

SMUGAN: THE SLOW CREEPER

The dragon caught a reflection of himself in the ocean. He was young but he was big for his age. The colors on his scales danced the way the sun danced on the crests of the enormous blue expanse. The ocean was the only place he felt that fit him. Land was too small. Out here he could breath and stretch his wings. Moisture tried to cling to his skin like desperate insects, but his scales were too hot and they evaporated the water as quickly as it could condense. If he flew fast enough, he could leave a stream of cloud behind him, marking his path for a few moments before it drifted off into the wind. Dragon mist, the sailors called it. A sign of good luck and protection.

His favorite time over the ocean was in the storms. He'd never felt a force closer to his own than in those stormy days. The waves would crash and roll so high, thirty or forty feet, that he would be caught by surprise and get a snout full of salty spray. It made him cough and sputter and laugh. The wind would howl at him and he would howl back. It would gust, pushing back like a tight, translucent veil or if he wanted to fly with it, the wind catapulted him forward, then would change it's course like some wild roller coaster ride.

He could go underwater if he wished. Another whole world was under there. When sailors speak of sea serpents, they are only seeing a dragon taking a swim. He was in no danger as no amount of water could put out a dragon's fire. A dragon's fire was unique to the dragon, a complex combination of chemicals produced by a dragons body, brain and heart.

Today, the sun shone, the ocean was calm and he was taking a leisurely fly. A tiny speck bobbed in the waves in the distance. A ship. He flew over it, just close enough to bob it violently in the water, but not to capsize it. Sailors hooted and waved their caps at him. They didn't mind the pitching. They laughed and tumbled about, happy to catch a glimpse of a lucky dragon.

He'd been born not far from here in a cave overlooking the ocean. A cluster of islands thrown about like bird seed around a great mass of land called England. He didn't understand why the people of the land had to name it. You couldn't own land and they fooled themselves into thinking that they could. It started wars between them constantly. Foolishly living and dying by it seemed a shame. He liked people and people seemed to like him. They were bright bits of fire and passion, and even when their lives were so very short, they continued to hope and dream and achieve. As a dragon, he had so much time to linger, to think and explore, but they, like the moisture that tried to cling to his scales, had no time. He felt for them and was sympathetic to their weak, fleeting lives.

He headed off to shore, wanting to take advantage of the sun with a nap on the warming rocks. He chose a rocky weathered peak and laid down amidst the anorexic pine tree's dotting the mountain around him. He closed his eyes, letting the sun sink in. If he stayed long enough, the warmth would radiate far down to his skin. It would ripple beneath the hardened scale, reminding him that he was vulnerable and not immortal. His mother told him dragons could live thousands of years. She said that it was rare for elements to kill them, but it was really about the thinking. The way a dragon handled it's thoughts that was the most important. Many dragons cannot hold the time in their minds. There is a dreadful loneliness that creeps in. An isolation. A madness.

"What of the company of other dragons?" He'd asked his mother.

"We are like the oak tree. We need space physically and mentally to survive. I suppose we can take comfort in the knowledge of the presence of other dragons, but it is impossible for us to live together. We are feral, instinctual creatures. Ultimately, we fight each other for everything. Even you, my son, will turn on me."

"Never" he remembered telling her.

“Then it will be me that turns on you.” His mother responded with a sad smile. “When you grow more and come of a certain age, it will happen.”

He couldn't imagine such a thing, but she had been right. A short time ago, she turned on him and attacked him. It had been vicious and savage. He'd cried out for her to stop, but the look in her eyes was one he had never seen before. She was lost, like a shark feeding in the water. She was much bigger and older than him, and he knew if he didn't get away, she would kill him. He flew away from her, and their nest, bleeding and wounded inside and out. He'd found a small cave and crawled inside for a week, letting his wounds heal and his dragon heart ache.

Today was the first day he'd been out, and the sun helped him to heal physically and mentally. He could smell a human close by and turned over onto his back, exposing his belly, daring the stupid little thing to come closer. He closed his eyes again, relaxed and calm. Suddenly, there was sensation on his stomach. A touch. A connection he had never felt before. His eyes popped open and a surprise snort came out of his nose and a small burst of blue flame shot out with it. He looked to the side and there stood a man, no more than twenty years old from the smell of him. His hair was dark black spilling in silly curls down to his shoulders, his eyes a deep mossy brown and his stature was short and stout. The man held his hand on the side of his belly. Even with him waking up and looking at the man, he kept it there. Entranced or extremely stupid, the man looked back at him. Mossy brown eyes mixing with his shifting dragon colored eyes. They looked at each other for a long time, as if neither could believe they were there. The warmth from the strangers hand radiated down and touched his skin. It sent a great appealing shiver all over his body.

That was enough. He sent a short burst of hot air into the strangers face, singeing the ends of a few of his curls. He rolled off of his back and onto all fours, stretched his wings and shook off the drowsy feeling he had from the sun and the human touch. He took one more look at the

man, who stood staring, and noticed that he was small, like a dwarf. Why had the dwarf done that? Why had he risked his short life to come so close to him? To touch him? A certain fate for most creatures that come near dragons.

He leaped into the air. One hundred feet of his young muscular body knocking the dwarf down from the force of his wings and the air beating beneath them. He launched fast and high. He needed space. Space to contemplate this new feeling that had just been forced on him. He wasn't sure if he liked it. It was new and foreign and scary. Scary! He was a dragon! How could he feel fear? He let out a stream of angry fire toward the figure below but it was too late. He was too high and his message shot unceremoniously across the sky embarrassing him. He flew away and back toward his cave to sulk.

For three days, he crouched in the cave, ignoring the angry grumblings coming from this stomach. The thoughts of his mother were replaced with the thought of this dwarf. The calm, steady stare and the touch that reached down to his very soul. He'd felt a connection. A connection with a dwarf? How was that possible? It was like a paw feeling a connection to the ant it was about to squash. It made no sense. He knew his mother would not approve. She had taught him that all animals were below dragons and only were a source of food. They were fleeting and weak and not worth a dragons time or energy. She would laugh at him for his naivety and weakness. But why did he care what she thought? She'd attacked him! Pushed him out of their nest and tried to kill him. Why should he care at all about her?

He was overwhelmed and hungry and after three days of sulking about his mother and about this dwarf, he didn't feel like anything had come to a conclusion. He stretched his wings and darted out of the cave. He dropped, a bit too fast as his wings were stiff from not moving, and hit the side of the cliff with a thud.

Clumsy! Weak! What had he become?

He balanced out in flight, and charged down the cliff face in search of food. It was raining hard, but that was good. He loved the rain. The only problem was that most livestock wouldn't be grazing and he would have to hunt for a proper meal. He didn't eat humans. His mother had encouraged it, but he refused. Didn't like the taste much, and besides, they were too interesting to him. A flock of sheep or a handful of grazing cows would suffice. He flew over his usual spots, but there was nothing. A great deer buck standing in a field, but he was too magnificent and hardly worth the mouthful or sharp horn points.

He flew for several hours, covering all of his usual feeding spots until he found that he had flown far out of his territory. There! A small flock of miserable, wet sheep huddled together beneath a tree. It would have to do. He circled a large half moon back and readied to burn the tree and roast the sheep standing beneath it, when suddenly, something hit him from above. He careened left, spinning toward the ground for a moment before evening out.

Another dragon banked in the distance. It was bold, he'd give it that. The other dragon was smaller. On closer inspection, he could see that it was skinny and probably a lot more hungry than he was. Its eyes were sunken and wild as if it hadn't eaten in weeks. It flew back and forth in front of him, guarding the meal below. He knew that he could beat this dragon easily and win his meal, but it didn't seem like a fair fight. His mother would never approve of his behavior, but what did he care. He was not her.

He backed away, keeping enough distance to communicate that he was allowing the weaker dragon his meal. A look of surprise flashed across the skinny dragon's face, but it was quickly replaced by hunger again. It reared up and dove toward the ground, fire like a hot poker spewing from its mouth. It should be more careful, he thought. Fire that hot and desperate could turn everything into ashes before you get your first bite. The tree smoked and then burst into flame. Even the rain didn't have a chance against dragon fire. The sheep bleated and immediately began scattering in all directions. A few by the tree trunk had been reduced to

ashes, and the rest ran off with their wool on fire. He watched as the poor dragon tried to herd his flaming meal. If he didn't do it quickly, they would all burn up and be no good. He should have herded them with short bursts out into the open, and then cooked them all in one breath. He ought to help him. He swung down and started herding a group of flaming sheep toward the skeletal dragon. It was trying to swallow the sheep it had caught before properly cooking them. They were struggling and making it hard for him to get them down. He could see in the skinny dragon's eyes that it thought he was stealing the sheep for himself. But, his plan was to herd them to the dragon's feet and then cook them for him. The other dragon made a desperate attempt to quickly swallow the two he had and try to get to the rest of the meal. With one blast delivered the sheep, hot and smoking, at the skinny dragon's feet. It looked at him as if it thought it might be a trick, then dove forward for the rest of the meal, too hungry to care if it was.

He left the other dragon and rolled upward through the rain, higher through the misty clouds and finally out and above it all where there was no rain at all. He reached his neck toward the sun, dried his wings in the cool air and he felt good for the first time in days. For the first time since his mother had kicked him out. It felt good to help his fellow dragon. He didn't feel an instinct to fight, to kill and be the better, stronger one. The only thing he felt was care and compassion for his starving brother. Even if it didn't feel the same about him.

His feelings of contentment were suddenly pierced by a scream below. Not the screaming bleat of a sheep, but a dragons scream of pain and suffering. He dove back through the cloud cover, mist coated and dripping, breaking back into the rain over the field. The skinny dragon had been injured. It was dragging itself across the grass, bleeding and screaming, trying to get away from something he couldn't see yet.

A third dragon passed below him. Bigger and gray and old.

"Mother". he whispered to himself.

He watched in horror as his mother stalked the injured dragon. Teasing her prey by burning it's wings so that it could not fly. It screamed in agony and he watched helpless and afraid from the clouds. She was going to feed on him. A good meal with a dozen sheep inside it's belly. He was frozen in fear. Disgusted by his mother. Disgusted by himself and his inability to act. Disgusted by his entire race. The small dragon screamed again. He seemed to be calling to him to help. To save him. But he was useless. It wasn't just the fear. He knew he couldn't beat his mother. She was bigger, older and more ruthless. She would win and there would be two dead dragons instead of one.

The screaming stopped as if the dragon understood there was no help to be had. It's fate was sealed. It turned to face mother directly. Staring straight at death before it came for him. It was terrible and beautiful all in the same moment. The clouds broke and spear of sunlight fell on the dragon's face. He could see centuries of pride, wisdom and dignity shining on it. Even though it wasn't that old, it was as if the whole race of dragons was there, presenting itself with honor in the face of defeat. It took his breath away. And then....it was over. Mother was on the dragon. Slamming into the beautiful face and ripping half of it off in one clean bite. He didn't need to see the rest of it.

He turned and flew quietly and slowly along through the mist and away from the wretched and cursed scene. What he had seen back there had changed him forever. He would never be his mother. He was his own dragon and he would do things differently and without fear.