

A DRAGON BIGGER S THAN MY STORIES

A STORY FROM THE WAR OF LEAVES AND SCALES

BY
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Every dragon's an introvert. Why else would they hide in caves? They hate small talk as much as I do.

But that's why I love my dragon so much.

I'm up on the roof, looking over gray Londinium. Smokestacks raise their middle fingers toward the sky, belching out their rotten perfumes. The Gears of the city grind out their music over the constant babble of the crowds on the streets below. Tiny pinpricks of snow try to blot out the sound as they pelt my face. My fingers will freeze if I stay out here too much longer. The wind is scattering my long hair and turning my snot to ice. I'm probably not the prettiest girl in the city right now. Or ever.

But I don't care. I have a dragon.

She told me her name once, but I can't speak her language. Not really. I tried saying it out loud, but making my mouth say her name was like making a Gear out of snow. It just didn't work. So she's just my dragon, and I'm just her human.

There she is. She darts through the pillars of smoke, snatching up all the gulls she can.

I laugh.

After she gobbles up another half-dozen birds, she arches into the marble sky and then down toward me. Her almost-white beak seems to curve into a smile as she makes eye contact with me. Her magnificent pale-blue wings flutter as she sets down on the roof, her four-taloned feet touching down on the rough slate. Her shoulder comes up just short of my shoulder, and even with all the muscle on her body, she seems as light as I am.

She comes and nuzzles into me. *Are you hungry?* she whispers into my mind. She doesn't really use words, but I understand most of what she whispers fine. At least that bit about hunger.

No, I lie.

There's a rumble deep in her throat. *You need food.*

I get enough. I glance back at the door that leads to the stairs, back down into the heat and the cram of bodies. *I should get back.*

I will take you to my home, she whispers. *When I am large enough.*

I smile and hug her head, patting her curved beak and looking into her golden eyes. *I can't wait.*

She sends me a picture. A cave. No Gears. No people. No smoke. Plenty of food. And there we are, me and her. I give her everything she needs, and she gives me everything I need.

Feed me, she pleads.

You just ate!

Feed me. Her golden eyes bore into mine.

And I know what she means. She needs more than the meat of pigeons. I glance again at the door.

Maybe we can take a little time.

I speak out loud, stroking her pale-blue scales, feeling their warmth and their surprising softness. "Once upon a time, a girl named Ash Anna was abandoned at an orphanage. But she had been left by mistake, for her parents were still alive and ruled in a faraway land. She told the orphanage mistress over and over again, but no one believed her. Or maybe they did. Because every child in the orphanage was a princess." And I tell my dragon the whole story, from the grinding poverty and the hard world and how all the princesses learn how to make something of themselves, and how they eventually banded together to free the thirty princes captured by the troll.

And they live happily ever after.

I always tell her stories of heroes. Always. Because I wish I had a hero to rescue me. Well, I used to. Now I have my dragon, and that's even better.

My dragon rumbles an almost-purr. *I am full*. She coils up on the roof, her long tail wrapping around her. I almost think I can see her grow. Good.

The stories feed her. And I am the best storyteller of all the grinding girls.

The dorms are hot, and the humidity clings to me. Three girls already pack into my bed. Ten opens one eye as I try to shove her over. "You wasn't at supper."

"I'm not hungry," I answer.

"Who's he?" She's still only got the one eye open.

"He?"

"You're gonna end up pregnant, you keep going out like that. You know the boys don't marry us. Don't matter what he says." Ten spits out the last words.

"I'm not seeing a boy." The thought disgusts me. I know some girls hope they can get out by finding some man, but life doesn't really work that way. Besides, any boy who would look at me that way would probably be mad.

"You're seeing a girl? That'll get you ground out so fast!" Ten leers at me.

I hit her.

She giggles, waking the other two.

Of course, the story is around the dorm twice before I can fall asleep, and by then everyone's talking about how I sell girls to upper-class ladies and if anyone wants to get out of the dorms, come see me.

I can't wait for my dragon to take me away.

The coal pours down the chute. "C'mon, girls!" cries Patty Rinkin, one of the only ones of us that merit a last name. She's angry. She's always angry when she's hungry, and like the rest of us, she's always hungry.

We all groan. It's only the third load today, but the cold is making us stiff. It's always cold here. Gotta keep the coal from lighting. We stuff what we can into our bags and trudge back to our tables over by the Gears to grind down the larger chunks into usable size.

I shout out over the constant deep rumble, "So Constance, she changes her mind. She lays down the sword. The sunset reflects off it. The Goblin King raises an eyebrow and his blade to strike."

The girls around me gasp. The stories pass the time. And it's good to know someone gets a happy ending, even if it's just made up. Even if I just made it up now. I grab another chunk of coal twice the size of my head and put it against the spinning gears. Black dust fills the air. I cough before continuing.

"Constance smiles. 'I'll trade you,' she says. The Goblin King chokes back a cry of rage. 'No! You know a goblin can never resist a trade!' And the girl, she just smiles at him. She finally figured it out. You can't defeat a goblin with steel, but you can with your wit."

The coal in my hand sparks. I cut off the story as I pull back. No fires here. That would be bad. Senny was in one of the fires. Now all she does is sweep the stairs over and over again.

And I glance down at the coal, and then again.

And I swear.

A stone the color of the sky and the size of my thumbnail sits in the middle of the coal chunk.

Another dragon egg.

I manage to smuggle it back to the dorms by tucking it up in my mouth. Tastes about as good as you'd expect.

Ten grabs me before I can get up to the roof. "Ey! You goin' walkin' with the boy again?" She winks.

"I'm visiting the House of Lords!" I mumble around the egg and trot off to take a seat in the crappery instead. It stinks, but hey, at least I'm alone here. I spit out the egg and spit some more to get the lurking taste of coal out of my gob. Nasty stuff.

It's the same blue that my dragon's egg was. The same smooth texture. The same size.

How many eggs do dragons lay? Well, considering that my dragon was the first dragon I'd ever even heard of outside a story, maybe no one knows.

Someone knocks on the door. "Be done in a gear's turn!" I answer and start putting myself back together, slipping the egg back into my mouth.

Patty Rinkin's waiting for me, her arms crossed. "Girls tell me you've been slipping out."

I roll my eyes.

"Girls tell me you've been seeing someone."

I roll my eyes again. I don't want to talk; the egg's in my mouth and would make me sound funny. Ten might not notice, but Patty would. Or she'd think I was drunk. That would make her even more angry.

"Girls tell me you ain't been visited by Bloody Jane for a bit."

I raise my eyebrow. Like any of them would know if I was pregnant! Or that anyone would ever want to have a baby with me. Or do what it takes to have a baby.

And that's when I feel the egg heat up in my mouth.

Oh no. Patty's telling stories. And the dragon in my gob's feeding on them. It was probably eating all the stories I told in the grindery today, and it only needs a little more. Yep. There's a seam forming in the stone as I run my tongue over it.

"Girls tell me lots of things, Manda. And I noticed, too, that you're not eatin' much. Maybe because you've got the morning heaves. Maybe you're in a family way with no family. And you know the mistress don't abide by us doin' any such hanky-panky, does she?"

I spit out a dragon.

Patty screams.

I slap her.

She shuts her mouth. She looks down at the wrinkled blue form I caught in my hands. It's tiny; barely a tadpole, really. I keep spitting. The stony remains of the egg fly from my mouth. I peer back into my hand. The thing's wings are wrapped tight around its body, so it looks like a long snake. Its eyes aren't open.

Patty wrinkles her nose. "That ain't the morning heaves."

I laugh.

Her eyes snap up at me. "You get this from some gearboy?"

The little dragon in my hand shifts weakly. It needs food. I don't really have a choice.

I answer, "Let's go up to the roof. Let me tell you a story."

My dragon is displeased that someone else is on her roof. She circles the distant pillars of smoke, refusing to come any nearer.

I understand.

Patty is pacing, stomping back and forth on the roof. Someone's going to hear the noise and come up. And then more people will be here. Already there's too many people.

Patty points up at my dragon. "So, she's been flying around up there for how long?"

"About a month. Probably since the girls started noticing I was gone." I refuse to look at Patty. Instead, I hold the little dragon. It drank in the story. Now it roams the contours of my palm, sniffing between my fingers and looking up at me. I can hear it whispering, but it doesn't have anything resembling language yet. It's more like the grinding of a very small gear.

"How come no one noticed him?"

"Her. And how often do you look up?"

"Hm." She frowns, stops pacing, crosses her arms, starts pacing again.

I don't want her up here. The back of my head aches. This is my space. My place for me and my dragon. Today it's not snowing, and there's a few shafts of sunlight coming down through the clouds. The Gears are loud and tugging their way into my head. At least the crowds of the street seem quieter.

"How do you know it's a her?"

I shrug. "I just know."

"What are you doing with her?"

I look up at my dragon. She's still circling over there, through the smoke, her wide, wide wings like a stab of sky that's come down below the clouds. "I'm not doing anything with her. She's her own dragon." Why should I tell Patty my plans?

She frowns. "So, this one's mine, then?" She gestures to the little guy now nestled in my palm and sleeping.

I pull back my hand, jarring the little one awake. "No! You can't own a dragon!"

“I thought you said that one was your dragon!”

I press my lips together. My space. My dragons. And Patty’s invading all of it, clanging like a gear out of place and the wrong size besides. Gumming up all my thinking, all my hopes.

How can I have a happy ending if there’s another person there?

Patty and I sort of end it by just walking away. She goes back for supper. I stay on the roof. My dragon comes to me. She isn’t too happy to see the little one in my hand but greets me as always. *Are you hungry?*

No, I lie.

You need food.

You need stories. And with that I begin. “Once upon a time there was a girl so ugly that no man would ever look at her. But she had a secret. Because no one would look at her, she could do whatever she wanted. So, she left the city one day and found a forest.”

My dragon snorts. *My story!*

I stop. *What?*

He’s eating it!

I look down in my palm. The little dragon is awake, its long tail lashing, looking up at me hungrily and clacking its tiny beak.

You can’t share?

Dragons don’t share food, she answers, lifting her head with a snort. *And you are my human. Dragons don’t share humans.*

What am I supposed to do?

Get that other one. The dirty one. She’s good enough for that. She stalks off to the other side of the roof.

I set the new dragon down on the slate. It paws around in a circle a few times and then looks up at me. “Wait here,” I tell it, and turn back to the door. I take a deep breath. I can send Patty and the dragon down to the yard, but so many of the girls go back there, if nothing else than for the crappery. They’d be found out so fast. The only place for them is here.

The only place is here.

I look down at the dragon again. All right. Fine. But only because of the dragon.

Patty stumbles through a bunch of stories. It's clear she has no clue what she's doing. She keeps going backwards and retelling things because she gets it wrong or forgets something or adds in random details. The stories are twisted, stunted, angry little things. Not the kinds of stories I like. It's like she never listened to me when I told my stories at the grindery.

Ouch. That one hurts. All I am is my stories. I got nothing else. I don't have looks or strength or money or friends or even a chest, really, but I can tell stories. That should be enough.

But if someone doesn't listen to my stories, I'm nothing.

My dragon can tell I'm anxious, though, and she nuzzles into me. My stories are enough for her. And at the rate she's growing, maybe just a few more days and she can fly me away to wherever this cave is that she remembers from before she was an egg.

How can you remember something from before you were an egg?
I ask.

She blinks. *Can't you?*

The Gears seem louder at the grindery today. Maybe my ears are already adjusting to the forest I'm looking forward to. I call out over the noise, "And Tristam stood before the Aeropterex. He drew his Gearblade, the metal lengthening as the machinery locked into place. 'Return Dulcet to me!' he cried."

Ten screams next to me. I jump to my feet, ready to pull her back from the Gears. Did they snag one of her fingers? An entire hand?

But all she does is hold up a piece of coal.

No. Another dragon's egg.

She peers at it, and the other girls gather around. "It's so pretty!" one says. Patty hops down from her coal chute. "Get back to work! Back to work!" she hollers until she sees what Ten holds. Her eyes dart to me.

I shrug.

But it is no longer just a stone in her hand. Its nature can't be hidden. It ate too much of my story. It shakes.

She drops it to her table.

Around us, the Gears continue to turn.

The blue stone cracks open and a tiny dragon emerges. It stumbles around the workstation, trying to find its balance.

Half the girls scream and back away. The other half step closer and exclaim about how cute it is.

I imagine what my dragon would say. *Not cute. Regal.*

I see Patty sigh. She raises her eyebrows at me.

Oh, no. She wants me to explain. She wants me to tell them. I don't want to. I can tell stories. But then they'll pelt me with questions, and they'll pry into my space and maybe that'll mean more people on the roof and my dragon won't come to me while they're there and I need my dragon—

Stop.

You can do this, Manda. Just tell them the story and feed the baby dragon.

Fine.

And so, I say, "Girls, this isn't the first dragon that's come from the coal. Let me tell you how I found my dragon."

She's really not happy. Neither am I. Patty on the roof was just a grinding Gear. Now a whole cacophonous Machine sounds in the back of my head, at my temples, through all of me.

All the girls are on the roof.

Their prattle drowns out the Gears, the crowds below, everything. I can't hear anything else.

My dragon circles the rising smoke again. And all the girls ask their questions. They're mostly good questions. I still want them gone. I answer what I can.

Yesterday's dragon snuggles up against Patty. He's grown to be about the size of a cat, though a very awkward cat. Apparently, Patty's stories didn't feed her as well as my stories nourish my dragon. I take no small pride in that. Maybe you are the stories you hear.

The new dragon rests in Ten's palm. Since she found the egg, I guess it's fair. And really, I only need one dragon, as she

reminded me yesterday. Ten's a better storyteller than Patty, too, but still not as good as me. She's telling stories about tricksters. Those are good. Not as good as hero stories, though.

The rest of the girls try sitting on the roof, but it's pretty cold up here, and the slate freezes them. They stand around for a while. When it's clear my dragon isn't coming, most go back into the dorm. Ten takes her dragon with. Before they go, though, I look at all of them. "You can't tell anyone. We don't know what they'd do."

Really, I just want to make sure they stay quiet until my dragon can take me away. I don't care what happens after that.

I don't.

The girls all nod solemnly. They're used to keeping secrets. Not from each other, but everyone knows about the dragons now.

Just Patty stays on the roof, trying to feed her dragon stories. After a while she says to me, "It's nice up here. All alone."

I grunt.

"I get why you come up here now."

I grunt again.

After a few more stories, Patty leaves, and her dragon curls up to sleep. Finally, my dragon lands, and it's just me and her. *Are you hungry?* she asks.

No, I lie. *Are you hungry?*

She comes to me. My head only reaches her shoulder now. She grows so fast. I wrap my arms around her neck, and she rumbles her approval. We hold each other for a while.

I love my dragon because she will never tell anyone when I cry.

The next day three more girls find dragon's eggs. Jealousy abounds. I am glad my dragon is mine and no one can take her away from me. I am told the dorm is alive with stories that night. The girls are trying to remember the stories I always make up in the grindery. Let them reuse those old things.

I tell my dragon stories no one else has ever known. Just her and me.

And Patty and her dragon, who have taken to the roof.

My dragon snorts at Patty.

Patty sticks her tongue out. "It's too loud down there now. And my dragon probably shouldn't go down." Her dragon is a slightly darker blue, and he looks thinner than mine did at that age. But he's gotten up to be about mid-thigh height, and Patti hugs him. "What are we going to do with six dragons when they're all as big as yours?" she asks me.

I don't answer. What should I care?

We should find a quiet place, a strange voice whispers at me. I jump.

Patty laughs. "I don't know what I'd do in a place without the Gears. Next you'll be saying we should find a place without smoke."

I whisper to my dragon, *I can hear other dragons?*

Why not? she answers. *You can hear many humans. Why not many dragons?*

I don't want to hear any other dragons. Just you.

She rumbles her purr again. *I don't want any other humans.*

I sleep curled up with my dragon. She's big enough to protect me from the wind, mostly. Patty tries curling up with hers, but he's just not big enough to give her enough warmth. She's not feeding him well.

The next morning, I watch dawn over Londinium. Cold white light shoots through the city from the east, pouring through the thick clouds, making the shadows of the smokestacks even deeper. The Gears pound on, as they ever do, and in the streets people go about their clockwork dance. But above I snuggle into my dragon.

Patty rubs her eyes. "It's actually kinda pretty, ain't it?"

I offer half a smile. "It's only pretty when there ain't people around."

"You ever think about taking your dragon and flying away?"

I look at her. I look at her dragon. I lie.

No one's paying attention in the grindery today. They all stayed up late telling stories. I really don't want to deal with the

screaming that comes from accidents here, though. There's plenty of bloodstains on the Gears already. Patty knows it. She's yelling louder than normal for everyone to pay attention.

The girls that are awake are watching their coal closely. They want their own dragons. Thankfully no one tried smuggling their dragons in this morning. Some of them might have been dumb enough to try, but Patty nixed that right away. Maybe she is good for something.

"Why do you think we keep finding eggs?" Ten asks next to me as she carefully grinds down some more coal.

"I was talking with my dragon about that."

"Wait—they talk?" she exclaims.

"Yeah. Kind of. Yours probably will today or tomorrow if you're feeding it well enough. Anyway, we think their mom laid all the eggs in the coal deposit. And the miners just took all the coal out, didn't notice the eggs, and sent them here for processing."

"Oh." Ten grinds away. "Do they remember their mom?"

"I get images of a dragon every once in a while. I guess they remember things from before they were eggs. I don't get it."

Ten giggles a little. "I'm sorry I thought you were sneaking off with a boy. This is so much cooler."

I look down. Yeah. It is cooler, isn't it?

Only two more dragon eggs found that day.

Only.

What has my life become?

Thankfully I don't have to teach anyone anything anymore. Not so thankfully, soon the dragons will be too big to keep in the dorm. And I'm like my dragon. I don't like sharing. This might be my last night alone with her.

Well, with her and Patty and her dragon.

My dragon's shoulder is a good foot above my head now. I hope the roof is strong enough to hold all of us. Then again, she's still lighter than I'd ever think, almost like a bird. Maybe that's how she flies so well, gliding through the air.

As I come to the roof, she lands as far from Patty as possible.
Are you hungry?

No, I lie.

Soon, she answers. *Tomorrow. Feed me well tonight, and tomorrow we will be gone.*

I don't even care that Patty sees me crying.

In the morning the dawn comes over Londinium. The cold, white light pours over everything. Today some gentle snow settles over the city. The Gears seem quieter.

And my dragon seems to smile at me. *Are you hungry?*

My grin must be so wide. I hug her face as hard as I can. *Let's go. Let's go now before Patty wakes up.*

My dragon kneels before me, and I scramble on to her back. Her pale blue scales are so soft and so warm. I hug her thick neck. I am ready to go.

She stands, and I almost fall off.

I have never been ridden before.

I've never ridden anything! I almost laugh.

Hold on. She spreads her wings, so large now, wider than the dorm, wider than I think she would ever need to be able to soar through the sky. She jumps.

And we are flying.

We're flying!

The dawn reaches out to grab at us, to suck us in. My dragon flaps her wings, and we rise to the heavens. The smokestacks couldn't reach us now. I let my laugh out. My joy fills the sky. No one can reach us! No one can talk to us! My dragon and I, we are alone at last, and even the sound of the Gears seems so far away. The city is small below us, all snow and shadows, its people vanished in the distance. I couldn't pick out the dorm if I tried.

Then a shadow blots out the sun. Darkness and cold claim me.

I thought my dragon was large. But this dragon dwarfs the smokestacks. Larger than the Gears that power the city. Larger than my wildest story. She flies on wings that crack the sky. When she lands, the boom of it overpowers the Gears. But even in her size, I can see: She is starving. She looks like Patty's dragon writ large. She has had no story for a very, very long time. And the stories she grew on made her very, very angry.

I have never heard silence before this. The Gears have stopped. The city has stopped.

Londinium cannot face this dragon.

Her scales are the blue of midnight. Her beak is stained red. Her golden eyes take in everything. And her whisper is quieter than anything I have ever heard, but I cannot turn away from it. *I have scented them from my nest to here. Now. Give me my children.*

The silence ends. The screams begin. This huge dragon waits a moment, a moment more, and then takes a step. A smokestack falls. A fire breaks out.

Fly! I tell my dragon. And she turns and flies away. Her wings beat faster than I have ever seen her move. The wind tears at my face.

This is my dragon. This other dragon may have laid her, but I raised her. She is mine.

And you are mine, my dragon answers. I hear her fear. She does not want to be claimed.

I hear another smokestack fall. I am sure the city will not recover. Who could survive without the Gears?

I could.

Of course I could. I was planning to survive without them.

All those people, though. How many people will the mother crush? And if my dragon is with me, far away, will she ever stop destroying the city? How many will die? How many packed in together, sharing sweaty beds in the humidity, laughing too loud with each other, serving the Gears together?

No. It's not my problem. All I need is my dragon. She can hunt for me. And I can tell her stories. I can tell her all the stories of all the heroes.

Of all the heroes who stood up to the monsters.

Heroes who helped people, even when the people didn't care.

Heroes who faced impossible odds and had their happily ever afters.

I feel my hands bunch up into fists. I can fly away. All I ever wanted in blue scales. All she ever wanted, in the stories I tell.

I don't want to do this.

But you are the stories you tell.

I know what would stop her.

She's angry because she's hungry and she wants her children.
I can solve both.

Turn around, I whisper.

Why?

We can save the city.

Why?

I can't answer for a moment. *She needs a story.*

My dragon glides for a moment. She banks, and we race back to Londinium. Back to smoke. Back to people and chaos and everything I hate. Back to face the monster.

Put me down—there. On that roof. Then go get the other dragons.

She lands, her claws scraping against the slate roof. I slide off her back, giving her a brief hug. *Come back for me.*

You are my human. And with that, she flies away.

My dragon's mother looms over me. She doesn't see me. How could she? I feel the heat come off her. It's not a comfortable heat like my dragon. It burns like the Gears on a summer's day. She lifts one claw larger than the dorms. It crashes down on the building next to me. Dust shoots into the air. I hear screaming. Her next step will destroy the roof I stand on.

Are my words enough to feed a creature this big? I'm not good enough. I've never been good enough.

I think of my dragon. I'm good enough for her.

I shout. The first word hurts so much to scream so loud, but she must hear me. She must. "Once upon a time there was a girl who wanted to be alone, but she lived with a home full of people. She longed to find solitude, but all she found were elbows in her ear while she slept and knees in her porridge when she ate."

The claw before me doesn't move. I hear her dark scales flex as she turns her long neck toward me. Eyes taller than me narrow.

I don't have time for relief. I don't have time for fear. I have to feed her.

"Her mother needed her, though. So, every day she swept the house and made the bread and tucked her brothers and sisters into bed. Every day she did what she must."

She did what she must.

Oh, my throat hurts so much. The words don't weave themselves the way they usually do; I can tell I'm thinking too

hard. I'm trying to make the story cleverer by half, and I don't have that in me. Not when I face a dragon bigger than my stories.

But I tell her. I tell her what it is to be a hero. To know what you want, to set it aside, to do what must be done to rescue others. Even if it means giving up everything you always wanted. It seems like I tell my story for hours until I reach the conclusion. "And so, she stayed in the home, and every day she visited the grave of her mother. And there she was alone. But she always went back to the little house to take care of her brothers and sisters, until the day she died."

And then my dragon arrives. She bears several small dragons the size of cats and dogs on her back, trying to teach them to fly and fly quickly. Patty's dragon follows on shaking wings. They all land next to me.

The mother breathes in, scenting them. *My children. Are you hungry?*

My dragon looks at me before answering, *We were well fed.*

My belly has been sated in small measure. The story nourishes me. Whose human is this?

Mine.

The huge dragon nods. *Dragons do not share humans.*

And my dragon trembles. *We do not.*

She raises herself tall in the sky above us. *I am hungry.*

And suddenly I realize I have not just delayed my dream of running away for a little bit. I turn to my dragon. "No!" I shout. I don't even care that I'm not whispering. I know she can understand. "I belong to you!"

She nuzzles me. *You have told me about heroes. She pauses. I didn't know dragons could cry. I am the stories you've told me.*

"Will she take me away?"

Yes.

"I don't want to leave you."

We may flee. But everyone here will die. Her anger will be fierce. She is angry when she is hungry.

"Come with."

She needed to make sure we were fed. Her job as mother is done. But dragons live alone. I cannot come with.

"Find me."

And now I cry, too. We hold each other.

I am hungry, the powerful, powerful whisper tells us.
“Fine then.” I step away from my dragon. I sniff. *Are you hungry?* I ask her.

No, she lies.

And the mother picks me up in a claw that could house all the girls. She places me on her broad, broad back. *Feed me as I fly*, she commands. And she spreads her wings, wings wider than I can see, and she lifts off from the ground. Nothing this large should be able to fly, and yet she does.

And I feed her. I tell her all my stories.

I am old now. Probably close to death. The dragon who took me is not. Dragons are as old and as young as the stories they devour.

I have wanted for nothing. Silk clothing and rich food. I have been as alone as I could ever wish.

But I long for *my* dragon. But dragons do not share food. Dragons do not share their humans.

I have heard that Patty and her dragon now protect Londinium. The girls have grown their clutch of dragons and are well taken care of. The Gears have stopped turning, and people grow things now. I cannot imagine such a place. I asked the dragon who owns me to take me there, but she refused.

But Londinium would have been destroyed had I not fed this dragon. And the girls would have died for nothing. I would be happy yes, but at what cost?

And my dragon.

My dragon is out there. I hope she is happy. I hope she has found someone to feed her.

No, I did not find my happily ever after. But I am a hero. They will tell my story until after Londinium has sunk to memories.

THE END

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