, a female with a wooden egg will talk as if there was a dragonet listening.

"They're easy to make, but a dragon must lick the wooden egg before putting the rock dust on it or it won't smell right.

"This wet wooden egg must be kept clean, because when it is wet, dust will stick to it and the color will change as it dries--perhaps close enough to egg-color."

"Honorable Jade," says Mona. Then Mona whispers "Say Anar does not like rock dust." When I do, the dragons laugh.

After five questions, Mona slides off of my back, and walks in front of me. "Anar's dragons tell stories before sleeping, but today the stories will begin early."

The dragons want Mona to tell the story about about me and the wooden egg.

"Jade is in pain and could not sleep, and with only this dragon to talk to, he became bored. Jade knows that Bitten female dragons like wooden eggs, and because Anar's dragons don't know of wooden eggs, Jade decides to show them. He asked this dragon to bring wood and stones to him, and with these things he made a wooden egg. Because no dragons will fight and every dragon will stay healthy, and because Jade became bored, he decided to play a trick on a female, but not this female. So Jade asks this dragon for white stones, and while this dragon looks, Jade finishes the wooden egg and tries to leave before this dragon could see--but the little dragon and Anar come to the sleeping cave too soon. This dragon is always curious... and since she smells of eggs herself, the male dragons want to please her. When she asks for the wooden egg, Anar gives it to her. Then Anar heard Jade cry, and then Anar knew to ask the little dragon for the wooden egg. Perhaps the little dragon would have been disobedient if she had held the wooden egg longer, but because Jade cried out quickly, she could be a proper little dragon."

Many dragons are looking at me when Mona finishes. I don't know what to say. Mona curls up against my chest.

"This dragon is your egg," she says. "Now you may talk like a dragonet and no dragon will smell you to see if you are healthy." Many dragons laugh.

"Your story made me into a better dragon than I am," I tell her. Bitten dragons have to pay by the pawfuls for that kind of storytelling.

"Mona's stories always make dragons into better dragons," says another female with notched and blunted fore-claws.

Stories that I know, like 'The Invisible Paw' and 'Dragon-hours are Dragon-hours,' don't make dragons better. Still, a story is a story, and I feel like I owe...

"I can tell a story from the Bitten Dragons," I say.

Pairs of dragon eyes look at me, and pairs of ears point at me. Before I get nervous, I tell them the story of Rule-Breaker, but I change it a little and don't mention the many bribes paid. These dragons wouldn't understand.

"One day, an apparently rational dragon spent every dragon-hour he could borrow to buy one-horned food-beasts. When his buying caused the price to go up, the Association decided that buying too many of these rare food-beasts was improper and they named him Rule-Breaker. He was herded by the watch-and-scent dragons to the Associate Court of Primaries. In front of Blue himself, Rule-Breaker is stupid enough to say that the one-horned food-beasts could talk. The Court impounded all the food-beasts, and some of Rule-Breaker's debts were repaid by selling him to the Association of Incarceration. Once there, Rule-Breaker learns that incarcerates are paid a quarter-dragon-hour for every sleeping-pad made--if it passes inspection--and that he owed much, much more than a quarter of a dragon-hour.

But before Rule-Breaker had made his first sleeping-pad, the Chief Associate at the Association of Incarceration was overcome by an unknown dust that blinded him and his other guard-dragons temporarily. Many of the incarcerates escaped during that time, including Rule-Breaker--and my father. He told me, when he and the others escaped, that all the guard-dragons fell asleep during an unscheduled Incarcerate Exercise Period--but he said he saw no dust. My father also scented one-horned food-beasts and saw their strange round paw-prints, but the other incarcerates said to keep quiet about that, so the guard-dragons might keep their jobs."

"Can the one-horned talk?" Mona asks. She smells faintly of fear.

"One-horned food-beasts don't exist," I tell her.

"Could they talk?" asks Mona... too quickly.

"They never existed," I say.

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"This dragon has eaten one," says Mona.

That started a long conversation about one-horned food-beasts, and many dragons speak of seeing them. The female with blunted and notched talons says she knows at least ten stories with one-horned food-beasts in them.

My paw no longer hurts enough to keep me awake, and I fall asleep during the discussion.

In the morning, I discover I'm wearing a cape. I cannot smell Mona's scent. The female with blunted fore-claws will be my right paw today. Her name is Seven.

"Expensive?"

"Why would you make a cape for me unless I did something for you in return?"

"Once, when I could not hunt, other dragons hunted for me. When I could not walk, other dragons carried me. If I will do what I can for other dragons, it is enough. You need a cape, I can make one, and no dragon here expects more than that."

"So, if Third hurts his paw, I will carry him and we'll be even?"

"You are telling a story?" asks Seven.

"No," I say, not to be outdone in obtuseness.

"If Third hurts his paw, many dragons will take care of him. All dragons and two-leggeds like Third and want him to be happy."

"Many dragons like Third, and Mona, and Seven. But I am a strange dragon, and I cannot expect other dragons to like me... yet many dragons have taken care of me. It is a kind of hat, because Anar's dragons could be doing something more profitable."

"Yes," says Seven, "but Anar's dragons prefer not profitable. Anar's dragons say you and yours are Dragon, so we will take care of you."

"When my paw heals, I could go live far from here," I tell her. "Then Anar's dragons will never be paid."

"When your paw heals you can go where you want."

"No dragon could stop me," I say.

"No dragon wants to stop you," says Seven. "Wherever you go, Anar's dragons will have a friend. Perhaps Mona will come visit you, and make tea for you, and then she will talk of the time she almost got herself Egged and you will laugh together."

Seven seems so wise... I cannot say anything. She puts the vegetation that she has tangled around her neck.

"You are Disoriented," says Seven. "All dragons are Disoriented now. It will pass. We will go see Mona and the two-leggeds, and we will make tea."

"I will give you a dragon-hour if you tell me of tea," I say to Seven as she mouth-pulls Hizoner's wagon closer to me. I must wait before she can answer.

"I cannot talk when I mouth-pull the wagon," says Seven, "but I will tell you all I know of tea. Your dragon-hour should go to another."

"To the owner of tea?" I ask.

"No," says Seven. "Give your dragon-hour to Jade."

I put my left front paw in the wagon, then my bitten paw--there is plenty of room. The wagon smells of food-beasts and vegetation. I push the wagon with my hind paws as Seven mouth-pulls. Sometimes it is a bumpy ride, but it does not hurt my paw.

Seven takes me to a strange place that smells of two-leggeds and smoke, and then, letting go of the wagon, tells me that the two-leggeds have taught the dragons how to command fire. Then she mouth-pulls on the front of the wagon again before it curves off the two-legged trail.

Seven tells me which tree-trunk structures are called 'cabin' or 'home' or 'the dragon's shed' by the two-leggeds, and she seems surprised when she finds only old scents. I think Mona was here a thousand breaths ago, but I don't do much scent-seeking.

Seven gets fire by reaching into a two-legged shelter, and shows me how to feed a fire and make it grow. Seven puts a 'cauldron' on the fire, then puts water in it, then tells

me we must wait. She tells me about fire and two-leggeds and imprinting and never mentions dragon-hours--and I'm thinking Anar is going to want something later. Then Seven puts vegetation she calls 'potatoes' into the hot water, and we must wait again. Seven shows me 'salt,' the only rock-dust that Anar likes, and crushes some salt into a powder using one of her blunted talons. After I taste a very small amount of salt (I like it), Seven tells me what happened when Anar's dragons were staying with the Dusty Dragons. It seems that Seven and Anar both managed to intoxicate themselves accidentally, and there was much Stupid.

I become tired of lying down, and put my front paws in the wagon again. When Seven is busy emptying a hot cauldron, I discover that I can walk backwards and mostly make the wagon go where I want it to. I move the wagon closer to where Seven is pouring from the cauldron into a 'washtub,' and do not immediately notice when the vegetation on the front part of the wagon falls into the fire. Seven says 'FREEZE!' and quickly pulls the vegetation out, but some of it is covered with fire. I watch as she throws dirt upon the vegetation. Then Seven says 'Your favorite release command.'

"How much do I owe?" I ask her.

"Those dragon-hours should also go to a dragon named Jade." Seven puts a washtub in the wagon in front of me. The water in it has a very mild smell.

"Two things," says Seven. "One--the tea is hot. Two--this tea needs salt in it."

I taste it--it is like drinking hot flavorless mud. I try it with a little salt sprinkled on top, and drink it all. Then I tell Seven, "It is like an expensive soup that the Bitten Dragons have, but with much less flavor. I don't know why I like it."

Seven has a potato that she has broken in half. "The first potato I ever ate was made like this," says Seven. She touches one piece of potato in the salt dust, then puts the pieces of potato together again. Then she says "Open your mouth and stick out your tongue."

When I do, Seven puts one piece of the broken potato on my tongue. "Salt side down," she says, and eats the other piece.

"Not good, not bad. If my paw was better, I'd go hunting and we could have better food," I say.

"They need magic to taste good," says Seven. "Potato magic has three parts. One, Mona taught all dragons how to cook potatoes. Mona has already been eating potatoes for many days, and the wise two-leggeds say potatoes can be good food for dragons. The next part happens if dragons break a potato. Each half of a broken potato will fit only to one other potato piece. So a dragon can put salt on one piece, then put the potato back together with the salt inside for a short time, and then share the potato and salt with other dragons. This makes dragons become Dragon again. I hope those reasons are enough, because the last part is very powerful magic that I do not like.

I consider this... and then I break a potato in half with one paw. I put salt on one half, then push the potato together again. "Salt side down," I tell Seven, and put one piece on her proffered tongue and eat the other. Then I ask "Honorable Seven, you have paid much, but I must know of the powerful magic."

"All dragons should know," she says. "The little dragon... Mona has recently calculated that dragons will eat all the food-beasts in the floodplains in nineteen thousand days if no new eggs are laid and no new dragons come."

"New dragons like me?" I ask.

"Yes," says Seven.

"Where are there more food-beasts?"

"Honorable Jade, the two-leggeds say there are food-beasts in the mountains. A big dragon can travel there in three days, but no dragon has found a sleeping cave there."

"I see the cold, hard truth," I say. "in a hot potato."

"Salt side down," says Seven.

We have waited a long time, and Seven wants to seek others but will not. When I suggest she does not trust me enough to leave me alone, she laughs. "Your right paw will not wander," she tells me. "Also, Gran will like having a hot stove when she returns, so I will keep the fire burning."

"Gran is a two-legged?" I ask.

"Yes," said Seven.

"You work for a two-legged?" I am incredulous.

"I will work for this two-legged because I like her," says Seven.

(grumble)

"Gran and her own taught Mona about fire," says Seven. "Gran helped teach us about 'cancel imprinting' and knitting and the FREEZE command, and bought dragons this cauldron, and Mona uses Gran's stove to..."

I can't move. To her credit and my debit, Seven quickly notices something is wrong.

"Jade, speak of your troubles."

I shudder so much that I nearly fall off the wagon. "Don't know," I say. "I couldn't move."

"Perhaps Hizoner should know of this," Seven says. "But I do not know where he is."

Bizarre! "You would find a two-legged when a dragon is ill?"

"Hizoner knows," says Seven. "He has read all the papers."

I don't understand this at all, but I remember the medicine on my paw. "What does Hizoner charge to teach a dragon?"

"Hizoner always teaches any dragons that will listen."

I'm more confused than ever. "Perhaps it is the Disorientation," I say.

"Do the Bitten Dragons have flesh-minders?" asks Seven

"Of course," I tell her. "But they ask a certain number of dragon-hours."

"A wounded dragon must negotiate with a flesh-minder?"

"No," I tell her. "A wounded dragon must pay what is asked."

Seven is quiet for a breath. "That is not good for either dragon," she says.

"If I had some of the medicine Hizoner makes," I tell Seven, "I could be rich among the Bitten Dragons, because they fight too often. With luck, I might become an owner, and owners always have enough dragon-hours if they need a flesh-minder. Owners can get the same from the Bitten Dragons as all of Anar's dragons can get from each other. But Anar's dragons will also help a strange dragon found on The Boss's [sic] territory. Any Bitten Dragon that brought a strange wounded dragon to the sleeping caves would have to pay the rent and the flesh-minder's bill."

"Perhaps your Disorientation is passing," says Seven.

I smell Mona and Chi and some two-leggeds half-a-breath before Seven victory- roars, and Mona and Chi roar back. Soon I see the two trotting females, but Chi has Hizoner and another two-legged on her back, and Mona also carries two-leggeds--one of which is the smallest I've ever seen. Seven's delight at seeing friends seems undiminished by the indignities that Mona and Chi let themselves suffer. The immature two-leggeds want to do the 'salt side down' magic with Seven... and Seven includes every two-legged and dragon, including me. The smaller immature two-legged nearly sheds tears onto my paw but she missed. Then Mona and the two-leggeds want to feed the hurt dragon in Hizoner's wagon, and I think I can taste the potato-magic.

When Mona asks me to hold my bitten paw over the edge of the wagon, Chi looks with her. Then Chi tells Seven that I should eat food-beasts until my injured paw heals, and that I should not do anything that might get my injured paw dirty--especially with food-beast blood. Seven wants to know why Chi does not tell this to me, and Chi says Bitten dragons don't like to be told what to do, so she will talk to his right paw instead. I say something about offering opinions rather than commands. Then Seven says she will make soup tomorrow, and Chi likes the idea. Seven asks me how to make expensive soup, and I have to confess that I don't know. The two-legged known as Gran knows of soups and will help. Chi says she will find a dragon to hunt for us.

The only dragons I know of who can command many dragons to prepare one meal are owners--and owners cannot command those that stand upon two legs.

Mona mouth-pulls the wagon to the sleeping cave. I try to make it easier for her, yet she insists on pulling as hard as she can. We are both tired when she pulls the wagon into the sleeping cave. She stops where some dragon has attempted to make a sleeping mat.

"This is for you," says Mona.

It's crude, but I like it. "Honorable." The mat smells like Seven... but she was with me most of the day. When Mona pulls the empty wagon further into the sleeping cave, I try to scent the vegetation underneath--and I smell other dragons. Who would bother to plant Seven's scent on a sleeping mat? Since I forgot to be discrete in my scent-finding, the little dragon sees me with my nose in the twisted grass. She lies in the dirt across from me and winks.

I see the set-up. "I'm supposed to ask you a bunch of questions right now."

"My ears are yours to speak into."

"Then... tell me of your job when you followed Big Dragon."

"To Big Dragon, Mona was useless--she is too little to polish scales, cannot run fast and far, cannot carry a big food-beast. His dragons would challenge-roar at Mona because she asks too many questions. Did the bigger Bitten Dragons ever roar at you, Jade?"

"Many times. I've been hit a few times too."

"If some dragon hit Mona, other dragons would laugh. This dragon is too small to be a threat."

"You have ears and eyes! You could spy upon any dragons that bother you and sell the information."

"Big Dragon's followers do not think that way. Did you spy on other dragons?"

"Many times. When I received the Bite, I had a few dragon-hours saved up because of it. But a wounded Bitten Dragon cannot work, but still must pay the prices other dragons ask. Soon, I almost had less than nothing. I wandered before that happened, because it seemed easier than staying and paying and paying."

"This happens to all Bitten Dragons?"

"Mostly, but... but I made some deals and it shouldn't have happened to me!"

"Perhaps other Bitten Dragons say the same."

"Some."

"Big Dragon wants dragons to follow in his footsteps, and Mona did not know better so she followed. Perhaps owners also want ignorant dragons, and Jade also did not know so he followed."

"What kind of dragons does Anar want?"

"Happy and quiet dragons."

"Is Anar an owner?"

"This dragon does not understand owners."

"Owners are... What does Anar ask of his dragons?"

"You and yours are Dragon."

"Honorable, but not an answer to my question."

"Anar asks that all dragons be good to each other--as if they were you and yours. If a dragon will do that, then Anar will be the big dragon. Mona thinks that is why many dragons follow Anar now."

Mona tells me that I look tired, and tells me of a sleeping test. I'm supposed to lie down and close my eyes while Mona tells me a story. I fall asleep when Mona tells me about a brave dragon named Stretch.

I dream I'm wearing my old neck-pack, heavy with b-sticks, *and* I have half-a-dozen two-leggeds still to sell. Life is good! I'm looking at the shiny rock that Hizoner had... there's not much medicine left in it. I decide to sell it before it is empty. Then I hear Mona make a distress cry, and I drop the shiny rock.

No other dragon is awake except the watch and scent dragons, and I cannot find Mona's scent. I try to sleep again, but there's a dragon moving somewhere...

"Anar," whispers Chi.

"I hear," Anar said.

Chi whispers "The little dragon... don't go far from her today. And try to be extra-nice to all dragons today--you are going to get grouchy."

"I am?"

"Mona smells of egg-pheromones. The more you smell them, the worse you will get--and Mona says you're going to smell them."

"Mona says this?"

"Yes! Do what she says."

Chi's scent has not faded when Anar gets up.

"First," whispers Anar.

"I heard every word," says First.

"Be the big dragon," says Anar.

"Good idea," says First.

"Honorable First," says Anar.

"Seven," says First.

"Yessir," says Seven.

"Take care of Jade," says First.

"Yessir," says Seven. "We'll stay by Gran's home."

"Honorable Seven," says First.

"Jade," says Seven.

"I hear," I say.

"Does your paw hurt?" asks Seven.

"Not yet," I say.

"Soup today," says Seven. "Ready to travel?"

"What is soup?" says Fays.

Seven invites Fays to come with us. I put my front paws in the wagon, and Fays and Seven take turns talking and mouth-pulling the wagon. As we travel, I smell a certain scent from the vegetation. When I mention it, Fays goes to get some of it without an agreement--and I didn't even have to ask. The piece of vegetation that she brings back is not the one I wanted, even though Seven says the two-leggeds will like it. Both females try again, and this time Seven brings back a piece of Stupid-berry vegetation.

"These berries are fun to eat, even though they taste terrible," I tell the females. "Big dragons eat ten, and little dragons eat two. I like to eat three.

"Why would any dragon eat terrible-tasting Stupid-berries?" asks Seven.

"Stupid Berries make a dragon stupid, and sometimes it is fun to be stupid," I pick three berries off of the vegetation. "A dragon should not eat too many, or it will cause much sleepiness."

"Chi will like to know of berries that cause sleepiness," says Seven.

"Unless a dragon eats too many, the stupid fades in half-a-day," I say. "And, since you have no particular reason to trust me..." I lick up the berries so the females can see them on my tongue.

"Jade," says Fays, "do you know what you're doing?"

"Perhaps," I say to her. I should have swallowed the berries quicker--the bad taste lingers longer than it should. "A Stupid dragon is an honest dragon, too stupid to lie," I tell her.

"Perhaps too stupid to eat soup?" asks Seven.

"Perhaps," I admit, thinking of the times I've Stupidly gotten water up my nose. "I'll be fine for traveling because of the wagon. Usually, stupid dragons find the ground too uneven to walk far."

"Let's hurry," says Fays, who starts mouth-pulling the wagon.

"Jade, will you be a burden to other dragons?" asks Seven.
"Not at all," I reassure her. "You'll see."

I sing-say one word with every step. "Stupid berries. Stupid Jade. Stupid berries. Stupid Jade."

"Jade," says Fays. "Why so stupid?"
"Stupid Jade ate too many Stupid Berries."
"What can I do?" asks Fays.
"Be beautiful!" I tell her.

"These?" asks Chi, sniffing the Stupid Berries.
"Yes, three of those," says Fays.
"He looks sedated," says Chi, "Jade will give you no trouble. But watch his paw--he's not going to be able to give it proper attention, should he decide to go make a mark."
"Then I will keep him on the wagon," says Seven.
"Honorable Seven," says Chi.
"Honorable Chi," says Seven, "how is Mona?"
"Physically good," says Chi, "but a little confused. Imprinting and egg-laying are like two Bitten Dragons--they don't get along. She wants to sit next to the stove with Lizabeth and sit under Anar at the same time! I'll watch her as long as Anar tolerates it. So far, Anar is also doing well--Mona suggested that he destroy some vegetation every five hundred breaths, and he's still himself. He hasn't grumbled at me yet."
"You expect Anar to be bad-tempered?"
"Yes," says Chi. "No male dares approach him, of course--but I think he would manage."
"Good for Anar!"
"When I tell Anar about Jade, perhaps he'll grumble!" says Chi.

"I didn't lie about the berries," I tell Seven.
"Honorable Jade," says Seven.
"You never lie," I tell her. "You never ask for anything."
"I don't need to," says Seven.
"No? Once I needed dragon-hours for rent, but also I just wanted them." I think about that for a bit. "It was like a game. I never lost. I always had more dragon-hours at the end of a day. Then, I received the Bite, and found out that what I thought was a lot was not, and there was a big hole where my dragon-hours used to be. I was robbed!"
"You don't need them," says Seven.
"No... I don't need them. But they were stolen from me! I want them back!"
"Forget them," says Seven. "You can do nothing about robbed dragon-hours."
"I won't forget."
"That's not good for my friend Jade," says Seven. "Jade will be angry about what he cannot change."

"Is this young 'un giving you any trouble?" asks Eighth.

"Not at all," says Seven.

"Good to hear," says Eighth. "Do you remember what the two-legged ship looked like?"

"Not very well," says Seven.

"I'm from the same egg," says Eighth. "There is a ship, but none of the dragons can tell if it's the same one."

Seven makes a happy noise. "It must be! How many ships like that could there be?"

"Hizoner can't tell, either," says Eighth, "and now First is worried. He says all dragons are to hide from the ship for now."

After Eighth leaves, Seven asks me if I know what a ship is, then she wants to know why I didn't ask if I didn't know.

"It's the Stupid-berries," I say. "Also, it's hard to ask anything from poor dragons who sleep in the dirt and don't have neck-packs."

"What is a neck-pack?"

"Like those vegetation-tangles you wear around your neck... except you can put things in them."

"Sometimes I do that," says Seven, "but... Jade, I have an Idea for a joke. A nice joke."

"Not like Egging?" I ask her.

"Not like Egging, not like putting Stupid-berries in a dragon's potato, and not like putting a hot stone where a dragon will step on it--this is a nice joke."

Seven puts more vegetation-tangles around her neck, then mouth-pulls the wagon and me to the nearest tall vegetation. Seven pulls branches off and makes a big pile. Then Seven tries to entangle the branches in the tangles around her neck. I help her as I am able, and Second wanders over and wants to know what we're doing--and soon he's helping us as well.

"If you could put your front feet in Hizoner's wagon," says Second, "you will look taller."

"What will Jade do?" says Seven.

I start to get out of the wagon. "I'll lie down," I say. Second keeps me from falling with the back of a massive fore-paw. I see him wink at Seven.

"Jade," says Seven, "What will you do?"

We have entangled as many branches as the tangle around her neck will hold, and when Seven looks at me, I see a walking branch-pile with a dragon's head in the middle--I can't stop laughing to answer her.

"The Goddess commands you to laugh!" she says. Funny!

My laughter attracts the attention of other dragons.

"The Goddess commands you to breathe!" says Seven.

"Obey, obey," says Second.

Seven is making the wagon move where she wants it, and she moves the wagon closer to me. She says "Heal!" and shakes her branches. One branch falls off and I laugh more. Then she says, in a big voice, "The Great Green Goddess commands you to heal!" Then she makes the wagon go to other dragons. Second follows behind the wagon and says 'The Great Green Goddess has come!' Soon I'm not the only dragon

laughing.

I have a branch in my paw... and I've been sleeping with my mouth open. Sometimes the Stupid does that.

"", I say.

"Jade," says Seven's voice. "We made soup, Jade. Do you want soup?"

I manage to sit up. I don't try to talk again, but I look up, blearily hopeful.

"Open your mouth, Jade," says Seven. When I do, Seven puts soup in it--good soup. Seven and a two-legged take turns feeding me... this must be what it's like to be an owner.

"Honorable," I manage to say.

I'm still thinking of a hidden agreement--a talon-trap, a claw attached, something I'm not seeing--what could it be? I must find it, or I'll be Twice-Bitten Jade.

When we get to the sleeping cave, there are other dragons there. My sleeping mat has only my scent upon it. The other dragons must recognize this sleeping mat is mine. Life is good.

"I will tell one on Mona, since she's not here," says Stretch. "This happened when we were exploring this cave the first time. I was following the little dragon, who was holding the branch-skillet with the fire in it. When we see light in the distance, Mona keeps walking the same speed so the fire in the skillet won't go out, but walks to one side. I run past her to the light, and scare away the birds who live in the cave entrance. I see ocean, and the water looks too deep for any dragon. I look up to see if I could climb that way, but I cannot see the cliffside very well. After Mona puts down the flaming skillet twenty paces from the entrance, I tell her to come and hold my tail, and she does. Then I tell Mona to pull my tail as I lean the other way, and I try to get a better look at the cliffside... but the thought of all that cold deep water scared me and I wouldn't lean out of the cave very far, especially standing in bird poop. Of course, my paw slipped, and I nearly fell in the bird excrement. Mona almost laughs. This is so unlike her that I ask what's so funny. Mona said 'the little dragon thought we were both going to fall because she couldn't see how much I was leaning when I slipped--but then she saw my shadow and knew I wasn't going to fall into the water--then, she almost laughs. She wasn't thinking about me covered in bird poop at all."

Stretch makes a (gesture of submission) and sits in her place. Then Third walks up.

"Mona's two-legged Lizabeth," rumbles Third, "is Dragon. But she is more than that. She is permission to do things I'd always wanted to do, but because a proper big dragon never does those things, I never did them. When I'm with her, I'll victory-roar just to make her do it too. With her, an immature food-beast, I'll make a useless tower of pretty boulders--and be proud of it."

"Today, after F-word practice, the little two-legged had a question for me. She'd seen Mona cry a few times, and Mona told her about our friend Jade here and the traditional female treatment for dragon wounds, so she wanted to know if 'boy-dragons' could cry.

I told Lizabeth, sure, male dragons cry, but only for serious injuries. I tell her she should probably see it done, since she's got to know everything about dragons, so we're off to find a place to shed tears. Lizabeth wants to select the perfect place, which complicates things... but she tells me a story where she's been wounded and a hero boy-dragon cries over her wounds and heals her. (Many dragons laugh.) "I'm a little worried--I don't want to hurt her--but her story will not be stopped. When she finally chooses a place, I ask her to sink her talons in a tree, and I'll wash her pretend wounds. She says her wounds are all on her front because she's so brave and would not run, so she must choose a special tree to hold onto--and the tree she chooses is leaning so she can stare into the eyes of her hero 'boy-dragon.' When she orders me to clean her imaginary wounds with my tears, I don't want to be disobedient--so I put my head really close to Mona's little two-legged and cry just a little." Again, many dragons laugh.

"As a dragon would expect, her feet slide out from under her, but she doesn't lose her hold on the tree with her forepaws. After that, I egg-hold her until she becomes warm again, but this dragon's tears had a strange effect upon her. We sang songs together until she could walk again..."

In my dream, I'm running again--but not happily. The Boss is chasing me. Somehow, I know the little dragon spoke the truth about The Boss, and I'm scared. Ahead of me, I see Seven trying to rescue a tiny two-legged apparently oblivious to the Big Dragon chasing me. Finally Seven helps the two-legged get on her back and she runs. Seven cannot run as fast as I can... before I catch up to them, I turn to the left, then right in front of The Boss--and the great jaws get so close to me I'm running with my head down.

When I wake up, Seven is watching me.

"Bad dream?" she asks.

"Yes."

"If you think of other things, the dream will be quickly forgotten," says Seven.

"Don't you ever sleep?" I ask her.

"Sometimes. The Stupid-berries made Jade sleep a long time." When I say nothing, Seven winks and says "Chi says that a Stupid male is quieter than an Egged female, but neither leave their sleeping caves."

"Chi knows nothing about Stupid or Egging!" I say dismissively.

"Chi knows about hats. Chi has her own wooden egg. We have learned much," says Seven.

"We have?"

"Yes. We have learned that if the female dragon cannot see the wooden egg for a small number of breaths, she is no longer Egged. I have not tried, but I heard Graith can throw a wooden egg into darkness after first covering it."

I'm no expert on Egging--but as far as I know, hunger is the only way a female voluntarily leaves a wooden egg. "I want to see this."

"I can demonstrate using your egg," says Seven.

I consider this, but... "Not yet, honorable Seven. If something were to go wrong, I wouldn't know what to do."

"Honorable Jade."

She's been a good right paw; she'd be worth many, many dragon-hours to me if we

were among the Bitten Dragons. I don't like thinking about her speaking like a dragonet to a useless wooden egg.

"The two-legged's ship has returned," says Seven.

"That's nice," I say. "What's a ship?"

"A big two-legged shelter that floats on the water," says Seven. "If you will get in the wagon, I can take you to see it."

"I've seen them before," I say as I get in the wagon, "but I've never seen one up close."

"Big ships?" asks Seven.

"Hard to say," I say, "from so far away. No Bitten Dragon likes to talk of them, because the only dragons who see them are on the beach."

"I have never seen the beach," says Seven. Then she pulls and the wagon moves.

"Don't bother," I say. "It is sand that is hard to walk in and noisy, restless, undrinkable water on one side. It is unowned because it is often cold, wet, and windy, and Bitten Dragons who will not... can not pay rent traditionally sleep there."

Perhaps it is good that Seven cannot ask questions while she is mouth-pulling the wagon.

There are many two-leggeds and big dragons by the big floating wooden thing called a ship, and more two-leggeds are standing on it. I am surprised to see Chi's head come out of a hole in the front of the ship.

"Which is next?" she asks.

"Start with the barrels," says a two-legged.

Chi disappears into the ship, and soon she is putting overlarge and flat-ended wooden eggs where two-leggeds can reach them. The two-leggeds struggle to move them.

"Call me if you need me," says Seven, and she runs to the ship and gets on it. The two-leggeds let her move the badly-shaped wooden eggs to the place where the ship connects with the land, and sometimes she rolls them down. Dragons take turns letting them roll by, then chasing. Sometimes the dragons gently pounce upon them as if they were a delicate kind of food-beast. It looks like fun, even though the two-leggeds laugh at the running dragons.

"How's your paw, Jade?" asks a female from behind me.

"Better," I say. "You're Graith, right?"

"Yes," she says, obviously pleased.

"You are just the dragon I want to talk to," I tell her. "Seven says that wooden eggs have no power over you. How do you manage?"

"That's not... quite true," says Graith. "A properly colored wooden egg is still fun to hold. But if I cannot see the egg, I can drop it after three breaths."

That might be worth a couple days worth of dragon-hours to some Bitten Dragons. "Can you show me sometime?"

"Yes," says Graith. "You do not know of this?"

"No juvvie male will walk near any females with wooden eggs," I tell her. "Even if the males aren't around, the females can get vicious."

"A big dragon like you shouldn't be scared of any females," says Graith, who then winks at me.

"But I am!" I exclaim. "The females have tongues sharper than my teeth." Then I wink at her.

Graith laughs.

"Jade, can I look at your paw?" asks another female who has talons like Seven.

I hang my paw over the side of the wagon, and the female--Dee, I think--looks at it from underneath.

"It's healing well, says Dee. "Does it hurt?"

"Not now," I tell her.

"Have you heard anything about Mona?" Graith asks Dee.

"Nothing from Mona," says Dee, "Chi says to leave them alone. But I did hear..."

"What?" asks Graith.

"It is in the papers," says Dee, "that matings between Big Boss D and Dragonic Logic are Not Recommended."

"Why not?" asks Graith.

"No dragon or two-legged knows what Not Recommended means."

"Jade," asks Graith, "Are there any Dragonic Logics that belong to the Bitten Dragons?"

I don't understand this at all. It must be obvious to the females.

"There are four types of dragons here," says Dee. "One type is like Anar--a big, strong dragon. Another type is like Mona--small and smart. The papers say that those types of dragons should not mate, because it is Not Recommended."

"Does Mona know?" asks Graith.

"I don't know," says Dee. "Do you want to tell her?" Graith is quiet.

"What are papers?" I ask.

"Encoded speech stored in designs made on flat vegetation," says Dee.

"What good are they?" I ask.

"FREEZE," says Dee.

I stare at her.

"Your favorite release command," says Dee.

She smells healthy...

"You didn't notice," says Dee. "Ask me what I mean when I say FREEZE."

My mouth won't move.

"Your favorite release command," she says a half-breath later.

"Don't do that again," I say, trying not to sound angry.

"I do not intend to hurt you, Jade," says Dee. "The papers say that a submissive dragon will always obey the 'FREEZE' command, and a dragon with a hurt paw must... your favorite release command! Apologies."

"Don't say the F word to Mona," Graith tells me. "Other dragons don't like that."

"I won't like that, either," I say.

"Cotton cord!" says Seven. She's returned wearing vegetation around her neck that interests the other females, who relieve Seven of her burden. Soon, all three females are working with the vegetation.

Seven says "This is finger crochet, Jade. Very useful." Seven holds up a piece of

tangled vegetation.

I can't think of any possible use for the square that Seven shows me, but she is quickly making it bigger... and she'll make it big enough to be useful.

"You'll like this," says Dee, who puts a similar piece of tangled vegetation in my left paw. Dee pulls, and the square untangles and gets smaller until some of the vegetation stays looped around my talons. The females laugh at my puzzled expression.

"What is it good for?" I ask.

"Capes and blankets," says Seven.

Now I'm really puzzled. "Why do you want capes and blankets that untangle?"

Dee recites a teaching-poem about fire to me and some other dragons, and several dragons offer additional facts about fire. They're discussing how to alter the poem when dragons scent Chi. When she appears, she looks tired.

"Mona is healthy, and her egg is healthy, and Anar is healthy."

"Chi, come here," says Seven, and Chi does. "Lie down here," says Seven, and Chi does. "Close your eyes, honorable Chi," says Seven, and Chi does--and quickly falls asleep.

"Seven, come here," I say softly, even though Seven is right next to me. "Lie down here. Close your eyes, honorable Seven." A few dragons laugh. Seven's eyes open again after ten breaths, and she winks at me. "That joke is pleasing to The Great Green Goddess," she says.

Hizoner comes into the sleeping cave, and every dragon is quiet. First and Hizoner talk about salt-making and barrels and other things I don't understand, but when Hizoner spoke of wheat and bread, some dragons seemed pleased. Then Hizoner and First want to talk to me. Hizoner holds a dirty square of white vegetation in front of me, and First seems pleased when he teaches me how to read a one-to-one map. Then First asks me "Where are the Bitten Dragons?"

"Here," I put a talon on the map. "This mountain."

"Then you live near the ocean?" asks Hizoner.

"Yes."

"Not near the Great River?" asks First.

"Far from it," I say. "That territory--here--belongs to The Boss."

"Interesting," says Hizoner. "Two days sailing, with good winds."

"Jade," says First, "could you stay inside a ship for two days?"

Now is not the time for sarcasm. "I don't know. I will try."

"Jade," says First, "in two days the ship could carry you to visit the Bitten Dragons."

"There are a few dragons I'd like to bring back with me," I say.

"The ship can only carry three dragons. If your larger friends could risk traveling to the Great River crossing, and will learn to eat vegetation once they get here, and then, if I like the look of them, they can stay." First winks at me.

"Yessir," I say.

"Can I go?" asks Seven. "Because, you can't trust Jade, can you? Especially without his right paw?"

"I don't like it," says First, "but..."

"Mission objectives, sir?" asks Seven.

"You will be a Night Runner upon the ocean," says First. "Take three capes."

"We'll also want Stupid Berries," I say.

Getting a dragon onto, then into the ship is complicated. But once we're on board, the two-leggeds lose interest in dragons.

I discover that I can make the ship move by shifting my body back and forth, but Seven tells me to stop. Then she wants to know about neck-packs.

"Neck-pack pockets can't be deep enough to hide your color," I tell her.

"So every dragon knows your name... unless a dragon is too poor."

"That's the Bitten way," I say.

"But... if you receive a creditor stick, everyone can see that too."

"Yes, but it is only the creditor half of a b-stick. Even so, dragons are supposed to take them to the owner of the b-sticks... the Association. They have a walk-up called Check-In, where you can trade creditor halves for whole sticks of your own color. They tried to charge twenty percent for that once, but they changed it back to ten."

"I suppose hoarding sticks of another dragon's color would be..."

"... very bad, if the watch-and-scent dragons catch you."

"Why would they care about that?" asks Seven.

"They're only called watch-and-scent dragons. They work for the Association."

"What is the Association?"

"It's a name for the three dragons that started it. Since they called themselves Red, Blue, and Yellow when they started the Association, they're called the primaries."

"Primary dragons?"

"I've never actually met one. They also own much else besides the Association."

"They own the b-sticks, so they get a part of every trade that uses them... why? Is it some sort of game?"

"Getting more b-sticks is... like a wooden egg for a female."

"The love of getting b-sticks is like a wooden egg... or a hat?"

"B-sticks can buy a food-beast or a warm place to sleep," I remind her.

"Yes..."

"Low-scent chews, thick warm sleeping mats, and dragons who will prepare your food--if you have the dragon-hours."

"Dragons don't need those things."

"Sometimes, dragons with many b-sticks can ask a hungry and cold dragon to promise all their future dragon-hours for food and shelter. If the hungry dragon agrees, the dragon will be owned."

"More and more hats, and they get bigger and bigger. B-sticks and wooden eggs you have explained. What of bitten paws?"

"Not all dragons live to be as old as Chi. The strongest and wisest Bitten Dragons will survive."

"No. The Association and their hat-makers prosper. Bitten paws and hats can make a smart dragon do stupid things."

"I'll remember that with every step I take."

"Honorable Jade! I need to learn of Bitten Dragons, not lecture you."

"Dragons will be Dragons," I say.

"Won't the other dragons ask about my unbitten paw?"

"I hope they do. If you keep quiet, I'll ask them for a dragon-hour up-front before I say anything." I wink at her.

(grumble)

"Seriously... our biggest potential problem is that the watch-and-scent might object to us carrying a big bag of Stupid Berries. They might keep the berries and make us pay for wasting their time. They won't be at the beach, but we should find one of my friends as soon as we can. Beach dragons are... strange, but they won't cause trouble. Then we follow the dragon-hours... and when we have enough, we can buy what we need and speechify with as many dragons as we can."

"I never had any dragon-hours, and I never had any problem speaking."

"I'm thinking we'll want food and a warm place to sleep."

"I like those things."

"We'll get them. We must keep even the scent of the Stupid Berries secret to ourselves until I can sell them."

"Yessir. I will have none in any story I tell."

"Good idea. Another thing... Bitten Dragons never tell each other what to do--don't even ask me to hold still when you tie my cape on. Without an agreement, it's rude for any dragon to act like a big dragon, especially a servant. You might be excused for being foreign, but let's not attract any attention while we're walking with berries."

"Yessir. What else should a storyteller know?"

"Perhaps this will help you," I say. "I heard this story many times. Once, an immature male dragon named Jack Dared went up a mountain, and the weather stayed warm and sunny for a whole week, or Jack would have never made it. Then Jack sees a huge dragon walk by, and hides. The dragon looks terrible, covered with a thick layer of dirt, and the dirty dragon is singing a strange song about bones and bread. But then Jack realizes that the dirty dragon just left his sleeping cave. Jack dared--he entered the sleeping cave--and there was a golden Crystal Rock. The Crystal Rock asked Jack, "What do you want to know?" Jack wanted to know about Higher Math. The golden Crystal Rock tries to teach Jack some algebra and calculus, but then Jack asked about sleeping caves. He learned of two nearby ones that were unoccupied. Then Jack wanted to steal the golden Crystal Rock, and despite its warnings, Jack ran away mouth-carrying it. He ran to one of the nearby sleeping caves that was unoccupied, but the caves were owned and watched, and Jack was seen entering by two big dirty dragons. Jack was caught and had to be submissive and follow orders. Jack also had to endure insults--one dirty dragon said only an ignorant dragon would mouth-carry a Crystal Rock. The owner of all Crystal Rocks said Jack owed one hundred dragon-hours. Rather than pay, Jack wandered away, and what happened after I cannot say.

"Why were the dragons so dirty?" asked Seven.

"The dirty dragons are in many many stories. The Great Fireball is even greater when a dragon is high in the mountains, so the dragons who live up there put wet dirt on

each other if they become too warm."

"Are the Dirty Dragons bad in some way?"

"No... the stories never say. It's just assumed."

"Perhaps this story was told by owners. Does Jade want to be like Jack?"

"No. Jack was lucky, not honorable."

"Jack was not a smart dragon," she says. "I would not behave like Jack."

"You want to behave like Mona," I say.

"Yes! And Anar, and Stretch, and Chi! Good dragons."

"Chi has a big mouth."

"And Seven puts her nose and ears between two dragons more than she should. But Chi is not trying to get your dragon-hours, and Seven is curious and wants to be as helpful as Mona."

"... and sound like her."

"Is that bad?" Seven asks.

(grumble) "No."

"Perhaps Bitten Dragons are taught to be owners?"

"Yes," I say. "We were taught to spend dragon-hours by the pawful."

"But what of dragons valued for other reasons?"

"Magenta, last I heard, is a good singer--so good, that she gave expensive performances for owners only. She is still Unbitten, a strange dragon from far away, but she became an owner."

"Are there others?"

"Many. Some dragons tell funny stories or sing, and some get lucky--like when Wine found he could run far up the walls of a big round room in his sleeping cave if he was running fast enough. For a dragon-hour, any dragon can try to run up the walls--I've done it myself twice, once without paying... (grumble) bitten paws ruin everything. The owner of that cave tried to make a deal with Wine--if he would demonstrate this running trick to other dragons twenty times, the owner would give him half the rent from the big round room for twenty days. Instead, Wine was smart enough to ask for half the dragon-hours the cave-owner would get selling permission to run up the walls. That way, Wine will do his running trick for his own selfish reasons for free. They made the agreement, and now Wine gets half the dragon-hours that are paid for running in the round room. Wine might be a full owner someday."

"I do not understand how a dragon can own running in the round room."

"Owning is controlling," says Jade, "and that comes from other dragons who agree to follow the Rules."

"But... without a big dragon, who makes the rules?"

"Owners do sometimes. For an example, when Wine became half-owner of the Round Room, the other owner rarely came to visit, so all the dragon-hours went through Wine's paws first, and he made all the business decisions... when business was slow, Wine would let spectators in for free, and would encourage a dragon to run longer than paid for. Wine's other half didn't like that, and they hired an arbitrator, both agreeing to abide by the decision reached--but the arbitrator said there already was a Rule. Since Wine was honest with the dragon-hours, the absentee half-owner had to let him give away free product."

"Was Wine a dragon like Mona?"

"No... Bitten Dragons are all bigger. Wine acts a bit like Stretch--but Stretch found a way into the sleeping cave, something that dragons needed; while Wine found something fun to do, like the wooden eggs."

"It is good not to have to tell you that."

"It is hard to learn from dragons who sleep in the dirt," I say.

"Some dragons sleep in the dirt because Anar does. Anar sleeps in the dirt because he likes it. He likes it because he got used to it, and he got used to it because he slept in a cave that was too small for other dragons if he tried to sleep on a pile of vegetation. I was one of those other dragons, as was Mona and Chi."

"There was once a dragon, and this dragon had a strange thought--perhaps he was not very smart. He tried to hide his obvious lack of intelligence, sometimes pretending to understand other dragons no matter what they said. Of course, he suspected the other dragons still thought he was less than intelligent because of his training. He had learned to never be sure what the other dragons thought of him because of the day he ran out of dragon-hours. After that, he never knew when he could just relax and be Dragon, so he ran away.

Then he had a dream, in which he meets a tiny female dragon with wings instead of fore-paws. The tiny dragon has magic, and she wants to help him in way she can. But he doesn't know about magic, and such a tiny dragon couldn't possibly help him, even though it was honorable of her. So the tiny dragon did what she thought was best.

The dragon began to learn things--like what made strange dragons laugh, and the quiet joy of kindness and compassion. He began to think as a big dragon, trying to do what was best for all dragons. He became so busy he had no time to think about what other dragons thought about him. The tiny dream-dragon flew away, because other dragons needed her more than this one."

"Honorable Seven, I miss Mona as well," I said. "I worry about her, too.

"Why, Jade?" asks Seven.

"Dee told me about what she read in the papers," I say. "About Not Recommended."

"Honorable Jade! She told me too," says Seven.

"Does Mona know?"

"Mona knows everything," says Seven.

"Are you sure?"

The air is damp, but warm, and I have no trouble sleeping as the ship sails on.

Once again, I'm dreaming of running from The Boss. Ahead I can see Seven and a two-legged who don't see the Big Dragon chasing me. "Run!" I yell, and Seven helps the two-legged get on her back. I wake up because Seven is licking my nose.

"No bad dreams on the ship," she says.

Those wooden walls that keep the water out are not very thick... but I manage to sleep again anyway.

"Once," I say, "I thought that all my problems would go away if I was an owner. I'd have more dragon-hours than I needed, and I wouldn't have to... I could do what I wanted."

"Perhaps owners have problems," says Seven. "Perhaps not all dragons believe in owners."

"Dragons like you."

"And you."

"I still believe in owners, but not in owning."

"I still believe in owning, but not owners," says Seven. "Those food-beasts on the flood-plain belong to Anar's dragons, but not to Anar."

"But if Anar spoke a Rule about food-beasts, every dragon would obey."

"Yes, Anar could abuse the trust of a hundred dragons, but he will not. Chi won't let him make any mistakes, and the wise two-leggeds trust him."

"I've never seen a Primary," I say, "but I've heard many rumors about where they live and what they do. Some dragons must have spoken the truth, but I never knew which dragons."

"Why not?" asks Seven. "Can Bitten Dragons lie so well?"

"They can and do, especially when paid."

"How can a dragon be paid to lie?"

"It is an easy way to get dragon-hours needed to pay for rent, and sleeping mats, and for entertainment."

"Bitten Dragons need to pay for what is not needed?"

I think Seven is just being stupid, but I'm not sure. "I don't understand."

"The sleeping caves belong to every dragon, so why pay rent?"

"The sleeping caves are owned," I say.

"By every dragon," says Seven.

"No--by the Stewards of the Primary dragons. They prevent abuse of food-beasts and sleeping caves, and want dragon-hours for this service, and we called it rent."

"The Steward dragons are owners."

I reluctantly agree. "Yes, it's commonly known that owning a commodity increases a dragon's interest in it, so..."

Seven puts her head on the deck and closes her eyes. After a twenty breaths, she speaks.

"Once, I made Anar a cape."

"Why?"

"I thought it would help him lead dragons far from The Boss and Big Dragon, and perhaps it did, for awhile. Then Anar threw it into the Great River and trampled it into the mud."

"Why'd he do that?" I ask.

Seven tells me the story of the first time Anar crossed the Great River. Then she explains how Anar could have crossed the river without getting stuck, or, once stuck, waited until Chi and the other small dragons brought him vegetation to stand on, preserving his cape. When I mention that the explanations ruin her story, Seven says that I might need to cross the Great River someday, or help another dragon do so, and

I'll remember what she told me. I'll know Anar's cape is underfoot when I'm crossing the river--and, when I'm a big dragon, I won't forget that dragons who let themselves get wet and cold don't sink in the riverbottom mud.

Perhaps Seven doesn't think of charging dragon-hours for her knowledge, but she could. I probably wouldn't have enough dragon-hours...

I must have fallen asleep. I sniff the air and decide to talk to a two-legged.

Seven is still asleep, so I quietly open the hatch. It's dark and cold, but there are a pair of watch-and-scent two-leggeds.

"Two-legged male," I say.

"My ears are yours to speak into!" he says. I'm impressed--he knows how to talk to the big dragon.

"I smell dragons," I say.

"I'll tell the Captain," it says.

The wind is light but cold, and the Great Fireball has just begun to light the sky. I'm standing on top of the big ship, and a two-legged is trying to wrap vegetation around my feet.

"If you'll do as I tell you, you will not fall," he says.

"My ears are yours to speak into," I say. The little ship looks tiny in the ocean. Soon I am wearing a 'rope-harness' and vegetation around my neck. Then the two-legged named Ace says I must move my feet only as directed. Seven's voice rises from below and says to obey. By following instructions, I get on the little ship easily.

The two-leggeds have affixed some vegetation around part of the little ship's paddles, and I'm supposed to hold it with my injured paw. Clever--it works. The two-leggeds let me paddle as fast or as slowly as I want--but I think they like it when I make the little ship move quickly.

I wish other dragons were there to see me get off the little ship. The two-leggeds don't mind becoming wet and jump out to get to the shore before the little ship does so they can pull the little ship high up on the beach. Then they take the vegetation off my neck, and after waiting for a wave, I step out of the little ship and my paws stay dry. "One dragon-hour for each of you," I say. Of course, my limp spoils the effect, but I do what I can.

The two-leggeds leave. I watch them for a few breaths and smell the air--and notice that two male dragons are nearby, both bigger than me. "Permission to approach," says the larger one.

"Granted."

"Why do you give dragon-hours to food-beasts?" asks the smaller male wearing a conspicuously empty neck-pack.

"It's a joke," says the other male. "How could a food-beast spend dragon-hours?"

"They could pay ten percent to a dragon," I suggest. "I'm Jade."

"I'm Nada, and this is Nadir. What brings you to our beach, stranger?"

"Serious business," I say.

"Dragon-hours are Dragon-hours," says Nada. "Boring."

"Not this dragon," I say. "I'm a traveling sales-rep."

"Not that we've got any real dragon-hours..."

"Yes we do," says Nadir.

I ignore Nadir's remark--living on the beach does strange things to a dragon. "My business is too serious for dragon-hours."

"Enough hype," says Nada.

"I don't have anything better to do," I tell them. They probably won't get the irony.

"What is too serious for dragon-hours?" asks Nadir.

"Ideas, and space in Anar's sleeping cave," I tell him. "Those who follow Anar have to work hard and do strange things to get enough to eat, but ..." Both dragons are laughing.

"What an Idea," says Nada.

"Strangest Idea I've ever heard," says Nadir.

"Where's this sleeping cave you've found?" asks Nada.

"Across the Great River," I say.

"That's a hard trip without a ship," says Nada.

"I travelled it with this paw," I say, winking too slowly to avoid an "Excrement" from Nada.

"No, it's food-beast. A big dragon named Third carried me most of the way. Third is part of a group called the Night Runners, and they rescue dragons from The Boss' sleeping caves."

"Who owns the rescued dragons?" asks Nada.

"They don't do that... I'll tell you their story. After a big fire, this group of dragons figures out how to cross the Great river. Then they find an excellent sleeping cave and all the food-beasts they could ever want... so what do they do? They disguise and minimize the scent of their big male dragons, and when the night is darkest, the males run to The Boss's [sic] sleeping caves and gather dragons who want to go--right under the nose of The Boss. They do this again and again, and now there are many dragons. To prevent running out of food-beasts, these dragons eat vegetation sometimes. Since that works, they sent me to say there is still room in the sleeping cave, and more dragons can sleep there if they will eat vegetation sometimes."

"Have you ever eaten vegetation?" Nada asks Nadir.

"Never," says Nadir, who winks as he says it. Both dragons rumble-laugh.

"These dragons have watch-and-scent dragons positioned on the wrong side of the Great River. When strange dragons come, they help them cross, and dragons are Dragons all over again."

"What's the bait and switch?" says Nada.

"The worst part is clearing vegetation and planting, but every dragon tries to help. One more thing --the females have sharp tongues. Never, never, never, make one of these females angry with you."

"And that dragon, she'd be one of yours, am I correct?" says Nada, pointing his chin at the little ship.

"That's tail-first," I say. "Not only can she be sarcastic, but she can tell stories that other dragons will repeat, so her sharp tongue is also long."

Nadir looks puzzled... so I say "If you are nice to her, she may make you a hero in one of her stories."

"How much does she charge?" asked Nada.

"Nothing. They don't do dragon-hours where we live. Now Nada looks puzzled.

"How is she paid?" asks Nada.

"She gets happy dragons to live with."

"I scent what you mean," says Nada, who winks at me.

"Seriously," I say. Then, when I try to help mouth-pull the boat onto the beach, Ace takes charge of that, ordering me away as if he owned me. I expected a few comments from my new friends, but Seven appears to have distracted them. Ace gives me the bag of Stupid Berries before the two-leggeds leave.

"This is Nada and Nadir, and they're beach dragons," I tell Seven.

"Has anybody ever called you a beach dragon?" Nada asks Nadir.

"Never," says Nadir, who winks at me.

"You and yours are Dragon," says Seven.

"You can't mean that," says Nada.

"I do," says Seven.

"Why not?" asks Nadir.

"She doesn't know us," says Nada.

"I don't need to," says Seven. "Once, when I was wandering tired, cold, and hungry, Anar found me and accepted me as Dragon, even though I had nothing to offer. If I can cause that feeling to happen in another dragon, I will, so you and yours are Dragon."

Nadir says "You and yours are Dragon."

I say it too.

Then Nada says it, but adds "Where's the sleeping cave and the food-beasts?"

"The cave is two days traveling upstream on the side of the Great River. The watch-and-scent dragons will see you when you come near the river-crossing place," I tell him.

"But that territory near the Great River belongs to The Boss," says Nadir.

"Yes," says Seven.

"You ever trespass before?" Nada asks Nadir.

"Never."

Both dragons laugh. Beach dragons are strange.

Now that Seven is here, I want to trade the Stupid Berries for some dragon-hours, but Nada advises against it. "Stupid-berries are hard to find these days, and the dragons that sell them ask for many dragon-hours. They're not going to like some young male like you taking away their business."

"Honorable," I tell him. After I make sure no other dragons could possibly be listening, I say "That's good advice, but we plan to stay only two-three days, then get back on the ship," I say.

"Why?" asks Nada.

"I already told you," I say. "I'm going to tell the Bitten Dragons that any dragon can come to our sleeping caves and not pay rent, even if there isn't enough food-beasts and we have to eat vegetation sometimes."

"Is it a dry cave?" asks Nada.

"Yes! It's a beautiful cave!" says Seven. "The floor is flat, and wide enough for three big dragons, and long enough for many more dragons, and the wind blows through so

the air stays good."

"What's the catch?" says Nada. "How do you get paid?"

"We don't," says Seven. "Some dragons, if they find a big herd of food-beasts, will call all their friends to come share."

"What do some other dragons do?" asks Nadir.

"Obviously, these generous dragons wouldn't know," says Nada. "Am I correct?"

"Have a pawful of these, and think about it," I tell Nadir, and put some Stupid Berries in his neck-pack. "I'm going to turn the rest of these into Jade b-sticks, and go buy a few things. You want some?"

"Not those," says Nadir. "Do you have any traveling food?"

"Not yet, but you'll get it," I tell him.

"When we go into town, try not to look like a tourist," I tell Seven, as I try to pick up my friend Tan's scent. "Pretend everything is boring--you've seen it all before."

"I follow," says Seven, "But why?"

"Mostly because being a servant does that to a dragon, but partly because tourists get their paws nipped," I say. "Looking interested will cause any Bitten Dragon to ask for more dragon-hours."

"Perhaps I should have a new name," says Seven.

"Not needed," I say. "Your name implies that I might own six other dragons."
(grumble)

"This will work," I tell her. "This way, Bitten Dragons will expect me to do all the talking."

"Why is that important?" Seven asks.

"You're not a Bitten Dragon," I can smell Tan--he's close.

"Jade!" says Tan, who emerges from some vegetation. "You're alive!"

"I think so," I say.

"They told me... Is that Stupid Berries that I smell?"

"Sure is," I say. "Want some?"

"Yes, Honorable Jade! Where did you get them?"

"From across the Great River," I tell him.

"Full of excrement as always. Come with me," says Tan. "You can get in big trouble with those."

"Why is that?" I ask.

"Stupid Berries are Controlled now," whispers Tan.

"Fiery excrement!" I say, too loudly. "They were hard enough to find as it was!" I manage to say more quietly.

"I think that's because dragons were paid to destroy the vegetation," whispers Tan.

"Now, you have to pay the Primaries if you want Stupid Berries. If the watch-and-scent dragons catch you with those--or if a dragon reports you for the reward--you'd be lucky if you're only Twice-Bitten."

"And a new product was born," whispers Seven.

"What can we do?" I ask Tan.

"First, we've got to hide them somewhere," says Tan. "Then, I need to know what

you're planning... then I can advise you better. Follow me."

Tan takes us to a place where lots of smelly vegetation grows, and we hide the bag of Stupid Berries there. Tan does not put any of them in his neck-pack, but I take some, just in case this deal goes bad. Then Tan wants us to walk away from the sleeping caves to get the smelly vegetation scent off of our paws. I explain our mission, and Seven and I answer questions about crossing the Great River and the sleeping cave on the other side.

"I think I can help," says Tan. He gives me the creditor half of a black Association trade stick with two hundred eight dragon-hours on it, and we agree that the rest of the berries are his. "I brought fifty two food-beasts to the feeding grounds for that," says Tan. "So remember--you found this on the beach."

"How much do I owe you?" I ask him.

"I think I can make my dragon-hours back," says Tan. "Selling Stupid Berries undermarket is risky--but very profitable, because the owner of Stupid Berries asks for more dragon-hours every time I buy them."

"It only took Seven and a couple two-leggeds two or three hundred breaths to pick those," I say.

"... and they grow for free," grumbles Tan. "Heard all that... but owners act like owners as always. Listen, Jade, eventually the word will get out about new undermarket Stupid Berries. The owners will soon guess you brought them even if they never scent them on you--you're the only one who's traveled. They're going to want to talk to you and any other dragon you talked to. So... how much time do you need?"

"Two days," I say.

"That's all? You got it. In four days, the watch-and-scent will be looking for you. The more I profit, the worse the hunt will be. Don't tell another dragon that you talked to me, or..." Tan makes a tiny distress cry.

"Tan... if the excrement gets too deep, you know where you can sleep,"

"Honorable Jade," says Tan. "Dragon-hours might become free for me here and now. I could win big."

"Is it a game?" Seven asks Tan.

"A what?"

"Winning dragon-hours is fun?" asks Seven.

"Isn't it obvious?" asks Tan. "It also pays the rent, and I can buy whatever I want without having to work."

"I am very ignorant," says Seven. "But I think you will say 'dragon-hours are dragon-hours' soon, and that I do not understand at all."

"What's to understand?" asks Tan. "What's wrong with winning?"

"What could be wrong with winning?" asks Seven.

"When winners take too much," says Tan. "Since dragons don't need Stupid-Berries, no matter how much they like them, I can't plunder, right? I can't charge too much. I'll ask just enough to cover my costs and reward my risks... but as a favor to you, I won't make more than twenty percent over the top."

"Honorable Tan!" says Seven. "You are making the best of a bad situation. The situation is dishonorable, not the dragon."

"So young, yet wise," says Tan. "Good choice, Jade."

We are near the sleeping caves, so Tan says goodbye and follows his own footsteps. I dig a hole and bury the Stupid Berries I have, hoping the bag keeps the dirt out. Then we go to the only place I can turn the trade stick into jade sticks without the Watch-and-Scent breathing on my neck--the Association.

I slide the trade stick I got from Tan half-way through the hole in the wall made of huge stones. The Associate on the other side is called Vermillion, and he seems to be a shifty-eyed dragon always looking for another dragon-hour. (I was like that.) When he sticks the debtor half on the counter, my creditor half matches perfectly. I get angry when he refuses to conclude this business.

"Listen, Verm, I get jade sticks or I trade my two-leggeds without bothering with the local money. Which one is it?"

"Whatever you want, Jade. It's just that your color is voided, and I don't know what to do, and the other Associate who is supposed to..."

"I get my sticks, or I walk," I say to him, gently.

I get my jade sticks.

Seven picks up the bundle of jade b-sticks that barely fits through the hole. She mostly succeeds in looking bored. I also have trouble looking bored--the smell of my color brings back memories.

"I also want temp sticks." I say "One hundred dragon-hours, in threes and eights," just to be difficult.

"Threes and eights? Eleven eights and four threes?"

"Eight eights and twelve threes," I say.

"Three hundred breaths," says Vermillion.

I accept. We can visit the Association's Consumer store for that long. "One," I say to Seven, and she pushes a b-stick out of the bundle with a blunted claw.

I bite the stick on the ten dragon-hour line, then split it. I slide the creditor piece through to Verm, and the debtor piece is dropped into the Hole as Verm watches.

"Thank you, Verm. Be sure to tell your bosses that stick belongs to a dragon named Vermillion and not to the Association."

"To me? Honorable Jade!" says Vermillion.

I leave without saying anything else, and Seven follows, rolling the bundle of sticks in front of her, then mouth-carrying them. Bitten Dragons don't treat b-sticks that way, but we don't have neck-packs yet. As I try to remedy that lack in the Consumer store, Seven is having difficulty looking bored. I give her a pair of neck-packs and ask her to judge the quality, a task she did as well as I would have. I buy the neck-packs, two baskets of traveling food, and a half-pawful of low-scent chews. As I bite various jade b-sticks on the proper lines to total thirty-two dragon hours, the store minder (Auburn) splits b-sticks and puts one half into the Store's Hole and the other in the Associate hole--then jokingly asks if I'm about to flee again.

"With just this? Not a chance," I tell Auburn. "I'm too busy to hunt today or tomorrow, and traveling food makes my breath smell like a carrion bird's unmentionables." Seven puts on a neck-pack, winks at me, and leaves the store. Servants don't behave like that--I'll have to tell her.

"My brother, Aqua, does food-prep," says Auburn.

"What's he charge?" I ask.

"He'll feed the both of you for five dragon-hours, unless you want specials."

"Five? Sounds reasonable. Where is he?"

"Probably sleeping off the Stupid."

"That's not the way to owning someday."

"There are many dragons and a few far-away owners," Amber says. "Aqua's young, but he can do the math."

I lower my voice. "Very good. Were you and Aqua both Ash's dragonets?"

"Yes," says Auburn.

"Excellent," I say, barely speaking. "Tonight, come find us, and ask Seven if I really own her. I'd like to hear what she says."

"Where will you be?" says Amber in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Don't know, yet," I say. "Scent us up."

As I load up my neck-pack with my purchases, Auburn is looking bored again. I suppose she'll find something else to do tonight. I eat one of the low-scent chews... they taste worse than I remember. I try to look for Aqua in the nearby Association sleeping cave, where the watch and scent dragons (both big males) are listening to Seven tell a story about the Night Runners. The watch-and-scents don't want me to overhear, or perhaps just don't like me--they try to charge me rent before letting me in. I tell them that I want to check the place out first... and they relent.

Aqua is a little male dragon who has yet to receive a Bite. He's sprawled on a sleeping mat near his neck-pack. I stop ten paces away, and listen to the babbling of the females for a few breaths until Aqua realizes I'm here. I hire Aqua to do food-prep for Seven and I and pay him a bit more than he asks for. To his credit, he mentions the discrepancy, and I wink at him and tell him the extra dragon-hours are for fast and friendly service. He laughs, calls me Honorable Jade, says I won't regret it, and leaves his neck-pack with the Steward on his way outside. It's fun to overpay dragons like Aqua--I never knew.

Seven is still talking with the with the watch and scent dragons on duty in front of Blue's sleeping cave, and I pretend not to notice. She follows me to The Association. Vermillion has the temp sticks ready.

"One hundred and twenty dragon-hours," says Vermillion.

"You charge every dragon twenty percent, or just me?" I ask him.

"Nothing I can do. My apologies, Jade."

After I pay, Vermillion gives the temp sticks to Seven. Each stick has jade spots on both ends.

"What's with that? I growl.

"New regulations," said Vermillion. "Too much funny business going on with temp sticks."

I notice the temp sticks are marked with scratches as well. "Perhaps the local money is too cumbersome to use to pay my servants," I tell him. Vermillion says nothing. I leave, followed by Seven, who is delayed a little putting temp sticks in the pockets of her neck-pack. Vermillion whispers something to her, and she 'accidentally' drops a 3 on her way out. Now I'm having difficulty pretending to be bored. Not only does Seven know something I don't, I can't plan on spending a few temp sticks undermarket after

dark. My jade sticks are going to leave a trail...

Seven looks at me and looks at the path outside the cave. We've got things to do--we don't have much time before the owners ask the watch-and-scent dragons to squash little limping Jade and his Stupid Berries. Might as well go make a mark... As soon as we are far from any dragon, Seven whispers "Blue has 'people.' Who is Blue?"

"He's an owner and a Primary. Do you know more?"

"No," says Seven. "What dragon will?"

"Dragons that charge a hundred hours for one of theirs. I'll tell you later."

"Can dragons overhear us?"

"Sometimes," I say. "I know a trick using large-leaf vegetation and a dragon's ear." I scent the air, then say "There are better ways to hide a dragon's scent than low-scent chews. Want one?"

Seven accepts, then says "They taste terrible," spits, then covers. "They probably couldn't work on me anyway."

"Why not?"

"Scent, Jade."

I don't smell any nearby dragons... but in five breaths I'm sure I smell a very stupid one and a female near egg-laying time. My paw hurts.

"I don't know what we can do... so we'll go to the beach."

"Yessir," says Seven. "Will we come back, Jade?"

"Probably not."

"Aqua and the Stupid Berries."

She's a good right-paw. "Honorable. Let's eat."

We scent-find Aqua, and he's dragging a big food-beast. He starts apologizing for not being ready even though we are early, but I tell him to cancel our agreement and keep the b-sticks. Aqua leaves so we can eat the food beast the old-fashioned way. Then Seven decides she's going to manage things--she wants to wash, then talk to Aqua.

We find him waiting outside a sleeping cave. After Seven asks permission to approach, she asks him "Have you ever traveled for many days?"

"No."

"Come to the beach, and I will tell you stories of the dragons you could meet if you traveled.

"I already know of the dragons that follow The Boss, so no sale," says Aqua.

"You got her wrong, Aqua," I tell him. "She never tells stories from The Boss or Big Dragon, and she never asks a dragon to pay. When does Auburn get off work?"

"Closing time," says Aqua.

"Come to the beach," I tell him. "Here--I'll pay you. Keep half, and buy traveling food with the rest and bring it to the beach. Bring your friends, too. We'll make a fire."

"A what?" he says.

I wink at him and we're gone. It's not the way I was planning to spend the temp sticks, but at least a nice dragon will get some benefit from them.

I can't see any dragons on the beach, and only a few places that smell of dragon. Neither Seven nor I like the constant wind, and we decide to wait between two sand-dunes. Seven uses the ship-signaling kit to make a fire. Soon, we smell a strange dragon. I say "permission to approach" to an old male with a tattered neck-pack not much bigger than me. He watches Seven and the fire closely for a few breaths, then he says his name is Zero. I tell him my name is Burnt, because I'm about to burn all my jade b-sticks. He laughs, but advises against it.

"You might think up a use for them yet," says Zero. "They look like nice throwing sticks, even if small."

"Do you have a use for them?" I ask.

"Not one," says Zero. "Are you two sleeping outside tonight?"

"I don't know yet," I tell him.

"We built a sort of shelter that way," says Zero. "It's small, but both of you could fit in."

"Honorable," says Seven, "but we must wait here for other dragons."

"What for?" asks Zero.

"I will tell stories," says Seven. "You can listen too."

"How much?" asks Zero.

"I never ask dragons to pay."

"Have I heard these stories before?" asks Zero.

"Thees are not stories from The Boss, and I have never heard stories from owners," says Seven. "I tell my stories."

"My ears are yours to speak into," says Zero, "but I could be a happier dragon if my friends could listen too."

"Are Nada and Nadir your friends?" asks Seven.

Zero winks at her. "Of course. I'll tell 'em if I see 'em, but they haven't been around all day."

"Honorable Zero," says Seven.

"Be right back," says Zero.

"What have you gotten us into, Seven?" I ask.

"One last chance to complete our mission," says Seven.

"Dragons on the beach tend to be strange," I tell her.

"Dragons are Dragons," says Seven, "but tell me more."

"I lived out here once, for the undermarket and for rumor-gathering... it was hard. It hurts dragons to live on the beach. It's cold..." I see some stealthy dragons downwind, wearing neck-packs. I wink at Seven and say "I can't see any dragons anywhere."

Seven, of course, has to take a look. She says "Permission to approach, granted!" to the dragons.

Aqua brought a couple friends, and transfers traveling food to my neck-pack (Seven doesn't like the smell). Then Zero shows up, and he's brought a friend. Seven doesn't seem bothered by all the strange dragons, and nearly asks as many questions as she is asked about two-leggeds and fires and ships and Anar. One thing surprised me-- after I gave some traveling food to Zero and his friend Naught, they said that Big Dragon and The Boss will stop their war very soon, and then Big Dragon will fight the Bitten Dragons. If true, that smells of desperation, as it would take a big dragon five days to travel that far.

Seven tells a story about a bragging Emperor and his Rock of Rule, eventually humbled by how many dragons wished to move his talons. By then, the Great Fireball is fading. Seven tells our story, and the dragons can smell her and know it's the truth. Seven builds another fire on top of a dune, then walks back and forth between the fire and the ocean many times.

"I could do that," says Zero.

"I cannot ask," says Seven, who keeps walking.

Soon, Zero is following in her footsteps. This lasts for one breath, exactly, before Naught follows too. Then every dragon but me decides to follow. Seven says 'honorable' to every dragon--even me.

"The little ship will come," says Seven. "It can carry one dragon to the big ship. The big ship can carry three little dragons to my home. Jade will come with me. There is room for one more dragon, no bigger than Jade."

"It is hard to believe we're too big for this one," Naught says to Zero.

"Perhaps Jade will not go," I hear myself say. "I can lead dragons to the place where the Great River can be crossed."

"Jade, you cannot travel far."

"No... not yet."

"The Great River can be crossed in one place, where there is always a watch-and-scent to look for wandering dragons. The Night Runners helped Jade, and they will help you if they find you. Any dragon who can travel to the river crossing could be Dragon on the other side."

"What about useless dragons?" asked Zero.

"I've never met one," says Seven. Then she tells a story of a useless little dragon who once floated across the Great River while standing on two trees--and once there, she chased food-beasts until they swam to her hungry friends on the other side.

The little ship comes. Seven gets in it and says "You and yours are Dragon!" The two-leggeds push the little ship into the ocean, jump in themselves, and start paddling to the big ship. Once they're clear of the waves, Seven helps with the paddling and the little ship moves away quickly.

"Why did Seven let the two-leggeds wrap that vegetation around her neck?" asks Zero.

"If Seven fell into the ocean," I tell him, "the vegetation will float and keep her head above the water."

"Dangerous way to travel," says Zero.

"Yes," I tell him, "very dangerous for dragons. I'd rather walk, even if I had to go through The Boss's [sic] territory."

"You got through once," says Zero.

"Not really. I had this hurt paw, and a big dragon named Third had to carry me."

"One of Anar's?" asks Aqua.

"Yes," I say. "Sometimes Third is one of the Night Runners." I explain that the Night Runners are dragons that de-scent themselves, and when the night is coldest, they wear capes and go to the sleeping caves of The Boss. They will bring back any dragon that wants to go. Because of the capes they wear and the extra capes they bring, they can outrun any dragon that chases them. Zero explains to Naught that both Big Dragon

and The Boss have forbidden capes to their follower-dragons. It sounds crazy, and Aqua says so. Zero says the big dragons don't mind the cold as much as the smaller ones, and cold dragons are slow and easy to catch.

When the little ship comes back, Aqua has decided to go. He promises to accept the two-leggeds and not hurt them. Aqua gives most of his b-sticks to his friends. He lets the two-leggeds wrap vegetation around his neck and gets into the little ship, and the two-leggeds paddle the little ship away.

"So... does any dragon want some Stupid Berries?" I ask.

"Perhaps," says Zero. "Where did you find them?"

"Two days sailing that way... if it makes a difference."

"It does," says Zero. "I like berries from far away. How much are you asking?"

"Two million dragon-hours," I say, and put a pawful of berries in his neck-pack.

"That pocket has a hole in it," says Zero, as the berries dribble out. He tries to catch them, but they bounce off his paw.

Soon, six dragons are trying to find berries in the sand. Aqua's friends, Orange and Teal, tell me that they've never heard of Stupid Berries, so Zero and I take turns telling them. Orange wants to buy a few, so I charge him twenty million dragon hours, and put berries in both his and Teal's neck-packs. I give Naught the few I have left in my neck-pack, and he says he'll give me a rock worth fifty million dragon-hours as soon as he finds it.

"How good are these?" asks Zero.

"I ate three, and got the sleeps," I say. "Next time, I'm only eating two."

"Good to know," says Zero. "These are the first Stupid Berries I've seen in a long time."

"Are there lots of Stupid Berries in your territory?" asks Naught.

"I don't really know," I say, shifting my bitten paw, "But I found these without much trouble. None of Anar's dragons knew about them."

"Why not?" asks Naught.

"I don't know--but I'm the only Bitten Dragon. The dragons that follow Anar once followed Big Dragon or The Boss--until that big fire."

"They got away and found a sleeping cave? Good for them," says Naught.

"Tell me about Anar," says Zero. "What's he like?"

I tell them what happened when I made a wooden egg, but my story loses a lot of focus when I see Seven paddling the little ship back to the beach. All the other dragons help pull the little ship to dry sand.

"Jade, go to the big ship," says Seven. "I hope to be with you before the Great Fireball rises."

I don't know why, but I obey. Seven pushes the boat back into the water after some of the two-leggeds get back in.

"My people want to talk to Blue's people. Can any dragon help them?" Seven asks Zero.

"I know the way to Blue's," says Zero, "but the watch-and-scent dragons won't let you in."

"I think they will," says Seven. "I'll show you."

Seven crouches, and a two-legged gets on her back. Another one gives long, shiny

metal things to the first one, then climbs onto Seven's back as well. A third one is putting things in Seven's neck-pack. I can't follow what happens next because by then I'm paddling, but the last time I looked, I saw a line of dragons following Zero. Two other dragons have allowed two-leggeds to ride on their backs, just like Seven. I wish I could go with them.

After letting Ace boss me around until I'm in the ship, I want to ask Aqua some questions--but he's looking miserable. "It's not too late if you'd rather walk," I tell him.

"I can endure it," says Aqua.

"The ship never stops creaking and is never still," I say. "I got used to it. Some of the two-leggeds say they have come to like it."

"Excrement," says Aqua.

"No, it's food-beast," I tell him. "Sometimes two-leggeds will say the strangest things."

"So do dragons."

"Three days ago, I discovered that I can rock this ship all by myself. Of course, it wasn't appreciated."

"I wouldn't appreciate it now," says Aqua. "Got anything less exciting?"

"A story, then. Close your eyes, and I'll tell you one, for free. Agree?"

"Agree. Why should I close my eyes?"

"It's a storyteller trick, Aqua. You'll understand after the story." Aqua grumbles a bit, but obeys. "This story is about a dragon like you, who wanted to travel a quarter-million steps through the Valley of Deaf. The dragon was not looking forward to the journey. He discovered couldn't possibly fit all the things he'd need in his neck-pack, and it was sure to rain on him before he could cross the Valley... but just when it looked impossible, a big dragon named Max offered the dragon like you a ride on his back since he was traveling that way anyway. The dragon like you tried to give Max some dragon-hours, but Max laughed and said he'd be happier if they found some Stupid Berries. The dragon had some, and gave them to Max, who ate just one, because he said it made traveling easier. Then Max helped the dragon like you get on his back. The dragon on Max's back decided he would be a watch-and-scent during the trip. Max walked up hills and down hills, trampling some trees and walking under others, walking much faster than the dragon like you could run. Max is so big that the dragon scarcely feels the footsteps, and in the Valley of Deaf the footsteps could not be heard. The dragon could only feel Max sway. Nothing was stopping Max, even if he did avoid a lake and a swamp in a big-dragon way. Max kept moving and walking, and the dragon like you went up and down, side to side, not seeing or scenting another dragon. The dragon like you tried to stay awake, but became sleepier. Slowly the dragon closed his eyes and felt only the motions of up and down, side to side, and the dragon like you could not hear anything even if he pressed an ear upon..." Aqua is asleep. I try to sleep myself.

Seven and the two-leggeds return a thousand breaths before the Great Fireball rises. First thing I notice is the pure-white temp sticks in Seven's neck pack. She tells us that the whole thing was a hoax--none of the dragons could scent any two-leggeds at Blue's sleeping-cave. Then she is quiet and points her eyes, head, and ears at the

Captain. He is holding a smelly lantern and is already speaking to many two-leggeds.

"She told us to put our hands over our ears as soon as she started singing, and pretend we were in pain. So, after the Blues capture us and bring us to the Commanding Dragon, Seven starts singing. All the two-leggeds perform as instructed, and she shoos us away from her and the Commanding Dragon right after she puts the F word in her song. The Blue dragons couldn't stop listening no matter what she did. I faked a limp, and Seven put me on Zero's back, and the Blue dragons let both of us wander around the cave with no further trouble--even when Zero stopped a few times to admire the wall-hangings. Then, when Seven finishes her song, Blue's dragons victory-roared and stomped and tail-thumped loudly. Seven decides to sing another song, and I don't think she used the F word, yet the Blues were as quiet as if she had. When she's done, Blue's dragons are even louder in their praise, and she decides to sing another song. Then Seven tells the Commanding Dragon that she'll do a private show. She stays behind, and we leave and walk back to the boat. By the time we get there, Seven is behind us. Seven, how did you get away?"

"I used the F word in a song and sang my way out, Captain."

The two-leggeds laugh.

"Well done," says the Captain. "Let's go home."

The two-leggeds disperse and do various jobs, and the ship moves.

The Captain orders that two fire-fountains and a smoke bomb are to be ignited off the leeward side of the bow. After a short dragon-conference, we decide that I'll see the smoke bomb, while Seven and Aqua will see a fire-fountain. Afterwards, both dragons tell me how pretty the fire-fountains are, but if the glowing bits are as hot as fire, no dragon could stand against them. After dawn, I see the two-leggeds' smoke bomb make a big, foul-smelling cloud that blocks the light, and the cloud persists long enough for the other dragons to take turns coming up to see it for themselves. After that, Aqua and I sleep because Seven does.

In my dream, I'm running again. The Boss is chasing me again, and he smells of dragon-blood. Once again, I see Seven and a tiny two-legged, oblivious to the Big Dragon that is chasing me. "Run!" I yell. and I watch as Seven helps the two-legged get on her back. "Jade," she says, in a strange, breathy voice. "Jade." I wake, and Aqua whispers "Jade" in my ear.

"Honorable," I whisper back. Seven still sleeps--she must be tired.

"Perhaps my scent did make Blue's dragons treat me well," says Seven. "But I had to use the F word on them, as well as a mean-spirited trick."

"What trick?" I ask.

"When I sang the F word and started moving dragons and two-leggeds around, no dragon said anything or moved to stop me. The Commanding Dragon said nothing, so Blue's dragons thought that he liked me. The Commanding Dragon probably didn't understand why he allowed me to act like a big dragon. Perhaps he thought he must like my singing very much if it made him speechless."

"Why is that mean-spirited?" I asked.

"Because of my trick, those dragons think I can sing," says Seven. "That is sad. They gave me valuables." She takes her neck-pack off and turns it upside-down. White wood, pieces of metal, and berries bounce.

"Zero said to keep some of these for when we come back," says Seven, giving a 25 to Aqua. The temp sticks are useless unless we do, but they are the real deal--unscratched, undyed, and untraceable. Seven picks up the pieces of metal.

"There are some gold coins in with the black ones," she says. "The two-leggeds like gold. Do Bitten Dragons like gold too?"

"I've never seen gold," said Aqua, picking up Stupid Berries and putting them back in Seven's neck-pack.

"Bitten Dragons like these best of all," I said, picking up the last of the white temp sticks--every one a creditor worth ten dragon-hours or more. Blue's dragons must be very well paid. "Did you see Blue himself?" I ask Seven, as I fill her neck-pack.

"I don't know," said Seven, quickly picking up the metal bits with her blunted talons. "What does he look like?"

"I've never seen Blue, myself," I say.

"Perhaps he was one of the dragons wearing black armor," says Seven.

"Those would be his bodyguards," I say. "I've seen them many times. Was there a dragon with them?"

"No," says Seven. "Only the Commanding Dragon."

"Maybe he was Blue," says Aqua.

"That dragon was big enough to be any color he wanted," says Seven.

"I've always heard that Blue was an average-size dragon," I say.

"More excrement," says Aqua. "That's what they say so you'll think someday you'll be an owner."

"Once," says Seven, "I heard a little dragon say 'Those words belong to The Boss. Perhaps The Boss is not your friend.'"

"But I never talk to owners, or know any dragon that does," says Aqua.

"Perhaps the words of owners are put in a dragon's mouth using mysterious ways... but you know the goal for which the words are very carefully chosen."

Seven thinks for half-a-breath. "If Mona was here, she'd be calculating how many food-beasts a dragon would need traveling on a ship for a hundred days, then how big the ship would have to be, and how many vegetation ships the food-beasts would need... and she'd warn us that food-beast poop in the ocean could have profound effects.

"Anar." says Aqua.

"If Anar was here, he'd probably sleep. Some dragon is always waking him up for some reason."

"Some dragon named Chi," I say.

"Yes," says Seven, "because she is not scared of Anar. But Chi never bothers Anar for selfish reasons."

"How is Chi paid?" asks Aqua.

"When all dragons are healthy and happy, Chi has less work to do."

"Who owns Chi?" asks Aqua.

"No dragon, and every dragon," says Seven. "Just like me."

"Jade does not own you?" asks Aqua.

"When you cross the Great River, no dragon owns any other dragon," I tell him.

"Then... why? What makes each dragon work?"

I wink at Aqua so Seven can see, then say "Dragons work or they suffer the sharp tongues of the females. Seriously, I don't know what makes it work, except Anar's dragons *like* one another. And... how can I not like these dragons who carried me away from danger and took care of my bleeding paw?"

"What's to prevent you from free-loading forever?" asks Aqua.

"What prevents you from taking care of the dragons who take care of you?" asks Seven.

"I don't understand," says Aqua. "Jade didn't have any agreements, and Anar's dragons took care of him anyway. Because there is no agreement, Jade owes nothing and is richer."

Seven laughs. "If a food-beast steps on your paw and then I take care of you, does that make you richer?"

I think I know what to say. "I can eat and sleep whenever I want without paying anyone anything... the same as all of Anar's dragons. But I'll eat potatoes sometimes, because... because the other dragons need to eat too. So we learn to eat potatoes salt-side down."

"Are Anar's dragons poor?" asks Aqua.

"Anar's dragons have two-legged friends who have ships," I say.

"We have enough to eat, a good place to sleep... and fire," says Seven. "and... Mona, Anar, Stretch, Chi, Hizoner, Gran..."

"You haven't met those dragons yet, but you will." I say, overlooking the two-leggeds in Seven's list of her heroes.

"It only works because you're rich," says Aqua. "You don't notice the inefficiencies because they don't matter."

"After your first potato... that's a vegetation you will eat... then we'll talk about rich," I say. Seven can teach you about potatoes, if she's not too busy making capes and telling stories... both at once, if there's any proper vegetation for it."

"I've done some cape-making," says Aqua. "Boring."

"Yes," says Seven. "I was one of many hat-constructors, and I became a storyteller because it was boring, and now the other dragons ask me for stories."

"What do you get for it?" asks Aqua.

"I get nothing that a dragon could see."

"Don't let her fool you," I say. "Curious Seven practically told her big dragon to give her permission to travel on the ship."

"... and ruined what should have been an easy mission," says Seven.

"No," I say. "I ruined this mission, because I am the big dragon of this mission."

"You rescued one," says Aqua.

"We could have been smashed like vegetation under a big dragon's foot," I say. "Stupid Berries weren't Controlled when I left, but I should have seen it coming."

Then a two-legged opens the hatch.

"Sir?" says Seven to the two-legged.

"Who's that?"

"Quiet, Jade!" says Seven.

"There's no hurry," says the two-legged. "There's a bigger ship that decided to follow us. They'll probably catch us by nightfall."

"Friend or enemy?" asks Seven.

"Hard to say," says the two-legged. "We're not flying under a flag, and neither are they. Since they're following without trying to communicate, I suspect the worst."

"What can we do?" asks Seven.

"If needed... could you scare them off?"

"We can try," says Seven.

"Problem is, they might decide to shoot at you... with cannons."

"Then they won't see a dragon," says Seven, "except for my tail."

Seven's plan sounds... fun. As the bigger ship approaches, Seven and I make our ship rock back and forth as much as the two-leggeds think is wise. Seven sticks her tail out of the hatch, and I make the ship bounce up and down until the two-leggeds ask me to stop. Aqua looks miserable. I put my tail next to Seven's for two breaths, then Seven and I rock the ship again.

"I never had a future," says Aqua.

Another two-legged is cursing about a mess, but Captain Two-Legged says to keep rocking the ship--just not so much. Seven does this while I challenge-roar through the hatch at the sky, hoping to scare the big ship that I can't see. The Captain says every dragon is to cover ears and be still--(THUNDER) and stinky smoke--then he tells me to stick my tail out of the hatch and flail around. Seven makes the ship rock as I do this, and other two-leggeds throw buckets of sea-water through the hatch and, honorably, don't get a drop on me. Once again, all dragons are ordered to cover our ears, and after the thunder and smoke, Seven and I tail-wrestle and tilt the ship at the same time. All the two-leggeds make strange noises--even the two-leggeds on the other ship.

The Captain says that's enough, the other ship is downwind. I ask which way the other ship is, and after he points, I throw a jade b-stick that way. I hear some of the two-leggeds laughing.

That was more fun than Stupid Berries--but Aqua doesn't look happy.

Then the Captain asks for and gets another round of noise and smoke. When the Captain says it's okay for a dragon to look, I order Seven to go first, and she does. Aqua doesn't want to go, so after she returns, I go up to look. I see the Great Fireball on the horizon, then the other ship, far away. The wind doesn't carry any scents from it. Then I look at the beach and see a pair of big animals that can only be dragons. I tell a nearby two-legged, and soon all of them are talking about a pair of dragons on the beach. I find my neck-pack, and get what traveling food is left--and Aqua gives me what he has; he says he won't eat it. I ask the Captain how to get this food to those dragons.

"Dragons have big hearts," says the Captain.

"What does that mean?" asks Seven.

"It means that dragons are generous and kind," says the Captain.

"Honorable," says Seven.

"That too," says the Captain.

"Thank you," says Seven.

I'll pretend I understood them. "Can I personally make the delivery?" I ask. I want to see the look on a pair of dragon's faces when I politely ask them, in future agreements with me, to tell me where delivery is expected.

"It will be faster if the two-leggeds use the canoe," says the Captain.

"Jade, will you send a b-stick?" asks Seven.

She's a good right paw!

Just to be weird, I bite a jade b-stick several times, carefully avoiding the proper biting place each time. The Captain say it will go with the traveling food. I wonder what Nada and Nadir will think.

(yawn)

I'm asleep before the two-leggeds return.

A few days after we return, a pair of dragons show up at the river-crossing. After Anar decides they are Dragon, the former beach dragons find me while I'm stirring a hot cauldron of potatoes. I ask them about their journey.

"Nada didn't want to go," said Nadir. "Then he said he'd only go two thousand paces, and then he said he'd stay only long enough to make a proper branch-blanket for me, and the next morning, he said..."

"Nevermind," said Nada. "When the two-leggeds brought traveling food and a badly bitten b-stick, I changed my thinking in a blinking."

"Where is Seven?" asks Nadir.

"In the darkest part of the sleeping cave with Third," I say.

"Why?" asks Nadir.

"Egg," says Nada.

"I want to go where I can hear," says Nadir. "I'll be quiet."

"You're easy to please," I tell him.

After Nadir is listening to Seven, Nada and I leave the sleeping cave. Mona follows us, wearing her sleeping dragonet.

"Nadir is kinda simple," says Nada. "I've been watching over him, even before I lost my color. He's not going to start fights or leave excrement in the sleeping cave, but... I can't explain it properly."

"We'll find something for him," I say. "They let me watch-and-scent."

"He could do that," says Nada, "but you have to tell him what to do when he scents a strange dragon."

"There's always work on a vegetation farm," I tell him.

"He'll work, and do a proper job, but... you'll see. He won't innovate."

"This dragon thinks it would be dishonorable to ask a Disoriented dragon to plant potatoes," says Mona.

"I'll also plant potatoes and watch him," says Nada.

"This dragon understands. Where is Nadir?"

"This dragon wants to see inside your mouth and nose," says Mona.

"Good Mona," says Seven squeakily.

Nadir looks at Mona and opens his mouth.

"The light is better that way. Will you follow?"

"Good Mona," says Seven.

Nadir looks at Nada, who drops an ear and lifts his nose. "Let's go," he says.

"Good Nada," says Seven.

Nadir follows.

"Nadir, I think you need to do what I am about to do," says Chi. Hizoner nods, and Mona blows, and somehow mist comes out. Chi chases the vapors with her nose. "It smells terrible (blows nose) but it is only a smell," Chi says, and Hizoner wipes Chi's nose.

"Colorless," says Hizoner.

"Once more, to be sure," says Chi. Then once again, and the third one was also clear.

Nada tries it twice. Chi says chasing the vapors won't help him.

Nadir tries it. Chi and Hizoner both ask Nadir to chase the vapors again.

I'm watching Nada watch Nadir--I wonder what he's thinking? A dragon could sneak a few jade b-sticks into Nada's neck-pack without him noticing.

Chi asks Nadir if his nose hurts, and he says no, so she asks him to chase the vapors again--and again. Nada watches with intense interest. I didn't mean to, but I sleep.

Once again I dream I'm running from The Boss. Again I shout at Seven and a two-legged, and again Seven helps the two-legged get on her back before she flees. I run between the big dragon and Seven, expecting the worst--but The Boss ignores me and runs past, intent on Seven and her burden. After I dodge a tail-swipe, I realize there is nothing that I can do. I run after them, but my paw starts to hurt and the dragons outrun me. I feel terrible and wake myself with a distress cry.

There is vegetation on me... it is almost as warm as sleeping with other dragons.

Because of my dream, I don't think I will sleep again. No other dragons are awake, so I talk to the watch-and-scent dragons, and decide to forget my bad dream by volunteering today on the wrong side of the Great River. Anar decides to be the other watch-and-scent--I'll probably get asked a lot of questions.

Even though I have to cross the river in the morning while mouth-carrying my neck-pack, I enjoy it. In the water, I can walk without limping--evidence that my paw is healing.

It's a short walk to the small hill for watch-and-scent. The vegetation is not tall and is easy to see over, and the Great Fireball is warm today.

Instead of questions, Anar tells me how to minimize the Disorientation of a new dragon. "Say 'You and Yours' first, and speak only the truth after. Try to give presents--food is good, but also news and locations. Listen closely to what a strange dragon says. Try to work together or sing together. Think about what a strange dragon needs."

"But... what if a large group of big dragons came all at once? Like that group that are walking in 'Blue's Cape' formation?" I ask.

"Are these the Blue dragons that think Seven can sing?" Anar asks me.

"Certainly," says Anar, "I'm working for her. I'm the manager."

"Does she own you?" asks the Commanding Dragon.

"Yes and no, not properly... I sort of run this place, originally just so I'd hear if she sang or told stories. Since I'm able to keep her and hers happy... especially a little female called Mona, one of Seven's best friends, you'll know which dragon I mean-- Seven trusts me and I somehow am big dragon and must say you-and-yours when new dragons come. Seven, of course, just hatched a dragonet, so she can't sing yet. Seven loves singing to her dragons."

"Does she?" asks the Commanding Dragon.

"Yes, you'll see for yourself! I have to manage this place, so I can't follow when she travels," says Anar, "but I've heard that Seven likes performing so much that there's no fee to see."

All the Blue dragons laugh until the Commanding Dragon is silent. Then he says "She performed for us without an agreement!" and the Blue dragons laugh again.

"She must really like you," said Anar. "She likes it when she is treated as if she was a big dragon--you and yours must be polite and proper dragons."

The Commanding Dragon is quiet but another Blue dragon says "Unofficially, Blue's Crew mistakenly thought she and hers might be spies or thieves and treated her rather badly, but she quickly forgave us."

"Of course she did," says Anar. "That's one reason we love her. Jade, go ask if she's telling stories tonight. I hope you and yours will stay if she is? She performs her best when there are many dragons. I'll guide you there myself."

I hurry off as fast as my paw will tolerate, and cannot hear what else is said. I think these dragons will decide to take Anar's job--and that Anar doesn't want me to see.

I meet Dee on the trail, still wet from crossing the river. I tell her the bad news. She runs, leaving me with another neck-pack full of vinegar. I walk back faster than I should have, because when one of the Blue dragons asks if Seven is performing, I don't have an answer.

"Yes, sir," I say anyway. That could be trouble...

Other Blues approach--bored and dangerous--followed by Anar and the Commanding Dragon. "Is she performing? Stories or singing? What do you have in those neck-packs?" A Blue dragon takes my neck-packs off and another one examines the jugs, nearly dropping one. He puts the tip of a talon through a little hole and swings a jug back and forth a few times. "What is this thing?"

"Vinegar. Smelly water. Seven uses it."

"She does? What for?"

"I can explain," says Anar.

"Proceed," says the Commanding Dragon.

"Once, when on tour, Seven used dust that some dragons put on their scales--a kind of disguise, for looks. She breathed in some of the dust by accident, and it made her sick. She got better, but her paws and nose were darkened. One of her followers suggested using vinegar that the two-leggeds can make, and it worked--even better

than expected. Seven was beautiful again, and she said it made her smarter. Not only that, but they tried it on me, and it helped my thinking as well. Seven was so happy that she adopted the whole tribe of two-leggeds. She also said any dragon that comes to the river-crossing gets treated with the vinegar, just like she was, for free. Seven has so many friends like me that also think it's a good idea, and we all help her do it--including the two-leggeds. Seven herself has worked here for as long as any dragon, giving many free treatments just like the one she got--you can tell if you look at her paws; they're almost pink! Afterwards, sometimes the treated dragons stay on her estate, like me, and do nice things for her and those strange two-leggeds that she adopted... it makes a dragon proud to be Dragon."

Then Anar gets asked many questions, starting with pink paws, and the Blue dragons temporarily lose interest in the jugs and Dee's neck-pack. When they learn what the treatment is, I've got the neck-pack loaded and on my neck, and Anar's promises to show the Crew how it works as soon as he can find some cotton-vegetation. I follow in his footsteps... and soon I'm wiping Anar's paws while the Blues watch. The vegetation turns a light red-brown color. The Commanding Dragon says "Does it hurt, Rusty?" and Anar and the Blue dragons laugh.

Anar explains once again about iron in dragon-scales. Because of my paw, I'm not working very fast on Number Eleven, the first 'volunteer,' so Anar decides to help me. Not ten breaths after that, the Commanding Dragon has his crew wiping each other. The vinegar is soon gone but the scent lingers from cotton stained nearly as dark as a trade stick.

"The two-leggeds will make more soon," says Anar. "Never before have so many big dragons come since Seven started this... apologies for the temporary shortage."

"I've smelled that stuff long enough," said the Commanding Dragon. "Where is the nearest sleeping cave?"

"There is a cave to the north. It's big enough for all present dragons," says Anar. That got every Blue dragon's attention. "There are no dragons there now because of the fire, and the cave is sometimes windy."

"How far?"

"See that hill?" asks Anar. "From the top of it, it is about five hundred steps to the cave. I can see ten thousand footsteps from the top of that hill."

"That's good to know," says the Commanding Dragon. "Does Seven own it?"

"No. Her place is on the wrong side of the river, and it's farther away. If you and yours want to cross, we should do it before the Great Fireball leaves the sky."

"How do you cross the river?"

"I'll show you when the next watch-and-scent shows up. I can't leave Jade by himself."

"Number Eleven! You're the next watch-and-scent."

"Understood," says a dragon.

"Honorable. Come back with Jade, so you don't miss the show," Anar says to the dragon who sits by me. Then Anar asks the Commander "Should I explain how to cross the river while Number Eleven can hear?"

"Honorable!" says the Commanding Dragon.

Anar belches loudly, and the dragons laugh.

"The secret to crossing the river is to get as wet as possible," says Anar. "There is thick mud underneath the water, and a dragon who tries to keep dry will sink into it. A dragon who keeps only his head above water will not sink so far and can still move."

"Perhaps you will demonstrate," says the Commanding Dragon.

"Of course I will. Every watch-and-scent dragon has to cross the river twice."

Then the Commanding Dragon asks me questions while blocking my view of Anar. "Yes, I crossed the river earlier today. Yes, I am... was the only Bitten Dragon here. Jade, sir. I got here by accident when I went wandering, and Seven lets me stay. Yes, that is my neck-pack. No, I don't carry any b-sticks. These dragons don't use them because everything belongs to Seven."

These questions are interrupted when the Blue dragons smell Mona. Neither I nor Anar mention new two-legged male-scents, and the Blue dragons ignore them.

Four of the Blues talk to Mona far from us; I can't hear anything. The Commanding Dragon is briefly distracted by this.

"Smoke," says Anar, before I get asked any more questions.

"What do you mean?" asks the Commanding Dragon.

"I smell smoke from fire," says Anar.

"Does any other dragon smell fire?"

No dragon answers... except Anar. "The smell is stronger."

"Your nose is not good."

"I can smell it even more. The fire must be growing." says Anar.

Now I can smell fire--and so can the others. The Commanding Dragon calls his dragons together.

"I must save Mona," says Anar, who runs toward her. A column of smoke rises behind the little dragon.

"Not yet!" says Mona, when Anar orders her to climb on his back. She runs toward the smoke.

"What are you doing? How do you fight fire?" Anar asks her as he reluctantly follows.

"What the little dragon does in a small way, you should do in a big way."

Anar grumbles but says nothing else I can understand.

The Blue dragons are still and silent. They watch Anar follow... then mimic Mona near the creek, doing something with vegetation. I take off my neck-pack and it feels like some other dragon is making me limp to the smoke... I can see the flames, too. I might not be able to help much...

"What are you doing?" says a Blue dragon's voice.

"I want to help," I say, limping to a place I don't want to go... just another dragon following in Mona's footsteps.

I will not look behind me, and since no dragon asks any more questions, I turn my ears straight-forward and limp... one breath, two breaths, three... then I hear the big dragons behind me moving. They run past me--and I limp a little slower. Soon the little dragon is commanding them all (even the Commanding Dragon) from the relative safety of Anar's back. The dragons are wetting leafy branches in a nearby creek and mouth-tossing-onto or dragging-over the burning grass. Anar is the only dragon digging and throwing dirt, and it looks to me like he's doing most of the work. Mona probably didn't want to ask the new dragons to get their paws dirty. All the fire is gone

and the scent of smoke is already fading when I get there, and the big dragons have already started to fight fires farther away--also next to the creek. Before I have taken ten paces toward the unfought fires, I hear something running downstream behind me. A two-legged male is running in the water like a food-beast! Twenty breaths later, I decide I've got a couple questions to ask it--but by the time I can see the river, the two-legged is half-way across.

I stop watching the swimming two-legged and see Third standing on the far shore. He looks at me and says 'come here' by dropping an ear and lifting his chin. I point my head to the top of what passes for a hill nearby, and Third nods. I limp to the top. I see another two-legged following the first down the creek to the river. It waves at me and I wink at it. I wonder how the two-leggeds can make fire.

I wait on the hilltop until I can see Anar and the Blue dragons... none are limping, and Mona is still on Anar's back. I victory-roar... and they return the roar, as does Third. Now I can step on Anar's Cape once again.

After I cross the river, Third tells me to report to First. I tell First that all the dragons are healthy and are returning. Gran and the tiny two-legged ask permission to approach. Gran is carrying vegetation tied to a stick on one end.

"This is the best I can do," says Gran, trying to get the water off of me by brushing down my side with the vegetation. "It works better with Mona." It feels strange, but it seems to help.

"I want to sweep Jade," says the tiny two-legged, who gets what she wants.

"Are these peaceful dragons?" asks First.

"All I know is that Blue dragons have a bad reputation, but not all Blue dragons are bad."

"Do you think those new dragons would mind being swept?" Gran asks me.

"I don't know," I say.

"I'll do it," says the tiny two-legged sweeping me.

"The dragons will be dry before you're done," I say, not liking that idea. "These are big dragons."

"Bigger than Third?" asks First.

"No... but the Commanding Dragon is as big as Anar," I say. First grumbles a bit, then he leaves.

"What bothers you and First about these dragons?" asks Gran.

"If the Commanding Dragon decided to take whatever he wanted, with eleven big male dragons that follow closely in his footsteps... what do we do?"

"What do you mean?" asks the tiny one.

"What if these dragons decide to stay and eat our food-beasts? How long will there be any food-beasts?" I say to the tiny two-legged.

"Aren't they nice dragons?"

"I don't know... probably not."

"We'll make them nice dragons."

"How?"

"Mona and Seven turned you into a nice dragon by taking care of you and trying to help you."

"These dragons are soldiers."

"I didn't know dragons could do that," says the tiny one.

"Your friend Third was a soldier," says Gran.

"He's the nicest boy-dragon of all! We *can* do it!"

Anar said there were too many big dragons in one place already... so I told him I'd do what I could for Seven. She and I are surrounded by Blue dragons.

Seven's voice is harsher than normal, but it doesn't seem to slow her speaking.

"These were the gold coins you gave me, and these were the black metal. One of my two-leggeds knows how to turn black metal the color of the moon," she says, showing off her new necklace to the Commanding Dragon. His followers are looking at every dragon except Seven and her necklace. Three Blues are staring at me.

"Do you think your two-legged could make my black metal the same way yours is?" asks the Commanding Dragon.

"Certainly," says Seven.

"How much?" he asks.

"You've paid already," says Seven. "You and yours are Dragon."

"Honorable... but how have I paid already?"

"Between me and mine, we do not ask dragon-hours. If you need help, I will do what I can--for my brave firefighting dragons!"

"Honorable!" I say.

"Sometimes," says the Commanding Dragon, taking bits of metal out of a pocket in his neck-pack. "More honorable than taking advantage of a dragon who is busy doing good things. Seven, why don't you add these gold ones to your necklace?"

"Honorable Sir! Perhaps my two-leggeds could make a necklace big enough for you?" To me, it looks like that idea had never occurred to the Commanding Dragon... and he likes it.

"They made this one quickly," continues Seven. "so yours could... I must find a two-legged."

"I'll seek for you," I say, turning to go.

"Ask another dragon to seek, Jade!" Seven says to my tail. Two breaths later, Mona's dragonet (Mona will not name him yet, and no dragon will call him 'Not Recommended') trots past me. Three breaths after that, the dragonet stops right between Seven and the Commanding Dragon. "Pretty!" it says to the big male dragon. I see Mona coming, scent-tracking while wearing Seven's sleeping dragonet as a cape.

I'm sure none of the Blue dragons can see my right eye, so I wink at Mona as she walks past. Because the Blue dragons are watching her, she ignores me--except her tail curls around my left front briefly. I wonder how she taught her dragonet to follow simple commands so quickly.

Hizoner is waiting for me. I can smell the hot potatoes he's carrying... and his fear. If Seven and Mona can't convince the Blues to eat potatoes sometimes, there may be trouble.

"I'll go back with you," I tell him.

The dragons ignore us in favor of Mona's dragonet. We wait quietly, but the dragonet sees me and decides to greet. I lie down as he approaches.

"Good Gade!" he says. I nod-agree, then submit to him. I'll talk like a dragonet for him later--right now, I don't want to distract him.

Since I'm quiet, he loses interest quickly and returns to his new friend, the Commanding Dragon. Hizoner and I wait while the Commanding Dragon talks like a dragonet. "Good Jade. Good Seven. Action scent (sniff sniff). Action lick (slurp)."

"Chirr-r-r-r-r!" He loves that one.

Despite the Blue dragon staring at him, Hizoner has a question. "Jade," he says very quietly, "have you ever looked at the dragon in the still water?"

"Yes. I know what I look like," I whisper back, trying not to stare at the Blue dragons who are watching me.

"Remember that dragon... with one of those capes, you'd look just like one of the Blues."

"All Bitten Dragons look like that," I say quietly.

"Is that so? Mona's dragonet looks like that, even more than you do. Shall I ask the sewing club to make a blue cape for him?"

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found in the footprints

Once, Micky made a big book for the dragons. The pages were notched to catch a claw tip so dragons of all sizes could turn them. The book was called "The Paper's History of Dragons" and, even though Micky wrote every word, all the words were told to him.

The book is short, partly because Micky thought he had to write with large letters for big dragons. Seven read the book to me--it took three hundred breaths. I wanted to ask many questions before she finished, but after she closed the book, it felt proper to let a few breaths pass in silence before I asked.

Long ago, before the Great Fire that Chi remembers,
an owner of the money
commanded the very finest two-legged brains with these words,
"Create dragons that will obey my every command."

They failed.

The owner of the money said "I want results this time."

They failed again.

The very finest brains went back to doing their old odd jobs, like designing reliable valves for pipes taking away excrement and ensuring that herds of traveling two-leggeds don't accidentally trample upon each other.

The owner of the money said "Dragons. Do it. Big ones, small ones, fast ones, strong

ones, fighters and runners and smart little ones that fit in a traveling machine or a flying machine."

The very finest brains preferred to do their old jobs.

"Do it, and there will be annual donations from the Association and its affiliates.

They received many monetary tokens. The cities decayed a bit, but there was a dragon prototype--like Chi. The first generation could lay viable eggs, but a DNA kink ensured none of the dragonets would. These prototypes were friendly, quick, smart, could drink salt water, had dextrous paws, but were not interested in following orders that came from strange two-leggeds.

The owner of the money, Lord Rots, said "Too scary. Do better. Have some stock options." Lord Rots was patient this time--with the DNA he had supplied for the prototype dragons, what else could the science-types do? This time, they'll try with his daughter's DNA.

By this time, all the money sloshing around Dragonland attracted many two-leggeds with an excessive love of money. One of these managed to obtain fifty fertilized eggs at once--and couldn't manage the dragonets because the eggs were from a 'substandard' species. Despite hunters with scent-proof suits and rocket-launchers, most of the dragonets became wild dragons, too old for imprinting or brain-chipping. Despite increasing the bounties paid, the dragon-problem persisted long enough for the rest of the world to notice. Then, war-helicopters and satellite pictures might have doomed these dragons, but the hunt was not completed before the Great Fire.

But not all the bio-engineered species were 'substandard.'

These were the big three factions of bio-factories that dominated Dragonland before the Great Fire:

Dragonic Logics Co. was the first success, according to those with enough money to buy dragons. These dragons were small and smart and quick as technology. Once imprinting is complete, they are proper little dragons and submissive to all two-legged companions. Versions with bio-golden scales exist because a two-legged owner of money (called Lord Rots) thought it would be a good idea, and bought many.

Plata-Power's dragons were slightly larger, not as quick, but stronger. The first dragons were much like the Logics, but the money man wanted amiable and athletic dragons without the 'burdensome' imprinting process. He got what he wanted. Plata-Power dragons reliably behave as if two-leggeds were Dragons without imprinting. Sadly, the silver scales won't stay shiny without frequent electro-polishing.

Big Boss D, the last of the three, is the biggest and strongest as technology. Their dragon-scales are very hard. These dragons are also intelligent and non-imprintable,

but their brains are wired to assume others (dragons and two-leggeds) always speak truth and act in good faith. The papers contain many references to one incident when four dragons were asked to fight a 'rogue' robot, and two other incidents when dragons were tricked into fighting each other.

After the Great Fire, the owner of the money never returned; and with no one to direct them, Dragons will be Dragons. Today, many dragons are Unbranded; for they are the Results of Natural Selection.

Once and again
various-sized mountains
fell in the gravity well
of a blue-green mudball

but this time
the puny two-leggeds had nukes
and domestic disturbances.
The nuclear weapons were too late
and the two-leggeds made mistakes.
The asteroid wasn't even poisoned with radioactive metal
but sold as such
(as usual).

This mountain nearly escaped the blue-green mudball's gravity well
and bits of it fell
for a long time after.

The biggest piece
made a splash
but it took a long time to fall (for a meteor)
and the forests it flew over burned.

Governments of incompetents
remained failures
as the air darkened.

A government said
that vast areas of land
were contaminated,
burned,
radioactive,

and uninhabitable.

Behind the veil
of a worthy bailout

Lord Rots got paid for his dozens of deca-thousands of hectares, some burned. He bought them back, plus more, when his staff verified that the meteoric contaminants were not radioactive.

Lord Rots lost two very nice palatial establishments that were no longer surrounded by vast tracts of forest. He decided to build a new one, far away. Lord Rots would not like to remember the burning that caused his staff to shrink.

The meteor taught him that wooly mammoths are inflammable, but most of his daughter's menagerie escaped and survived. He wrote memos asking for hunters to kill the rest of the animals (excepting his daughter's dragons and his secretary-dragon). Because the stupid radioactive story scares his remaining staff, Lord Rots' hesitates to command them to hunt dragons, and his radio-controlled war helicopters--Lord Rots needs them elsewhere.

The visible hands of Lord Rots were very busy.
(riots and looting and dereliction of duty)
and his new Xanadu was far away

so

after the tsunami
the dragons ran free
on land unrecognizably
burnt.

Because the owners of the money never came back
the Big Cannibal Dragons rule.

Now, with every meal, Big Dragon and The Boss bioaccumulate a high percentage of what their dragon-victims have bioaccumulated over a lifetime, including scarce platinum and palladium atoms.

Dragons bioaccumulate, and so do food-beasts. Metals bio-concentrate.

The metals first fell as dust from a hot sky-rock.
The dust fell onto the grass the food-beasts eat
and the grass bioaccumulates also.

The little dragon once told me
that the top of this food-chain has so much metal in his scales
that some of his prey may spend their days
rubbing his scales with abrasive sand
just so he won't get too heavy
to catch other dragons--but then she winked.

There is too much platinum in his food, which was formerly used as growth-regulator. His body can increase bio-production of designed enzymes that require formerly scarce atoms. He can grow in a logarithmic fashion for too long a time.

He is very strong.
He is always a 'he' Big Boss D
and he is
not dragon anymore
but dinosaur
and Mona thinks he's been poisoned
because along with the iron and platinum and palladium that bioaccumulate in
dragons
so follow some petrochemical pollutants
along with cesium and aluminum and mercury
(another unexpected consequence of two-legged tinkering in dragon DNA when
starch and fortified dragon food were cheap).

Once, the little dragon said she was poisoned.

One rainy day she spent thousands of breaths
drawing pictures in the dust
on the floor of her sleeping place
in a very small part of the caves that belong to Big Dragon.
Her nostrils were half a talon-length from the dust she was drawing in.
She was breathing on the dust so she could see it better.
The dust came from the feet of dragons
mixed with years of small stones and shed dragon-scales slowly ground to a powder
beneath feet.
That dust belongs to Big Dragon.

Mona's nose hurt and she became weak.
Mona became sick after she used Big Dragon's dust to draw the faces of food-beasts
she saw only in her dreams.

But Mona learned.
She would not breathe the dust.
She rolled pretty sand into leaves and mouth-carried it
to her sleeping place
for rainy-day drawing.

The new pictures of food-beasts looked happier.

Since Mona's place in the sleeping cave was too small for all dragons,
perhaps her drawings are still there.

The Great Spite-er

Once, there was a great spider-being, made of metal and fire. 'The Hand' told all the dragons that the spider preyed upon two-leggeds, and no two-legged war machines could come for many breaths. Four big male dragons decided to stop the spider. Their battle went well, and the dragons were almost successful--but their opponent did not tire and its body became too hot to touch. Even with three severely-damaged legs, it could still fight, even if it could not travel very well. The dragons were forced to retreat, and their foe always attacked when it could.

Two females threw a boulder and the male dragons prevented the great spider-being from dodging just long enough to trap a damaged leg. Soon the spider-being's other legs were buried under many rocks and stones, yet no dragon felt like victory-roaring. Their enemy was incomprehensible--perhaps it was unhealthy, like the 'rabid dog' story the two-leggeds tell. One of the big males actually felt sorry for the buried being, and shed a few tears upon a gaping spider-wound that did not bleed.

The spider-being began to burn quickly and furiously, and all the dragons fled.

The Hand summoned expensive and expert dragon-flesh-minders, and the dragons became healthy again before their scales re-grew. The Hand rewarded each dragon with a boon, including the females; all they had to do was to ask. All the dragons knew better than to ask for permission to leave the Hand's Property or to raise dragonets that would never know brain-chips, because The Hand would say no. Dragons know that The Hand prefers to grant requests from such loyal, valiant, and entertaining dragons; all his servants must be happy with what they get--or be replaced.

The dragons ask The Hand for time to think, to ponder, to realize the importance of this 'boon' rather than ignorantly ask for what a dragon should not get. The Hand is pleased, agrees, and to show his approval, he lets the dragons choose which wax to wear. (They chose unscented.)

Long ago, there was a dragon and her owner. They lived on a vast estate owned by a man who also owned the money. This man called himself 'Hand the Invisible' but everyone else called him Lord Rots. Her owner was one of Hand's favorites, yet she loved dragons more than following Hand's rules.

One day she sent her favorite Dragonic Logic female to deliver a package. Her dragon left the package (unopened) with the correct Property Line Sentry, and, before her dragon had taken many steps back to shelter, she discovered a long tunnel made of metal. Her dragon discovered that the tunnel had an exit, and the exit was on the wrong side of the Property Line Sentries--and her dragon did not experience the unpleasant electric spells cast upon a disobedient dragon that tries to cross the Property Line. Her dragon did not explore further, for all dragons must report to the Check-In once a day and there were many footsteps yet for her to travel.

The next day her dragon told her owner about the long metal pipe. Her owner gave her dragon a present--a syringe and a bottle of Dragonic Logic fertility hormones. Her owner winked at her dragon and said to act quickly. Her owner did not tell her dragon that the Dragonic Logic hormones would lose potency when kept in the sleeping cave--she'd give her more if too much time passed.

And time will pass. Her owner knew her dragon would not use the hormones until the problem called 'Draconic Management' was solved. Her dragon's eggs must not be found on the Property because Dragonic Management would claim them--but there was a lot of Property. Visiting eggs off-Property would require much traveling by a dragon and the Management demanded dragons visit the Check-in once a day. Her dragon took most of the day when she made the journey there and back; even if a dragon could visit the Check-in early one day and late the next, her dragon still needed the help of other dragons. She watched as her dragon spoke to a big dragon named Max who's owner was far away. Her dragon asked if Max would carry herself and another small dragon on his back--he would. Problem solved. Max could help two or three of the little Logics travel quickly between the metal tunnel and the Check-in, and as long as he helped, her dragon's eggs would never be left unattended.

Her dragon hadn't been told to keep any secrets from the other dragons, so soon the other Logics knew about the hormones and Max. In addition, her dragon was slow to discard the syringe. In this way, her dragon shared the hormones even though she knew sharing needles is not healthy and forbidden by her owner. The other Logics scheduled who was due when and where Max should be. Max thought it strange that female dragons were ordering him about, and even stranger that he liked it.

Many eggs were laid. Her owner was very proud of her dragon, but pretended ignorance and indifference rather than confront her dragon about sharing needles. (Her owner did not expect that.) In addition, she thought her dragon would have more trouble getting sufficient help from other dragons with her Free Eggs project. By sharing the needle, her dragon wisely included the other dragons--now all the dragons involved would benefit--even Max. But those dragons belonged to Hand the Invisible. Perhaps, if The Hand questioned them, they would tell all.

The Logics maintained a continuous watch-and-scent over the eggs laid off-Property

(and therefore not of concern to Draconic Management). Neither Max or the Logics ever figured out a way to get a big dragon across the property lines without triggering the electric spells, but Max became the father of dragonets that came from eggs he'd never seen or scented. With a wooden egg, the Logics found a way--partly because there weren't any male Logics (she and The Hand both preferred females) and partly because Dragons will be Dragons, and the female Logics thought Max was *Dragon*.

There was much the Logics did not know, but they did their best to raise dragonets that would never know brain-chip spells and Draconic Management. But nobody told the dragons about Not Recommended or about an incoming asteroid and failed nuclear attempts to redirect it.

Before the Great Fire came, Draconic Management *called* all the brain-chipped dragons to Shelter, and none of the chipped dragons could refuse. The young dragons were leaderless when fire and ash fell. They sheltered in the long iron pipe-tunnel.

After the fire, the young dragons fled together. They were smart/lucky--after finding less fire-damaged areas, they systematically searched until they found another sleeping cave. Two days after that, a group of the young dragons went searching, but found no food-beasts or vegetation anywhere near either end of the pipe-tunnel--only ashes. The dragons searched for many days, including the places their mothers told them were Forbidden, but they could not find the scent of any other dragons. They avoided all two-leggeds (successfully) for fear of finding new owners and being 'claimed' by Draconic Management.

No other dragons came near their new sleeping cave for many days. The young dragons did not forget what they were taught, but they were inexperienced and disoriented. Because the dragonets were raised together, they sought mates other than their siblings, yet non-sibling dragons were rare. The young male dragons were the same age, about the same size, and each one wanted to be the big dragon at about the same time--but they did not fight. The redirected dragon-behavior led in strange directions.

The discovery of split-stick money complicated a brittle culture--until the Association (a group of three big male dragons, each bigger than any of the young dragons) exploited flaws in the money-system and became 'owners' of the stick money and of much more. The local sleeping caves were soon 'owned' and somehow became too small for all dragons. The Association's money system ensured that there will be dragons that could not pay. The Association didn't mind the minor (to them) cost of the watch-and-scent dragons needed to enforce the rent-rules and the money-rules. Despite some dragon-grumbling, the Association remained quite profitable... until Jade and Seven's visit resulted in most of the beach dragons leaving.

Without destitute dragons willing to work long and hard for food, many jobs didn't get done. To force 'their' remaining dragons to work harder, the Association shrank the money supply; but some of the remaining dragons found that they could not earn enough to pay the rent for the sleeping caves. This seemed crazy and harsh to most of the dragons since the sleeping caves were getting emptier all the time. The dragon supply shrank faster than the money supply. Even dragons that could pay the rent decided not to be part of the crazy. It's well known that dragons that travel away don't want to travel back.

Long ago, a two-legged male re-named 'Mencius' spoke with a two-legged big dragon.

Mencius: "What is the difference between killing a two-legged with a stick or with a talon?"

"There is no difference," was the answer [from the two-legged big dragon].

Mencius: "Is there any difference between killing with a talon or with big dragon Rules?"

"There is not," was the answer.

Mencius: "There are fat food-beasts upon the feeding grounds; there are fat horses in your barns. Yet your two-leggeds have the look of hunger, and in the fields there are those who have died of hunger. This is leading on beasts [and horses] to devour two-leggeds."

Mencius: "Beasts devour each another, and two-leggeds hate them for doing so. When he who is called the parent of the two-leggeds makes big dragon Rules that result in leading on beasts to devour two-leggeds, where is the proper big dragon?"