Dragon’s Kingdom

The sun rises deliberately over my valley, casting mighty rays through the fog of a passed night. I take a deep breath of cold, fresh air, admiring the green of pine trees far below contrasting against the blazing white sun and gentle, earthy grays and browns of the mountain and the blazing yellow and blue morning sky.

I take a noble step forward, rough rock and snow scraping against my claws... and immediately receive a sharp pebble jabbed into the palm of my hind paw.

"Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!”

I leap back and nearly hurl myself off a steep cliff. Small rocks clatter down the ominous vertical edge.

"*COURAGE*!"

I freeze, feeling my thick scales prickle and my poisonous tail spike rise automatically. I settle them quickly as my father, Legacy, stomps furiously out of our den, smoke rising thickly from his flared nostrils. His brilliant silver eyes burn into me, emanating fearlessness, and his spike-sporting tail lashed, thumping the ground so forcefully I was sure the Earth King was throwing a fit, thousands of miles away.

I should explain. My name is Courage. I am nine Suns old, reaching late hatchlinghood; I am nearly fully grown.

Oh, you thought I was a regular teenage boy, didn't you? Weren't paying attention, I suppose.

1

No, I am most certainly *not* a regular teenage boy. In fact, I am an entirely different species. I am a dragon—not a silly, wormy Chinese dragon, nor a tiny lizard that humans keep caged in their dens as companions. No, I am a dragon (class Heavenborn, to be precise) with mighty soaring wings, and gleaming rich indigo scales that deflect nearly all human weaponry, and four legs with piercing blade-like claws. My roar makes all creatures before me scatter for shelter, and one stab of my poison can kill twenty men.

They say I look just like Father did when he was my age, and more handsome, too.

Well... I suppose I am not *nearly* that powerful, but when I'm older, I will develop those abilities. When I am a drake. I'm still a drakite, and my venom is just developing its potency. Dragons reach maturity at around twenty Suns. My roar is not quite as ear-shattering as Father's, or even Mother's, for that matter.

Yuck. I still can't believe you thought I was a *human,* of all miserable creatures. No. Humans are among the lowliest of living things. They are nasty, irritating, and a general pain to the universe. They do things without thinking, if they even have brains.

Although, they must have *some* intelligence, since just one man is able to charm an adult dragon into being his companion. The dragon then is forevermore tainted with the foul stain of humankind, and he is never permitted to enter the secret realm of the dragons.

We Heavenborn dragons live in the valley which is pure and untouched by human claws. Father and Mother are King and Queen of the Sky, and I am their Prince. We live in the mountaintops, where the sky is bright and majestic and expansive. We can see the rolling hills of the valleys of both humans and dragons, though we prefer to rule our own kind, where

2

humans have never seen.

And if a human does happen to find our valley? The solution is simple: fillet him into small slices and eat him for supper. Human is an acquired taste; you must have a ripened tongue to enjoy it properly.

Ah, I'm getting off topic. Where were we? Oh, yes. Father storms toward me with a murderous glare. Why, you might ask, does he look as though he might slash my throat with his venomous spike?

You see, Legacy is a stern King of the Sky. He believes that I must grow up to be as bold as he is, otherwise I am no more useful than a duck that is unable to swim. He knows that I must be a merciless Ruler someday, with a beautiful young Heavenborn dragoness whom he wants me to marry, named Divinity.

I'm sorry, I will resume the story. Anyway, once Father is close enough that I can see orange flames flickering an inch from his snout, I sit on my haunches and try to look as though nothing happened. I lick my paw once, doing my best to ignore the tears gathering in my eyes.

“What are you *doing?*” Father asks harshly. “You are supposed to be hunting for your mother and I!”

“I was—” I stop myself. What I was doing was practicing being a mighty King, scouting my homeland for any trouble! But, of course, I still have to serve the present Ruler, even if he *is* my father.

“Just going to hunt now,” I finish, carefully selecting my words. The lie rolls off my tongue like an oily drop. Thank the Sky, Father's hard features relax a tiny bit.

3

“Well, hurry up then.” He turns and flies back to our den on the very top of the mountain with stiff wingbeats.

I breathe a sigh of relief and spread my wings. I leap off the cliff and descend slowly, wind billowing under the membranes of my wings.

Alighting on a small spire of rock, I watch for prey. My sharp eyes spot a tiny goat, which I dismiss. Food has been scarce lately in the valley, not good when you have a kingdom to uphold.

I finally settle on a large pig that is drinking from a nearby stream. I slink down the stone and silently pad toward the animal. Its little ears raise and it lets out a soft squeal. Hunching down, muscles tensed, I count, three, two, one, and spring at the pig.

Bad aim. I realize that the pig really is massive. At half as big as myself, it raises its head and I flail my wings open, stopping myself midleap. The pig screeches and jumps straight up into the air, waving its stubby legs. I watch it take off through the woods, squealing all the way.

*That was a fail,* I tell myself, biting my tongue. *Courage, if you ever want to lead a kingdom, you must learn to hunt fir—*

Suddenly, the ground beneath me begins to rock! Birds fly swifter than hurricane winds to the safety of the sky. I follow the example of the birds—I take off into my domain, out of the dangers of the earth, unpredictable and often deadly.

How terrible it is! It scared me! In fact, I find it safe to say that it frightens me like nothing else—not even when Fire and Sky battled, my Father slashing, winds hurtling through

4

the sky, feeding forest fires of the Queen of the Flames!

I watch the trees roll, turbulent streams sloshing out of their beds, the ground turning and twirling like water.

I know the Earth King is furious. I know just by watching the land tumble about. Father must fly to the dry mountains where the King resides immediately, to settle it out before things get worse.

The quake finally stops, and I cautiously light onto the turned-up soil. My claws sink through until my ankles are touching the loose ground.

Despite the earthquake just seconds before, the morning sky is still beautiful and bright. Father hasn’t decided whether to be surprised or angry or worried yet, I decide. If he became mad about the Earth King’s temper, then the sky would turn clouded and dark, and winds would tear dragons’  wings out from under them as they flew. The Kings of the Earth and Sky would battle the months away, not bothering to calm their destructive behaviors until the dispute is ended.

I quickly lift off again and ascend back up the mountain. I have put up with enough of the Earth King’s temper. He has put up too many stubborn fights.

Once I reach our den, my wings aching from the rapid vertical flight, I step inside to see Father wearing his silver and iron battle armor, nuzzling my mother goodbye.

“Father,” I gasp. “The earthquake—are you--”

Father acknowledges me with an expression more serious than I have ever seen on him.

“Courage,” he says so softly it is almost a whisper, “the Earth King is stronger than ever now. I believe this battle will be one that the Heavenborn will never forget.” 5