

What Was on the Book Cover

by Keely Walsh

3.23.16

There is a used bookstore across from the library, with many old, worn science fiction novels in the window. One of them has a dragon on the front, golden green with sky-blue eyes, wings spreading in an ancient-looking alien forest, against an orange sky. You've passed it many times, noticed it offhand. But now you really stop and take a look at it.

The dragon looks like you. You stare at it for a minute. Maybe longer than a passerby would think appropriate. Then you go inside.

The person at the desk looks up when you push open the door, taking care not to let it slam on your tail. Her eyes widen. Your trenchcoat is huge and ratty, your wings pressed close under it. The broad hat pulled over your face is just as ratty. Humans steer clear of you on the street, and you're fine with this. You don't like talking to them--it's a pain to enunciate their excessively lippy speech with your long jaws.

You look at her briefly. Your glamour is not strong--it's the equivalent of a piece of holed pantyhose, pulled awkwardly over a form that balances tenuously on two legs. The Fair Folk are best at hiding themselves with glamour--illusions--and dragons like you can only try to match their skill. But humans are very good at seeing what they want to see. You are a human with a speech problem, coordination issues, snaggleteeth, a hunchback. And this is all she sees.

You remember when you didn't have to hide. You want the book with the dragon on it. You are lonely. You have not seen another one of your kind in what feels like ages. You hope that your best friend is still alive, for you miss her terribly.

"Hello!" chirps the woman at the desk. You shuffle across the floor delicately, tail throwing dust into the air. You stop at the counter and lean across, to the display that faces out the window behind her. She looks at you, unsure. "Can I help you?"

Right. Humans prefer to talk. "I want...that one." you point with a claw, awkwardly stuffed into a leather glove. "The dragon."

"Oh--" the woman pulls it off the rack. Her name tag says Taylor. Her hair is scraggly, and she has a metal pin in the flesh of her nostril. You inspect it curiously as she looks at the book. Her face brightens.

“Ah! ‘Defenders of the Dreaming Depths!’ I love this book like--so much. It was my introduction to the wonderful world of sci-fi.” She hands it to you. You hold it tenderly. It’s not a perfect representation, but humans have been getting better and better at those things. You’ve seen the pictures of Saint George killing the dragon on banners, stuck into wet dirt, where you are little more than snake-birds. You begin to pocket the book.

“You taking that? You have to pay for it.” says Taylor. She doesn’t seem angry, just bemused. You remember that humans have currency, and that you have none. This means that you cannot take the book.

“Oh,” you say.

You take it out of your pocket and look at it. Swallow, breathe in. You still feel cold and soggy, like mud has replaced the fire in your chest. You make eye contact, and she sees your sadness.

“I know, I know. The capitalist system oppresses us all. But I’ll tell you what.” she says. “I’ll make you a deal. There’s supposed to be some old books coming in from an outer branch of the library--they’re donating them all to us, they don’t need them anymore. A big truck full.”

Where’s this going now?

“There’s not going to be anyone here to help me unload them. If you come by tomorrow around ten and help me unload them, you can take it then. You won’t even have to help me sort.”

She holds out her hand.

“Deal?”

You look down at the book again. You’ve been holding it too long...now you’re attached. You still want it.

Fine. You’ll come back and lift things. How hard could it be?

“Sure. I will do it.”

She holds out her hand. A handshake. You hesitate only for a second before putting out a gloved claw and take the hand in it, shake it. Withdraw.

“Thank you.”

Taylor grins. “No, honestly? Thank you.”

+++++

The next day, you find yourself trudging back to the bookstore. You can’t believe that you’re doing this... but you shook on it. It’s not good to go back on a deal--it’s one thing you have in common with the Fair Folk.

It’s grey and blue outside, and the wind whirls around you. A truck is parked outside of the used bookstore, acrid and diesel. You wrinkle your snout. Taylor is there, tugging a box of books from the back of the

deck. You hold up a glove in greeting, and her face brightens.

“Hey! You made it. Awesome.”

She hops down.

“Grab a bin, we’re taking them into the back.”

You snag a bin and follow the smell of the truck driver around the edge of the building to the back door, and deposit the box. One of them has something silver wrapped around it, and it sticks to your gloves.

“What is this?” you ask, indicating the sticky grey stuff. Taylor looks over from her box of books.

“That? It’s duct tape, my friend.”

Duct tape. You’ve never heard of it. It’s so sticky--worse than pine sap, or the stuff that humans spit on the ground. You put this information away, in case you need it later.

When you are done, the truck drives away in a cloud of smoke. You sniff. Taylor holds out the book to you.

“All yours.”

You grab it, disproportionately elated, and grin at her. Your teeth rest, pointed, on the surface of your glamour like toenails through a thin sock. You’re sure that to Taylor, your “human” teeth look a bit more frightening. But she grins too, and reaches into her pocket. What next?

“Here...there were a lot more books than I thought. I’d feel kind of bad if I left you twisting...here.”

She holds out a piece of human currency, a green one. They’re all green, you remind yourself.

“No thank you.” You have no need for human paper.

“No, you should take it. You couldn’t even pay for the book, and...you, um...”

She’s dancing around the fact that you look like a human who sleeps outside regularly.

“...look like you could use it. Get yourself something nice.”

You don’t want to get in a fight with a human, so you take the proffered paper and stash it away in one of your deep pockets.

“Thank you.”

You feel a little less sodden--it feels like warmth.

+++++

You live on an overpass on the outskirts of the city, cars roaring by beside you. Humans who look like you huddle beneath tarps with their bags and shopping carts. You slip off your gloves to reveal dexterous claws and scramble up a concrete pillar, to where you sleep in the molding.

But you don't sleep. You disentangle yourself from your trenchcoat, allowing your weeks-old glamour to shred like wet paper. Your wings are thin and hold the moonlight like silk draped over a lamp, green-gold.

The book is cradled in your claws. You lift the cover, gentle to not poke holes in the leaf-like paper, and open it, inquisitive. There are a lot of words, and they're all very small, so you close it again and look at the cover.

The dragon is green-gold, but you know what that looks like. You miss the rosy orange, the sunlit green, the cherry-wood red of your family and loved ones. You haven't seen them since the knights of Saint George attacked. Your family told you about them in hushed tones, ever since you were a dragonet, but you never truly knew what they were like until they came. You know that they are around you, but you don't know where. You don't even know if your family is alive--you were scattered, like leaves on the wind.

You remember it so clearly. Your roost was in a rock face, far far above a crystal lake, filled with fish. You were piled up in a heap with your best friend, happily dozing.

When the humans arrived, they had nets--but they were not for the fish. You flew to the sounds of your family in battle, and then you were falling and flailing. The lake was as hard and cold as ice, and it poured down your throat. Steam rose from the lake, a cold shock moving through your belly. Human shouts rang from the shore, and the sounds of your family fighting and crying.

You flopped to shore like a bitten fish, choking and gasping, water and steam pouring from your jaws. You fell to the ground like a wet rag, doused.

You remember wriggling free of the ropes, only to see a human approaching you with a hard face and a long weapon in his hand, and so you fled into the woods, too sodden to think about anything but hiding. By the time you returned, everyone was gone. There were only the tracks of the human vehicles, and they led here.

The dragon on the cover has its jaws wide open, a flicker of flame at the back of its throat. You cough and wheeze, your chest heavy and cold. You wish with all your dampened heart for your family and your flame back.

+++++

The next day you find yourself skulking around the bookstore. You don't realize why without a close examination, and when you do examine, the reason surprises you.

You want to talk to Taylor again. You don't know what you want to say, or why, but you want another taste of the warmth you felt before, a feeling delightfully like something drying out.

So you go inside. The store still smells like dust, but it bothers you less. Someone who is not Taylor is at

the counter.

“Hello!” he says. “We’re having a sale today. Everything with a yellow sticker is 30 percent off.”

You nod. You don’t know what a percent is, but you head to the back, on the tail of a feeling. Out of sight of the man at the counter, you take a big book off the shelf and pretend to look through it. There are a lot of pictures, and the pages are so glossy that they reflect the long, purple-blue lights overhead.

The book smells like a place far away from here. The pictures look like some type of human confections. Food. One picture is of a piece of cooked meat, and your mouth waters. You’re not hungry, but it’s been a long time since you’ve eaten.

Taylor emerges from a door at the end of the aisle, holding a bin of books. You look up, back down at your book, suddenly afraid to look at her.

“Hi!” she says. You nearly drop the book, fumble it in your clumsy gloved claws. She makes a move to grab it, but you shove it back on the shelf.

“Easy there!” she says. “That’s one heck of a book. Was that that cookbook I just put up there?”

You scan the shelf frantically, but the books all look the same. “Here.” You pick one at random and hope it’s right.

It’s not. This one has a dragon on the cover, too, a misshapen, chunky, purple one. It looks like a toad. You snort.

“Are you looking for anything?” she asks. The first thing that jumps to your mind is “my family, my friend, my fire,” but you suppress them all and what comes out is “Huh?”

Taylor leans on the shelf, hoists the bin on her hip. “Are you just back to browse? We’ve got the sequel to Defenders of the Dreaming Depths, if you’re done with that already.”

That’s the book with the dragon on it. You shake your head. You haven’t even considered reading it. The print is far too small, and you aren’t very good at understanding the human script.

“No.” You wanted to talk to her. But about something better than this. What would a human do? Sometimes they make jokes. You like jokes, but you don’t know any human ones, and you doubt that a dragon one would make any sense. This frustrates you so much that you decide to make a human joke of your own.

“I read like duct tape.” you say.

Taylor is silent for a moment. “What?” she asks finally.

“Slowly.” you say. “Like it’s sticky.”

Taylor is blank.

“Forget that.” You say. You’re never making a human joke again. “What are some of your favorites?”

Taylor sure does know a lot about books. You wonder how long she’s worked here. None of the books she pulls off the shelves are ones with a lot of pictures. You can read this kind of human script, but it’s arduous going. You fill the gaps between her paragraphs with questions or comments, and you notice that your stomach begins to feel less like a wet firepit, and more like a rock in the sunlight.

It’s been ages since you felt this comfortable around someone else. You remember the piece of green paper in your coat pocket, and wonder if it will buy you a book with pictures. It only seems polite--you may not have any use for shops, but you know how they work.

You pull a big book off the bottom shelf, wings pulling at your glamour, and open it up. It has pictures of the wild in it, fallen leaves and cold mountains. The leaves are the color of your missing family. You comment instead on how real it looks.

“He’s one of my favorite photographers,” says Taylor. “He has a wonderful eye for color. I feel like his pictures--man, I dunno, but they--call to me. They make me just want to go somewhere else, like I’m nostalgic. But I don’t know what for.”

You definitely know what you’re nostalgic for. You pull the paper out of your pocket. “Is this enough?” you ask.

“For this?” she takes the book and flips it over. “Yep. Just enough.”

“I’ll take it,” you say. She brings you up to the front and takes your paper, putting the book in a flimsy bag. You feel like a leaf near a bonfire, and you’re confused.

Has it only been this? Has this been all you’d missed?

You’re on your way back to the overpass where you sleep, ambling along with your sticking “quadruped attempting to pass as biped” walk, when you pass a human shelter on a corner, one with a big plastic banner hanging off the front. It has a red cross on it, the color of spilled blood. You may not be a good reader, but you know the words “Saint George”.

You stop, frozen. You remember banners stabbed into the earth by your family’s home, white with a red cross, and an untenable slaughter, owed all to a dogma set down thousands of years ago. Humans have a pernicious tendency to fear what they don’t understand--and to kill the things they fear.

You read the rest of the words that you know on their sign, lips curling, teeth bared, your glamour stretching web-thin. And they have the audacity to call themselves a charity.

There’s a few walkers-by speaking to the humans who sit at the table. One takes a pamphlet, leafs

through it. A spokesperson in white is deep in conversation, but suddenly breaks eye contact and looks straight at you.

Your weeks-old glamour stretches, trembles, touches its breaking point. You cough, fierce, letting your teeth speak for you. Your wings rise beneath your coat, and a long, guttural snarl escapes you. The heat in your belly refuses to become fire, but it burns like acid.

The man's eyes widen in fear, and recognition. You feel a primal satisfaction, and rage nearly gets the better of you before fear kicks in.

You pull your hat over your eyes and walk, quickly. You look at your wrist--this is a thing you know that humans do when they have to go somewhere--and when you turn the corner, you run.

There aren't many humans out at this time, or in this place, so you allow yourself a gawky sprint. Your coat flaps as you charge down the block at an inhuman pace, fuelled by panic and raw fear. You don't dare fly. Humans are always watching.

You arrive back at the overpass in a matter of minutes, scramble up and up like a treed squirrel to your hideaway, shuddering with animal fear. You curl up around your book in the dimming sunlight and pant, shedding your coat. You bring your wings closer to yourself, lay your tail fins over your claws, breath hot and fast.

You stay there a while, until the moon rises and bathes you in its chilly glow. You move, finally, from your frozen position, and begin to rub at the back of your ears. You don't realize you're doing it until you smell blood, notice thin red streaks on your claws. You lick them off, embarrassed. Ashamed. You haven't done that since you were a young dragonet, and it brings back memories of being left alone and bored.

You take deep breaths, page through the book mindlessly. Your stomach feels upset. When the moon has moved again, you begin to weave yourself a new sheet of glamour. You lick your claws and begin at the backs of your ears, rubbing the saliva on the crusting scratches. When you're good and coated, you move to between your fingers, then duck your head and smear your damp claws on your brow. (Once you saw a cat doing a similar thing in an alley, and wondered, idly, if all cats were glamourous.) You pass your rough tongue over the spines of your back, pay special attention to in between your toes. You try not to think about where they've been.

The glamour clings to you, thick and protective and a little stifling, cloyed with the remains of your panic. The sky behind the skyscrapers lights to pale grey, then a wan blue, then blossoms into day.

The humans beneath your overpass begin to shuffle away, pushing their shopping carts. Other humans in

white outfits are busying themselves below, setting up a table. From it, they string a banner with a red cross.

Your blood runs cold. One of the humans has a dog on a leash. It snuffles around the base of your pole while the white humans hand out food to the ragged shopping cart humans. You do not know if they've tracked you here, or if this is bad, bad luck.

You grab your hat, ease your way across the ledge and slip down the other side, discreet. The dog barks at you, and you shuffle away, head down.

You end up at the used bookstore again. You hope that your friend is working there today, and she is. You smile at her when she looks up from her book, and she waves.

“Hey! Ready for the next book?”

She thinks you've finished the book with the dragon on it--Defenders of the Dreaming Depths. You nod. Let her think that.

“Well--I've got some bad news. We don't have it anymore. Someone bought it yesterday.” her stomach makes a gurgling noise, and you twitch an ear under your hat in surprise. “I have it at my house, though, and we don't live far from here.” Her face lights up. “Tell you what! We can grab some food, and then I can lend you the next book. C'mon, it's my break anyway.” She springs up from behind the counter and slings a ragged bag over her shoulder. You follow her out the door eagerly.

You do not stop at the food store down the street. You're relieved--you don't have any more human paper, you don't like their food, and eating is a hard thing for the glamour to keep within the realm of human. You're a little confused when Taylor takes off down a side alley behind a food place. One of the big metal containers where the humans put their rubbish sits in the dark. Taylor casts a glance at you, then pushes the lid up.

You've eaten out of these bins before--sometimes it's worth your while to forage for scraps, though you haven't done so for a while. But humans don't eat out of these--or you never thought so. You poke your head over the edge, look at the beetle-black bags within. It smells rank, and you curl your lips in disgust.

Taylor is already pawing through the bags, evidently on the trail of something. You reach in beside her, and she looks at you.

“I thought you might be a fellow dumpster diver.” she says. “I like to come here a lot, to pick the vegetables. These guys don't seem to care much about throwing them away if they're looking a little wilted.” She pulls a green thing out. “Like--look at this. Who throws this away?”

But you're on the tail of something better than vegetables. Mixed with the smell of the garbage is a

meaty smell, and suddenly you're hungry, hungry, hungry. You pull a clear bag of grey-pink from the mess, caked with pale yellow fat, and your mouth waters.

"I'm eating these," you stutter out.

"Are those precooked? Burgers? Dude, score!"

You nod. You don't know what a burger is, but you could probably eat them all and still be hungry. You sink to the ground and cram handfuls of the meat into your maw. Taylor sits next to you with her leaves and asks for a handful, and you oblige her, with only a little grudging. You didn't realize how hungry you were, and the ground meat fills you up with a nice warmth.

Taylor stares at you, when she thinks you aren't looking. You think she's probably staring at your "snaggleteeth", or your perhaps abnormally long tongue, or the way your back doesn't sit up right against the wall. You tone it down, open your mouth less. It's sticky beneath your glamour, humid.

When the bag of meat is gone, you lean over with a contented purr and close your eyes. It's good to be full, even if it's of questionable meat from a human trash bin. Your shoulder leans up on Taylor's.

"How long has it been since you last ate?" she asks later, tentatively. You don't know how to answer--how often do humans eat again? Their measurements of time fly from your head like birds from a wire.

"...a bit." you say. That sounds right. You are walking to her house, through a neighbourhood where the houses look like teeth, all crammed in together. They are big old things, nothing like the blue towers near your sleeping place. You are warm, and you can feel good things crackling inside of you, softly, like logs in a fire.

You arrive at an old house at the top of a set of steps. It's old, with chipped colors, but you can tell that the humans who live here take care of it.

"If you like, you can hang out here, or you can come in--I'm gonna go grab the book, I'll be right back." There's a sheltered spot to for humans to sit in front of the house, with a few long, cushioned seats. An empty glass bottle sits on one of the tables, a pile of colorful paper fluttering in the breeze. The house looks dark and cramped, and smells like many different people.

"I'll stay here."

"Ok. Be right back."

She vanishes inside. You settle gently onto one of the soft cushions next to the colorful paper. Three humans and some red text are on the cover, and you inspect it, giving your reading skills a run for their money. As best you can tell, it's something about rocks.

There aren't many pages with pictures inside, so you put it back down and stare off into space,

wondering how many trash bins have food like that inside them. As good as the meat (what had Taylor called it? Burger?) was, you feel a pang of longing for hunting, with your mate. Your best friend.

The railings around the sitting place are the same blue-white as her scales, and you're hit with a wave of loneliness. You don't want to be friends as a human. You want to be friends as *you*, free to finally not worry about glamor hitching on claws or snagging on wings. You miss her. You miss being you.

You cough, great fat tears rolling from your eyes. A fit of coughs do nothing to propel the awful tightness in your chest away, your fire trapped inside you. It's too hot to take, and you choke out a thin cloud of smoke and whine.

Taylor returns within a minute. You see her nose wrinkle. She's probably wondering where the fire is.

"Here it is: 'Warriors of the Waking World'."

She gives you the book, and you are stricken speechless.

The cover depicts the same green-gold dragon. There's a human on the cover as well, and they face each other calmly. The human's hand rests on the nose of the dragon, and it seems a deep understanding is passing between them.

There is no way this can't mean something. You are broken from your reverie when Taylor asks if you're ok.

"It's beautiful," you tell her.

"Isn't it?" she says. "I really admire just--everything about these books. Especially the artwork. They mean a lot to me."

You walk back to the bookstore, letting Taylor do most of the talking. You're lost in thought. Part of you is burning to just have it out with. You know it's irrational--Taylor has done very little to prove herself worthy of knowing your true identity. You don't know how she'll react. But the rest of you wants to take the leap, no matter the consequences, because you are so tired of living in fear, and of walking on two legs.

You realize that you're now leading the way, and that you are headed down a side street, around a parked truck. Your overpass is ahead, and you come to your senses. Why are you here? The threat of the red cross returns in force, and you slow to a halt.

There's a man in white leaning against your overpass. He's waiting for something, and you don't want to find out what. You look at your wrist in a facsimile of humanity and about-face, to go back the way you came.

Taylor, to her credit, matches your backpedal with ease.

"Everything ok?"

You spin around and advance on her, heart pounding. They are here, and they've forced your hand.

"Taylor," you say. Her face is fearful, but you are twice as afraid. "I'm--I'm not--like you."

"What? Poor?!" she says. You hear panic rising in her voice.

"No!" you spit. The truck parked in the alley is rounded by humans. They come towards you. They are faceless, and carry long weapons.

You both look, and you grab Taylor's shoulders because if you don't tell her now, everything is ruined. She feels your claws through your gloves, gasps in pain, and you pull away, horrified.

"Human," you hiss frantically. "I'm not human."

Confusion blooms on Taylor's face, and you throw your hat to the ground, because all she can see is the glamour still. It feels good to let your ears flop into the cool air. You bare your teeth, anxious, and tear off your gloves. The glamour strains, ready to give. Confusion changes to realization on Taylor's face. You see her mouth shape your name.

There's nothing else you can do. The knights are advancing, and you have to get out of here. You whirl around and snarl at the mob. Taylor grabs your coat, and you shed it, dropping to all fours. Your wings quiver above your head, and you inhale to fight.

The coals in your belly crackle and you feel them catch. You are you again, a bonfire shaped like a dragon. Taylor's hand rests on your neck, and you have something to defend. You will die a lump of mud if they take this from you again.

"Oh my god." says Taylor, and the flame dies in your mouth.

One of the humans has something a lot bigger than a dog on a leash. A pale yellow eye gleams above a slim pair of jaws, held shut with duct tape. Her wings are pulled to her back by the same token, and beneath them, ribs stand out like the rebar of your overpass. One leg is bound to her tail.

Your best friend hobbles towards you, leaps on one leg, but the human yanks her back and pins her to the ground under his boot, holding a long weapon to her head.

"Oh. My. God." repeats Taylor.

"Come with us without a fight." he says. The weapon is inescapable, and the implication is clear.

You cry, wordless, a keening call of distress. Your friend lies still, and this is the greatest weapon they could have ever brought. You crack your jaws, let the fire shine in a helpless act of defiance.

Close them.

Your friend's eyes open wide, and she tenses. Someone tackles your neck, shoving your head to the

ground, and the rest of you follows. Taylor yells in anger. A tear splatters on your snout, one of yours. You try to see your friend, but you can't move your head. There's a tearing sound and your jaws are fixed shut. Someone pushes your wings down into the small of your back, and you whimper.

You shove the human off with a mighty effort, and scabble forward on the rough human ground and your friend does too. The humans yell, and for a brief and beautiful moment, your snouts touch and it's like you're home again.

They pull you apart immediately and tape your legs, then they lift you and throw you into the back of another truck. You can hear Taylor yelling, but not what, and then they close the door.

It's dark, but for a series of tiny air-holes at the top of the walls. Your fire curls and roars inside you. You'd stoked it to an unbearable, bone-charring heat, and now, as if seeking revenge for its repression, it seems to be cooking you from the inside out. You wish and wish to spit it out and let the world burn, but you cry and cry and at last, all that remains is the dark.

+++++

Time passes. You lay still, your belly searing. There are bumps, voices, sounds of the truck's engine. You are being moved, but you don't care. You concentrate on trying to cool yourself. Your wings are crushed against your ribs, and the heat is trapped in their folds. In the light filtering down from the air holes, you see that the air from your nostrils wavers. You breathe hard, but it only makes it worse.

The truck has stopped. You only notice once you hear humans talking outside. They sound scared, and you quiet your breath as best you can to listen.

"I don't wanna go in there," says one human.

"I want it dead," says the voice of the man who held your friend under his boot. You shudder.

That's you. They're going to kill you.

"Wasn't the plan to interrogate it first?"

"It was. I've decided that keeping two is too much of a liability--we don't have the manpower for it, plus we couldn't have accounted for the kid who got away. It'll be easier for everyone if we cut off this end before it unravels further." A metallic rattle. "Believe me, I'm more disappointed than anyone else. Besides, this will be like an initiation for you." He sounds like he is smiling, but he also does not sound very sincere. "I trust you. You're the best person for the job." A sound like a pat on the shoulder. "You don't even have to fight it first. Good luck."

You hope that this is not how your story ends. A door closes, far off. You hear a shaky sigh.

“Sure, ‘part of your initiation’. Thanks.” You can smell a rank, metallic stink, wafting in from the air holes. This human, you realize, is scared senseless. You shift, and as best you can, thump your tail against the wall.

You hear a gasp from the human outside. “Fuck this,” she says in a shaky voice.

You hear the door close a minute later. There is silence, and the echo of human sweat. A nasty, poisonous stench lingers, and it takes you another minute to realize that the smell is *you*. Something tickles your lip. You snort, glancing down at your nostrils, and see something beautiful.

The tape wrapped around your snout is crinkling and smoking. You try to pull your jaws open, and it yields. Firelight floods your cell as you writhe, flinging your head to and fro. The silver stuff flies off and hits the wall, crackling and alight, curling like a dead thing. You gasp in a great lungful of cooler air as the tape around your wrists, too, smokes and curls. You pull and tear at everything with a vengeance until it pulls apart and you are free.

You take a last cool breath and let your furnace-hot flame loose at one of the walls, fanning it with your wings. The metal changes from black to a deep cherry-red, then the red of a setting sun, and you throw your weight against it, clawing at the soft material until it sticks between your fingers. You open a hole, rimmed with yellow-hot light, scrabble through, and you are out.

Your truck is inside a large structure. You smell water--you’re probably near the river. Another truck is nearby, and you run to it. You know your friend is in there, and you have to get her out. The box is held shut with a chain, and something held around the links. You pull, but it doesn’t come off.

Your fire has subsided, given release. You pant, muster a breath of it, blow it onto the chain. It fails to heat and glow the way your box did, and you begin to panic.

There’s voices behind the door. You run to the back of your friends’ box, leap atop it and press yourself to the roof.

The door opens.

“Shit, it’s hot---”

Silence. Then, quieter, a word you don’t understand. You peek over the edge of the box. A short human, dressed entirely in an odd silver suit, is standing by the door, holding a weapon. She takes a few steps back, then stumbles over her feet and steps out the door.

You jump to your feet and glide down, engulf the chain in fire, pull at it with all your might. The links

begin to glow a wan red, and you pull harder, harder, harder still. Then the door slams, and there are two humans, in the same suits. You wheel to face them, panting in exertion. One steps forward, weapon in hand.

You fight for your life, fire in your jaws. One human approaches you while the other runs for your friends' box. You blow a plume of flame at it, but the silver suit fails to catch and the human begins to fumble with the chain. You leap for it, claws outstretched. No one is stealing your friends away again.

You make contact and pull the human to the ground. The chain comes away in its hands, skittering across the ground like a snake. The weapon clatters from its hand, and you claw at its silver suit.

A movement catches your attention, and you rear back. The other human's weapon only slices your arm open instead of pinning your wing to your ribs. You roar and totter on two legs, then leap for your assailant. You fall to the ground on top of it, pinning the weapon to its front, and the two of you struggle for control before you wrest it away and toss it across the room. The other human runs for the door. Good. The first human struggles beneath you, and you claw at the golden glass over its face, your blood spattering across it.

Then before you know it, the human has the chain in its silver hands. It throws it over your neck, where it lodges behind your skull. As it grabs the other end of the chain--you realize suddenly that it means to strangle you--you whip over, quick as lightning, and seize its gloved hand in your teeth.

The cloth is slow to puncture, and you dig in, whip your head viciously. The glove comes away in your jaws, and you spit it out. The human grabs the chain, and this time it skates over the protective scales under your neck to lodge in a soft part. You choke and pull away, bracing on the human's blood-slick hood for leverage. It slides off to reveal the same human who pinned your friend beneath his boot.

Your head drops to the human's chest, and you scramble frantically away against the bite of the chain. Your jaws gape, and the world begins to vanish into black spots. The human's exposed hand is pink, and in a last ditch effort, you bury your teeth in it.

Bones crunch like twigs, and the taste of blood explodes in your mouth. The human screams as it drops the chain. You wriggle away, panting, then struggle to your feet.

The chain lies in a silver pile on the ground, and so does the human. Half-delirious, you pull your friend's box open. She is struggling to stand, and you utter a joyful name in your own tongue and run to her, push her to the floor of the box with the force of your joy. You summon the last dregs of your fire and pair it with your teeth, and the silver tape peels away, agonizingly slowly. You both pull at it until it falls away, and a frantic, adrenaline-saturated forever later, you are both as free as the wind.

The human stands in the doorway of the box, hooded, a black weapon in his good hand. Your friend

roars and springs forward, knocking him to the ground. You add a gust of fire to her assault and run after her, and you both leap over him, escaping. Cool air flows around you as you spread your wings together and vanish into the brown city night.

+++++

Taylor's face glows blue in her yard, a red ember at her fingertips. You and your friend crash-land into the leaf-covered hardness of the yard, and she jumps approximately three feet in the air. "Holy--" she hisses, and then is speechless.

Your arm is coated in blood, and you are dyed a sooty piss-grey from the smoke. Your friend's wrists and jaws are ringed with sticky, charred marks. Some of your blood is on her. You collapse, completely and utterly exhausted.

Taylor scrambles back and turns on a bigger light. You make eye contact with her and summon the energy to move your lips.

"Please..." you rasp. Your throat is raw. Your mate curls around you, and the last thing you remember is Taylor approaching you.

+++++

When you awake, everything is blue and glows. You are curled in a ball with your friend, and everything is ok.

You shift, and she opens one blue eye, the color around you.

"I missed you so much," she mumbles.

You don't respond, but to lick her ear, breathe a nuzzle of warm air into your embrace. The blue above you crinkles loudly, and you start. You raise your head, bumping it into the blue, and then seize it in your teeth and pull it away.

You are still in Taylor's yard. It's the morning, and the air is cool in your lungs. A large, loud piece of blue material has been placed over top of you. Taylor is sitting on the steps to the house, asleep. Your friend looks around, takes in the sights.

"Are we safe?" she asks.

"I think so," you whisper back. You don't want to disturb Taylor.

Your friend looks around for a while. You lay your head across her back, then pick up an old habit, better than scratching. You groom her in the spots where you used to, behind the ears, in the crook of the wing, lapping with a dry and rasping tongue like you've seen the stray cats do. A thin web of glamor forms around her.

She has tasted miles better, so you allow that there will be plenty of time for this in the future and begin to lick your wounds. You don't like the taste of your own blood, but you want to be clean. You splay your swollen and metal-burnt claws and give them a going over as well, all the while soaking up the rays of the sun overhead and the relief of being back together.

There is stirring in the house. One of the people you saw last time you were here comes out of the back door. Sees you, stops.

"Taylor?" she says.

Taylor awakes with a start. Her housemate looks concerned and casts you a glance.

"Taylor, whose...dogs are these?"

When the housemate goes back inside, Taylor stands, steps down the stairs. She looks nervous, and you remember being scared of her.

"You were always...?" she asks. You nod, a little nervous about what she'll say next.

"First of all-- I'm somehow not surprised. I mean, I don't know how you looked like a person, but I hope you won't mind me saying you weren't a very good one. Second...

"...you're beautiful." she finishes. "Both of you! I can't believe--"

She saddens, then. You see that she looks at the scabbing blood on your arm, the marks on your friend's wings, the bruises under your chin.

"I can't believe anyone would want to hurt you." She sighs. "There's probably nothing I can do, but...if there's anything I can do to help, I'm here."

And you feel relief--that you are not hideous in the eyes of all humans. That even if most of them want to hunt and kill you, at least one doesn't. That if you ever need to come back to the world of humans, you have an island on which to rest.

You have a fire back in your belly, you're back together with your best friend. You're still worn out, but you're ready to fly and hide somewhere forever with her. But there is something you'd like to do for Taylor first. You take a few steps toward her and look her in the eye.

She holds her hand out, like she doesn't know what she's doing. And you push your nose into it, like on the cover of *Warriors of the Waking World*. You snuffle a little--her hand is cold, soft in some spots and hard in others. You can't ever imagine biting this hand.

You pull back then. You have never seen a human look like Taylor does, all disbelief and wonder. "Thank you for everything," you say. "Thank you for helping me. And for letting us stay."

“Of course,” says Taylor.

“We probably won’t be back,” you say. And she nods.

Your friend dips her head to Taylor, and you both leap into the air. Leaves fly everywhere. You climb, then soar and are lost in a sky the color of happiness.