

The bubbling tarmac on the lower level of the car park below the office block was the first sign, but no one noticed it, because there was no one parked there at midnight on a Friday night. The second sign was the smoke curling and twisting through the expansion joints of the concrete pillars. No one noticed this either, because the car park attendant was four levels up, and fast asleep in his booth.

The third sign could not be missed, as the tarmac reached a critical temperature and exploded into fire, fire that leaped to the nearer vehicles and set their gas tanks off one after another like fireworks, for the fire was already far, far hotter than it should have been.

Sensors sent their warning even as they melted, and the sprinkler system worked for a full thirty seconds before the heads and pipes turned to slag and dripped from the ceiling.

The fire raced through the level above, exploding more cars as it passed. The attendant saw his CCTV monitors flash yellow and orange and white and go blank in a second. He reached for the phone to call it in, but his instincts were good, and as the monitors for two levels below him flared and died at the same time, and he felt the first flush of the wave of superheated air from below, he dropped the phone and ran from the booth instead, sprinting up the ramp as the fire bells chattered, high and sharp above the bass boom of exploding cars.

The attendant kept on running when he got outside, which saved his life. He was around the next corner, panting like a fish snatched from water, when the fire roared up from the car park into the building, and within a minute, turned it into a torch fifteen stories high.

Later analysis showed the time from the first radiant heat detector trip in the lowest car park floor to the immolation of the entire building was six and a half

minutes. The first firefighting unit was on the scene in seven and a half minutes, but there was nothing they could do, save to try and establish a perimeter to stop the fire from spreading. This, with the help of seventy other units, eighty trucks, three hundred sixty firefighters, and eight million gallons of water, they eventually managed to do, though the core fire within the rubble of the building continued to burn throughout the night and well into the next day.

Three people died in the fire. Two cleaners in an office on the twelfth floor; and one firefighter, who had a heart attack as he put on his breathing apparatus. But everyone knew if the fire had happened on a working day, there would have been at least a thousand dead. The fire was so hot and so fast there would have been no chance of evacuation.

Even before the forensic teams had finished sifting the twisted, ruined remnants of concrete and steel, the fire chief called an emergency meeting with the mayor. Unusually, the chief requested they meet on the roof of Ladder Company Number One's firehouse, one of the oldest public buildings in the city, a six-story gothic revival tower of black stone that squatted darkly between two gleaming new skyscrapers of glass and shining steel.

The mayor thought it must be for some PR gimmick, and was surprised when he found the chief alone, without a television crew or reporters. The mayor had a troupe of PR advisors, aides, and followers himself, all lined up behind him.

The chief was waiting by the door at the top of the stairs, which was shut. He shook hands with the mayor and said, "Send your people back down, please, sir. We need a few minutes private discussion, and there's something you need to see up here."

The mayor shrugged and sent his assembled flackery back downstairs. The chief waited till they were gone, then opened the door to the roof and escorted the mayor outside.

“What’s this about, Hansen?” growled the mayor.

“The Oldgate building fire,” replied the chief. He pointed at the small shed over on the corner of the roof. It had chicken wire walls and a corrugated iron roof, and pigeons were roosting on top of it. “Let’s go over there.”

“What’s the Oldgate fire got to do with a pigeon house?” asked the mayor suspiciously.

“Nothing directly,” said the chief. He led the way, shooing some pigeons off so he could open the door. “But there is something you need to know about the fire.”

“Listen, your people said it was some kind of one-in-a-thousand gas main explosion. We told the media it was a gas explosion! Why do you need to drag me up to a pigeon house to tell me anything different?”

“I wanted to show you something,” said the chief. “Which happens to be here, with the pigeons.”

He brushed the straw from the floor to reveal a trapdoor fastened with a big brass padlock. He opened this with a key he wore on a chain around his neck. The key was iron, big and old, and the mayor thought it must be damned uncomfortable to have it hanging around your neck. He began to wonder about the sanity of his fire chief.

Then the chief opened the trapdoor, and the mayor began to wonder about his own sanity. Under the trapdoor was a cavity, and curled up on a bed of gold twenty-dollar pieces, there was a small dragon. Its eyes were closed, but its scaly, scarlet chest slowly rose and fell, suggesting it merely slept.

“What the hell is that?” asked the mayor.

“A messenger,” said the chief. “Listen, did your predecessor ever talk to you about . . . the Dragonborn?”

The mayor scowled and looked around. Then he looked down at the small, sleeping dragon.

“Yeah,” he said reluctantly. “I thought he’d gone senile. Something about people who were half dragon and half human, and they’d done a deal with the city a long time ago. I don’t remember all of it.”

“We do,” said the chief. “Everyone here in Ladder Company Number One remembers. You ever wonder why, if you look at any chief’s record, they always did time with Ladder Number One?”

“No, why the hell would I?” asked the mayor. “And what’s with this Dragonborn thing?”

“First things first. The fire, the Oldgate building inferno. A dragon started it—”

“What!?”

“Let me finish. A dying dragon started the fire. It would have been coming up from the hot center of the earth for its final flight. Only it didn’t make it. Now it’s stuck down there, and until we get rid of it, it’s going to cause more fires. Very intense, very fast fires, like the one last week. It could destroy a lot of the city.”

“So sort it out,” said the mayor. He took off his hat and wiped his forehead. Even this talk of very hot fires made him sweat, and the thought of another one like the Oldgate fire . . . It would finish his chances for reelection. Plus, a lot of people might die.

“Even with our most advanced suits, chiller technology, the works, we can’t get anywhere close enough to a dying dragon to deal with it,” said the chief. “But one of the Dragonborn could. It’s what they do.”

“So what’ll it cost?” asked the mayor reluctantly. “Your budget is already over—”

“There’s a small amount of gold involved, nothing significant,” said the chief. “The most important thing is that we have to reaffirm the pact. The mayor and the fire chief together. We personally guarantee it, with our lives.”

“The what? What pact?”

“The agreement between the city and the Dragonborn,” replied the chief evenly. He was taller than the mayor, and had to look down at him for their eyes to meet. This reinforced the politician’s suspicion that the firefighter didn’t think much of him as the leader of his city. “Two hundred years back, the mayor and the head of what was called the Fire Watch agreed with a representative of the Dragonborn that we would keep their secret, protect them if necessary from our citizenry, and in return they would deal with any dying dragons who came up from beneath the earth.”

“Bullshit!” exclaimed the mayor. “You’re making this up! The dragon thing there, some film studio made it—”

“No,” said the chief. “You’ll see when we wake it.”

“There are no dragons,” said the mayor. “You *said* a gas main—”

“The last time we called on the Dragonborn was thirty-three years ago,” said the chief. “You would have been what, twenty-five or so? You remember?”

The mayor looked across to the west, to the buildings lining the river. They didn’t look sleek and new now, but none were more than thirty years old. There had

been tenement buildings there before, huddled together against the mudflats. They had all burned one terrible day thirty-three years before, with tremendous loss of life.

“Yeah,” he said slowly. He could never forget the columns of smoke boiling up, the great mantle of darkness upon the city, the ash falling like black snow . . .

“That was a dragon,” said the chief. “One too tired and old to make it to the surface. The fires were its last attempts to get through. They would have kept burning, constantly getting hotter and more widespread, except Chief Gramowitz and Mayor Tell called in the Dragonborn.”

“OK,” said the mayor. He knew when he had to face up to something, when it could not be swept under the carpet or smothered in spin. It was one of his virtues as a politician—he would accept tough realities when there really was no alternative. “How do we do this?”

The chief took a folding knife out of his pocket and opened it. The mayor watched the fireman’s eyes, and instinctively turned sideways a little, ready to brawl. He’d grown up with knife fights, and the muscle programming was still there forty years after it had been necessary. He had scars to show as well, evidence of hard lessons never to be forgotten.

The chief sliced the end of his thumb and held out the knife, handle first, to the mayor.

“A few drops of blood from the chief and the mayor,” he said. “We drip it on the dragon’s snout.”

“This going to give it a taste for human blood?” asked the mayor, still suspicious. “My blood?”

“It’s ceremonial,” said the chief. He held his thumb near the dragon’s head and let the drops fall, red splashes on the gold.

The mayor held the knife, but didn't cut his thumb. The dragon moved, its wings flexing a little, as if it were waking from a long and restful sleep. A scarlet tongue, forked like a snake's, flickered out of a mouth only slightly ajar and licked the blood.

"Quickly!" ordered the chief.

The mayor moved. The knife was much sharper than he expected, and he sliced his thumb to the bone, so deep he cried out and dropped the knife. But he repressed the pain and held his thumb against the chief's, their nails touching, and both bled straight into the dragon's rapidly widening mouth.

The creature continued its yawn, gulped a few times, then closed its jaws with a sound like the harsh snap of a mousetrap, making both men jump. At the same time, it opened its eyes, bright golden eyes with no visible pupil at all.

"We call upon the Compact," said the chief. He sounded nervous, which surprised the mayor, till he considered this was as far outside the other man's experience as his own.

"Yeah, we call upon the Compact," added the mayor.

The dragon lidded its eyes twice, arched its back, and spread its wings. The men stepped back to give it room. The creature made a noise rather like the coughing bark of a seal, and shot a small, multicolored flame out of its crocodilian nostrils. Then it launched itself up and dove straight into the dark stone of the corner buttress. For a moment a red and gold imprint remained on the stone, a fading afterimage of its passage.

"Where did it go?" asked the mayor. He was holding his thumb tight to stop the bleeding.

“Into the stone, and down,” said the chief. “The firehouse is clad in sixteen-inch granite blocks, and built on foundations of stone down to the bedrock.”

“So what happens now?”

“A Dragonborn will come,” said the chief. “Here to the firehouse, within three days.”

“Where from?”

“I don’t know,” said the chief. “You’d better get your cut seen to. We’ll tell them you did it on the glass on the parapet.”

He took a slim radio handset from under his jacket.

“Ten thirty-seven on the roof, Connie. Nothing serious. Send someone up with an aid kit.”

The Dragonborn arrived the next afternoon, which was earlier than expected. Though the chief had half expected someone to fly in and land on the roof, or emerge from the stone of the firehouse, the Dragonborn actually turned up in a cab and the first he knew about it was when his assistant brought in her card.

“There’s a woman to see you,” said Connie. “Said she has an appointment, but she’s not on your schedule.”

The chief looked at the card. It was printed in a raised, metallic red ink and simply had the name Ylane Smith on it, an e-mail address, and in the corner, a symbol. It took him a moment to realize it was a stylized version of the messenger dragon he and the mayor had sent from the pigeon house.

“Ah, yes,” he said. “Please send her in.”

“OK,” said Connie. “Buzz if you need rescuing. We already had to give oxygen to some of the boys downstairs.”

“What!?” asked the chief.

“You’ll see,” said Connie dryly, and left.

Ylane Smith came in, and the chief realized what Connie meant. The Dragonborn—which is what he presumed she was—was very tall, strikingly beautiful, had skin the color of polished bronze, and as far as he could tell, was only wearing a long, loosely buttoned alligator-skin trench coat, with nothing underneath. She looked like an exotic model who’d just stepped off the catwalk, right up until she took off her big dark glasses and he saw her eyes.

She had exotic eyes, too, but they did not add to her beauty. Though almond shaped and lined with long lashes, her eyes were entirely smooth, shining gold, without iris or pupil.

“Fire Chief Erik Hansen,” said the Dragonborn. “You have called upon the Compact.”

“Yes,” said the chief. “Yes, uh, Miss Smith.”

“Call me Ylane,” said the Dragonborn. She crossed the room and looked at the photographs on the wall. Some were of the Causeway fires. Then she moved to the map of the city. In the old days it had been constantly replaced and updated, but since the department went electronic the chief hardly ever looked at it, and it was at least three years old. “The Smith part is just to have something on there. Where is the dragon?”

“Let me . . . let me show you on the screen, here,” said the chief. He started to swivel his monitor around, but Ylane held up one perfectly manicured hand. Her nails were gold, too, he noted, long and sharp.

“No. On this map. We cannot see illuminated images well.”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

He came out from behind his desk and cautiously approached the map, almost as if he was about to enter a burning building. In truth, he would have been glad to be wearing his protective clothing, including the breathing apparatus.

“You need not be afraid,” said Ylane.

The chief nodded and tapped the map. He could feel the heat emanating from her, like a sidewalk baked in the summer sun all day, and those gold, pupilless eyes, giving no indication of what she was looking at . . .

The chief gave an involuntary shiver, one born of fear rather than cold, and tapped the map again more forcefully.

“Here,” he croaked. “We think it’s here.”

Ylane bent her head toward the map.

“Oldgate,” she said. “What is the history of the site?”

The chief retreated to his desk and poured himself a glass of water, drinking half of it down before he answered.

“We don’t know the origin of the name,” he said. “The first house built there was for a Chinese merchant, who called himself Lin . . . uh . . . Smith. He called the house Oldgate. It had extensive grounds, and stayed in the family up to, let’s see, ten years ago, when the last Smith died, though he’d reverted to the original name—”

“Chuan Ren or something similar,” interrupted Ylane.

“Yes, how did you—”

“Never mind. The house and gardens were built over?”

“Yes. An office block. It was entirely destroyed by the fire last week. A superintense fire, originating from below the ground. The kind my predecessor told me meant there was a dragon somewhere underneath.”

“Yes,” said Ylane. “When last week?”

“Friday,” replied the chief. “Day before yesterday.”

“Then we have little time. I will need a volunteer from your department. Someone unmarried, without children or other ties. Most preferably an orphan. Also, thirty kilograms of twenty-four-carat gold, in coins, not bullion.”

The chief dropped his glass on the desk. It didn't break, but water spilled across the polished mahogany and ran under a pile of budget papers. He made no attempt to save them, or to right the glass.

“What!?”

Ylane turned her head from the map, and her gold eyes caught the overhead light, making them flash.

“I need a firefighter to help me, but it will be extremely dangerous for them, so it is best to have someone who has few ties. The gold is to . . . distract the dragon.”

The chief leaned back on the wet patch on his desk, sprang forward, almost collided with Ylane who did not move at all, and then retreated crab-like around to his chair.

“I see. I guess . . . uh . . . we can arrange a volunteer . . . and the gold.”

“There is something else,” said Ylane. She leaned over the desk, saw the puddle, and elegantly planted her hand palm first in the spilled water.

The chief averted his eyes from the top of her coat.

“Yes . . .” he said, nervously fingering his own top button.

“The Oldgate site. It must not be built on again. Turn it into a park.”

“I'll talk to the mayor,” said the chief with a gulp. The puddle of water under Ylane's hand was starting to steam, wisps of vapor coiling up from beneath her palm.

“It must be done,” said Ylane. “That site was called Oldgate for a reason. It is a gate, a point where dragons pass from ground to sky. Your fire on the river was

an aberration, a dragon too sick and old to make it to the Oldgate. Before that, even in the time the city has been here, hundreds of dragons have passed through the gardens of the Long De Chuan Ren. You have been very lucky that only one sick, old dragon has found its way blocked by steel and concrete, and was too big for any other passage.”

“Hundreds of dragons . . .” whispered the chief, the image of a hundred fires like the Oldgate building flashing through his mind. “It *will* be a park . . . and I will find you a volunteer, and the gold.”

“Good,” said Ylane. She stood back. The desk was no longer wet, and the budget papers were dry and curling at the corners. “Before midnight, if you do not want another fire. I’ll be at the Hilton.”

“The Hilton,” repeated the chief. Somehow he thought he hadn’t heard right.

As Ylane opened the door, the chief had another thought.

“Uh, Miss Smith . . . Ylane . . . does it matter if it is a . . . male or female . . . firefighter?”

Ylane looked back at him and smiled, a smile showing teeth which were not precisely reptilian, but sharper than a normal human’s.

“I would . . . prefer . . . a man. A big strong man.”

Lieutenant Armin Jaxon touched the silver bar on his collar as he rode up in the elevator, and wondered why his promotion had come through so quickly. He’d been expecting it some time in the next couple of years, as he’d scored extremely well in the exam, and had the time in, with a 100 percent positive record. But it was way too soon after the exam results, and he couldn’t help feeling it was some kind of weird preemptive reward for volunteering for this special mission.

This special extremely hazardous and secret mission that the captain had acted so strange about, and then the chief had acted even stranger. Both of them asking after his parents, who'd been dead for years, and whether he was settling down or had plans for a family . . . Odd questions, which when he thought about the tone of voice and the general caution suggested that this special mission was probably going over the line of "acceptable risk" and into entirely new territory.

But Jaxon hadn't got where he was by avoiding trouble. He wasn't foolhardy, but he was always ready to step in, and whatever lay ahead, he figured being made lieutenant early was worth it.

At the top floor, he got out, stepping past a trio of armed Brink's guards who were waiting for the elevator. Which was weird, since there was only the one penthouse suite on the floor, where the person he was to report to was staying.

"Hey, how're you doing?" said Jaxon.

The guards didn't speak. They went straight past into the elevator, not one of them meeting his eyes.

"Well, you all have a good evening," said Jaxon. He meant it, too. He wanted everyone to be happy on his promotion day, and he couldn't stop himself from admiring his new badges of rank in the ornate, gilt-edged mirror on the wall opposite before he knocked on the double doors of the suite.

A woman opened one door immediately, but not just any woman. Jaxon found himself staring at the supermodel-gorgeous woman who was looking at him through her bug-eyed sunglasses, despite the fact that the sun was down and the hotel lighting, as always, fairly dim.

"You are the volunteer I asked Chief Hansen to send?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Jaxon. "Presuming you're Ylane Smith."

“I am,” said Ylane. She looked him up and down appraisingly. “You look big and strong enough.”

She pointed to one of the interior doors and said, “Let’s get on with it then. Everything is waiting in the bedroom.”

“Ah, just hold on one minute, ma’am,” said Jaxon awkwardly. “I’m not quite sure what I volunteered for, but it didn’t include any . . . You know, firefighters may have a certain reputation, but as a point of fact while you’re very attractive, I’m kind of old-fashioned—”

“What are you talking about?” interrupted Ylane. “There is an aluminized Nomex proximity suit in there for you, and breathing apparatus. I will tell you what we are going to do while you put it on.”

Jaxon didn’t immediately move. Instead he looked around. The penthouse sitting room looked entirely usual for a hotel. The only thing out of the ordinary was a big leather Gladstone-style bag on the floor which was padlocked at the top and sealed with tape marked “Brink’s.”

“That is what you will need to carry when you are suited up,” said Ylane. “It contains thirty kilograms of gold.”

Jaxon frowned. This was getting weirder, but also more interesting.

“I think you’d better tell me what’s going on,” he said firmly, and sat down on the white leather lounge, up at the end near to the gold.

Ylane sighed, took off her sunglasses, and looked at him.

Jaxon jerked back, his hands instinctively curling into fists, the fight-or-flight reflex kicking in. Now he knew why the Brink’s guards had looked so cowed. She must have not been wearing her sunglasses when they made their delivery. There was

something about those eyes, something that made him want to get away, to run until he couldn't see them anymore.

“I am Dragonborn,” said Ylane. Her voice sounded huskier and more sibilant now, as if she had been putting on some other accent before. A human accent. “That is to say . . . part human and part dragon. Long ago, my people made a Compact with this city, agreeing we would help if there was ever a problem with dying dragons causing fires. The Oldgate fire on Friday was caused by a dying dragon, who is now trapped some forty feet below the Oldgate site. Am I making myself clear? Your expression indicates a lack of comprehension.”

“You're clear enough, ma'am,” snapped Jaxon. “But could . . . could you put your glasses back on, please?”

Ylane did as he asked, and continued. Jaxon breathed a little more easily, but he slid across the lounge, to get closer to the door. Just in case.

“We can get quite near the dragon's position by going down to the bottom level of the hotel car park and along a main-line sewer for some five hundred meters to a point only a few meters above and to the north of the dragon's head. We will lay out the gold there in a particular pattern, to attract the dragon. I will then perform the mercy killing.”

“What do you need me for?” asked Jaxon. If he hadn't seen her eyes, and felt their power, he might have thought this was an elaborate practical joke, some kind of promotion hazing. But he knew, deep inside, this was all for real.

“I need you to carry the gold,” said Ylane. “And arrange the pattern, under my direction.”

Jaxon thought about this for a few seconds.

“Why do I need the suit?”

“The dragon will flame as I kill it.”

“How hot is dragon fire? And how long will it last?”

“The breath lasts only a few seconds. I don’t believe the temperature has ever been measured,” said Ylane. “But in similar situations in the past, assistants have worn nothing more than water-soaked woolen cloaks.”

“And survived?” asked Jaxon.

“There were survivors,” replied Ylane.

“OK,” said Jaxon slowly. His mind felt as if it was a step behind, having difficulty processing what he was hearing. But he knew about fires, and if the suit was OK, and the chief had said to do what this woman said. . . “What are you going to do the . . . ah . . . mercy killing with?”

“You will see,” said Ylane.

“I take it you don’t need a suit?”

Ylane laughed.

“I am Dragonborn. Fire is not a problem for me. Get in the suit. We must complete our business before the next paroxysm.”

“Paroxysm?” asked Jaxon, over his shoulder. He was already heading for the bedroom, where he could see the suit.

“The dragon is too old and weak to . . . do what it needs to do. It cannot make its way through all the tons of rubble that now lie above it. It is dying,” said Ylane through the open door. “It gathers its remaining strength to breathe fire all about itself, in the hope that it can burn its way free. I do not believe your chief would like another fire such as the one that consumed the Oldgate tower.”

“No!” agreed Jaxon as he checked out the suit. It was a top-of-the-line model, fully certified, ready to go. It was hot inside, as always, but he was in peak

condition and he figured he could carry thirty kilos of gold as far as the woman . . . the Dragonborn . . . said. Hell of a lot easier than carrying a casualty.

The breathing-apparatus rig would add to the weight, but again he was used to it. He checked the air cylinder, regulator, mask, and harness, before shrugging it on and adjusting the straps.

Ylane was waiting in the other room. She had changed her alligator-skin coat for a pair of coveralls marked “Hotel Maintenance,” but had kept the bug-eye sunglasses, which made an odd combination. She had what looked like a carrying case for fishing rods in her hand, a three-meter-long plastic cylinder, about fifteen centimeters in diameter, which unscrewed in the middle.

“What’s in there?” asked Jaxon.

“An explosive harpoon,” replied Ylane. “Get the gold. We need to go.”

Jaxon picked up the gold. It was too heavy to easily carry in one hand for any distance, so he cradled it like a baby and followed Ylane out to the elevator. Ylane used a key to turn the fire service on, and they went straight down to the car park.

At the lowest level, six floors beneath the lobby, they got out. Ylane led the way to an unmarked door, which she opened with another key, exposing a conduit stuffed with pipes and cables. There was just enough space to shuffle down the middle, though Jaxon had to watch his elbows, making sure the suit didn’t catch on anything and tear.

“So we lay out these coins in a pattern,” he said. “Distract this ‘dragon.’ What do I do then?”

“Run,” said Ylane. She didn’t look at him, and seemed distracted. Keyed up, like the guys when they were all racing to a hot one. But Jaxon didn’t feel a supercharged sense of things about to happen, partly because he still couldn’t believe

it. He was even kind of doubting the golden eyes, now that Ylane had her sunglasses back on. The hotel room had been dim, maybe it was some sort of special effect, a promotion-day gag of some kind, and he was being filmed on a closed-circuit system or the woman had a spy cam and it would all be up on YouTube in a day or two.

But he wasn't sure, and the captain had told him to do what the chief said, and the chief had told him to obey this woman, and neither of those guys was into punking juniors . . .

"How far do I need to run?" he asked, as they climbed down a metal ladder from the conduit into a sewer. It was one of the original tunnels, all nineteenth-century brickwork, like he'd love to have in his apartment, with patterns above the arches and everything, though here it was spoiled by the dangling electric cord strung between the 1950s utility lights, some of which were still working.

Maybe on a lieutenant's pay he could move into an old building, get out of the plasterboard-and-sprayed-concrete hole he'd been renting the last two years . . .

"Run as far as you can," said Ylane absently, answering his question a full minute after he'd asked it. He was behind her, so he couldn't see exactly what she was doing, but it looked like she was sniffing the air. Which didn't smell too bad, considering they were in a sewer. Or maybe it was a storm-water drain, because there was only a thin trickle of water—Jaxon was pretty sure it was water—running down the center of the tunnel.

"Stop," said Ylane. She turned around, nostrils flaring, and bent down toward the tunnel floor. She inhaled deeply and said, "Yes. It is here, just below us."

"OK," said Jaxon. He put the bag of gold down, and flexed his arms. He didn't need to do it, but it was a welcome stretch. "What now?"

Ylane took a stick of yellow chalk out of the pocket of her coveralls, and started drawing small circles on the bricks, on either side of the trickle of water. “You can take the breathing apparatus off first. Then you need to put coins down on these circles, until I draw the last one. For the last one, you wait, while I get the harpoon ready. Then you close up your suit, turn on your air and prepare yourself. You place the coin and you run . . .”

She looked along the tunnel in both directions. “Go back the way we came, I think. When you feel the flash, hunker down and hope for the best.”

“The best?” asked Jaxon. He wasn’t exactly apprehensive, but he was feeling the energy. Action coming. Life or death.

“Hope is always necessary,” said Ylane.

“If guys in damp cloaks made it in the olden days, I’ll make it,” said Jaxon. He bent down and opened the bag. The coins were in paper rolls. He’d never seen gold coins before, and was surprised when he tore open a roll to find out how heavy each one was individually. And the sound they made when they fell on the bricks—they really did “ring true.”

“Be careful,” said Ylane. “We’ll need all of them. Or almost all. There are nine hundred and sixty-five and we need nine hundred and sixty-four.”

She was working quickly, drawing circles. Jaxon concentrated on the job, following her with gold coins, trying to catch up. The pattern she was making seemed to be circles within circles, a kind of geometric pattern like the ones he used to make as a kid with a spirograph. She had a good eye, not needing any aid to get the curves right. He tried to do as good a job placing coins, getting them exactly on the small chalk circles.

It took about an hour and a half to get the coins down. When Jaxon had two left, Ylane stopped drawing.

“This will be the last one,” she said, her nostrils constantly flaring, her head moving as she sniffed the air. Jaxon thought he could smell something now, too, a chemical whiff, maybe sulfur. “There’s just one more thing.”

She came up close to him and he flinched a little, even though her eyes were still hidden. Then she leaned forward suddenly and kissed him full on the lips, an old-fashioned kiss, lips closed, though they felt hot upon his own. Kind of like after eating a Mexicana pizza, which he liked, the after burn of chili spreading across his mouth.

“What was that for?” he asked.

“Good luck,” she said. “For both of us. Get your suit ready.”

She opened the fishing-rod case and took out the harpoon. It looked old to Jaxon, the shaft a pale aged wood and the head a dark iron with a bulbous ridge to hold the explosive. Ylane checked it over, and screwed something into the bulb, while Jaxon got his breathing apparatus back on and went through his checklist, tasting the cool, metal-tanged air flowing through his mask, making sure his hood was closed, that all seals shut tight at wrist and ankles, his gloves secure. He had a gold coin in each hand. The one in his right hand to go on the circle, the one on the left he figured he could keep as a souvenir.

Ylane moved back about ten feet and took her sunglasses off, throwing them aside. Then she adopted an Olympic javelineer’s pose: legs spread, left arm forward, right arm with harpoon back ready to throw.

Jaxon knelt down carefully, balanced on the balls of his feet. He held the coin between thumb and forefinger, an inch away from the circle, and looked over at Ylane.

“Now!”

The coin went down. Jaxon spun half-around, already moving, legs stretching out as he went up one side of the tunnel, like a bicycle on a velodrome, and back down again to sprint along the middle, and even through the suit he heard a vast bellow and a wave of air pushed him in the back like the pressure wave from a subway train, sending him stumbling, and he glanced back, even though he knew it was a bad idea, and he saw the great orange snout break through the tunnel floor, sending bricks exploding like a Lego disaster, and Ylane, the flash of movement and

*Bang!*

That was the explosive harpoon, but the dragon didn't just die. Instead the air pressure in the tunnel reversed. A savage wind smacked against Jaxon, dragging him back. The dragon was breathing in, sucking in oxygen, oxygen to fuel a fire Jaxon just knew was going to be hotter than anything he'd ever seen or heard or even believed could exist upon the earth, and Ylane's talk about the wet woolen cloaks was horseshit and he was going to die in this tunnel after all, and his name would go up in gold letters on the memorial board at his old company . . .

But he kept trying to run forward because you never gave up, not even when everything was gone to hell, *especially* then, because if you had to die then you did it doing something, not just giving up—

The flame was more than a hundred meters long, and in its hair-thin core, as hot as the outer reaches of the sun.

Jaxon dove for the floor a moment before the flash came, but he was too close and it was too late to make any difference. The straps holding his air cylinder vaporized, the cylinder itself deforming as it fell. The suit, the best money could buy,

fared little better, though its makers could be proud that even as ash, small pieces of it clung together in useless clumps.

His skin, which should have charred through to the bone in a microsecond, did not char. His hair, short as it was, did not go up like a lit match. The soft, wet tissue of his eyes and ears and mouth did not instantaneously boil away.

He felt only pleasantly warm, though he was lying on bricks glowing as red hot as the day they left the kiln, and he was entirely naked.

In his right hand, he held a globule of molten gold.

Something fluttered in the air above him. Jaxon rolled over and looked up. There was a tiny . . . dragon, all scarlet and green, its eyes as golden as Ylane's . . .

“Ylane?” croaked Jaxon. The croak was psychological. There was nothing wrong with his throat. He just couldn't believe he was alive at all, or that he could speak. He looked at his hands, and saw that his skin was as red as the bricks beneath him, but it was whole, and he felt no pain.

*Yes*, said the dragon, though her voice was not audible. Jaxon heard it in his head.

“What the hell happened?”

*You know*, said Ylane.

Jaxon thought about it for a moment, and he did know.

“A dragon dies, a dragon is born,” he said.

*Yes*.

“I am a dragon,” he said, and as he spoke he realized he was OK with it, because he knew what it was to be a dragon and to be a dragon was immeasurably better than to be merely human.

He popped the cooling, misshapen gold disc into his mouth and ate it with some relish, the metal soft under his teeth. Then he jumped up, and in that motion, there was no longer a man with golden eyes and skin the color of dusk, but another small dragon, as resplendent as the first.

Yes, said Ylane. She led him into the hot bricks and the bedrock beneath, and they dove into it together, heading deeper and deeper toward the hot center of the earth where dragons lived and grew, till they became ancient, and rose like salmon to a waterhead, to seek their birthplace, and begin anew.

*A dragon dies, a dragon is born. But sometimes they need a little help.*



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