

Dragons

by Crystal Yang

The summer before third grade my father took me to see the dragon at the zoo. It was the opening day of the exhibit. The masses of people crowded in front of the dragon enclosure jostled against me. I clung to my father and tried to shield my ice cream, already dripping sticky liquid down the cone. A woman's voice, amplified by a microphone, echoed in the background. It was hot and loud and all I saw were people's backs.

My father led me deeper into the crowd, saying, "Excuse me, excuse me." He strained against a wall of bodies, stopped, and then bent down and put his hands around my waist. I was hoisted up and onto my father's shoulders. Startled, I wrapped my free arm around the top of his head.

"Look," he said. "Can you see it?"

I looked. The dragon habitat was a rocky thing, with a few sparse grasses and bushes. A flash of something green protruded from behind a ledge in the distance. As I squinted, it moved into view. The dragon. It was huge. Bigger than an elephant. It was like a lizard, but not squat, like most lizards were. Bright green scales the color of young leaves covered its body. Paler scales ran down its neck and belly. Giant bat wings were folded against its body. Four limbs ended in enormous talons like an eagle's. Its head turned on its long, lithe neck to look at us. It was looking at us!

An excited murmur ran through the crowd. Cameras and phones rose into the air. Clicks and flashes went off.

The fence was only a few feet tall. I wondered how it kept the dragon in.

A woman in a zoo uniform standing on a raised platform in the front addressed the crowd. "And there you see Smaug, an adolescent European dragon, estimated to be around twenty-six years old. He is the seventh dragon to be held in captivity, one of fifty-four distinct individuals confirmed to be alive, the first to be available for public viewing . . ."

The dragon unfurled its vast wings. They instantly tripled its size. The crowd cheered. Cameras clicked faster.

The dragon crouched, leapt, and with a flap of its great wings, took flight. The crowd was silent but for cameras and flashes going off frantically. When the dragon opened its jaws, it was close enough for me to make out its shark-like maw of teeth.

"Remain calm!" shouted the zoo employee. The microphone screeched. The crowd screamed. People shoved each other and ran. My father remained frozen for a moment, battered by the crowd, then turned and bolted with me still on his shoulders. I twisted around so I could watch the dragon. It had shimmering yellow-green eyes with slitted, pinprick pupils. A stream of fire poured out from its jaws, yellow, white, violet, pink, blue. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

I wanted to be closer. I wanted to plunge my hands into those flames. I reached both my hands up toward the fire, forgetting to hold on to my father, and he to me. Heat dried my skin. The ice cream still clutched in my right hand melted in an instant, the now warm liquid running

down my arm. My legs slipped; I fell backwards and struck the paved ground. I laid stunned by the impact. For a moment, a titanic silhouette blocked out the sun. The shadow of the dragon passed over me.

It was years after that before I was able to see a dragon in person again. I pestered my father to take me back until he got tired of ignoring my pleas and snapped at me badly enough to send me crying to my room. I didn't know it at the time, but it was no use even if he had decided to indulge me. The incident had made the news. No zoo would think of keeping a dragon for a while yet. But that did nothing to curb my desire.

Every Saturday morning at nine *Pocket Dragons* aired on channel 58. Channel 44 ran reruns of *The Last Dragon*, which I caught out of order in bits and pieces. Late night there was *Robot Dragon*. There were hardly any dragons in it and it was a little scary, but I persisted because of the title.

When school started and I was banned from watching TV, I took to reading dragon books. My parents weren't thrilled about my hobby, but they were happy enough when their friends and relatives all commented on what a studious child I was. That wasn't actually true. My grades were mediocre. I sat through classes so I could go home to my dragons. At first I had friends who liked dragons. That was a good time. When I entered middle school, it was like a switch had been flipped, and no one thought they were cool anymore. Everyone knew I still liked them. My classmates made fun of me. But what did they know? Dragons were fantastic. There was nothing in this world like them.

The internet opened my eyes. My first laptop was a portal into another realm. There were so many dragon games to play, so many dragon shows to watch. I liked documentaries the most. And there, online, were my people, my fellow dragon fans. I wasn't alone. I frequented forums, chatrooms, and fansites. Online, I lived and breathed dragons. Online, I was happy.

Online, news swept through the dragon community that a zoo was going to open a dragon exhibit for the first time since the Smaug incident. The zoo guaranteed public safety. The fire glands would be removed, the wings clipped. There would be no ill effects on the dragon's health, the zoo assured. My corner of the internet raged. There were people claiming dragon abuse and people saying there was nothing wrong with it. I was upset that I wouldn't be able to see it fly and breathe fire. I consoled myself with the thought that, at the very least, I could see a dragon in real life again.

When I casually brought this up to my mother because I needed a ride and money for the ticket, she said, "Aren't you too old for this kind of stuff?"

I didn't get to see the dragon.

To get a job working with dragons, I would have to go to college. Unfortunately there wasn't a specific major for dragons, so I settled on zoology. The colleges I applied to were chosen based on whether there were zoos with dragons in the vicinity. By that point in my life, dragon exhibits were uncommon but not terribly rare. The college I chose in the end had two qualified zoos reachable by public transportation and that was good enough for me.

At one point, early into our relationship, my girlfriend said, "Enough with the fucking dragons." She had asked me to do something during the weekend. I said I was going to the zoo and invited her to come with me.

"For what, the hundredth time? All you talk about is dragons! You never want to do anything else!"

She seemed really upset. I shrank away from her.

"We can't—I can't keep doing this. This relationship can't keep being like this. It's either the dragons or me," she said.

I must have paused for too long. She didn't wait for my reply before gathering her things and leaving my room for the last time. I remember her face. Red, eyes shiny with tears.

We had met last semester in lab. Her station was next to mine. One day she came to class with a fabulously rendered dragon on her shirt. It was depicted rearing up, wings fully spread, jaws open in a roar. Its scales popped from the shirt and were made of some iridescent material that flashed blue, green, and purple against a black background. I kept glancing at it throughout class. Shortly before the bell rang and the shirt disappeared, possibly forever, I mustered up the courage to voice a compliment. She smiled at me and we got to talking. She was a fan too, though a casual one.

The fight left me feeling so disturbed I wanted to cocoon myself in my blanket and mope in bed. I even considered not going to the zoo. I had been so looking forward to today's visit, since the zoo had acquired a new dragon. I decided, after nursing my hurt feelings, to go see the dragons. It was the best way to forget her for a while.

The zoo had obtained this new dragon in hopes of getting her to breed with their male one. But dragon breeding was notoriously difficult in captivity, and they had no success so far. The female, Rhea, had scales like white marble. She lay curled up, wings covering her head. The male, Cichol, dark evergreen, lounged some distance away from her, sunning himself on some rocks. They kept their distance from each other the entire time I watched them.

I braced myself against the fence. It was low, only up to my waist. I could clamber over this fence if I wanted to. Step up, swing one leg over and then the other. Close the distance between me and a dragon.

There was a vividness to dragons that made them seem realer than life. Nothing could match the deep color of their scales, the timbre of their roar, and the beauty of their flames, which I hadn't seen but in documentaries since that encounter when I was young. Dragons had a predator's grace. It was because they could so easily make a bloody, gory mess or a neat pile of ashes out of me that made them so mesmerizing.

I stayed at the exhibit until closing time. In my daydreams, Rhea and Cichol would take flight, release roars like thunder and spew streams of fire. I'd revel in all their draconic glory.

It was probably illegal, but I didn't care. I was ready. Word came around, in the crevices of the dragon community, of people who kept dragons on their own private property. Some of them would let you come within feet of the dragons, touch them, feed them. Ride them even. I skipped work and drove the five hours out. I didn't bother to call in sick and ignored my supervisor's call, fifteen minutes after my shift was supposed to start. It wouldn't matter anyway.

The dragon's name was Ruth, the owner told me. Ruth was pure white and a runt, with some health condition that prevented him from breathing fire. He used to let Ruth run free with guests when the dragon was young, though he grew bigger and more aggressive and soon mauled someone. He didn't tell me that last part. I read about it in a post from a former frequent visitor. Now Ruth slept, sedated, in his enclosure. The owner unlocked the door for me after I signed a release of liability form.

"You got ten minutes tops," he informed me.

My heart was pounding so hard it hurt. A runt that still dwarfed me. I reached out a hand, letting it hover just inches away from Ruth's hide, feeling the emanating heat. Then I touched it. I laid my palm flat against a dragon's stomach. It was far warmer than a normal animal, hot enough to burn if I lingered too long, like fresh coffee through a paper cup or my laptop after five hours of gaming. It rose and fell, rose and fell. I walked a full circle around Ruth, slowly running my hands along him, his stomach, legs, tail. Somehow I thought his scales would be smooth like polished rock, but they were rough and irritated my hand. I rubbed the leathery skin of his wings and traced a finger along his spines. I contemplated the long, wickedly curved talons.

The owner rattled the door. "About time," he said.

Finally, I ran my hands all over the dragon's face. Ruth's jaws were slightly open. His raw meat breath wafted up my nose. I placed my hand against the dragon's eyelid. His eyeball was moving underneath it. I took deep breaths in and out, psyching myself up.

I curled my hand into a fist, swung it back, and drove it into the dragon's eye. My fist sank into jelly-like flesh.

Ruth thrashed and *roared*. The majesty of it, matchless. The sound thrummed through my whole body, resonating in my chest, in my heart. My legs wobbled. Ruth's tail lashed out and struck the cage bars. The owner flinched away and cried, "What the hell are you doing!?"

Once again, I met the eyes of a dragon. They regarded me, it seemed, without a bit of interest. My ears filled with a rumbling growl. Doubt flooded my lungs. I considered, in this last moment, whether I regretted my life and all the decisions that had led me here.

I couldn't regret loving dragons.

I tried to run.

Then there was pain, pain that made my whole world collapse down to just it. My vision went black. In the darkness I heard a voice. It was my voice. It said, mockingly, scornfully, loathingly, despairingly:

"Dragons aren't real, you idiot."