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The Adventures of Mish

1

For as long as she could remember, Mish had always wanted a dragon. She spent her days walking along the stream and picking up rocks, hoping to find a dragon egg. She had it all planned out. She would keep the egg behind her father's forge for warmth. When it hatched, she would keep it in the stable and make sure it did not set the hay on fire and didn't eat the chickens. And eventually, one glorious day, it would be big enough to ride! They would fly through the sky and have the most wonderful adventures, fighting off pirates and saving princesses.

She searched the woods, looking up into the biggest trees, wondering if dragons laid eggs on the ground, like snakes and other reptiles, or whether they were more like birds, and laid their eggs in nests in the trees. *I think they are like birds*, she decided. *Besides, I don't want to find a next on the ground. What if there was a dragon guarding the nest?* She couldn't take an egg from a mother. The mother probably wouldn't like that and might try to eat her. Better to take an egg from an unguarded nest.

She thought she spied what might be a dragon's nest high up on one of the biggest trees in the forest, so she ran back home, borrowed her mother's hoe, and thrashed her way through the prickly underbrush for a closer look. After several hours of futile effort trying to climb the tree to get a better look, she decided it was just a squirrel's nest.

But there were no dragons' nests in the trees, or on the ground, or in the stream. *Weren't dragons big, and flew through the air?* She thought she should have seen one by now if one were living in the area. And why would a living egg be lying among the stones and water? Mish thought upon this problem. Eventually she asked her mother. *"Where can I get a dragon?"*

But mother only smiled her slow, sad smile, shook her head, and looked away. There was no point in asking father. He would either grin and give some nonsensical answer that would have her talking to cows, or he would scowl and swear and set her to work on some meaningless task to keep her occupied.

Her brother was not much help either. "At the dragon store, dummy!", he said. At first Mish was pleased with this answer, but after consideration, she realized there were no dragon stores around here. Even the nearest village, several hours away, only had one store. She asked but the owner said no, no dragons sold here. *Maybe in the city?* But that was several days away, and besides, didn't a store mean that you had to pay money to buy things? Mish didn't have any money, and even if she did, dragons were probably very expensive.

Her schoolteacher said he didn't know, the other girls just giggled and laughed at the question, and other adults didn't seem to understand the question. "You should be looking for a nice boy instead", they would say.

So she put the problem of the hidden dragons out of her mind.

Years went by, Mish looking the whole time, but she never found her dragon. She wasn't worried. She had her whole life ahead of her, or so she thought, with plenty of time to find her dragon. But she was bored of her life and wished something exciting would happen, like a dragon attacking the town.

Well, maybe not the town. she thought. *Maybe just the gangs of boys that threw stones at her when she walked to and from school.* The boys were mean. They were supposed to be in school but thought it was boring and useless so they spent their time running around throwing stones at everyone.

One time Mish had seen a visiting merchant come to town. He set up his tent at the edge of the street full of shops and laid out his wares, but the boys came and knocked down his tent while he was resting in it. They had laughed and laughed and laughed. Mish didn't see what was funny. When the merchant yelled at them, they threw stones at him. They did this all day and the next day the merchant wasn't there. Mish thought it was very sad that people could be so mean to someone else just because they were from a different town or city and looked different.

So Mish spent her days walking to school, avoiding the boys, and dreaming of dragons. Then one day her mother sat her down and calmly explained she could no longer go by the stream, or walk through the woods, or even walk to school. Not by herself anyway. Mother explained it was "too dangerous". When Mish rationally explained that she had been playing in the woods for years and nothing had happened to her that she couldn't handle, Mother explained that she was "too old".

Mish was confounded. She realized her search for her dragon would be over if she wasn't allowed to go by the stream or the forest. She couldn't take a friend because she didn't have any friends, not unless you counted the silly girls at school, but they wouldn't understand anyways. None of them wanted anything cool - only clothes and jewelry.

"But Dax (her brother) can go wherever he wants!" she protested.

"He's not a girl", said mother, which got Mish even more confused. Seeing this, mother sighed and explained that Mish was of an age where men were starting to pay attention to her, and she couldn't be alone anymore when she went out, or they would make her life difficult. Numbly, Mish listened as her mother destroyed her life, how she would have to stay at home and help her tend the house, and her brother must walk her to school from now on. Oh, and she would have to start wearing her dress.

Mish hated wearing her dress. *How can you climb trees or fight pirates in a dress?* She thought. She remembered her dragon that she would ride someday. She had tried to ride a horse once while wearing a dress, and it was a difficult, embarrassing experience. And so she stupidly blurted out “But how will I ride my dragon!?”

She was nervous, and when Mish got nervous she made stupid jokes, and she laughed and made her words sound funny, but as usual mother took the question seriously. “Mish, there are no dragons around here. They are on an island in the middle of the ocean. They don’t leave their island, people who go there don’t come back, and the ocean is full of pirates.

Mother continued to lecture on how Mish needed to start behaving like a lady, with proper manners, and how it was her duty to find a husband and make babies, but Mish was no longer listening. She knew what she had to do now. She had to get to dragon island. She needed a ship to take her. Mother had said there were pirates there, and pirates had ships. She had to become a pirate!

2

Mish knew she had to go to Valeria, or as everyone called it, The City. There was only one city, just like there was only one Town (N’chata, about three hours away), just like there was one village (Myst, which they lived in the forest on the edge of). *That’s where the pirates would be*, she thought. *They will get me to the island.* She knew boats were somehow involved, but Mish had never seen a boat other than the toy ones Jimmy Stiles floated down the river and for some reason thought they only came attached to people, like pirates, and she had never seen a sea or the ocean, and so she thought the ocean was just a big river - a means of transportation between cities.

So she walked to school and asked her teacher, Mr. Duwey, how to get to the city. Mr. Duwey knew everything. In class he sometimes talked about the city and the things in it - the castle with its princes and knights, the mountain with its great mines, the amazing markets smelling of fruit and flowers.

When Mish asked her question, Mr. Duwey gave her a long, quiet look, and for a second Mish thought she had done something wrong, but then he told her the city was at the end of the west road out of the town, many days walk away. She should not think of going by herself.

Mish of course ignored this advice, and followed the road out of the west edge of town.

She walked and walked and walked. She listened to the sound of the birds, the gurgling of the river off to her left, and admired the openness of the sky around her. She looked down at the ruts in the road made by the many carts that must have passed through here, she looked up at the sky and its magnificent puffy white clouds, and she looked as far into the distance as she could see - and there it was. The mountain. That’s where the city was, and where she was heading.

Mish imagined she could see a great big castle sticking out of the side of the mountain, and houses speckling the base. She imagined the dark spots were the mines. She had never seen a mine, but vaguely understood that it was underground, and that meant big holes in the ground - so those dark spots must be holes and therefore the mines.

While Mish walked, there was nothing much to do except think. *I'm going on adventure, just like the story books in school!* she thought. Mr. Duwey handed out books to students, and the most well-behaved students got the coveted picture books, sometimes even in color. Mish loved the pictures. A handsome prince battling a dragon - a bad dragon of course, not the good kind - and rescuing the beautiful princesses. An evil witch challenging the king. A brave knight on a giant horse, with his magic shield and wizard companion.

And so Mish dreamed as she walked, and when her feet got tired and she became bored from the monotony, she looked up at the mountain in the distance and imagined all the pirates and dragons she would find in the city, and that renewed her energy.

But her thoughts did not behave. A little voice in the back of her head whispered that the mountain seemed awfully far away, but she ignored that voice. It whispered that the dark spots on the mountain might not be mines, but just big holes she might fall into and get trapped and die. That flat part of the mountain might not be a castle, but just a boring cliff. There might not even be a city this way.

But Mish knew she was on an adventure, and in the stories she read at school, no one ever got bored, or lost, or wondered if they were going the wrong way. *Stupid thoughts never happened in stories!* She thought. *They must not be happening to me.*

The dirt road she was on, with its cart tracks in the dried mud, and the field of poppies all around her, bobbed and weaved its way over the gently rolling plains. She walked and walked and walked, seeing no one else besides the birds and the insects. She imagined this road going on forever and ever, past the city, past the mountain, to the end of the earth. She was awoken from her daydream when the sun dipped low on the horizon and Mish realized it was getting chilly.

She had no other clothes than the ones she was wearing. She had no food, no water, and she was starting to get hungry. She was tired and wanted to rest, but there was no home, no bed, no hay to lie in. A forest loomed in the distance. She decided she would make it to the forest and try to find some shelter.

The path led to the edge of the forest and turned, leaving the river and skirting the edge of the forest. It wasn't a proper forest, with massive oaks and thick pine trees to sleep under. It was more of a wood, with trees too skinny to climb and bushes that stopped you from walking wherever you liked.

Mish found a large gorse bush and huddled into a ball below it, her arm her pillow, the thin leaves her blanket. As the sun went down, she drifted off to sleep, only to be awoken by the gentle pitter patter of rain. It was pitch black, and wet, and Mish started feeling very sorry for herself.

Mish was used to sleeping outside - the days in summer were warm, and her one-room hut was crowded and smokey and whenever she could, she slept outside in the hay pile with the goats. It was warm and cozy, and Mish had never had a night where she was wet and afraid.

She was definitely afraid now. She couldn't see - there was no dying embers of a fire to show her where her family lay sleeping - no stars or moons poking through the clearing where they made their home. She couldn't hear the comforting patter of the river nearby, just the ceaseless torrent of rain that soaked her clothes and stuck her shirt to her body, her pants to her legs, the rough wool scratching at every movement, every shiver, every attempt to keep warm.

Did she imagine another shape crouching in a nearby bush? Was a wolf, or something worse, stalking her? Lightning flickered - was that a shape of a man in the depths of the woods? She cried out, but her voice was crushed by a massive boom of thunder that was so loud it took on physical presence, crushing her body into the ground. A wind whipped sideways across her body, freezing her already chilled body. Did the wind say something? Was that a howl? Was a wolf nearby, or did the wind contain some evil magic that raked at her with its ethereal claws, seeking something deep and precious inside her to rip out and claim as its own?

Shaking, crying, freezing and quite miserable, exhaustion and terror guided Mish into unconsciousness under her pitiful gorse bush.

Mish awoke. The ground underneath her had turned to mud and she was curled up in a big muddy ball, shivering and still wet, and wanting to go home. The terrors of the dark night were gone, replaced with exhaustion and a chill that seemed to come from within her bones. Without examining her muddy clothes, without looking for the shadowy shapes of the night really were, without the slightest iota of curiosity, Mish summoned the willpower to pull herself out of the sticky mud, away from the woods with its chattering birds and bugs, and stumbled her way back to the path.

She decided to go home. Her quest, her dream, was a failure. *This sort of thing doesn't happen in the stories.* She thought. A little part of her answered back: *this is a stupid story.*

Mish made it back home safely. Her mother didn't even notice she hadn't been sleeping in the hay pile, and merely scolded her for going out in the rain. Her father, as usual, didn't acknowledge her presence. Her brother was the only one who seemed to notice that something was different about her, and instead of his normal teasing, left her alone for the next day or two.

Mish went to school the next day, ignoring her runny nose, ignoring the usual gossiping girls and stupid boys around her. When the story books were passed out, she didn't take one, not even the one with the colored pictures. All she could think about was her story. Her own stupid story.

Most stories were full of amazing adventure, magic rings, heroic feats of strength and daring. Her story was crying herself to sleep, wet and miserable, scared of shadows. *Is this what being grown-up is like? Realizing that all the stories you knew and wanted are just that - stories. They aren't true. They aren't real. Reality is going to school, doing your chores your father commanded you to do,*

wearing dresses your mother wanted you to wear, and hoping a boy will marry you and take care of you.

Mish forgot about her dreams. She forgot about princesses, she forgot about castles in the mountain, and she forgot about looking for pirates. She went to school. She did her chores. She wore the dress her mother made for her. Sometimes she remembered her lonely night in the rain, and quickly told herself to forget about it. She had been a stupid child. It was a dream. It didn't happen. She never thought about adventure again.

Until she found the magic sword.

3

Mish had accepted she could not walk to school on her own. She had noticed people in the village - men - looking at her, watching her, and she didn't like it. She walked with her brother to school, Mother told her she was growing up, and that she was no longer a child - she was becoming a woman, and had to cover her body to prevent men's lust. Mish didn't like it, but she accepted it - why not? There was no point in fighting. Her dragon dream was gone. Mother said she needed to wear proper shoes, leggings, and socks. Mish hated it but obeyed. Then mother insisted she start wearing dresses.

Mish hated dresses. She had caught boys in the classroom staring at her, and they seemed to do it more when she was in a dress. She didn't like the attention. She wanted to be ignored. To be ignored was to be safe. She didn't understand males, and why she had to change the way she dressed, looked, and moved because of them. And now she was being told she had to wear dresses, and stay at home and do nothing but chores, and cook, and fetch water, and gather sticks, and wash clothes!

So Mish did what any thirteen-year old does when given orders - she ignored them. She wore boys' pants, she ran barefoot in the woods, and slept in the hay with the goats. Above all, she continued to climb trees. She did it because it was difficult to climb trees in dresses, and she unconsciously knew a day would come when she had to wear dresses, and no longer be able to climb trees, and she'd better get climbing while she still could.

She would get to the top, above the highest branches, and stick her head up and stare at the sky, and in those moments of open sky and endless horizons, she remembered her dream, her stupid silly dream about having a dragon. She would stay at the top of the tree and stare at the sun and wait for a dragon to fly overhead. It never did.

One day her mother had enough. Mother had told everyone there that Mish was 'available', whatever that meant, and if they saw Mish walking about by herself, they were to escort her back to her little house in the woods. Mish never let them, of course. Men she had known her whole life suddenly became frightening, and she left them to run back home on her own.

She tried to continue her normal daily routine of walking to school, listening to Mr. Duwey and reading his story books, and ignoring boys. But it became more and more difficult. Other girls her age stopped showing up at school. The boys kept looking at her, and the men kept trying to talk to her. It made her uncomfortable, and finally one day she realized that her mother was probably right. It was time to give up wearing pants. It was time to put on real shoes, and cover her hair, and wear plain dresses. Maybe if she found a boy - or a man - to walk her to school, she could still attend, and learn about history, music, and continue to read the story books.

But she was going to have one last day of freedom. She would have one last day where she would do everything she could without a dress. She would get in a fight with the silly boys in the village. She would throw rocks. She would venture to the other side of the ravine and visit the forest on top of the cliff along the path to town. She would climb the tallest tree in the forest. She would conquer her world - after she did all that, then she could think about becoming a woman.

She knew exactly which tree to conquer. She had seen a massive tree that towered above the forest, beyond the cliff, above the ravine, deep in the forest. She had walked to it once - a mighty tree with reddish, soft bark in long dangling strips, with trunk so big that two of her holding hands could not wrap her hands around it.

She had climbed many trees. The ones with low-hanging branches were the best, for they were the easiest to get up. Pines were prickly at first until you got to the insides which were nothing but branches that made perfect steps up to the top. If all else failed she would take off her shoes, wrap her arms around the tree, and slowly inch her feet up the trunk until she reached the lowest branches.

But this mighty tree, this redwood, was too thick. She wondered what sort of giant could climb this tree. If only her arms were longer. Was there a way to extend her arms? Something that could wrap around either side of the tree... some way to extend her arms... and then an idea hit her.

In her father's forge, hanging on a hook in the corner, were long flat strips of leather. They were used for wrapping handles. The leather was rough, improved grip on tools, and would catch on bark. If she wrapped one around a tree, would it hold? Would she be able to hang on to each end, and dig her feet in, and flick the leather up a few inches, and so hop her way up the tree?

It was a mad idea, crazy, impossible. The lowest branch of the redwood was fifty feet off the ground. If it didn't work, she would fall and hurt herself, maybe die. But if she made it that far, she would rise above the forest, higher than she had ever been, and would see across the world, to the mountain with its city, and maybe even to the sea itself.

So she sneaked into the forge, making sure her father wasn't around, swiftly taking down the largest strip of leather, and stole into the forest with her prize. She walked along the ravine path, wound her way up the cliff, and entered the thick forest above. Deep into the forest she went, relying on a previous glimpse of the mighty redwood to guide her way through the shadows and the patches of sunlight.

She found the redwood in a tangle of roots, its bulk so great it blocked out the sun and prevented anything else but moss from growing. She looked up at the kaleidoscope of colors, pinpoint of sun and bark and branches radiating out above her, the central trunk a line piercing the circle of branches, beckoning her to enter that circle and discover the beauty hidden above its heights.

She wrapped the leather around the tree, and pulled it taut, and jumped up the side of the tree. The leather held. She was two feet above the ground. She dug in her feet with all her might and flicked the leather up the side of the tree and held her breath, waiting for the leather to slip, her feet to fail her, and plummet to the ground. But the leather held again. She was farther up the tree. Mish dug in her feet, gripped the ends of the leather strap with all her might, and jumped. It worked. She did not fall. She was climbing the largest tree in the forest.

Her hands numb from gripping the leather so tightly, her feet aching as they dug into the bark, Mish slowly worked her way up the tree. She daren't look down for fear she would see how high she was and lose her nerve. She made her way up to the first branch, a good fifty feet off the ground, and swung her legs up around it. She wiggled her way on top of the first branch, and then the second, and then the third. *I can do this!*

It took hours. Her hands were sweaty and her clothes stuck to her body. She tasted the salty tang of sweat on her lips. Between catching her breath she would listen to the sounds of the forest, the aggressive chirp of the bluejay, the twittering melody of the thrush, the soft sough of the wind gently shaking the trees around her, and her grunts of effort. As she went higher, flickering beams of light managed to penetrate the dense fir above and sparkle on her face.

Finally she made it to the top. There is a point in any tree where the solid bark gives way to fresh growth, where the branches no longer shoot outward, but instead aim straight up, and the tree starts to bend under one's weight. Mish reached that point and looked around. She was higher than the entire forest. She could see her small village, nestled in the crook of the cliff where the ravine met the stream. She could see the faint smoke rising from her house deep in the woods several miles from the village. She could see the town a long walk along the ravine. She could see the people, faint dots moving among the houses, so small, so insignificant. She imagined throwing a rock that distance, even though she knew the town was a good twenty miles away.

And she could see the mountain. There was that flat edge that might be a castle, the shadows that might be a mine, the fuzzy dots at its base maybe the city. She remembered that walk years ago where she had first seen the mountain and imagined the riches it contained, the pirates at its edges, and her longing for her dragon. Something stirred inside her.

Why had she not made it to the city that time? Why had she given up? From her heights above the forest she could see the muddy road winding its way through the grassy plains. There was the little forest where she had sobbed herself to sleep in the rain. It was so close - she could retrace her steps within a day. Whereas the city - she could see this clearly now - was many days away. Perhaps a week of walking, perhaps two or three. Why did she not realize this her first time? Why did she not bring anything to protect her from the rain, or any food, or most importantly, an understanding that it would be difficult?

In this contemplative silence at the top of the world, she saw her future ahead of her. A future where she walked to the city. It would be long and boring, but there was a path, and she could do it.

Mish thought about her mother, and dresses, and being a woman who did what she was told, who wore shoes that didn't show her toes, and didn't go anywhere without an escort. Walking to the city meant leaving her mother and her brother, behind. She couldn't disappoint her mother, who loved her and fed her and knew what was best for her.

And there almost touching the clouds, leaning back against a fresh growing branch, Mish realized for the first time in her life that she had a choice. She could do what everyone expected of her - to wear dresses, to be polite, to stay home and cook and get married and raise children - or she could choose to do something different. She didn't know where each choice would lead. She might end up homeless and starving. She probably *would* end up homeless and starving. But it was still a choice.

She looked down at the small clearing by the river where she knew her house was. She imagined her mother boiling the water for the evening meal, her father pounding away on his anvil, her brother out in the woods with his sword pretending the logs and bushes were goblins and knights. She looked at the village with Mr. Miller and his silly grin and stupid sayings that made her smile, at Ms. Anton and her store full of sweets. She looked at the town twenty miles away with its shops and horses and the happy people bustling about their business. She saw her school - a one room building where student of all ages showed up when they wanted, and Mr. Duwey, patient Mr. Duwey, who would teach any lesson to any student of any age, picture books and chalkboard always at hand. She thought of home and how Mother would have a meal waiting for her. Mish didn't want to leave any of it.

And then Mish looked the other way, towards the mountain with its hidden city, its promise of castles and kings, princes and pirates, dragons and adventure. A little voice in her head told her it was stupid to want to go there - there was nothing there for you. *You don't know anyone. It's nothing special. Why go through that trouble just to get there and then come back home?*

And while she debated, and pondered, and thought about choices, her gaze drifted to the horizon, the blue horizon - and she suddenly realized she could see the ocean. There at the far edge of the horizon, beyond the fields, beyond the mountain itself, she thought she could see a line of shimmering blue stretching out to the west. She had heard about the mighty ocean, the endless body of water full of islands, mystery, and yes, pirates.

She leaned forward, the redwood below her creaking ominously, looking for pirates, a ship, anything. Was that something moving at the far edge of her perception? A mighty object dipping beyond the horizon? It had to be a dragon. Nothing else could be that big. Maybe it was a big bird. Or maybe she was imagining the whole thing.

Dreams she had forgotten years ago came back to her. Hours went by as Mish imagined herself as a pirate sailing across the seas, soaring on her faithful dragon. She knew she could, if she really wanted to, make it to the city. She would hunt down the pirates, and find the legendary island of the dragons, and make one her pet.

She knew it was a stupid, silly, dream. A part of her mind told her it was so unlikely. *You will spend your whole life chasing this impossible dream. It will never happen. You have a good life here, with your future planned out.*

But she wanted to go to the city and find a dragon. She desired it greater than anything she had ever wanted. But she didn't know how, or what to do. *If only someone would decide for me!* If someone would tell her 'leave everything - go to the city' she would do it. If God would just give her a sign, something, anything that told her she was meant to go to the city, that she was meant to follow her silly dreams, that she was meant for something greater...

But nothing happened. The clouds did not part to reveal a picture of what to do. No voice spoke to her. The wind carried no message other than the usual song of the forest, the swaying of the trees, the smell of pine and running water from the river far below.

And so sadly, silently, Mish decided an adventure to the city wasn't for her. Time to go home. She made her way back down the tree. Looking down she could see the darkness below her. No light shone from this direction - only the deep shadows where the crook of the branches met the solid bulk of the tree.

But there was a glimmer. Just the briefest of shines, a reflection of something in the bark. *No, not in the bark*, she realized as she crawled closer. A hole, a few inches wide, from a split in the tree - an ancient lightning strike had split the tree but the tree grew around it.

She stuck her head close to the hole but saw nothing inside. Her head blocked the sun from revealing the depths of the hole. Should she reach inside? The glimmer she saw could have been from the eyes of an animal, a raccoon or marmot, whose home she was invading. It would bite her, her claws tear her skin, its fangs take off a finger.

Mish almost passed by the hole and continued to work her way down the tree, but a still small voice whispered in her head. *Do it. Don't be sensible. Try it.*

Quickly she stuck her hand in, expecting nothing but empty air. Instead her fingers slammed into something hard, so hard she strained her finger, yet it moved as her hand hit it. An object. Something man-made was in this hole, deep in the tallest tree in the most remote part of the forest, high above the cliff where no one could get at.

Mish reached into the hole again. Her fingers touched something furry. She startled - *was it an animal lying in wait?* - but no, the fur did not move. It was an ordinary animal skin covering an object. She reached in further and discovered there was something long and hard in the hole, wrapped in the animal skin.

She carefully found a grip in the folds of the skin and pulled out - she could already guess from its shape and weight - a sword. The tip poked out from the end. That was the part she had seen, that tiny glimmer that a chance beam of sunlight had hit. She found her hand clasping the pommel. She pulled out the sword.

It wasn't a jeweled sword of legend. There was no gleaming blade or golden hilt. This was a rough sword, barely three feet long, unfinished, unpolished, with its hilt no more than a rough peg of metal. A gladius, if she had known the term.

But unfinished as it was, it was still a sword, a rare object, and solid metal.

Metal! The origins of magic! She thought. *A treasure fairy must have left it up here, as a reward for the most courageous of adventurers.* High up in the branches of the redwood, Mish held the sword up to the sky. At that moment, the clouds above parted and a beam of light shot out and hit the sword full. It glimmered and sparkled in the sun. A gust of wind rose up and the entire tree shook but Mish, holding the sword aloft, felt that she and the sword remained rock solid, immune to the wind and the swaying.

This was her sign she had asked the gods for. This was her sign that she was supposed to go to the city and seek out her dragon. This was her magic sword.

4

People have many thoughts in their head. Usually they are just the overlapping thoughts of a normal, ordinary person that thinks about normal ordinary things. *What should I eat? And That person has purple hair.* These thoughts are tied to whatever the human body is feeling and are just a way of putting into words whatever is going on in the body at that moment.

Then there are the second thoughts. These almost always contradict the first thoughts. Second thoughts were created the first time you were told 'No'. *No you can't have that candy. No you can't run into the road. No, you can't just go around saying mean things to people all the time, no matter how much fun it is.* Second thoughts are a result of civilization - the collective consciousness of lots of people that live together and so came up with a bunch of rules that make sure everything is peaceful. Laws and morality come from second thoughts.

Third thoughts are the observant thoughts. They are the ones that are always paying attention, even when you don't want them to. These are the thoughts that tell you that you left the oven on. In the middle of a car crash, you can always count on your third thoughts to notice what song is playing on the car radio, and as the car flips over you realize you had always thought that word was saying 'nude' but it was really the word 'out'.

Intelligent people tend to have more third thoughts than anyone else, and in the same way it can take a lot of effort to be stupid, third thoughts are always responsible for someone saying the most inappropriate thing possible. If you've ever known someone who was smart, but also really dumb sometimes, you can blame their third thoughts.

But sometimes, and this is incredibly rare, a person can have fourth thoughts. Fourth thoughts obey no rule other than they are always true. They tend to come out in important moments in life, and when you think them you can never un-think them. They aren't even thoughts, really - more of revelations that change the way you think. They don't come from the senses, or observations, or in reaction to other thoughts. You might call them intuition. These are the thoughts that let you know someone is lying, even though there is absolutely no reason or justification for the thought. *I don't want to be a doctor.* Is another good example. Fourth thoughts stretch the limits of what you know. *Something is wrong with me. I need help.*

And when Mish held up that sword, her fourth thoughts spoke. They said, *You will find your dragon.* Mish knew this was a life-changing moment. She had to leave, to follow her dream, or die trying.

Mish headed for the city. She did it right this time - she used her thick wool blanket as a cloak to shield her from the rains. She emptied the straw from her pillowcase and filled it with food - bread, cheese, and pears from a pear tree she had found deep in the woods. And the sword, *my magic sword*, she thought, *even if it doesn't show any sign of magic*, she strapped to her back using that same long strip of leather she had used to discover the sword.

It was summer, meaning her father had left for the city to sell his wares, and would not be around to notice the theft of his leather. Mish wondered if she would run into him. She took her slate and piece of chalk from school and left her mother a note saying she was going to the city and would be back soon. It was a bold move - she had never gone anywhere far on her own, and certainly never without asking mother. She didn't know when she would be back, if ever. She hadn't the courage to say she was leaving to go find a dragon. The only one she told she was leaving was her teacher, Mr. Duwey, who she knew would wonder what had happened if she didn't show up at school after a few days, and would seek her out at her house in the forest.

She felt a little guilty for leaving her mother to herself - but she told herself her mother had her brother, Dax, and she would be just fine by herself.

Mish took the same western path out of town she had taken four years ago. She reached the copse of trees where she had huddled in the night within a few hours. She marveled how what had seemed like an epic trek when she was nine, was, at the age of thirteen, nothing more than a pretty stroll through the fields.

She admired the trees, and the clouds, and the road, but after a while they all looked the same and she began to get bored. There was nothing else to do but walk and think. She thought:

Was this how all journeys felt at first? The first time you travel a path, it seems like it takes forever, that every curve is a portent of some hidden danger, every cluster of trees a massive forest? And then when you travel the same path again, it seems easy? A mere stroll? Why? Is it the unknown sights? Is it the nature of humans to make every new thing seem portentous? Is there fear involved, making any new journey a challenge? Or is it just the nature of traveling, that every trip feels a challenge, when it's really all in one's head?

Mish reached the fork in the road, and instead of being overwhelmed by it, merely looked at which way the cart tracks turned. All the tracks turned to the left, so it made sense the city was to the left. Most of the traffic went to or from the city, after all, and so it only made sense to follow the traffic.

Her first night was spend on the side of the road under a bush, her wool cloak wrapped around her. She awoke stiff, but after a few stretches, refreshed and ready for another day of walking.

She was not alone on the road. Her first sign of life was a soldier, resplendent in his red uniform, on a lovely white and gray palomino horse, galloping past her. Then a couple, an old man and woman on a cart pulled by a mule, passed her in the opposite direction. Uncertain what to do, she glanced up as they passed only to see them looking at her. She exchanged a nervous nod, and they both smiled, seemingly saying that Mish had done the correct thing. Mish wondered *why am I nervous just to acknowledge a couple of strangers?!* Her second thoughts informed her *because you are just a big scared-y frog.* Mish didn't like those thoughts and so stopped thinking about strangers other than she hoped she wouldn't meet any.

On the third day she was overtaken by a small caravan of travelers on several carts and covered wagons. The leader of the group informed her they were part of the usual caravan between some town she had never heard of and the city, and that normally they charge a dollar to join the caravan, but they would let her sit on the end of the cart for free as long as she wasn't a nuisance. Mish was hesitant to join them, but they seemed nice and non-threatening and *I don't have to talk to them, and riding is better than walking,* so she hopped on the cart. A few of the men gave her long looks and her sword strapped to her back, but said nothing.

There was another boy her age, Po, in the caravan, and she spent the first few days giving each other wary glances, then the occasional bit of conversation, then eventually she decided they were friends. Po was traveling from his uncles where he spent the spring and fall – planting and harvest time - helping out on the farm, and returning to his home with his parents in the city in the summer and winter where they ran a bakery. When he found out Mish had no place to stay in the city, he invited Mish to stay at his house. “Maybe you can help out at our bakery.”, he said.

The trip to the city took thirteen days. The plains turned into farms, the farms turned into mansions, the mansions turned into buildings and shops, and then somewhere along the way, Mish found herself in the city. She had thought there would be a big sign saying ‘you are now entering the city’, or guards, or a wall with a gate but no, there was just buildings and houses, not very different than the town back home, just a lot more of them.

Mish had thought it would be easy to find a pirate and ask him if he had seen any dragons, but when she told this plan to Po, he gave her a funny look and told her that pirates were bad people to avoid. *Yes, they may be bad,* thought Mish, *but why should I be afraid of them? They have no reason to hurt me.* Po seemed to think pirates were some sort of creature separate from the rest of humanity, who caused pain and suffering for no reason. *That's silly,* thought Mish. *Everybody does things for a reason, even pirates.*

To her surprise, most people seemed to think the same as Po. Pirates were bad, period, and anyone who asked about pirates must be bad too. One thing Mish noticed was that most people didn't appear to think about her question. Their answers were too fast. If they were really thinking about how to find pirates, they would take a second or two to think about their answers.

Mish asked everyone she passed on the street if they knew where the pirates or dragons were, and learned to ignore the people that answered too fast. Those fast answers were usually negative, or

silly as if she had told a joke. They told her that pirates were bad, or to stop looking for them, or that she was doing something wrong. She wondered what caused people to answer without thinking. *Did they think they were so smart that their first thoughts must be correct? Did they like giving wrong answers? Or were people just that stupid?*

The answers that seemed sensible were not very encouraging. They told her there were no pirates in the city, that she had to go to different city, or to get on a ship and sail to the island of Tuga, or most ominously, that the pirates would find her. *Pirates are a very secretive bunch!* She thought.

Mish wandered the city, east to west, north to south. It took an entire day of walking just to get through the dense part of the city, where the buildings and shops and apartments were all scrunched together, people and markets and sounds and smells everywhere.

Her favorite part of the city was the river. It was the same river that went by her little village, except now it was a wide body of water with a swift current down the middle that could only be crossed by a bridge. There were paths along the river for people to walk, and people would walk there and admire the water. There were many boats tied to posts, houseboats, where people lived. Mish wondered what it would be like to live in one of those little bobbing huts, constantly moving up and down all day and night.

One day Mish decided to walk the river as far as she could, just to see what she might find. When the boats stopped appearing on the edge, past the boats and houses and where the city started to turn into plains and farms, she saw it. The pirate ship.

It was magnificent, with mighty sails and double masts, cannon ports and a sleek shape so different than the usual flat barges on the river. Pirate flags adorned every inch of the mast – images of skulls and bones and swords. To her delight the colors were not black and white, but bright reds and yellows and blues. *These must be friendly pirates!* Mish thought.

But as she approached she realized it wasn't a real ship at all. She had seen proper ships, and the sails were thick and there were ropes everywhere. Here the sails were thin cloth, and no ropes and pulleys to raise or lower it. The sides of the ship were not thick timber, but a hodgepodge of planks and beams and flimsy pieces of wood covering every inch in the general shape of a pirate ship. The most disappointing moment came when she realized the holes in the ship were painted squares of black with fake wicker cannon nozzles glued on.

The entire pirate ship was fake - a bunch of random pieces of wood laying on top of a barge in the shape of a pirate ship. *The masts were probably hollow,* her second thoughts whispered at her.

Stopping at the gangplank, Mish took a closer look at the pirate ship on a barge. Amid the colorful flags and streaky was a banner stretched out between the two masts saying 'The pirate princess and the dragon'. *This must be some sort of theatre,* she thought.

Mish had seen theater before - there was an assortment of performers and theaters in the town back home. Even her small village of Myst was occasionally graced by a group of jugglers, musicians and

performers who would act out some play about distant lands and kings and events Mish had never heard of.

Strangely, Mish felt relieved that it wasn't a real pirate ship. *Why are you relieved?* Her third thoughts whispered at her. *Don't you want to find real pirates?* As usual, Mish ignored these annoying, unhelpful thoughts.

She tried to be positive. *Maybe there are real pirates aboard! Or maybe they can tell me about real pirates. Or maybe they know something. Pretend pirates are better than no pirates,* she reasoned.

She clambered up the gang plank to the stairs leading down. The hatch was open and she yelled a tentative "Hello?" downward. She listened and thought she heard whispered voices in the darkness below - *was that light from a flickering candle?* - but after standing very still and listening very hard, she decided she had imagined it. No one was home.

Mish sighed, decided she would have to come back some other day, and turned back towards the gangplank to leave. But there, standing behind her, directly between her and the way off the ship, was the largest man she had ever seen, bald, dressed all in black, a gigantic sword strapped to his back, looking down at her with menace in his eyes. Mish had found her pirate, and he wasn't friendly.

5

Mish jumped back, grabbed the sword off her back and held it in front of her. *Where did he come from?!* The big man also pulled his sword from his back and held it in front of him, in a two-handed grip just like Mish's. Mish stepped sideways towards the gangplank. The big man mirrored her, blocking her way. Mish stepped backwards, towards the river. The big man again copied her - two steps, at the same speed as Mish.

Mish raised her sword and opened her mouth as if to scream. The big man hefted his humongous sword over his head and opened his mouth too.

Mish's first thoughts were screaming *I'm going to die!* Her second thoughts told her to run and jump over the side of the boat into the river, sword and all. But her third thoughts, the thoughts that are always paying attention and watching everything said, *Wait a second. That sword is bigger than he is, at least seven feet long! And he just lifted it above his head as if it were hollow wood!* Mish paused and looked at the sword. It was so big it was almost comical. The blade was a foot wide. *No sword is that big - It can't be a real sword! And the man, he's not moving, he's not attacking, he's not saying anything - he's just copying me. Like a game!*

A voice rang out from the stairs - 'Bain, Are you scaring people again?' Mish turned to see a beautiful redheaded girl wearing a huge puffy dress and what appeared to be a silver crown on her head emerge from below-deck, her face trying to suppress a smile. Mish turned back to the big man - Bain seemed to be his name - just in time to see him put away his sword. A wave of relief flooded through Mish. *He was just teasing me!*

The girl spoke again. "Don't worry, he won't hurt you. He just thinks everyone has to be scared of him, and does his best to make sure they are. Are you here for auditions?"

Mish hurriedly put away her sword - her tiny, tiny sword compared to Bain's huge sword. "Auditions?" She said. "No.. what are those?"

"Auditions? They're, you know, trying out for the play." the girl said. "If you're not here for auditions, then why are you here?"

Mish responded "I just was walking along the river, and I just wanted to see how far I could go.. where am I?"

But before the girl could open her mouth, a voice bellowed from under Mish's feet. "An excellent question! Ahoy there! Welcome to The Lucky Pirate! Allow me to introduce myself!" And with those words a head wearing a bandanna and several gold teeth popped out of the trap door just behind Bain.

So that's where Bain came from. Thought Mish. There was a trap door behind me!

The man emerged from the trap door. He was clearly a pirate. Tattered colorful clothes hung around him. His tanned, weathered face spoke of many days under the sun, surrounded by salty spray. A hip flask hung by his side by a thick rope that served as a belt. He seemed to be missing a hand - a rusty hook was in its place.

"Captain Costa's me name! Welcome aboard me ship! I like to be the first to greet people, especially a pretty lady like yourself, but Bain and Gillian beat me to it!"

Mish's thoughts swirled as she put the pieces together. *Bain? Gillian? Auditions? A giant banner talking about pirates and dragons? A pretty lady? Me?* Other pirates started appearing from the stairs and the trap door.

"Is this a theatre? And you are ... actors?" Mish asked. Smiles broke out on everyone's faces. The redhead who looked like a princess took off her crown and waved it about like it was made of wood. Captain Costa, to Mish's delight, took off his hook to reveal a perfectly intact hand somehow hidden inside it.

"Yup!" Said captain Costa, his pirate drawl suddenly gone. He waved his arms theatrically in the air and gave a magnificent bow. "Welcome again to The Lucky Pirate! The big man is Bain.. The beautiful princess is Gillian.. And here is the crew!"

Almost a dozen people made their way onto the ship. "We were in the middle of trying on costumes" Gillian explained.

Mish started to explain her story, how she was looking for pirates to sail her to the island of the dragons, so she could get a dragon pet, but aware of how silly it sounded, she broke off her story. They all just stared at her, saying nothing.

“Do you know any pirates?” Mish asked to the silent crowd. “Real pirates?” The entire company looked at each other then shook their head. Trying to make a joke out of her foolishness, Mish asked Gillian “And do you know any princesses?” Gillian burst out laughing. “Not any more!” she said. When Mish looked confused Gillian just winked, and Mish thought that maybe she had, at one point, known some princesses in her life.

“And dragons? Do you know anything about dragons?” She asked everybody. Again there was that long stare from every member of the company, and they looked at each other again, and again shook their heads.

Captain Costa broke the silence. “Ho ho, dragons? Of course not! How would we know anything about dragons? We only know about pretend dragons, on the stage!” The company laughed along with him.

He’s lying, said Mish’s thoughts. His silly pirate voice came back when he said that! And everyone else seemed to know something, too. They were looking around because they didn’t know if they should say anything. But Mish didn’t know what to make of this, and just politely nodded and smiled.

Mish was introduced to each of the people, each one wearing a colorful costume, each one with a funny retort or action. It was a colorful group of characters, all a little weird, but all of them happy. They acted out scenes from the play for her, with lots of interruptions and other people shoving people out of the way with cries of “No no no, that’s not how it goes! Let me show you!”

Mish found herself laughing and jumping around with the rest of the crew, getting more and more excited to discover, if not real pirates, something better - people that welcomed her. As the sun dipped lower in the sky Mish explained that she had to start walking back to the city before it got dark.

Several crew members told her to come back and audition for a part in their upcoming play. “What part?” She asked. “We don’t know!” they said. “What would I do?” She said. “Who cares! Just be a part of it!” They said. Apparently they made up their parts as they went along. The general plot was written by Gillian and the Captain, and they could write her in. Mish thought this was a fantastic idea but didn’t want to seem too excited and said she would think about it.

Gillian especially begged her to return. “It’s all a bunch of men here, and no one my own age” she said. “They are nice, and keep me safe, but I sometimes want a girl my own age to talk to.” Mish thought that sounded very nice, and said she would return as soon as possible, and made her way back along the river, back to the bakery where Po let her sleep in a corner, skipping and humming to whatever song those silly players had been singing, her magic sword a comforting weight on her back.

6

Mish came back the very next day, and the day after, and the day after that. Everyone welcomed her with cheerful smiles. She had never met a group of people so full of energy, so alive!

The captain especially went out of his way to talk to her about her quest for pirates and dragons. He had heard about the legendary dragons on their Isle in the middle of the ocean, and excited Mish with his stories.

“Aye, the dragons can talk and make things, magical things that they trade to visitors - if they don’t eat them first!” the captain chortled. The more he talked, the more Mish resolved to find a ship to take her to the Isle of Dragons immediately.

Except, Mish realized, there was a problem. It wasn’t the problem of no ship – Mish never for a second doubted that she would find one. It was the problem of making friends. She was spending all her time at the theatre she wasn’t looking for her dragon. She realized she had never made friends back home – not really. The people she thought were her friends were actually petty and selfish and stupid. *Everyone here is kind of nice*, She thought. *Why was I ever afraid to come here?* And so Mish hung out with her new friends, and wondered how they could be so nice, so alive, so unafraid of anyone or anything or where their next meal was coming from.

Gillian especially was becoming a good friend. Gillian would see her and let out a squeal of delight, then come and hook her arms through Mish’s and spirit her away to some dark corner inside the ship, or along the river path, or even a walk into the city.

Mish kept putting off the day when she would find a ship and leave. Some days she grew sad inside, sad that she would lose her friends. *Life isn’t fair! I shouldn’t have to choose between my dreams and my friends! Why am I even looking for a stupid dragon, anyways? I’m happy here!* So she stayed in the city, worked in the bakery, and had fun drinking and dancing and acting with her new theatre friends.

The crew acted out scenes for her, and Mish delighted in her role as the imaginary audience for these fake pirates. One day while watching from the shore, where the audience would be, Gillian started asking “Where is my handmaiden?” which wasn’t part of the play at all. To Mish’s surprise the entire cast took up the call. They pretended to ‘discover’ Mish sitting at the shore and invited her to come on board and be part of the play. True to their word, they had written Mish into the play. She would play the part of the princess’ servant and bodyguard.

“It’s sort of what you are in real life” said the captain. “You’re always following Gillian around, and with that silly sword on your back and fierce look in your eye, you look like you’re about to attack anyone who comes near her”. “No, that’s Bain’s job!” Gillian replied, and there were laughs all around as everyone welcomed her to the show.

Mish had never known such happiness. Everyone genuinely *enjoyed* helping each other! *Well, except Bain.* She thought. Bain never said anything or even smiled. As far as Mish could tell, his only role in the play was to pretend to be a grumpy yet diligent guard - except he couldn't stop acting. He always wore the same black outfit, complete with gigantic pretend sword on his back that skimmed the floor as he walked, and he never smiled or seemed to enjoy himself. Whether they were performing or not, Bain just stood in the background and watched everyone and everything, a silent, hulking brute in the corner. Mish normally ignored people who didn't talk to her, especially a big scary looking man like Bain, but Bain was especially hard to ignore, mainly because he followed her everywhere.

Well, it wasn't her, Mish realized. *He follows Gillian. And I follow Gillian, so it just seems like Bain is following me.* It made her notice that Bain followed Gillian a lot.

Even when Gillian and Mish went on a walk together into the city, Bain followed. He kept a respectful distance away. Mish asked Gillian about it. "He just thinks he has to keep me safe, since I'm a beautiful, young girl!" Gillian said with that mischievous smile that made Mish think there was some sort of private joke between her and Bain. But Gillian wasn't worried, and everyone else just sort of ignored Bain, so Mish did the same. Eventually she barely noticed Bain's presence.

The upcoming play occupied everyone's time. The plot was that Gillian, the princess, would be kidnapped by an evil dragon, and rescued by the heroic pirate captain, played by Captain Costa. That was why Gillian was wearing a crown when Mish first met her, and Costa was dressed as a pirate with a hook for a hand. Gillian would be kidnapped, and Costa would rescue her.

Mish protested mightily when she found out about this plot. "Dragons can't be the bad guy!" She exclaimed. "It should be the pirate who kidnaps the princess, and the dragon who rescues her!" *Ridden by a young girl named Mish,* Mish added to herself. The crew seemed to like this idea, and the dragon almost become the hero of the story, but when Captain Costa heard he immediately overruled it. "I'm the hero!" he boasted. "No dragon will best me!" And so the dragon remained the kidnapper, and the pirates the heroes.

The climax of the play was a action-packed moment where Gillian appeared to be yanked in the air by the dragon. A system of pulleys and thin wires had been rigged up between the masts to pull Gillian upward. Bain, with his strength and standing in the shadow of the mast, would pull the hidden rope to send Gillian flying into the air up behind the banner. When she flew upward, a 'dragon' (made of red and yellow silk and sticks) flew across her path, and the effect was Gillian had vanished in mid-air, taken by the dragon.

"I want to fly, I want to fly!" said Mish, as she begged to be hooked up and pulled into the air. But Bain shook his head 'no' and Gillian said, "It won't work for you." The captain saw her pouting and snapped "It's not a toy," and that was the end of that. Mish resigned herself to playing the role of handmaiden. She told herself she wasn't good enough to play the part of the princess. *But someday I'll fly,* she thought. *When I get my dragon, I'll fly.*

The day of the performance arrived. Posters were printed and the crew went around the city, pasting them on every pole, every wall, and outside every pub. The crew unmoored the ship and floated into the heart of the city. The people who went to sleep in the houseboats tied to the shore in prime location in the middle of the city found themselves docked to a different part of the shore,

pushed to the side in the night as The Lucky Pirate commandeered a spot on the shore, right in front of a large intersection full of shops and traffic.

Before their first performance started, the crowd was quite large, partly because the owners of the boats had been yelling at the ship all day. Some policemen showed up and told them they had to move their boat. "You don't have a permit to dock here!" they said. The crew just laughed and turned it into an improvised comedy routine as people showed up just to see what all the commotion was about. Everybody loves a good conflict, at least watching one. Mish secretly delighted in the guilty feeling she felt in not obeying the police. When she asked Gillian "Aren't we going to get in trouble?" Gillian replied, "No, we do this every year. If they try to move us, Bain just comes out and waves his sword around and they leave us alone."

"Can't they see it's a prop sword?" Mish asked, but Gillian just smiled that mischievous smile and said nothing.

The show went magnificently. Everyone oohed and aaahed when the silk dragon appeared and Gillian shot into the air. Costa came out with his magic sword, defeated the dragon, and the two got married to cheers from the crowd. The cast and crew proceeded down the gangplank into audience, holding out their hats and asking for money. Many people didn't pay, sometimes even leaving early so they wouldn't have to feel guilty. Mish thought this was horribly rotten, but then her pesky second thoughts chimed in with *Would you pay if you didn't have to?* Thinking any more about it made her head hurt and in the end Mish was just grateful she didn't have to worry about it.

They performed every day for several weeks, but eventually the crowds were getting smaller, and less and less people were paying, so the captain announced the next performance would be their last. They went around and put up new posters saying LAST DAY! and MUST SEE! It seemed to work, for the evening of their final performance the crowd was the biggest ever.

The excitement on the ship was palatable. Mish kept poking her head out of the trap door to gape at the crowd. Food sellers were shouting their way through the crowd about salted bread and stuffed jellies and peppered cracked corn. Woodcutters sold miniature figurines of the ship, of the dragon, even Gillian herself with her pretty dress and a tiny wooden crown. Tailors sold costumes that looked like each of the characters. Some people were even dressed in them. Mish saw several Bain lookalikes, a giant paper sword attached to their back.

The sun started setting in the sky, a giant red orb glowing above the sea behind the ship. Framed between the two towering cliffs that separated the bay from the ocean, The Lucky Pirates began their final performance. The cannon boomed (they did have some real cannons), a mighty CRACK echoing across the bay and its cliffs. The crowd roared in excitement, then hushed as Captain Costa announced the show, introduced his plucky crew, and explained their role as robbers and looters of the rich to give to the poor. Many in the crowd knew the story and its characters by now, and Gillian got a cheer as she stepped onto the stage, her silver tiara sparkling in the setting sun. *I wish they'd cheer like that for me*, Mish thought.

The dragon was introduced, its silk and paper flapping mightily as it went back and forth, back and forth on the wires between the masts. But instead of the usual good natured 'Booo's from the audience, someone actually screamed! *How over-dramatic they are today*. Mish thought. But then she looked at the audience. Many of them were pointing at something behind the ship.

Mish looked behind her and saw that the sun was turning black. A large black dot was already covering much of the sun, and was growing, growing, growing. Mish's first thoughts were one of curiosity. *What is that?* Her second thoughts were telling her to run. But her third thoughts pointed out *Of course the sun isn't turning black. It's just something in front of the sun.*

Mish walked to the side and saw that there was indeed something in the sky that was blocking the sun. It was swirling now, black and blue and purple and darkness, and seemed to suck the eye towards it. It floated above the middle of the bay, and grew.

"Gillian!" Bain shouted. Mish looked at Bain, then at Gillian. She didn't know which surprised her more, the sudden emergence of something obviously magical behind the ship, or Bain speaking. She had never heard him speak.

Bain shouted something more, but it was drowned out by a mighty gasp from the crowd. Mish turned her gaze back towards the portal - for it was indeed a portal - now easily a hundred feet across, just in time to see what appeared to be a massive dragon emerge from it.

7

The dragon was a deep, deep green, so deep it was almost black. It undulated along the water as it flew, up and down, up and down, straight at the ship, straight at where Mish was standing. Without thinking she yanked her sword from her back, and she saw out of the corner of her eye that Bain had done the same. Her second thoughts screamed *Both your swords are useless!* but before Mish could tell herself to shut up, she realized the dragon adjusted its course and came directly at the ship.

With a mighty roar it flew directly towards them. The crowd scattered. Everyone on the ship sprinted over the gangplank to shore or dived overboard. Everyone except Bain and Gillian. Bain, *Gods almighty!*, was walking **towards** the dragon!

Mish froze, not wanting to leave Gillian. "What are you doing!" Gillian hissed. "Get out of here!" She said and pushed Mish. Mish, to her great annoyance, mumbled "But Bain isn't running..." Gillian seemed to read her mind and glanced at Bain, and said "For God's sake, you're not Bain! And no, his sword isn't a prop!"

Before Mish could puzzle out the significance of those words, Bain let out a mighty roar, sprinted towards the dragon, and, sword raised over his head, leapt over the edge. But instead of sailing the expected ten or so feet only to plop into the water, the entire ship lurched as Bain pushed off it and *flew*. He soared straight at the dragon, which was now a mere fifty feet from the ship and closing fast.

The dragon saw him coming and opened its mouth wide enough to swallow both Bain and sword. Bain merely roared and raised his mighty sword high over his head. Mish watched him as, mid-flight, he brought his sword up and back, winding up to deliver a mighty blow.

The dragon, sensing that normal people do not scream defiance as they were about to be eaten, or perhaps seeing the sword, changed tactics. It closed its mouth and lowered its head to charge through Bain.

Bain and the dragon collided. Bain swung his sword. He connected directly with the top of the dragon's scaly head. Mish saw a flash of green ripple down the length of the dragon and heard the crash of metal on scale. *It's dead! He killed it!* Mish thought. Her second thoughts, always the pessimist, thought *"but even if he killed it, it's going to hit Bain and keep going and crash into the ship, and crush us!"*

Bain, a tiny figure compared to the dragon's impossible bulk, should indeed have been carried away by the momentum of the dragon. But instead it was the dragon who went crashing down into the bay. No, not crashing down - **hit** down. Bain's gigantic sword had been like a baseball bat hitting a ball, where the dragon was the ball.

The force was stupendous. Mish had never seen anything that big change direction that fast, faster than gravity, faster than the fastest bird. And all that force went straight downward. The spray of water that flew into the air from the impact of the dragon rose up like a fountain around Bain, a spear of water leaping fifty feet in the air to splash Bain.

Bain seemed to hover in the air. The force of his blow had canceled out any momentum, leaving the impression of weightlessness. For a second, for two seconds, he seemed to float above the water. Then gravity took over and he fell down, down, slowly at first, then faster as he hit the water and vanished into the exact spot the dragon had disappeared.

8

The roar of the dragon's crash washed over them. It was followed by a mighty wave from the impact of the dragon hitting the water, literally washing over Mish and Gillian and soaking them. Silence followed. The roar of the dragon, and Bain's answering roar, echoed through her mind.

Mish saw Gillian leave her side and run to the edge of the ship, looking at the water where Bain had disappeared. Mish found herself saying "My. Gods." Her stupid second thoughts were thankfully quiet, but her third thoughts whispered *"Who are you talking to?"* Sound returned, and Mish could hear the roar of the crowd behind her. Relieved-looking heads popped out of hatches and looked around.

The captain appeared at her side and together they walked to Gillian. "Was that a, a.. dragon?" Mish asked, still not able to completely wrap her mind around what had just happened. "Looks that way." said the captain. The tone of his voice made her look at him. He was not looking out to the water like everyone else, but was looking at Gillian. Gillian, seemingly aware of some unspoken question, said in a sad voice, "He's found me."

"Looks that way", repeated the captain. "Is Bain...?"

"He'll be fine" Gillian answered. "It takes more than that to kill him. See? There he is."

Mish stepped next to Gillian and looked and, yes indeed, there was Bain, popping out of the water. There was no sign of the dragon.

Bain seemed to be, just as Gillian said, completely safe. His arms and legs were treading water, the huge sword still in his hand. But he was not looking to swim back to shore - he was looking down at the water beneath him.

There was a pause as Mish, Gillian, and the captain contemplated what Bain must be thinking. *Where is the dragon?* "It must be dead." Gillian said. "Not even a dragon could survive that.", but Mish heard the hesitation in her voice. Mish thought she heard the captain whisper, "That's no dragon".

And with those words the dragon that wasn't a dragon roared up from the sea.

Its head was not cleaved in two. Bain's hit had not killed it. Except now it was glowing green. A yellow flash of light pulsed down its body. Several times a second the light zipped down its body, and Mish had the feeling it was angry. Its roar had an extra quality to it, a higher-pitched feel of rage.

It was quite obviously whole, but Bain had damaged it. Yellow sparks spewed from the top of the dragon's head from a gash where Bain's sword had connected with it. If this affected it, it showed no sign. It turned and soared, again, directly at the ship.

"Whatever it is" said Gillian, "it's angry." The three of them turned to run towards the gangplank, but they had wasted too much time realizing the dragon was still after them. It was now a mere twenty yards behind them, charging in at head height. Mish glanced back at it to see it open its huge mouth with rows of black obsidian teeth, and two huge red eyes that her third thoughts told her was unlike any -

"We won't make it!" yelled Mish, and to her great surprise, Gillian said calmly "Yes, you will." and flew into the air.

The captain jumped on Mish and threw them both to the deck as the dragon whooshed over their head. As she fell to the deck she thought *It ate Gillian! It grabbed her in its mouth and that's why she flew away!* But no, the dragon roared past and they looked up and saw Gillian calmly floating in the air, a faint spray of sparks from the dragon's head silhouetting her body.

The captain immediately pulled himself and Mish to their feet and they ran down the gangplank to shore. He pushed and pulled at Mish, but Mish was staring at Gillian hovering in midair in the center of the ship. *Awesome!* Said Mish's first, second and third thoughts. *She used the wires to fly into the air!*

And in this moment, when Mish looked up to Gillian suspended by wires, floating in the air, Mish's fourth thoughts spoke. *She's not using any wires.* They said. Fourth thoughts are always true.

Her third thoughts, never to be outdone, pointed out that that's impossible. *Bane had just pulled on the wire.. while floating out at sea!* Her second thoughts told her she should go to Gillian, and her first thoughts screamed *DRAGON! DRAGON!*

The dragon was indeed coming back. It looked like a giant dark snake or electric eel swimming through the sky, fast and fierce and deadly. Its approach this time was slower, more calculated, as if determined not to miss again. Gillian was still floating in the air. Mish could see that she wanted down, but couldn't.

Bain leaped from the water, one mighty hand grabbing the railing and throwing himself on deck. Again, the dragon flew at Gillian. Again, Bain let out a mighty roar and, sword wound up behind him, launched himself at the dragon. Again the dragon lowered its head and charged at Bain. Again Bain unleashed a mighty swing at the dragon's head.

And missed.

The dragon swerved faster than Mish could see, and Bain's stroke went wide. His momentum continued, and he collided with the side of the dragon. With one mighty hand, he found some leverage or handhold or maybe he just had spider powers where he could stick to anything. Bain grabbed the side of the dragon.

The dragon's path to Gillian was only slightly delayed. It swerved back on course towards Gillian. Gillian was drifting downward, down towards the deck, but slowly, oh so slowly. She wouldn't reach the deck before the dragon swallowed her.

Mish had a clear view at the foot of the gangplank. There was Gillian floating in the air, still dressed in her princess outfit, her tiara somehow still attached to her head. The twin masts of the ship on either side of her, framing her like a massive picture. Directly behind her was the dragon, its eyes gleaming with menace and intelligence its mouth now opening wide, wider, to swallow Gillian. And behind them both, the setting sun, its orange given way to fiery, burning red.

The dragon was a mere twenty feet away. Ten feet away. The pulses flashing down its length seemed to speed up, as if in excitement, as in anticipation for its kill. It opened its mouth. *She's dead!* thought Mish.

Time seemed to slow down. And then through the fountain of glowing sparks, Mish saw Bain appear above the head of the dragon. As if in slow motion, he raised the entire bulk of his impressive body up in the air. His sword, his mighty sword longer than himself, raised even higher. Back, back, back, Bain pulled the sword. Closer, closer, closer came the dragon towards Gillian.

Mish could see the calculation in Bain's eyes. He had to swing the sword before the dragon reached Gillian. He only had time to swing downward, but the force of the blow would knock the dragon into the ship. The ship would be destroyed, but Gillian would be safe. He would take every millisecond between that moment to wind up the sword as much as possible, to deliver what would surely be a death stroke.

Even as the dragon started to close its jaws to snatch Gillian out of the air, Bain swung the sword. It was a mighty blow, its speed so fast Mish saw the air sizzle around the blade, vaporized by the friction of metal on air. Bain's first blow, the blow that had knocked the dragon into the sea, was a weakling's kiss compared to this blow.

The dragon's flashes had reached a speed where they were almost a solid glow illuminating, enveloping the dragon. Bain, standing directly in the shower of sparks, a mighty warrior immune to sparks, to water, to whatever forces that should have blown him off the dragon, struck. The massive sword, with blade eight feet long and a foot wide - *It's not a prop*, Mish thought - connected directly between the dragon's eyes.

The sword shattered.

There was a flash of light as the green glow surrounding the dragon discharged. Bain, shock on his face, went up into the air, the pieces of his sword tumbling around him. The dragon's course did not change. Its jaws snapped shut on Gillian.

So close Mish could have touched it, the dragon passed over her head. Above the now empty intersection it turned upwards, still undulating, as if running from the ground itself. Now above the ship, above its towering masts, higher than even Bain could jump, it turned towards the purple and black portal that remained hovering over the middle of the sea.

Bain was suddenly besides her. *Hadn't she just heard him splash into the sea seconds ago?* Mish's sword, her puny, blunt sword, was yanked out of her grasp. Before Mish could fully turn to look at Bain, he was climbing - no, not climbing. He was *throwing* himself up the mast with inhuman speed. *Magic.* Mish thought.

The dragon was almost to the portal. Bain reached the top of the mast, even above the crows next, and seemingly without stopping, launched himself into the sky at the dragon.

But Mish saw he wouldn't make it. Even with the tremendous speed of his jump, the dragon was too far away. Bain reached the apex of his jump, still a good twenty feet behind the tail of the dragon. She saw his hand reach out, futilely grasping at the air.

She saw him swing the sword futilely. But there was no hope of hitting the dragon. It was a futile, despairing effort, a last hope of a desperate champion who had failed his princess.

Then Mish heard, its echo booming off the cliffs around her: "HEY UGLY!" The dragon turned its head. Mish saw the glimmer of light between Bain and the dragon.

Bain had not futilely swung her sword at the dragon. He had thrown it. Right at the dragon's eye.

Mish's sword, her magic sword, perfectly thrown by a man with superhuman strength, buried itself up to the hilt into the eye of the dragon.

No cry of pain was heard as the dragon's mouth had already entered the portal. It flew silently into the portal. The portal gave a mighty swirl of color and vanished. The dragon was gone, Gillian with it.

9

Gillian was gone. Eaten by the dragon. Dead.

Mish did not resist as captain led her below-decks. In the dark hold of the ship, the crew gathered. Everyone seemed in shock - numb silent, saying nothing. Except Bain.

"She's not dead". said Bain. "The king has her. I'm going to get her back. And you're going to help me."

Bain explained to her that Gillian was a real princess, the daughter of one of the kings of the seven kingdoms, and she was being forced to marry the king of one of the other seven kingdoms. But on the voyage to the other kingdom, a storm had risen and destroyed the ship. Gillian had used the opportunity to escape using her magic ring to let her fly above the storm. She and Bain - her bodyguard - had been rescued by captain Costa and she had been a member of its crew ever since. Captain Costa and the crew had gone into hiding in the city - sailing their ship as far inland as they were able, disguising it and themselves, and becoming actors.

The ship they were on, The Lucky Pirate, was not a barge at all, but a pirate ship that had been disguised to look like a slow-moving barge. They had put boards up to turn the sleek trim of the boat into a boxy, ungainly shape. The sails and ropes had been taken down, parts of the mast had been sheared off to make it look like a couple of simple poles, and the greatest trick of all - to act and dress like pirates. Not like real pirates - but by how people *thought* pirates acted. They went around saying 'aaarr' as much as possible, waved flimsy swords around, dressed in colorful rags, and everyone remembered them as a bunch of bad actors living on a barge.

Hours went by in the hold. Everyone debated what they should do next. At the end of the discussion, everyone agreed "We will get her back!" And with that, they set sail. The crew repaired the mast, put back the sails, and sent Mish out to buy provisions. She went to her bakery to buy bread - not the soft fresh bread but the large salted rolls that would last on a sea voyage. Strings of onions, sausages, huge chunks of cheese, limes, a flock of chickens - all were purchased and stored in the galley. With the ship fully provisioned, they set sail.

As the ship sailed out of the bay into the ocean, Mish went up to the captain who was leaning on the rail, admiring the scenery.

"So where are we going?" Mish asked Costa.

"We are going to one of other kingdoms" He replied. "But which one, that's a big trickier. Either her father, the king of Eonexera, will have her, or her to-be-husband, the king of Uhath, took her. Bain reckons her father will have her."

"Was the dragon his?"

"The dragon, ah, that's a puzzler and no mistake! Bain had never seen that dragon before."

"I didn't know dragons could appear out of portals like that"

"They can't." said Costa. "Not normal dragons, anyway. I've heard rumors, but.."

Costa looked up at the sky in thought, as if to check if there was a dragon overhead that would tell him the answers. "It had some sort of magic that protected it. It broke Bain's sword."

Mish pondered this new information. She had always thought of dragons as, well, big animals that talked. *A magic dragon?*

"But how will we get Gillian back?" She asked. "If a magic dragon is guarding her.."

Costa smiled, though there was no humor in it. "We are headed to the trading island of Tuga. We'll get some answers there"

At that point a large wave broke against the side of the ship, its spray drenching both Mish and Costa. Mish leapt back with a squeal, but Costa held his ground, unfazed.

As they sailed to Tuga, Mish began to be aware of a strange sort of sensation. A ball of heat was growing behind her eyes. It felt like a headache except there was no pain. The ball of heat spread - down her neck, down her chest, and stopped inside of her stomach. Mish realized she felt quite ill. She wanted to throw up but couldn't. Every act of moving caused that ball of heat inside her stomach to stab her from the inside. Even looking around - moving her eyes - caused that strange sort of pain. Mish was seasick.

The crew comforted her by telling her what she was feeling was completely normal for someone who had never spent any time at sea, and that it would pass in a few days when her body got used to the sensation of the boat bobbing up and down, back and forth, side to side.

This, of course, was of no help to Mish, who just felt more and more miserable with every roll of the ship. The feeling didn't let up. After a few hours Mish thought she had never felt more sick in her entire life. Nothing seemed to help. She went and stood in the front of the boat where the cool air and salt spray hit her. She tried hanging in a hammock in the rigging, so that her feet might get off the deck of the ship. She tried throwing up but her body would not oblige.

Eventually she found that the best solution - although hardly a solution at all, since it only made her feel slightly less ill - was to go to the lowest point of the ship and lie down directly in the center of the ship, where the swaying of the ship was minimized. And there Mish stayed for the next week, sick from the motion of sea, face green, barely able to eat or drink - until one day Bain came, picked her up, and threw her into the ocean.

10

Mish was barely aware of being picked up and moved, of the light of the sun or the salty tang of the ocean air, until she felt herself hitting the water. She panicked, flailing and thrashing, and eventually righted herself, spitting out salty water and blinking the water out of her eyes.

When Mish realized she had been overboard, she *really* panicked. They were abandoning her! The ship was leaving *her!* She looked around wildly for the ship, hoping to grab on to part of it before it sailed away. She found it and lunged for it and scrabbled wildly at its sides for a handhold... and then realized the boat wasn't moving.

A burst of laughter greeted her. There was the crew, directly above her, looking down at her. Even Bain had a small smile on his face.

Mish was furious. *They threw me in the water!* She was so mad she ignored the laughter and didn't say anything as she swam around the ship, looking for a rope. *I am NOT asking them for help! Even if I drown! They won't be laughing then!*

Mish found a pillar of wood sticking out of the water. She looked around and saw hundreds of them. They were at a dock, which was why the boat wasn't moving. *We must be at Tuga.*

"Would you like some help there, lass?" asked the captain from the dock above her.

"Why!?" Mish shouted. "Why would you throw me overboard!"

With a manic grin, the captain replied, "I bet you're not seasick anymore."

And with that Mish realized that her seasickness was gone. The pain in her stomach, the heat in her head, gone! She felt great! It was a miracle!

Mish was so happy at this discovery she forgot to be angry. She accepted a hand up onto the dock as the crew explained that a swim was the best cure for seasickness, and so as soon as they docked, they resolved to make sure she went for a swim. How to get her to swim led to the idea of throwing her overboard. Seeing everyone's mischievous faces, Mish doubted anyone bothered to suggest an alternative.

The island of Tuga had beaches, palm trees, wooden docks for boats, and markets. Markets were everywhere. The island sold everything. Stalls of herbs, clothes, dyes, trinkets of every sort, even a stand full of puppies in cages - each had their own stall covered by colorful canvas on poles. The result was a sea of color and shade, shadows dancing through endless aisles.

Mish had never seen such color. Valeria, while equally busy with people and with markets of its own, were surrounded by dull gray buildings which hid the sky. Here there was sun, ocean breeze, and color, color, color. Even the people dressed in bright orange, green, and reds. The noise - people shouting their wares, dogs barking, seagulls screeching overhead - was overwhelming.

"Welcome to Tuga!" said Captain Costa. "Here you can find anything you want and at a bargain, no less! If they don't have it, it doesn't exist!"

They passed a stand full of metal rings and necklaces with a sign advertising magic. "Magic rings! They sell magic!" Mish said.

"Pshaw! Those aren't magic." said Costa. "They're leftover metal. Not a drop of magic in those. They melt useful things like shovels and axes into rings and hope that some fool will come along and buy them. One shovel can create a hundred rings, and one ring could pay for a hundred shovels, if someone was fool enough to buy it. Pay them no mind."

"But everyone knows metal is magic - "

"Aye, everyone knows it - and something everyone knows is useless. Trust Captain Costa - magic rings aren't found in a flea market. If it was magic, you'd know it. Magic is alive and wants to be used. It would never let itself sit in some peddlers stall."

Mish hovered around the stand of metal rings. *What if - just what if - one of them was magical? What if it awakened when I touched it? What if it was waiting for me?* Mish looked around. The market was crowded and no one was watching her. Captain Costa and the crew were far ahead of her.

What if she just... took... a ring? It would be easy. They were right here in front of her face. *There are hundreds of rings - he will never miss one. I will just take one of the smaller ones. Look, right there, that ring is so small it could barely fit on my pinkie! No one could possibly wear that ring! It's useless to everyone else. It's meant for me. It's very plain.. it's not like I would be taking anything valuable.. it's probably not magic either, which means it's useless.. I won't be hurting anyone...*

Mish, eyes on the stall owner, reached out for the tiny ring. Slowly, carefully, cautiously, she extended her finger.. *If he catches me I can just say I was trying it on.. I was going to give it back, honest..* The shopkeeper turned her head and Mish looked away. The shopkeeper followed her gaze, not noticing her hand creeping forward.

The shopkeeper didn't notice me! I can just pretend to look somewhere else and no one notices what I'm doing! Her heart was racing. A faint roaring sound was rising in her ears. *This is so easy! So simple! So exciting!*

Suddenly a huge hand clamped down on her shoulder. Heart leaping up her throat, Mish yanked her arm back and turned into the chest of Bain.

"I wasn't taking it!" She blurted out.

Why did I say that? She thought. *If I were not doing anything I wouldn't have said that! I definitely look guilty now.*

Bain didn't move. He didn't do anything except look at her. Terrified, Mish looked up into his face. She couldn't be sure, because Bain's face never showed much, but was that sadness?

Stupid, *stupid, stupid*, screamed her second thoughts. *What were you thinking?! You didn't need a ring! What if a guard had caught you! They would have chopped off your hand!* Annoying as always, her second thoughts chimed in: *it was awfully exciting, wasn't it? I bet if you had gotten away with it, you'd have done it again.*

Bain leaned forward into Mish's face. It took all her strength of will not to flinch and pull her head back. His stillness somehow let Mish know that Bain was holding back from doing something more, and that next time, she would find out what that something was. Bain let go of her shoulder and walked away.

Mish released the breath she didn't know she was holding. A nervous laugh burst out of her mouth. *Why did I laugh?* Mish thought. *And why was I so scared? It's just big dumb Bain.. he wouldn't have done anything to me.. he's my protector!*

Confused in thought and weak in knees, Mish followed the crew, not quite sure what had just happened. She was excited and hurting and scared, but did not know why. One thing she did know, *I'm not going to steal anything ever again. (Unless you have to. Said her third thoughts.)*

Captain Costa took them to a shack at the edge of the markets. He took them in and introduced them to a couple of men. There was great laughing and back-slapping and mysterious bottles appeared out of Costa's sleeves and disappeared into the sleeves of the men, and just when Mish was sure they had all become best friends and were about to have a party, one of the men punched Costa. The crew surrounded him and just as it seemed they were all going to fight, Costa told the crew to go away and wait for him on the ship.

The crew returned to the boat and waited for Costa. As the sun was setting in the harbor, he appeared with a glum look on his face. There was no news of Gillian, if any king had her, or if she was alive at all. Only Bain remained convinced she was alive.

Mish suggested they look for the dragon that had taken her. "Surely it would be easier to find?" There was silence at this statement. No one relished the idea of hunting a magical teleporting dragon. Costa decided for everyone.

"It kicked your butt" said Costa to Bain. "A mysterious dragon we know nothing about. If we are going to face it again, we need to figure out how to defeat it. And the best way to do that is to go to dragon island. I've got a feeling this dragon isn't a normal dragon. The dragons would want to stop it just as much as us."

"We're going to dragon island" said Costa. He looked at Bain and his scowling face. "It's my ship. I've decided. Besides, I've always wanted to meet a dragon."

11

The Lucky Pirate set sail for the island of the dragons

The Lucky Pirate set sail for the island of the dragons. Captain Costa had hired a guide, whose name was Bradley. He directed the ship eastward so they could catch the northern wind which he said circled the ocean at this time of year and would remove weeks from their journey.

Meanwhile, they sailed. They sailed and sailed and sailed. The entire trip, Mish was giddy both with seasickness and also excitement. *We are going to the island of the dragons!* She thought. Her dream, her quest, her lifelong goal to get a dragon was going to happen. But Mish's dream, like all dreams when they start to feel real, became infected by doubt. Mish found herself thinking of all the reasons why her quest was stupid.

How would I get a dragon? She thought. *Would I steal an egg and raise it to think it's my mother? That would get the momma dragon rather mad at me, wouldn't it? Could I even steal an egg away from its mother?*

The more and more Mish thought about the ways she could befriend a dragon, the more and more disheartened she became. She imagined discovering a dragon trapped in a pit with a broken wing, which she and she alone knew how to mend, and helped the dragon fly again. She imagined coming across a cache of eggs that the mother had foolishly laid on the beach while the tide was coming in, except Mish stumbled across them and rescued them. She imagined coming across a fossilized stone egg, but Mish found some magic fire and the egg hatched. Each idea seemed more stupid than the last.

Mish asked Bradley if he had ever been to the dragon islands, and when he replied in the affirmative, she asked him what the dragons were like.

“Now that’s a smart question.” he said. “Most people don’t bother to ask what other people are like - they just assume they are inferior, and dragons get it worst of all.”

“They’re basically like human beings”, he said, “Except a lot smarter. They live forever, and they remember everything. They’re magical, of course. Most of them can talk, and fly, and the older ones can even change their shape to look like whatever they want. They can’t use magic in metal like humans, but they have their own type of magic that they teach to their young.

Mish ruminated on what it might mean that she wanted a pet that was smarter than her. She wanted a dragon - but what if the dragon didn’t want her?

One day, while hanging out in the crow’s nest looking for dragons, Mish spotted a cloud on the horizon. The crew had taught her that clouds, something she had always taken for granted but were rare on the open ocean, usually meant land. She yelled this information down to the crew and they altered course. After a few hours, a cry went up around the ship “Land ahoy!” For there was indeed land - a giant mountain poking through the clouds, its snowy peak whiter than the clouds around it.

And circling around at the very tip of it, a dragon. It was just a tiny speck, but the fact that it was visible at this distance meant it must be enormous. It was long and sinuous, like a snake, and undulated slowly up and down as it circled the mountain. Everyone on the crew watched it except Costa who was busy steering the ship towards a promising stretch of beach.

There was no harbor on dragon island - no piers, no docks, and no buildings. Costa sailed the ship directly on to the beach, the ship hitting the soggy sand with a lurch that brought Mish out of her reverie. Seeing the ship grounded on the beach alarmed her, but the crew explained that since it was low tide it was safe to land on the beach. When the tide came in, it would lift the ship and they could sail or row back out to sea.

The crew just finished explaining that there was nothing to be worried about, when an enormous blue dragon dropped out of the sky and landed next to their ship.

Everyone flinched back except Bradley and of course, Bain.

“What do you want?!” roared the dragon.

Bradley stepped forward. “We’re here to trade.” He announced.

“The landing fee is one magical item” said the dragon. “You may then bring your wares into the trading square.”

Before Bradley could speak again, Costa stepped in front of him. “We’re here for information, information about one of your own, a dragon. We’ll trade for it, if you want.”

"We have no information for you." said the dragon. "We dragons do not get involved in mortal affairs."

"Then why has one of you kidnapped a *mortal* princess?"

The dragon snarled and a wave of smoke blew out of its nostrils, implying that he could blow a lot more than just smoke if he wanted to. "Whatever happened to your princess, blaming us would be a mistake. I told you we don't get involved. If you came here to insult us, you should leave now while you still can."

Bain spoke then. His towering, unmovable presence, dressed in black, and his deep voice, drew everyone's attention. "I saw it myself. It happened in front of me. A dragon, looking like that one circling the mountain, snapped its jaws around her, in the city of Valerian a few weeks ago.

"I broke my sword upon its head. This sword." He held up the shattered hilt of his mighty greatsword, great no longer. "You require a magical item as payment? Here it is." And he tossed the remnants of the sword over the side of the ship, where it landed with a plop at the feet of the mighty dragon.

The dragon looked at Bain for a long moment, then down at the sword, a tiny piece of metal compared to its own bulk. He looked once more at Bain, the ship, the crew, and then an astounding thing happened. The dragon transformed into a human man. Mish heard herself gasp along with the rest of the crew.

He was a gorgeous man with long blue hair, a matching silk outfit complete with silver buckles and cuffs, and shiny black boots that came up to his knees. He stepped over the sand to the sword hilt Bain had tossed onto the beach. He picked it up and appeared to sniff it. After a long pause he spoke.

"This is acceptable. If what you say is true, this has a story attached to it, and I would hear it. We also may know something about this dragon you speak of. You may come onto our lands."

12

Aldura led them to some ruins at the edge of the jungle. It provided a large enough space for the crew to set up camp. After a while a large white dragon landed in the middle of their camp. Judging by Aldura's submissive bow, Mish figured this must be a dragon of some importance.

The dragon listened to Costa's tale about hunting the mysterious dragon to recover their friend the princess, and at the end he spoke.

"We have heard of this dragon of which you speak. But it is no dragon. It is a mechanical construct created by men and obeys the king of Orphel. It is a toy – a robot made of metal and magic - nothing more. As for your princess - she is not here."

"But do you know where she is?" asked Costa.

"If the dragon of Orphel took her, then that is probably where she will be."

"Will you help us?"

"I? No. Nor will any of us, I suspect. We do not get involved in human affairs."

"But there's a pretend dragon going around kidnapping princesses! It's giving dragons a bad name. Doesn't that anger you?"

The dragon lowered its head and snorted, steam billowing out of his nostrils and around Costa. "It is annoying, yes, but most everything humans do is annoying. We used to eat your kind but now we are content to take your treasure. Be glad we do nothing more."

The elder dragon looked over at Aldura, still in his human form, still holding the broken hilt of Bain's sword.

"You have paid the toll and may stay here - although it is a pretty poor toll. A broken sword? Not even a pretty one at that. Still, we sense its magic. Perhaps we will give it to one of the foundlings - it is time they started their own horde. Come, Aldura."

And with that command, Aldura changed back into a mighty blue dragon. The two dragons spread their mighty wings and with several whooshes that bent the trees back, took flight towards the looming mountain.

The crew was visibly disappointed that the dragons would not help them, but they had all heard the news that the dragon they sought was owned by the king of Orphel, and that is probably where Gillian was. They repeated among themselves the news that the dragon wasn't really a dragon. Mish had to hear it several times from several different people before she could accept it. *The dragon was a magic toy? Some toy! What did the dragon call it? A robot? So it's a giant, flying, magic, robot dragon?*

Costa seemed unfazed. "Cheer up, me mates! Did you think it was going to be easy? That we'd just sail in and pluck a dragon from the beach? Of course not! Don't worry, I've got a plan! For now, just settle in and leave things to your old Captain Costa." And with those words, he walked into his tent.

The crew seemed content to accept his words, but not Mish. She went over to Bain and asked him what was going to happen.

“We’re going to hire one of them. Dragons love treasure. Brandon says the dragons are willing to trade with people. So we’ll just set up shop and wait.”

But ‘setting up shop’ turned out to be harder than anyone had thought. During the night, several of their tents, including Costa’s, were knocked down over their sleeping victim’s heads. Costa came out sputtering and spitting with a knife in his hand but stopped when he realized the culprits were dragons.

The dragons - three of them - were smaller than the dragons they had seen. They stood back and watched the humans scurry from their tents and emitted rhythmic hissing noises. At first Mish was worried but then realized they were laughing! The dragons were smaller because they were younger, she realized. They knocked down the tents as a teenage prank, just like the boys back home.

One of the three dragons blew a tiny fireball in their direction, and when everyone flinched, they laughed their hissing dragon laughter some more, then flew off into the night.

The same thing happened the next night. Some of the crew tried setting up their tents on the beach, but the result was the same. The young punk dragons thought it was funny to torment the newcomers. *They have no manners at all!* Mish wondered where their mother was. *Did they even have mothers?*

During the day, the results of Costa’s trading were equally dismal. Dragons did come to look at their wares, and one or two pawed through the jewels Costa had brought, but all seemed disinterested. Mish pondered the difficulty of getting a dragon to do what you wanted. *If they collected treasures, didn’t that mean they had their own piles of gold and jewels somewhere in the mountain? They probably aren’t impressed by what is a small amount of treasure to them.*

After the third day, Costa had reached a breaking point. “Enough of this!” He yelled at the crew. “I’m not sitting around to be made a fool of. The Captain knows when he’s not wanted. We’re leaving.”

“But we haven’t hired a dragon yet!” argued Mish.

“The bloody stupid dragons aren’t for hire!” Costa yelled back. “We got what we came for. We know where Gillian is, or at least where she was. Crew, load up!”

Mish persisted. “A dragon would solve all our problems! He could fly us to wherever Gillian is, and rescue her, and even fight that robot dragon!”

Costa just ignored her and turned towards his tent, when Bain spoke.

“If we can’t hire a dragon, then I need my sword back.”

A hush fell over everyone, and Mish thought a chill breeze accompanied those words. Without looking at Bain, Costa stopped and spoke. “Your strength is gone? Nothing at all?”

Bain shook his head. “My strength came from the sword.”

“The sword you gave away as a toll?” Mish asked. Bane nodded.

Costa, never to be caught hesitating, turned with a big smile on his face. “No worries, no worries! We’ll just go ask the dragons to give it back! That old cranky dragon said it was pretty much worthless to them, not being all shiny and whatnot. Why, it would probably be a disgrace if we let them keep it! We just have to go find the blighter and ask. Heck, we’ll buy it back if we must!”

The crew all agreed this was a sensible plan. They all decided they would search the island for the dragon Aldura and ask for their magic hilt back. They split up into groups and divided their food among them. Mish asked what group she was going in.

Costa said “Mish, me missy, you’re in my group.” Mish was excited at first, but then Costa added “we’re staying on the ship.”

Mish protested. “I don’t want to stay on the ship!”

“Ach, a island full of dragons is no place for a young girl to be wandering about. It isn’t safe.”

“I can go with Bain!”

“Bain’s got better things to do than babysit you.”

Mish thought this was incredibly unfair. She looked to Bain for help but he looked away, seemingly disinterested.

“Then I’ll go by myself!” she said.

“Aye, you could” said Costa. “But see, dragons collect treasure, and a young maiden would be the greatest treasure of all. Girls such as yourself have a habit of being kidnapped, and I don’t want to lose another princess.”

“I’m no princess” she said, but without any force. She was about to argue some more until she realized the truth of what he was saying. Young girls did get kidnapped. She had seen her best friend, her only friend really, Gillian, get taken right in front of her eyes. By a dragon no less. Well, it wasn’t a real dragon, that was true, but these dragons might be worse. They certainly didn’t seem friendly.

She considered just grabbing some food and venturing off on her own, but realized the stupidity of this idea. No one else except Bain was going off on his own, and she was no Bain. She thought of all the terrible things that might happen. She might fall and break her leg, and she wouldn't be with a partner who could go for help. And of course, something might eat her. She didn't think there were wild animals about - but the dragons were more dangerous than any wild animal.

If I'm a treasure, then maybe the dragons will protect me. She thought. Then her annoying second thoughts spoke up. *Don't be stupid! Why would they protect you?* Mish waited for her third thoughts to overrule the second, but to her annoyance and dismay, her third thoughts only said *"Hm? What's that? You want me to say something? Oh, sorry, nothing to say. Other than you're right - the dragons have no logical reason to take care of you. They might even kidnap or eat you!"*

Mish yelled internally at her third thoughts and let herself be led back to the ship. *It's just because I'm a girl.* She pouted. *It's not fair.*

The crew left in their groups, leaving Costa, Brendan the guide, and Mish on the ship. That night she could not sleep. Her thoughts continued to torment her. Why had she let herself be led onto the ship? Why didn't she just get up and go find her own dragon? Lying awake in her hammock below deck on the gently rocking ship, she realized the answer: she was afraid. She was afraid of what might happen.

Her teacher Mr. Duwey had once said, "Everything is a choice". Mish had not understood what he meant at the time, but she did now. She had a choice now. She could choose to listen to what Captain Costa had said, do what he said, and stay in the ship - or she could choose to disobey him and go off on her own. She could choose to act out of fear, and do nothing, or she could choose to ignore her fears, and take a chance.

Once Mish discovered this epiphany, it seemed so simple. She would leave the ship and venture into the island on her own. She would find a dragon and convince it to come back with her. And if it didn't work, at least she tried. Just almost jumped up right then and there and charged onto the island, but something told her to be sensible and wait until morning. And with that moment of hesitation, her thoughts attacked.

Going into the island alone? That's a stupid idea. To do what? No dragon is going to come with you.

Shut up, *Shut up!* she yelled back at her thoughts. Suddenly a new revelation occurred to her. Wild animals or deadly dragons were not going to stop her - but she might stop herself. She might talk herself out of going. She was her own worst enemy. She was the danger. *If only I hadn't hesitated! But then.. why hesitate now?* And she saw the solution was to not think. *Move.* she told herself. *Move, move, move! Keep moving!* She grabbed some food, put on her old cloak and blanket, and ran on deck. She was all set to jump over the edge of the ship and wade to shore when she looked over the edge and saw the dark black water below her. She froze.

Why did I stop? Jump! Just go! She yelled at herself. But something in her body wouldn't let her jump over the side. The water was too black. She imagined that it was not a mere few feet

deep, but that a giant chasm had opened beneath the surface, and even though the boat was anchored near shore, they had drifted over a giant pit. And in that pit was a giant monster, its mouth open, its predatory eyes looking upwards at Mish, watching her, staring back as she stared at it.

She couldn't jump. She couldn't leave the safety of the ship. *Stupid.* She thought to herself. *You're so stupid. You're a stupid little girl who's afraid of a little water. You're afraid of the dark, of the cold, of a little water. Like a little kid, like a little baby.* To her dismay, tears started to roll down her cheeks. *And now you're feeling sorry for yourself, for no reason. You're sorry you're too stupid to move.*

Just then a soft splash was heard on the far side of the boat. Something - or someone - had fallen off the boat, on the sea side, hidden from the shore. Mish hurried to the other side of the boat. To her surprise she saw Captain Costa swimming around the edge of the boat to shore. She watched by the light of the moon as he swam to shore. He did not wade through the shallow water like most men do, arms flailing back and forth, legs pumping, sea spray flying - instead he kept his head low and glided through the water. She could barely see him.

Suddenly Mish's indecision was gone. Seeing someone else perform the action she was so hesitant to do cured her of all doubts. *Someone else had done it, so I can do it to.* A weight lifted, as if someone had given her permission. She jumped over the side and followed Captain Costa to shore.

As she reached the beach she saw, in the moonlight, the captain disappear into the jungle. He did not seem to be following the path to the trading square. Mish tried to follow him, but as soon as she took two steps into the jungle, the darkness became so complete she could barely see her hand in front of her face. There was no way she could follow a path in complete darkness, and had no idea how Captain Costa was navigating through the jungle without light.

She thought about calling out for him - he was probably still within earshot - but something told her the captain was hiding from something. He did not want to be seen, and would not come if called.

I'll just walk along the beach. She told herself. She looked both ways. One beach went towards the mountain and curved around its base. The other one went towards.. nothing. The beach didn't even curve - it seemed to go on straight forever. She knew that they were on an island - everyone said so - but it was an island so big she couldn't see it curve.

Everyone else probably went towards the mountain. I'll do something different. I'll explore away from it.

And so with nothing but the moonlight and the waves swishing over her feet as her companion, Mish walked along the beach.

She walked for a full day, stopping only to eat. She thought she saw dragons passing across the beach far ahead and headed that way. When the next night came she walked inland to the edge of the trees, wrapped herself in her cloak/blanket, and drifted off to sleep. The sun was just poking its

head above the horizon when Mish was wakened by the sound of whooshing wings. Groggily, she raised her head and saw several dragons flying overhead. They were coming from the ocean. Mish got up and looked out where they came from - far out to ocean she thought she saw a large rock. *Could that be where they slept?*

Turning inland, she watched the dragons fly over the jungle until they went out of sight over the trees. Just as they disappeared, she thought she heard a loud squawk and the tips of their tails appeared for a second, as if the dragons had gone downward. *Had they landed?*

Mish decided she was tired of walking along the beach. It was very pretty but she was sunburnt and had a headache. The jungle was dense with brush and long grass inhibiting her path, but she saw she could pick her way around the densest parts. She started to walk slowly inland.

She aimed roughly where she thought the dragons had disappeared. After hours of slow progress, she thought she heard voices. The voices were low and sibilant, full of *esssss's* and extra growling sounds, and Mish guessed they were dragons speaking. She crept through the trees until she came to the edge of a rocky clearing. Scattered among the rocks were about ten smaller dragons. Standing on a large rock that served as a pedestal of sorts was a large dragon, speaking. All the smaller dragons were looking up at him with bored looks.

Mish realized the smaller dragons were younger dragons, and the dragon at the head of them all was an adult. Mish looked at the bored, half-closed eyes of the smaller dragons, as well as the occasional fidgety movement, and was wondering why this scene felt so familiar. Then she realized - *It's a classroom! The big dragon is the teacher, teaching the younger ones!*

Mish watched, wondering what she should do, until the wind decided for her. The weather changed, the direction of the wind shifted, and suddenly a few of the dragons were looking in her direction and sniffing the air. *They smell me!* She realized. *Should I run? Should I come out? Should I say something?*

She was about to slink away when her second thoughts - usually completely useless - motivated her. *What are you doing? Isn't this why you came here? To find dragons?* Deciding it was better to be bold, and hoping they wouldn't eat her, Mish stepped into the clearing. With excited roars, all the dragons sprang up from their rocks and charged at her, blowing fire.

13

A huge roar from the adult dragon sent the smaller dragons scurrying back to their rocks.

"What do you want, human?" said the dragon, a large yellow thing.

Mish started to explain how she was looking for dragons, how they wanted a dragon to help them rescue her friend, Gillian, and if they couldn't do that then maybe they can get Bain's strength back if only they could recover his magic sword, when the yellow dragon interrupted her.

"You are interrupting my lesson. Whatever your issue, you need to talk with the elder."

"We did!" Said Mish. "He said he wouldn't help us, and then a bunch of smaller dragons knocked over our tents."

Mish thought she saw a couple of the dragons in the classroom suddenly look away. All the dragons looked about the same - the same dark green - *maybe colors didn't appear until they were older?* - but the dragons that flinched could have been the dragons that knocked their tents over.

The head dragon did not miss the sudden movement. When he spoke again it was not the gruff voice of command, but a softer, soothing tone, almost like a purr.

"Is that so?" He spoke. "I'm sorry about any inconvenience we may have caused. Knocking over tents is a foolish activity, one unworthy of a dragon - even a young one." With those words he looked directly at the dragons who had flinched.

There was a pause and the dragon appeared to be thinking. Then he spoke. "Come in, come in! Don't be afraid!" he said. "We're not going to eat you! Are we, class?" He scanned his gaze over the classroom, his big teeth showing in what was probably supposed to be a smile. The classroom shook their collective heads in the automatic way students do when, just from the tone the teacher uses, they know the answer even if they don't know the question. The two guilty-looking dragons did not shake their head.

Mish didn't feel exactly safe, but she realized she wasn't about to be eaten any time soon. Not while the teacher dragon was there, at least.

"Come in, come in!" repeated the teacher. "Class, we have a visitor! A human! Today we will learn all about him!"

"Her." Said Mish. When the dragon looked at her, Mish clarified further. "I'm a girl."

"So you are, so you are!" said the teacher dragon. "Class, humans are very picky about whether they are male or female! If you talk about them, you must make sure you say 'he' if it is a male, or 'she' if it is a female! Therefore it is easier to just call them all 'human'."

Mish tried to ask "isn't it the same for dragons?" but the teacher dragon talked over her. He - or *should that be 'the dragon'?* - talked about her as if she wasn't there, reciting all sorts of facts about 'humans', some that Mish hadn't even known, such as they wished they were all butterflies, or were

sometimes confused if they were a butterfly or a human. Something about butterflies anyways. All the student dragons laughed and looked at her. Mish felt insulted but wasn't sure why.

She tried to leave, or at least move about the classroom, but the teacher dragon subtly intercepted her no matter what direction she went, and as a result Mish spent the afternoon being used as an 'example human', surrounded by a bunch of young dragons who snickered at her. When she spoke, they either pretended she wasn't speaking, or stared as if the sounds coming from her mouth were exotic sounds they had never heard before. They never responded to her questions, and even when the teacher stopped talking long enough to listen to her, as soon as she stopped the teacher continued talking as if she had never spoken.

It was all very exhausting, and Mish found herself sitting on the ground, waiting for school to get out, just like back home. Eventually it was over. And the teacher dragon told her she could go back to her ship. A few of the younger dragons seemed to want to stay and talk with – or at least stare at – Mish, but the teacher shoed them away.

"They should leave you alone" He said. "But best not dawdle. Some of the boys are... rambunctious. This is the first human they have met. Who knows what they might do." And with that warning he flew away.

Mish was exhausted. She had found some dragons, only to spend the day stressed out, first wondering if she was going to be eaten, and then wondering if they would ever let her go. They just stared at her, as if she was just some sort of talking bug.

She settled down against the side of a tree, ready to take a nap, when she looked up and saw three smaller dragons heading her way. She couldn't be certain, but she thought it was the same three dragons that had harassed their camp, and two of them had been in the class. There could only be one reason they were coming back to this clearing in the jungle. They were looking for her.

Remembering that these dragons had not agreed to not eat humans, Mish slipped into the trees and stayed quiet. She heard the dragons land in the rocky clearing and call out "Come out, come out, little human! We smell you here!" She turned away and crept further into the jungle. She thought she heard the dragons take off into the air, and could hear them flying overhead, but the dense jungle canopy prevented her from seeing the sky.

Soon it started to get dark and Mish realized the sun was going down. *I don't want to get stuck in the jungle in the dark! I need to get back to the beach.*

Mish turned in the direction she thought the beach was and stumbled her way through the dense undergrowth. However she soon realized she was hopelessly lost. She hadn't taken her bearings when she left the clearing. For all she knew she was heading deeper into the jungle.

Downhill. Her thoughts told her. *The water is always downhill.* Mish looked at the slope of the ground and turned her feet in the direction that seemed like it sloped the most downward. She just had to keep following the lowest point on the ground and she would arrive back at the beach.

Mish sensed the moment the sun dipped below the horizon. A chill air blew up through the trees, rustling them all around her. They seemed to speak, their rustling a strange and unknown language she had never heard before, one that whispered of darkness and danger. It was getting dark quickly. Mish knew she had maybe half an hour of light left before she would become totally unable to see. She had heard stories where people who couldn't see would walk in circles, even though they felt they were going completely straight. If that happened, Mish would become permanently lost.

She began to run. The brush grabbed at her clothes and cloak. Long, needle-like branches whipped at her face, leaving welts. Thorns in the bushes ripped through her pants and left bloody welts on her legs. Even the long grass, normally so soft and benign, felt like whips, whipping at her ankles, her hands, at any part they could reach.

She began to panic. Her breath was racing faster than was justified by her reckless pace through the brush and trees. She started to feel dizzy and ran into several trees. She thrashed wildly through the brush, her hands and arms flailing wildly in front of her in a desperate attempt to protect her face. Her foot hit a root and she crashed to the ground, branches and thorns stinging her hands and face.

Faster! If I could just run faster! Don't stop! Almost there! Had it been this far to the beach?
She would stumble into it any second now. She had to. The trees and brush would give way to blessed air, her feet would feel the wetness of the sand, she would stumble into the blessed surf and the salt water would wash away her blood, and the moon would show her the way back to the ship.
Almost there! Any second now!

And just when Mish started to despair, when she felt she would never reach the beach, and she would have to stop and lie down and hope nothing would eat her, the ground gave way beneath her. She stumbled into open air. She had reached the edge of the jungle. She felt her feet enter the water, and with a splash she fell into it. She let out a cry of joy, her body releasing the tension that had been building for the last hour. She lifted her face to the open sky and saw the moon shining high above her. She could see.

But instead of the endless ocean stretching out before her, she saw a wall of blackness beyond the water. The water itself was not salty, but stagnant and smelly. There was no beach, no comforting rhythm of waves crashing on it. She had not been running to the beach. Her downhill path had led her inland. She was at a small inland pond, farther away from the beach than ever. She was cold, miserable, and lost.

Just when Mish thought it couldn't get any worse, the three young dragons crashed down from the sky, surrounding her as she lay in the water. Though they were still young, they stood on their back legs to the height of a full grown man, towering above her, blocking out the moonlight. Before she could get her hopes up that they were here to save her, she heard their laughter and knew they were not here to rescue her.

"What a merry chase you led us on! But now we've got you. You got us in trouble in class - now you're going to pay. We've always wondered what human tastes like!"

Mish hauled herself out of the water and tried to turn back to the dark jungle. One of the dragons expertly twirled and his tail slammed into her chest, hurling her back into the water. As she stood up another tail spun towards her. This one she managed to throw her body around and grab. She heard the displeased hiss of its owner as he spun her around, snapping at her, trying to dislodge her grip.

A dragon's head reared up to bite her. She quickly reached behind her back and in a single motion ripped off her pack and threw it into the dragon's face, no easy feat when hanging on to a thrashing tail. Surprised then enraged, the dragon reared back and then came for her, his entire body behind the lunge. Mish's one arm let go of the tail and her other arm reached back and grabbed her cloak and threw it at the dragon. It crashed headfirst into her billowing cloak, ripping it off her back.

Mish and the dragon landed side by side in the shallow water. Mish looked over and saw the dragon struggling to dislodge the cloak from its head. Before he could shake it free, Mish rushed at him and took a mighty leap onto his face. He could not see or bite her because of the cloak covering its face. The dragon reared up with a muffled roar. Mish brought up her legs to wrap both arms and legs around the dragon's head as it whipped back and forth, struggling to free itself from both the cloak and Mish.

The other dragons leapt back. Try as they might, they could not get close enough to bite Mish when she was whipping back and forth on the head of the dragon.

"Stop moving, Roth!" the two of them screamed at their struggling companion. "Let us get a bite on her! She can't hurt you!"

Mish wished she could prove them wrong - that she could indeed hurt the dragon she was on. But they were right. She had no sword, no knife, nothing that could damage the dragon. She tried pounding with her fist through the cloak to where she thought the dragon's eye might be, but it just closed its eyes and its scaly eyelid was too thick.

"Get it off of me!" the dragon named Roth yelled. He stopped struggling and threw himself down into the water. The other two dragons approached.

But instead of being a helpless bit of slime they had to pluck off their friend's face, Mish was determined to make it as difficult as possible to be eaten. Maybe if she struggled enough, they would decide it was not worth the effort and would go away. Maybe if she could hurt one of them, even just a little bit.

So as the dragons approached, she got a foothold on Roth's nose and launched herself at the second dragon's open mouth. He opened his mouth even wider but Mish threw the wet cloak right him.

The dragon, feeling the cloak enter its mouth, instinctively snapped its jaws shut. Just in time for Mish to land on its head and punch it in the eye and snout.

Screaming in anger, it snapped its body around and lashed out with its thick tail. In its haste it smashed its tail into the face of the third dragon, who went flying into the jungle.

All three dragons were down. Now was her chance. Thrashing her way through the muddy water she threw herself up the small embankment and into the jungle. She felt the snap of jaws behind her as Roth thrashed through the water after her and tried to catch before she entered the jungle. The third dragon, the one who had been knocked into the jungle, struggled to his feet and lunged at her. Mish quickly veered out of its reach. It attempted to run after her but it was too big and bulky, and its fat legs were not made for lifting over brush, nor its heavy body made for maneuvering around trees.

Mish made it into the jungle. She ran and ran and ran. She thought she had been tired and unable to see when she ran towards the pond, but now true terror gave her more strength and energy than she knew she had. She could not see. She did not feel the branches whip at her face, and she tore through the brush and thorns as if it were confetti.

Not until she stumbled and fell and lay panting did she stop. She had escaped. It had cost her all her energy, every ounce of cunning and fight she was capable of, but she had survived. She was safe. Bloody, muddy, soaked, but safe. She flipped over on her back and lay there panting. She would fall asleep right here.

But right as she closed her eyes, she looked upwards. There was a hole in the trees, just tiny enough for a little bit of light to poke through the dense canopy and shine on her face. She saw the sun, shining pale orange, its distant warmth promising heat and rest for her tired body. She closed her eyes.

The sun?! The sun had just set! There's no way it could be shining on her! Mish opened her eyes. The orange light was still there, but brighter, and closer. The sun was coming to earth, falling on her.

Not the sun. Fire. A fireball. Dragon's fire.

An angry dragon descending from the sky right at her, flames shooting at where she lay.

The jungle exploded into flame around her. Fire. The world was on fire. It blinded her. Mish flipped over and curled herself into a ball, willing her body to dig itself into the dirt and mud around her. She felt the heat scorch her body, her arms, her head. It felt like her hair had caught on fire. One of the dragons was burning the jungle to get at her. She hadn't attempted to be quiet when running away from them. They just had to fly above her, listening to her crash through the jungle, and wait for her to stop. When she stopped they unleashed their fire.

Just when Mish thought she was going to burn up in the dragon fire, she was suddenly squashed into the mud. A dragon landed on top of her, pinning her to the ground. The mud was cool and protected her from the fire, but now she had a new problem, mainly, a dragon crushing her.

Claws slashed at her back, tearing her clothes. Teeth clamped around her body, piercing her skin, picking her body off the ground. Then she was airborne. Now she was falling. With a splash she landed in the very same stagnant pond she had just escaped from. The dragon had picked her up and thrown her into the pond where it could get at her easier. She was in the very middle of this time. The water was up to her waist. There would be no dashing to the jungle.

She looked up and saw two dragons in front of her. With a roar and smoke billowing from his mouth, Roth landed with a mighty splash behind her. She tried to push off towards the shore but one of her legs weren't working, crushed when the dragon landed on her. She tried to swim but one of her arms weren't working, pierced when the dragon bit her.

The three young dragons didn't bother to taunt her this time. They didn't say anything. They were too angry. Saliva dripping from their jaws, the three dragons closed in on Mish, murder in their eyes.

15

A fourth dragon dropped from the sky. It landed on Roth's head, bounced to the second dragon, and collided with it, sending them both into the water. The dragons struggled to their feet. Roth spoke.

"What are you doing, Cricket?! This one's ours!", he said, referring to Mish.

"Leave the human alone." said the new dragon. Mish could see that it was not an adult dragon, but a smaller, younger dragon. It was the same size as the three dragons surrounding Mish, but a lot skinnier.

"Why, what are you gonna do about it, Cricket?" said Roth.

The new dragon - apparently its name was Cricket - did not respond to the taunt but just repeated "Leave the human alone."

Roth was about to pounce on Cricket, but the other two dragons spoke up.

"Why, are you in love with the human?" "Oooh, Crickets got a girlfriend, Cricket's got a girlfriend!" "A human girlfriend!" And started laughing.

The laughter released some of the tension in the air. Roth stopped advancing on Cricket. He was clearly in no mood to laugh, but he looked at his two immature companions and the hint of a smile grew on his face.

“We weren’t going to hurt the human. Much.” He said. “We just want to teach it a lesson.”

Cricket merely repeated his warning in that same low voice. “Leave the human alone.”

“But she attacked us!” said Roth.

“Leave the human alone.” Cricket said.

“Leave the human alone!” they mocked him.

Cricket said nothing.

Roth puffed up and blew a fireball out of his mouth at Cricket, but Cricket merely turned his head. He was a dragon, and fire didn’t hurt him, not such a little fireball, anyway. It was more of a puff, clearly meant to intimidate, not kill. But Cricket was not intimidated.

Cricket’s lack of reaction discouraged Roth. Roth snorted and moved away, and his two friends copied him, huffing and grumbling and moving to the edge of the pond. One of them, taking his cue from Roth, puffed a small fireball at Mish still in the center of the pond. She saw it coming and ducked underwater. When she came up, she could still hear the laughter of the two dragons as they flew away. Mish was reminded of the bullies back home throwing rocks, but instead of rocks they hurled fireballs.

Cricket came running to the center of the pond, great bursts of water thrashing upward. Halfway to her he started to swim. Mish was amazed at the transition. One moment, clumsy and thrashing, the next, a sleek scaly shape moving towards her.

Mish was too tired to flinch as the young dragon lifted her up on top of its head and swam to shore. As he cleared the water, he turned back into that ungainly dinosaur, thrashing and flailing out of the water. He reached the shallow edge of the water, said “Hang on”, and took flight.

In the air, the dragon said “My name’s Karoket, but everybody calls me Cricket. Except my mother. What’s your name?” but Mish was too tired to respond. She only closed her eyes and held on as best she could.

Karoket - or Cricket, as everybody called him - flew her to the beach. He laid her down on the sand, grabbed some wood from the nearby jungle with his teeth, set it down next to Mish, and lit it on fire. Mish felt her body relax. The fire - warm, safe fire, not scary fireball fire - made her realize how cold and wet and slimy she was. It was still the middle of the night and the wind from the ocean chilled her. She sneezed, then moved closer to the fire and lay down. In an instant she was asleep.

16

Mish woke the next morning to the sound of crashing waves. The sun was high in the sky, and her fire was out. There was no sign of Cricket. She looked out to the ocean and saw a series of smaller islands sticking out in the distance. She had not seen a view like this before. She was on an unknown part of the island. When she looked left and right, the beach did not extend on forever, but ended at a series of scary looking rocks. She was in a cove, a small strip of beach at the edge of a cliff. Behind her there was some jungle, but she could see towering rock cliffs behind it and knew

there was no way out. She was trapped. The dragon Cricket had brought her to a remote part of the island where she could not escape.

Her leg felt much better, but her arm had a nasty puncture in the shoulder where a dragon's tooth had pierced her. There was no way she could do any climbing or swimming.

To her surprise, her pack she thought she had lost in the fight with the dragons was lying beside her. Ravenous, she ate as much cheese and bread as she was able, even if it did smell of stagnant pond water.

After a few hours, the dragon Cricket returned. He again introduced himself and asked Mish her name. This time Mish responded. "Mish."

"Mish. That's a funny name." he said.

"So is Cricket", Mish pointed out.

"But mine's a nickname", said Cricket, as if that explained everything. "Is yours a nickname too?" Without waiting for an answer, Cricket began to pepper her with questions. "Where did you come from? Did you really fight Roth? Aren't you glad I rescued you? Are you a female?"

That last question annoyed Mish. "Yes, I am a *female*, and you haven't asked me if I am hurt!"

Cricket blinked twice before responding. "Oh, yes, sorry, sorry, no, I haven't asked you if you are hurt! Are you hurt? Of course you are hurt, I can see you are hurt! How bad are you hurt? Are you ok?"

This dragon is a bit slow. Mish thought. But at least he's trying.

Mish took a deep breath and bit back the sarcastic retort that was on her tongue. "Yes, I am ok. Thank you for saving me."

This seemed to be exactly the right thing to say, as Cricket let out a snort of delight and spun in the sand, to the point where Mish had to take a few steps back to avoid his tail.

"I saved you! Did you see me? I was all brave and heroic!"

You were, thought Mish. *But now you're kind of pathetic.* Still, she was happy that she was safe and warm and full, and the sight of a dancing dragon brought a smile to her face.

Cricket was still talking, half to Mish, half to himself, and he said. "I saved you! And now you're mine! All Mine. My very own human. I've always wanted a pet human!" Mish's smile turned into a frown.

"Um, excuse me, but I am not your pet!", said Mish.

"Are you someone else's pet?" asked Cricket. "I hope you're not Roth's pet because he wasn't taking good care of you at all!"

"I am not anybody's pet!"

"Yes, you are, yes you are, you're my pet! Don't worry, I'll take good care of you, I'll bring you food, and keep you safe, and we can play together!"

Oh, great. Thought Mish. I've been rescued by a retarded dragon.

Mish continued to argue with Cricket that she was not a pet and he needed to let her go. Whenever she thought he was getting through to him, he would suddenly break off conversation and dance around, or fly away and come back with a dead deer that he unceremoniously dropped in front of Mish, blew a big fireball that turned most of the meat to cinders, and then looked at Mish expectantly. Other times he would announce that they were playing hide and seek. When she didn't go hide, he said 'Ok, I'll hide!' and she could hear his big bulk thrashing through the bit of jungle attached to the cove.

I could just follow his path he made and find him right away. She thought. It would be funny if I weren't trapped here.

After an hour or so, Cricket came back. His head hung low, clearly disheartened. "Maybe you'll feel like playing tomorrow." He said. "I have to go or my Mom will come looking for me."

Mom?? "Wait!" said Mish. "You have a Mom? If you tell her I'm here, then I'll play with you!"

"No," said Cricket. "She doesn't like it when I keep pets. She'd make me get rid of you. But you're my pet, and you're staying here forever." and he flew away.

17

The next day Cricket's mother landed in the cove, Cricket close behind her. Cricket must have changed his mind, and told his mother about Mish. His mother was a massive green dragon, the biggest dragon Mish had seen so far. This is because female dragons are bigger than male dragons, and this was the first adult female dragon Mish had seen.

The mother took one look at Mish and rounded on Cricket. "Karolet, why are you imprisoning this human?!"

"I'm not imprisoning -" began Cricket, but his mom cut him off.

"I don't care what you call it! How would you like it if I locked you up somewhere you couldn't escape!?"

The mother dragon was so ferocious, Mish felt a little sorry for Cricket. She also wanted to get the mother's attention, so she said "For a prison, it's actually kind of nice, the beach is pretty -"

"Oh great." Interrupted the Mother. A human who wants to be a prisoner. Perfect. You two are perfect for each other. I should just leave you here."

"Oh no no no!" said Mish. "I didn't mean it! Please help me! I don't want to be a pet!"

The mother turned back towards Cricket. "Their ship is at the base of the mountain. Get her back there. Now."

"But she promised to play with me!" said Cricket. "She said if I told you about her, she would play with me!"

"Oh, did she now?" Mother looked down at Mish and raised a scaly eye-ridge. "Did you promise to play with my little Cricket if he told me about you? Maybe you're not completely stupid."

Mish had no intention of playing with Cricket, she just said that to make Cricket get help. She felt a little guilty about this lie, now that a big dragon was asking her about it. The mother was amused at Mish's guilty look. "Very well then, it looks like you'll just have to play with my son. Cricket, she'd better be back on her ship before nightfall."

"Aww.. but Mom!" said Cricket.

"Karo... " rumbled the mom in a low voice of mothers everywhere.

Cricket hung his head. "Yes mom." He said. Satisfied that her son would obey, the mom flew away. Cricket and Mish watched her go.

After a while, Cricket turned towards Mish. "So what do you want to play?"

"How about the game where you take me back to my ship?" said Mish.

Cricket either took this literally, or was a lot smarter than Mish thought. "That's where you hang on and I try to throw you off, right? I love that game!" And with that he dove headfirst under Mish's legs, tossed her on to his head, and took off into the air.

The next hour was a paroxysm of terror and delight for Mish. Cricket flew up into the sky, higher than she had ever been before, higher than the crow's nest on the ship, higher than the highest tree she had ever climbed - but she wasn't here to admire the view. She was too busy hanging on for dear life. She thought she was just getting the hang of staying on him when Cricket performed a barrel roll, spun upside-down, and dumped Mish off his back, a million miles above the ground.

Before Mish even had time to scream, Cricket had swooped back under her and caught her on his head. Ignoring the pain of her wounded arm and leg she wrapped her whole body around Cricket's head. Just when she felt slightly safe, Cricket would throw her off and catch her. Every time she landed on his head she found herself in yet another awkward, ungainly pose, sometimes head hanging over the side of his face, sometimes with her butt sticking into Cricket's eye, sometimes landing right on his snout and staring the mischievous dragon in the face.

Cricket didn't seem to mind. Her knee was mashing into his eye and he snorted with glee and tossed his head. Sometimes Mish barely hung on, other times he would toss her a few feet in the air as they flew along.

But every time, Cricket caught her. One time Mish landed farther back on Cricket's body, on his back, and she was able to straddle Cricket and wrap her arms around his neck. With this new grip, the flips and shakes didn't knock Mish off. Mish she the oily yet rough texture of Crickets scales, a seagull flying past, one time she even risked sparing some energy to look over the side at the island below - until Cricket *really* began trying to shake her off.

Steep dives, tight turns, and bucking - Cricket tried it all, but Mish continued to hang on. One moment she almost lost her grip, and felt the strength in her arms and legs giving out, and started to despair, when she heard Cricket laugh.

"I almost had you!" he yelled over the whooshing of the wind, and suddenly the ride became smooth and gentle. Mish realized that he was just toying with her.

"Stop!" She yelled. "Different game! Different game!" Cricket landed on the beach, and Mish slid off his side and, legs shaking, collapsed onto the white sand.

Mish felt Cricket looking at her and expected him to ask her what game to play, but he didn't say anything. Curious, she looked up and saw his face right in front of hers, grinning madly.

A dragon grin is a terrible sight to behold, with huge teeth and pulled-back lips, and for a second Mish thought he was going to bite her, but then she saw his eyes, those golden cat-iris eyes, wide open and staring straight at her, and suddenly realized Cricket was grinning as big as anyone - or any dragon - had ever grinned in their life, and she wondered how she could have ever thought his look could have been scary.

"How do you like flying?" He asked. This time he waited for an answer.

Mish, even though she was over-stimulated and didn't feel like talking, still answered honestly. "It was amazing" she breathed. "Although I wish you hadn't tossed me so."

"I knew you'd love it." He said. "I've never had a pet that I could take flying before. The ducks flew away, the deer wouldn't hang on, and the badger kept screaming."

"I am *not* a pet." said Mish. "Your mom said you had to take me back!"

"I know, I know. It's just my entire life I've always wanted a pet human. I wish you didn't have to go."

"But you will take me back.. right?"

"Okay, okay.. but will you play with me first?"

The big scary manic smile came back, and Mish couldn't help be moved by his enthusiasm. "Sure" She said. "How about hide-and-seek?"

Cricket did his little happy dance and Mish found herself almost dancing with him. When he hid, he did the same thing as before at the cove - he crashed and thrashed his way into the jungle, leaving a wide swath of broken brush and trees that Mish could easily follow, to find him lying down next to a rock about the same size as him. He did not seem the least bit disappointed to be found. His tail wagged like a dog and he cheerfully agreed to look for her. He was quite horrible at it. Mish thought about slipping away and walking until she came across the ship, but she wasn't certain where on the island she was, and to her surprise she found herself enjoying waiting for Cricket to find her.

A dragon! She thought. I'm playing with a dragon! It's almost like he's my very own dragon.. like a pet. My pet dragon.

This thought sobered her. Cricket had just said his entire life he wanted a pet human. Yet she hated, absolutely hated, the idea of being anything's pet. She was a living, thinking being and wasn't going to be kept cooped up. What if a dragon - Cricket, for example - also a living, thinking being, didn't want to be a pet? How could he? How could anyone like being locked up? Mish had never thought about pets having feelings before, or what it might feel like to be kept prisoner.

"Cricket" she asked the dragon. "Would you like to be a pet?"

"A pet? I'm not a pet!" He said. "Pets need to be kept trapped in a cove. I don't think I would like that."

And that seemed to settle it. Mish realized it was unfair - cruel even - to expect a dragon to ever be her pet. As she thought about it, she realized this was the end of her dream, her dream of owning a dragon. She had come all the way to dragon island, and found a dragon who could be her pet, before realizing it was a foolish, childish wish, selfish and petty.

The serious question about being a pet, as well as Mish's new melancholy, seemed to tame Cricket as well. His boyish energy was replaced with a sleepy look and he waddled up to Mish and flopped at her feet, his head against the side of her body as she sat in the sand.

Eventually Cricket took her back to the ship. He still seemed to prefer Mish ride on his head, even though she had nowhere to grab and he often couldn't see. Mish asked why she couldn't ride on his back, and he seemed genuinely astonished at the idea, as if it had never occurred to him. She carefully slipped to his back. When they landed at the ship, Cricket said it wasn't as much fun that way.

The crew was still not back from their expedition to find the dragon's homes. Captain Costa was not on the ship. Only Bradley, their guide, remained on the ship to watch over it.

Bradley came out to talk to greet Cricket and Mish, but Cricket was shy and flew away when he saw Bradley approaching them on the beach. He said "My mom is waiting for me." and flew away.

Bradley was very impressed that Mish found a dragon that allowed it to ride it.

"He's not quite... normal." Was her reply.

"Did you ask if it would come with us?" He asked.

"Doh! No, I didn't." said Mish. "I didn't think of it. First I was so scared, and then I was afraid I was never going to get home, and I didn't want him to kidnap me again... I'm sorry. If I see him again, I will ask him."

Fortunately Cricket returned the next day. He didn't say anything to Bradley even when Mish introduced him, but at least he listened to Mish explain their quest to find their friend and princess Gillian. After the explanation, Cricket did not respond, but just asked Mish "Do you want to play with me?" Mish agreed, and the two of them played hide and seek and dug huge holes in the sand.

Cricket took Mish for a ride into the sky. He went as high as the clouds, and pointed out different small islands - little more than large rocks sticking out of the water - and which dragon lived on them.

"Can we go visit them? Maybe they will help us." Said Mish.

Cricket shook his head, almost throwing Mish off. "We usually don't let anyone in our home. They might steal our treasure. If we want to talk or play with each other, we meet somewhere on the mountain."

"Treasure?" Asked Mish.

"Yes, every dragon has their own horde of treasure that they sleep on, or at least nearby. Someday I'll have my own horde! It will be the biggest and best pile of treasure in the world!"

Mish thought this was very interesting. *Piles of treasure? Magical treasure? I wonder what magic it could do!* She asked Cricket what sort of treasure he had now, wondering if there was any magical items she could use, but sadly Cricket said he was too young to have his own horde. "If I collected my own horde, I'd have to leave home, but I'm not old enough yet. But someday soon I'll find my own cave and then I'll have lots of treasure!"

Several of the crew returned. They had no good news. They either found no dragons, or the few dragons who did bother to talk to them chased them away. They were impressed by Cricket and did their best to flatter him, praising his shiny green scales, or playing hide-and-seek with him. This attention seemed to encourage Cricket - Mish suspected he did not get complimented much, or ever - and Mish thought this would be a good time to get an answer if he would come with them on their journey.

"Oh, I wish I could!" He exclaimed with glee. "But I can't. My mother would never let me. I'm still in school, and she says I wouldn't last two days on my own."

Mish replied that she thought Cricket could defend himself very well - he beat up the three dragon bullies - but Cricket explained that he could not blow a decent fireball, and he had just learned to fly in the last ten years, basically a beginner, and it would be at least fifty more years until he molted into his adult body. "I don't even know how to change shape!" He said.

"How long would it take you to learn?" asked Mish, thinking that this would be a very handy skill to have.

"About three hundred years" said Cricket. Mish thought this was very disappointing.

Mish and the crew did their best to convince Cricket to come with them, even promising him his own horde of jewels, but ultimately Cricket said he couldn't leave home yet, and that he was afraid, and flew away.

Mish hoped to try again to convince Cricket the next day, Cricket did not return the next day, or the day after. Meanwhile the rest of the crew returned from their exploration of the island. Every one of them told the same story - the dragons watched them from the sky and alerted any nearby dragons of their presence, whereupon they flew away and the crew never got to speak to any dragons. The few that did land did not talk to them, only told them to go back to their ship, and no one, not even Bain, had the temerity to pick a fight with a dragon.

The only one who was not there was Captain Costa. Brendan told him Costa said he needed to do something, and 'don't go looking for me', just wait on the ship. Mish shared what she had witnessed a few nights ago, how the Captain had left the ship in the middle of the night and disappeared into the jungle as if he did not want to be seen or found. The crew mused on what this might mean, but came to no conclusions.

They told stories of their captain, how he had taken on three sabre-toothed cats with nothing but a pair of coconuts and survived. How he had conquered the east sea on their little pirate ship, robbing rich merchants and adventurers alike. He had no magic but would win any fight, survive any battle, and lead any crew to victory. They spoke as if he was right now gathering an army of dragons and would appear any moment. Everyone trusted the captain, and spoke of his return with smiles.

Everyone except Bain, that is. Mish asked him where he thought the Captain was, and Bain had muttered "Nowhere good."

The next day, the captain returned. But he did not arrive leading a group of dragons, or carrying a magic sword. He came being carried in the claws of a dragon. The dragon flew far overhead and when he was barely a speck in the distance, dropped the captain in the ocean.

18

"Anchor up! Oars out! Sails away!" came the cries of the crew. "Save the captain!"

The Lucky Pirate sailed to where the captain had vanished into the ocean. To their relief they heard him yell and saw him waving, and swung around and pulled him aboard. The dragons had dropped him far out in the ocean still wearing his boots, and it was a miracle he had been able to tread water for as long as it took for the ship to reach him.

Everyone asked him what happened, especially what had caused a dragon to throw him into the ocean?

"Just a misunderstanding, a little misunderstanding!" he said. But when asked if we should go back, the captain shuddered and declared that there was no returning to dragon island. He didn't explain exactly what this 'misunderstanding' might have entailed, but Bain had guessed what had happened and explained for him.

"You tried to steal it back." He said. "You tried to steal my sword back."

Brendan gasped. "Stealing from a dragon's horde is one of the few things that would cause all the dragons to work together. They guard their treasure most fiercely, almost as much as their eggs! They would hunt down anyone who did, and burn him alive!"

"They'd burn this ship and everyone on it." Grunted Bain. "That's why I said 'tried'. There's no way he succeeded. We wouldn't be alive if he had."

"Alright, alright!" said Costa. "It may have crossed my mind. But I didn't steal anything, or even try to. I just got a liiiittle too close to one of their dragon dens. It's common knowledge they leave their dens during the day, and I was hoping to just take a little peek inside when no one was looking. But just my bad luck, this dragon was a selfish, greedy little hoarder and was sitting on her pile. Or maybe it was her eggs. I couldn't tell, didn't have a chance to see, what with the fire and running. Over-sensitive, that's what they are, over-sensitive."

"You're lucky they didn't charge you with a crime." Said Brendan. "Dragons do have laws, and enforce them most thoroughly. I suspect the punishment for attempted theft is worse than being thrown out to sea."

"Yeah, like burning you on the spot." Said Bain.

"I didn't attempt to anything!" said Costa. "Except looking. I was just looking, That's all. Besides, they wouldn't have hurt me. I'm the legendary Captain Costa, I am! I just had to tell them my name and they became downright apologetic!"

"Apologetic?" said Bain, clearly not about to let up on the captain until he had been taught a lesson. "I can't see a dragon being apologetic for anything. More likely you told them you were a captain and your crew would come looking for you."

"Aye, aye, that I did. But either way, it made them change their tune."

"You mean it was just easier to throw you away than to kill you."

Costa said nothing to this, and Bain gave a wry smile, apparently satisfied that he had scored some sort of point on Costa's morality-meter.

"You were looking for my sword." said Bain. "Did you find it?"

"No, no, sadly I just found a pile of magical junk in a cave somewhere. I asked about our sword but the ungrateful lizards said they had thrown it away and didn't remember where! The nerve! Even when I asked for it so nicely."

Mish somehow doubted that the dragons threw anything magical away, or that he had asked for it nicely, but said nothing.

When the captain had had dinner and a change of clothes, he came out of his cabin and announced that they were traveling on to the kingdom of Orphel. True, they didn't have a dragon, and yes, Bain had lost his magic sword, but 'We didn't really expect those ungracious lizards to be of much help anyway.'

Mish approached Costa to tell him about Cricket, and how he might be willing to help them, and maybe he would listen to a captain, but once Costa found out that Cricket was a child - barely fifty years old, can't even blow a proper fireball! - he scoffed at the idea and Mish felt rather silly for bringing it up.

Mish thought that was the end of it, that she had missed her chance to persuade Cricket, and there was nothing to be done. As usual, her thoughts plagued her. *Why didn't I stay? Why did I stay on the*

ship when we all went after the captain? I could have stayed and convinced Cricket. For that matter, it's not too late! I could get in the rowboat and make it back to the island!

These thoughts were, of course, ridiculous. Mish had never been given the opportunity to stay. She had no way of knowing that they would never return when they went to rescue the captain. And who wouldn't rescue the captain in that situation? As for rowing back, the island was already out of sight, she had no way of navigating, and if she tried, she would be lost at sea.

Logic is little comfort in the dead of the night, especially when under attack by one's own mind, but Mish did her best. *Cricket never would have come with me. He's basically a little kid. A kid who is bigger than me, but still a kid. Besides, he said no, and it would not be right to try to change his mind. I need to respect his decision to stay.*

Still. It was my dream. It was his dream too.

And with that final sad thought she fell asleep.

19

Orphel was only three days away. "This side of the world seems to have more magic." said Costa. "Orphel, the dragon islands - they have more magic. No one knows why."

"So everyone can fly or something?" said Mish.

"Ha, I wish!" said Costa. "No, they have mages - magical craftsmen that can create the most amazing machines, and they've the trick of pulling magic out of metal and putting it elsewhere, like in that metal beast we're looking for."

The land of Orphel was a forbidding-looking place, with great cliffs and fierce rocks preventing them from approaching. They sailed along the coast "looking for the harbor" Costa explained. As they rounded a curve of coastline, an amazing sight greeted Mish.

"It's a fountain! In the ocean!" she exclaimed.

Costa chuckled. "Not just any fountain. You'll see."

The fountain was a great gushing spectacle of shimmering light spraying outward from a point in the water. A good ten feet high and across it sprayed, and Mish marveled at how such a feat was possible, miles from any land. Mish had seen a fountain in the city, but that was a pathetic little thing where the water came out in a small trickle. Mish knew vaguely that it had to do with water pressure and underground springs, but surely there could be no such spring here. If there was, how did they build a pipe under the ocean? And how did they get the water to spray so high? And the

light! The water seemed to shine and glow beyond mere sunlight, and Mish wondered if there was some sort of light source illuminating it from below.

As the ship sailed next to the fountain, she got her answer. Mish held out her hands to feel the water splashing on her hand, but to her surprise her hand contacted something hard and sharp that stung her hand. The water splashed onto the deck but instead of the familiar pitter-patter of water hitting wood, the sound was a clunk-clunk-clunk. The water was not water at all, but some sort of clear rock or stone.

"Diamonds!" She said, scrambling on her hands and knees to collect the pea-sized stones.
"They're diamonds!"

"Very good" said Costa. "They're diamonds. That there fountain is the reason diamonds are worthless."

"I thought diamonds were rare and valuable." said Mish.

"A hundred years ago, they were. But one day this fountain appeared out here. The first person to discover it became a very rich man. He filled his ship's hold full of the rocks and went back and sold them for a fortune. But others found the fountain too, and they tried the same thing, but by that time everyone had diamonds. Overnight they went from a king's present to worthless rock.

The ship passed the fountain. Mish looked behind the ship as they moved away from it. "Where do the diamonds come from? Can you take them all? Can the fountain run out?"

Costa chuckled. "Aye, that's a mystery and no mistake. No one knows where they all come from. If you dive down, you'll find a large chunk of metal stuck on a pole, with a little hole about the size of my fist, and diamonds just spewing forth from it. Nothing underneath. It's magic."

"It just appeared one day?"

"My best guess is someone found a way to create diamonds, but couldn't figure out how to get it to *stop* making diamonds. So they put it out here, as a symbol and warning of their power."

"Why here?"

"It marks the entrance to their kingdom. Look."

Mish looked ahead and saw that far ahead, barely at the limits of what she could see, was another mass of land. She looked at Costa for an explanation.

"We're entering the Straits of Legand." Even as he spoke these words he turned the wheel to the left and the ship began to turn between the cliffs far to the left and the cliffs ahead. "That's a strip of water between two cliffs. It leads to the Castorian Sea. There we'll find the city of Darmund, and hopefully our princess."

Mish marveled at the idea of a magic kingdom in a hidden sea, guarded by a magical fountain that spits diamonds. She envisioned piles and piles of diamonds falling, falling, falling endlessly into the bottom of the ocean. She wondered what it would look like if one swam down there. Would the entire sea floor glitter and shine? Or did something happen to them? Maybe there was a magical fish that ate nothing but diamonds, and swam in circles on the ocean floor below the fountain.

Mish had always wondered what the difference between a sea and an ocean, but as they sailed the Castorian sea, she found her answer - not much. The cliffs behind them soon faded out of sight and again there was nothing but water as far as the eye could see. Mish imagined that the waves maybe were a *bit* smaller, and the water a *tad* clearer, but other than that the sea was just like the ocean.

They sailed on through the night and it was approaching sunrise when Costa wakened Mish and said she'd want to see this.

As the sun rose ahead of them and the morning mist cleared, Mish saw them sailing towards the largest city Mish had ever seen. Houses and shipyards stretched to the left and right as far as Mish could see along the shore. The city was built on a low hill and as far as Mish could see up the hill and the surrounding countryside were houses and buildings. And at the very top of the hill, the sun rising directly behind it, was the castle.

This castle was the grandest thing Mish had ever seen. Its stone was creamy white, and it stretched higher into the sky than Mish thought possible. Spires and crenellations stuck out everywhere, including one giant tower in the center of the castle that was twice as tall as the rest of the castle. Mish gaped in amazement, and Costa smiled and said "I told you they had amazing craftsmen."

As they approached the harbor, Mish saw that one dock stuck out so far into the ocean that the ships in the harbor were still tiny specks as they approached.

"Is that a dock?" She asked Costa. "It must be a mile long!"

"It's a pier, made of stone, and it's almost two miles long." He said. "It's where they'll assign us to one of the smaller piers, closer to land."

The ship pulled up to the massive pier, where Costa and Bain got out to talk with, and pay, the harbormaster. "It's how much?!" Mish heard Costa yell. Their arguing went on for a while, with Costa raising his voice, until Mish heard the change of pitch in his tone and she knew he had switched into what she thought of 'charismatic Costa', where he was all smiles and acted like you were his best friend. Eventually Costa handed over a small bag of money, and then turned and yelled 'gangplank out! Looks like we're staying here!'

Costa explained to the crew that there were no closer spots available. Every one of the smaller piers were taken. "Some kind of royal affair", Costa was told.

"We will walk to town and inquire as to dragons and princesses. Oh, and put on a dress." said Costa to Mish. "People are more willing to talk to a lovely young woman."

Mish found herself blushing at that. *Young woman! I don't feel like a young woman. I'm still a kid!* She thought. *And there's no way I'm wearing a dress!* "There's no dresses aboard!" She protested.

"One of the princesses dresses will do." said costa.

"Those are costume dresses!"

"So?"

"I'm not wearing one of those big frilly things! I'll look ridiculous!"

"You'll look lovely, and if you want to find Gillian, you'll put it on. Haven't you learned to manipulate men yet?" He said this last statement with a wink and a grin. Mish turned to Bain for help but he just looked at her with a blank expression that said he would never willingly agree with Costa, but the captain was probably right and she should put on the dress.

Mish rolled her eyes and went below-deck to change. She came out in a huff, feeling ridiculous in these soft fabrics that would probably drown her in seconds if she fell overboard.

She stomped up the steps and presented herself for inspection. Bane and Costa took one look at her and said as one, "Wash your face."

Mish knew she should have cleaned up more, but didn't mainly out of protest for being made to dress up. She thought she was prepared to fight for her right to look at least a little bit like a rough and tough pirate, with a dirty face and hands, but since both Costa and Bain told her to do it, she went to the little basin in the lavatory and washed her face and hands.

"And comb your hair!" she heard Costa yell from above. This, Mish felt, was going too far. She didn't want to comb her hair. It was too much work and it hurt when she hit a snarl, but she knew she ought to do *something* about it, so she pulled her hair back into a bunch and fastened it with a ribbon. *I dare them to complain.*

She went above-deck with a scowl so fierce that even Bain smiled at her. *He smiled! At me! How dare he!*

"Wonderful!" Costa said. "You almost look like a lady. Excellent choice with that ribbon!". He offered Mish his arm. "Let's go, gorgeous!"

Mish almost snarled at him, stormed down the gangplank without touching him, and began the long walk down the pier.

Gorgeous! He called me gorgeous! And he looked at me! Looked me up and down as if I were a doll! She fumed.

Her second thoughts chimed in with the most annoying thing possible.

But why shouldn't he look at you? They said. *You're a pretty girl, and he's a man who likes pretty girls. He's not hurting you.*

But I'm not pretty. She thought.

Her third thoughts, never to be forgotten, spoke: *You do look quite beautiful.*

Oh, shut up! She thought at both them.

At that exact moment, Bain chuckled behind her, almost as if he could read her mind. Mish quickened her pace, trying to leave the two annoying men behind.

Mish, Bain, and Costa walked by many impressive ships. One was a mighty merchant ship, twice as big as the lucky pirate, with four large sails! Mish was impressed - until they approached the ships that occupied the piers closer to land.

These must be royal ships. She thought. Some were taller and bigger than even the merchant ships, but what astonished Mish was not their size but that some did not look like traditional ships at all. They were painted in colors Mish had never seen before, from brilliant sparkly blue to a deep red that seemed to pull the eye in. Some had colors that seemed to change and shift depending on where you looked at it. Sails were not big flaps of canvas but instead looked more like kites, on long strings that currently dangled down the mast. *If they all got wind in them, the kites could probably pull the ship. A kite ship!* Some smaller ships didn't have masts and Mish wondered how they moved. A couple ships even appeared to be made entirely of metal. Metal!

Her favorite ship was a traditional looking ship, made of wood, with proper masts and ropes and struts, but instead of sails, it appeared to be a collection of boxes suspended in the air on ropes. The boxes were cubes about two feet square but with the ends missing, a sort of big three-dimensional square. The boxes appeared to be made of canvas on sticks, similar to sails. Mish had no idea how a bunch of boxes could pull a ship, but assumed it must work somehow, and marveled at the beauty and creativity of a sail made of boxes.

And then Mish saw the dragon. It was the same dark green scales, shimmering and glowing with that magical internal light, poking its head out of the water.

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She gasped, grabbed Costa's arm, and pointed.

By the time they all saw what Mish was pointing at, Mish realized it couldn't be a dragon. It was too still, and bobbing up and down, and was floating where a ship should be. The trio walked along the length of the harbor towards it and saw that it was not a dragon – it was a ship. The ship looked almost exactly like the dragon they were searching for. Even the sides of the ship were made of that strange green metal, fashioned in the shape of scales. The front of the ship was carved in the head of a dragon, complete with painted red cats-eye eyes.

Mish kept staring behind her at those eyes, expecting them to blink any second, but they remained still. Eventually she concluded the ship was just a ship, as inanimate as the other ships. Just then some guards approached and made them move along.

"Obviously, whoever made that ship copied the look of the dragon that took Gillian." Mish said.

"They're probably made by the same person." Said Costa.

"That ship and those guards are owned by a king." Said Bain.

"Which means the king owns the dragon too." Said Costa.

“Great. A king’s dragon.” said Mish. “And if the king’s boat is here, the king’s dragon probably is too.”

They all looked up, as if the dragon might be flying overhead. But it obviously wasn’t anywhere near, else other people would be pointing up and shouting.

“We need information” Said Costa. “Let’s head to a pub and buy people some drinks.”

Mish paused at this. “Why do we have to go to a pub? Why can’t we just ask people here?” The harbor-side was packed with people. Stalls were on every corner. The streets leading into the city were packed with people, merchants, crew members, even people who just walked around and did nothing - tourists.

“What would they know? Don’t want to be bothering people on the street.” Said Costa.

“No, look, they won’t mind.” Said Mish, and walked up to the nearest person and asked “Excuse me, have you seen a giant metal dragon flying around here recently?”

The person gave her a startled look and scurried away.

“See?” said Costa.

Mish was in a petulant mood and said “Then we just keep asking. Eventually someone will answer.” Mish then went around asking people if they had seen any dragons recently. Eventually an old lady responded “Yes, they come around every now and then. But everyone goes into a tizzy and the guards harass them until they leave.”

“This dragon is... different. It’s not a real dragon, it just looks like one. It’s metal and sort of glows...”

“Ah, you mean the king’s dragon.” *Yes!* Thought Mish. *Finally someone who knows!* “Yes, it’s known that a dragon serves the king, but no one likes to talk about it. I think it lives in the castle. Sometimes it swoops through the town scaring people. Some say it can disappear and reappear somewhere else.”

“Have you seen it around here recently?” Asked Mish.

“Hmmm... my nephew, bless his soul, said he saw it a few weeks ago.”

“Thank you very much!” Said Mish, and turned towards Costa and Bain who was watching her from a distance, arms crossed. It was clear they didn’t approve of her tactics.

“See?” She said to them. “You just have to keep asking.”

The two men stared at her and then Costa turned to Bain said “Do you want to tell her?”

“That was embarrassing to watch.” Said Bain.

“Embarrassing?”

“Extremely.”

Mish just shook her head and wondered why men had to be so difficult. “Well, we learned what we needed.” She said. “I don’t see the problem. The dragon has been here about the time Gillian was taken. She’s probably here somewhere, probably in the castle.”

“We are happy to leave the talking to you.” Said Costa. “Now if you can figure out where she is and how to rescue her, we would be ecstatic.”

Mish continued asking people on the street and in the harbor if they had heard any news about the king’s dragon kidnapping a princess, but no one had heard anything of the sort. They did say that all the visiting royals were here for some sort of wedding, and maybe that was the princess they were looking for. None wanted to talk about the dragon, or the mysterious ship that looked like the dragon, other than to warn Mish that it ‘didn’t do’ to talk about it, and that the dragon, and the king, was a mean bastard and it was best not to inquire into his affairs. “Your friend isn’t the first person that dragon has taken” said one person, mysteriously. No one had details though. It was always a rumor - something they had heard from a friend’s brother’s cousin.

After a day of walking the streets talking to strangers, Mish, Costa and Bain agreed it was time to return to the ship. They were walking back down the long pier, facing the setting sun, when Mish thought she saw movement. Coming out of the sun was a dragon.

“It’s coming from Dragon Island.” said Costa. “I’m sure it’s not here for us. Still, probably best to hurry to the ship.”

The group hurried to the ship. They were just walking up the gangplank when they could see the dragon change course. It had been heading towards the city but as it approached it let out a roar and changed direction slightly to fly at them. It was most definitely here for them.

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Costa let out a curse. “It’s probably here to take me back. Can you do anything?” he said to Bain.

“Not without my sword” said Bain. “Time to use that silver-lined tongue of yours.”

They stood on the stairs leading below deck, ready to run or hide, and watched the dragon approach. With the setting sun directly behind it, it was difficult to see if it was a dragon they recognized. It flew lower and lower, aiming directly at The Lucky Pirate.

Mish thought there was something familiar about the way it flew. It was one of the sleeker type of dragons, with small wings and long body like a snake, like the guardian dragon that flew around the tip of the mountain of Dragon island. *Could it be the guardian dragon? No.. its smaller than that.. its... its..* The dragon flew close to the ship, still aiming directly at them. Mish was scared but then she recognized the dragon. It was Cricket. Before she could say anything, the dragon flew headfirst into the mast of the ship.

The mast bent as if it were a mighty tree bent under a fierce wind, and then snapped back, unbroken. The dragon bounced off it, hovered in the air for a second, then fell backwards. It hit the edge of the ship, bounced into the edge of the pier, then splashed into the water.

“Cricket!” cried Mish.

For it was indeed Cricket, Mish’s dragon friend. Cricket’s head and then claws appeared on the edge of the ship and he climbed aboard in an undignified flailing of tail and head. He pulled himself on board the ship and shook his body like a dog to shake off the water. If he had been injured from slamming into the mast, then the edge of the ship, then the stone pier, he showed no sign.

“I made it!” Cricket exclaimed. “Roth said I wouldn’t make it, but I did! And I found you right away!”

Mish ran up to Cricket and hugged his head. “You did make it! And you didn’t find me, I found you!”

Cricket let out a big dragon laugh. “No I found you silly!”

“Cricket!”

“Cricket! Cricket! My name is Cricket!” This obvious statement seemed to excite Cricket and he did his little happy dance right there on the ship, tail flying around and forcing Mish and the crew to take a few steps back.

“What are you doing here? Are you looking for me? And did you just run into the mast?”

“I don’t know, I saw you and was so excited and something hit me. I flew for days and days to find you!”

“Days and days? It only took us a few days to get here, and you can fly a lot faster than we can sail.”

“Well, maybe it was one day but it felt longer. I changed my mind. I want to come with you. I flew in the direction you sailed away, and then I saw the land, and then I saw the city, and then I saw you!”

“Why did you change your mind?” asked Mish.

“Well after you left I realized that it was my dream to have a human pet.. and it was your dream to have a dragon pet.. but neither of us wanted to be a pet. So I thought, it’s stupid for us not to be together because we don’t like the word ‘pet’. What if we called it something else? What if instead we could be... friends? I know you may not want me, but it’s always been my dream to play and hang out with a human. We could fly and play together - ”

Mish interrupted. “I was thinking the same thing! Yes, yes, yes! Yes, of course! I would love it if you were my pet- I mean, friend.” Feeling overwhelmed with relief and happiness, she ran forward and gave Cricket a hug.

Cricket seemed to try to bend down and hug her with his stubby claws, but something prevented him. He was holding something. “What’s that in your hand...er.. claw?” Mish asked.

“This! Oh! This! I almost forgot. It what you were looking for, right?” And with that he tossed the item to Bain. It was Bain’s broken magic sword.

Bain stepped forward and caught it. Stoic as always, he merely held it up as if checking he was really holding it, and then said, “Thank you Cricket.”

But Mish did not do stoic. “How? How did you get Bain’s sword!?”

“Oh, I knew you wanted it, so I asked Aldura for it.” Said Cricket. “He asked if this meant I was moving out, and I said yes, and he went and got it for me right away! I think he likes me.”

“Cricket! You’re amazing!” Mish said and hugged him again. This time Cricket hugged her back.

“Let’s go find your friend.” He said.

22

Mish and Cricket found Gillian that very evening. They flew to the castle and Mish heard someone yelling her name. There she was. Gillian, waving out of a window. Mish was very happy to see Gillian, even if she wasn’t in the highest turret in the castle, like the stories said she was supposed to be.

Cricket flew over to the window and, flapping his wings with gusto, hovered in the air. “Jump on!” said Mish. Gillian started climbing out the window when suddenly there was a familiar roar from

below them. Bursting out of the ground came dark green death on wings - it was the dragon. It headed for Cricket. Cricket veered out of its path and, terrified, flew in a random direction.

There was no way they could rescue Gillian while a huge dragon was chasing them. "To the ship!" She yelled at him. "Back to the ship!"

Cricket heard her and swerved back to the HARBOR and the long pier where their ship was docked, but it was clear they weren't going to make it. Cricket was not a very fast flier and the bigger dragon was closing in on them fast.

"Down!" Yelled Mish. "Between the ships!"

Doing little corkscrews to fly faster, Cricket dived down towards the harbor and the lines of royal ships. "I don't like this game!" he yelled.

Mish's stomach lurched up into her chest and she gripped Cricket's neck with all her might. Cricket headed for a gap of water between two of the ships, and Mish was so certain Cricket intended to dive into the water she squeezed her eyes tight and braced for the impact. But at the last second Cricket whooshed level with the water and shot out from between the two ships, heading towards the open water.

The large dragon did not follow them into the gap between the two ships but instead anticipated their maneuver. He was ahead of them when Cricket emerged into the open.

"Go back! Back!" She screamed. "Hide in the ships!"

Cricket turned around faster than should be physically possible and darted back between two different ships. Again Mish shut her eyes as she was sure they were going to crash into the side of the ships, but Cricket tucked his wings in and glided through the gap. The enraged large dragon tried to follow them but it was too big to fit, and pulled back right before it got stuck.

Cricket swooshed out of the gap between the two ships and immediately dodged a building. Startled sailors and guards threw themselves to the ground. Mish heard the voice of a little girl shout "Mama, a dragon!"

Cricket did not know what to do and to Mish's dismay she felt him again performing the complicated U-turn. She peeked a look and saw Cricket again going back between the two ships - back to where the dragon was waiting.

"Stop! Stooooopppp!" She screamed. Cricket tried to stop but doing so caused his wings to slam into the sides of the ship. He slammed into the side of a ship and Mish felt a burning pain in her arm and side. Then Cricket tried to fly upward, but he was off balance and had lost too much momentum, and the result was he flew upside down and crashed into the ropes and rigging above them.

Mish was thrown off his back and landed on some rope netting attached to the side of the mast, where she promptly got tangled up.

The large dragon landed on the stern of the ship, causing the entire ship to tilt into the water. It snapped at Cricket, but cricket was tangled in the ropes on the other side of the mast and the dragon could not reach him. Unwilling to wade into the mess of ropes and sails and risk getting stuck, the large dragon let out a huff of frustration and flew away.

Cricket, being a sleek and aerodynamic creature, wiggled his way out of the ropes and thumped onto the deck. He stood up, stood there for a few seconds as if processing what had just happened, then shook his head and turned towards Mish. He stumped over to her and asked "are you ok? Let me get you out." He started to bite at the ropes. Mish tried to help him but then saw something much more important. The dragon was coming back.

"The dragon! Behind you!" She yelled. Cricket turned and they both watched as the dragon gave a mighty U-turn over the water and headed directly towards them. The familiar roar that signified the dragon was charging at his prey told them the dragon intended to crash into the ship, and them. Its bulk and momentum would prevent it from getting tangled up, even if that meant destroying half the ship in the process.

"I can't get out!" She yelled. "Fly away! It will chase you!"

Cricket, despite the seriousness of the situation, smiled a big dragon grin and said "It'll never catch me!" and flew upward.

Fortunately, the big dragon either didn't see that Mish was trapped, or didn't care and just pursued whatever was moving, in this case, Cricket. Mish watched in horror as the big dragon overtook Cricket and opened his mouth wide to bite the little dragon, but just as it snapped its mouth closed Cricket would swerve and the dragon would miss. Several times she thought Cricket had been eaten but he would emerge from behind the dragon, laughing. He hid between the ships for safety, and would zip in and out of the row of ships, taunting the big dragon and daring him to follow.

At one point the large dragon got tired of the hide-and-seek and followed Cricket between two of the ships. It didn't fit, and Mish saw the sides of both boats lurch as the dragon struggled to free himself.

Mish took the time to free herself from the netting. She struggled and struggled until she felt her dress ripping and she fell to the deck. The netting gave her an idea. She ran around the ship until she found what she was looking for- a fishing net, lying loose in a corner of the deck. Every ship had one - there weren't always schools of fish out in the ocean, but when they did see a school of fish they would throw the net overboard and collect what fish they could.

Nets were heavy, especially when wet, and usually required several men to lift and throw, but this one was dry and Mish was able to collect the bulky thing and carry it in a tangle over her head.

Several ships down, Mish heard a crack of breaking wood and a roar of an enraged dragon, and knew the large dragon had broken free.

Barely able to see, she began to climb the largest mast. "Cricket!" She yelled, hoping he was near. "Fly it into the net!" "OK!" came his reply. "Fly into the net!" Mish hoped she had misheard.

Above her she heard the sound of dragon's teeth snapping and knew that cricket had resumed his deadly game of 'catch-me-if-you-can'. Cricket was no longer laughing though, and she imagined his movements were becoming sluggish. She would have to be quick.

She climbed as high as the rigging allowed her, higher than the crow's nest, and worked her way out onto the struts where the sails hung. She gathered up the net, hid it as best she could behind her back, and yelled at the two dragons jousting in the air 'HEY UGLY!'

To her dismay, Cricket reacted to the taunt and turned and flew straight at her. *Stupid dragon! I didn't mean you!*

But regardless of how it happened, the plan was working. The big dragon was chasing Cricket, meaning it was flying at her. She just had to wait until it was about to eat her, then throw the net at it and jump out of the way. Cricket just needed to get out of the way.

Cricket flew straight at her. He swerved once or twice as the large dragon caught up to him, but each time Cricket readjusted his path to fly straight at her. As he approached she could see his eyes and realized they were wide open with terror. He was no longer playing with the dragon, but was terrified for his life.

Then why is he flying at you? A little voice inside her said. Why wouldn't he hide in the ships? Did he think I said 'fly into the net?' Oh Gods, he did, didn't he... He's going to fly into my net. Stupid, stupid dragon!

Just then cricket looked her in the eye and lowered his head slightly, and Mish realized Cricket intended to catch her on his head. He had seen her standing exposed at the top of the mast and was terrified, not for himself, but for her. He was coming to save her!

You stupid dragon! She thought. *You stupid, wonderful, brave dragon!*

"Get out of the way!" she screamed "Get out of the way!" But Cricket did not seem to hear. He continued to fly at her. She would not be able to let the big dragon run into it - she would have to throw the net - throw it over Cricket.

She let go of the rope she was hanging on to and, balancing on the strut, reached back and grabbed the heavy net with two hands. Straining every muscle in her body, she heaved the netting out into the sky with all her might. She threw her entire body into the throw, throwing herself off the mast in the process. She hoped she would clear the deck and land in the water. If she didn't clear the deck she would break her leg. But as she released the net, she realized she had not gotten enough force behind it. The net was too heavy and took up too much of her momentum. She was too

weak. It was too heavy, and her throw was short. And worst of all, she had not managed to throw the net high in the air. She had thrown the net right at Cricket.

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But she had underestimated the little dragon. Quick as a flash of lightning, he swooped under the net and caught Mish as she fell. With a whoomp and the air leaving her lungs, Mish found herself - again - grabbing and scrabbling to hang on to Cricket's head.

The large dragon had been right behind Cricket, and the netting slammed full into its face. It let out a roar and began thrashing its head back and forth, which was probably the worst thing it could have done, as the netting spread out and settled over its body. One end hooked on the dragon's teeth, and another edge fell over the pumping wings. The dragon managed to get two solid pumps out of its wings as it tried to fly upward after Cricket, but the netting quickly wrapped around one wing, and the dragon began to fall out of the sky.

One wing still beat wildly but it was insufficient to keep the dragon aloft. The result was a dragon who couldn't fly straight, and as it fell it curved into the row of ships.

The first ship it managed to miss the mast. The second ship, it bumped the mast, then flew into a sail, and finally went crashing down to a deck, tangled hopelessly in nets, rigging, ropes and sails from multiple ships.

Cricket and Mish watched it thrash about. Then Mish felt Cricket bank downwards and head towards the entangled dragon.

"What are you doing?" She yelled. "We have to get Gillian! We have to get out of here!"

"I'm seeing if it's okay!" Yelled Cricket over his shoulder.

"What?! It's a robot! Who cares if it's okay!"

But Cricket had already landed in the ruins of the deck and hopped over to the dragon lying tangled on the deck. It went still as its big red eye saw Cricket.

"Are you okay?" Cricket asked.

The dragon only snarled and thrashed some more.

"Why were you chasing us?" Cricket persisted. The dragon did not react, but only continued to act like a trapped animal, snarling and thrashing.

"If you want to play with someone, you have to ask first." Cricket said.

Gods! Thought Mish. *Sometimes you act so smart!*

She pounded on the side of cricket's neck. "It can't understand you!" she said. "It's not a real dragon. We. Need. To. Get. Gillian!"

But then Mish saw something that made her want to stay. The dragon's thrashing had caused it to reveal the other side of its face. She saw it was missing an eye. Where there should be a glowing red orb was a dark cavity. And sticking out of that cavity was the hilt of a sword. Her sword.

It was Mish's sword that she had found in the forest, that Bain had thrown at the dragon as it kidnapped Gillian and vanished into the portal. And it had been stuck in the dragon all this time.

Mish slipped off Cricket's back and approached the dragon. It could not see her and did not react. Its thrashing had died down to the occasional twitch, and Mish felt she could safely pull the sword from the eye.

"What are you doing?" asked Cricket.

"Shh." whispered Mish. "I'm getting my sword back."

"What sword?" whispered Cricket.

Mish turned to respond to Cricket and saw, poking their heads over the edge of the ship, several people staring and pointing at them. A dragon crashing from the sky attracted a lot of attention and people were coming to look. The collision had knocked the gangplank into the water, but it wouldn't be long before a replacement was found. Mish saw a small group of riders wearing red, guard's colors, galloping out of the castle. If this really was the king's dragon, they were probably coming to free it.

"Go! Get Gillian." ordered Mish.

"But -" Cricket began to protest, but Mish cut him off.

"NOW!" she said, and Cricket, hearing the voice of command, reserved only for teachers and his mother, obeyed. He flew off towards the castle.

Mish turned back towards the dragon. It thrashed a few times more, like a fish out of water, and Mish had to carefully circle around to a place where she was certain the dragon could not simply turn his head and see her. She crept up to the dragon, carefully, slowly, and reached out her hand. The dragon's head was as big as she was, and the sword stuck out at waist height. She closed her hand over the hilt of the sword.

The dragon froze and began sniffing the air. *It knows I'm here. But it's not certain. I have to be quick.*

And so, drawing her courage and a breath, she pulled hard on the sword. It didn't budge, but the dragon did. With a roar it renewed its thrashing, and Mish fell to the deck. She stood up and waited for the dragon to settle down again so she could try again, but a shout from the edge of the ship, and a thunk as the edge of a gangplank landed on the deck, told her she was out of time.

Gathering up what remained of her ragged dress and her courage, Mish launched herself on the head of the dragon. The dragon bucked with renewed vigor, but Mish had two hands on the handle of the sword and was determined to hang on or die trying. Mish held on, and then managed to get one foot, then two feet on the dragon, and pulled and tugged as the dragon bucked beneath her.

She heard the stamping of boots coming on board the ship. "Stop! Stop in the name of the king!" Someone shouted from directly behind her. Hands grabbed her shoulder and -

The sword came free. The sudden release threw Mish backwards to the deck. She pulled herself to her feet. Guards were all around her, standing over her. Mish brought up the sword in front of her. The guards lunged for her - and stopped.

For the sword was alive. Lighting crackled up and down its length, and the occasional spark shot out from the blade. It was still her sword - it still had the same rough unfinished edge, the same plain, unadorned handle, it was still the same short stubby length - but now it was obviously magical.

Awed, reached out and touched the sword. Nothing. The lightning and glow did not alter in the slightest. She felt not a tingle.

Mish looked up at the guards with their spears leveled at her. They were all wide eyed and staying a healthy distance away. Mish marveled at the sight she must look. A young girl in a puffy (if somewhat tattered) pink dress, holding a glowing magical sword, lying next to the body of a captive dragon. A smile began to form on her face. She didn't know what was going to happen, but she just knew she could handle it, and stood up.

Just then she became aware of a high metallic humming. It was coming from the dragon. When Mish had pulled the sword free, it had gone completely still, as if the sword was its power source and Mish had disconnected it from power.

But clearly there was still some power in the dragon, for it was humming. The humming became louder and louder, higher and higher pitch, until Mish and the guards were backing away from the dragon, covering their ears.

The guards turned and ran. Mish, not willing to run in the direction they did, ran towards the back of the ship and prepared to jump into the water. Just then, Cricket landed on the deck beside her. Gillian was lying on his head. She looked just as undignified as Mish had felt on Cricket's head. Her knees gripped his snout and her feet dangled in front of his eyes, while she held on to his ears. But there was no time for reunions.

"What's happening?" she yelled.

"I don't know!" yelled Mish. The humming - now more of a shriek - was so loud it made hearing anything else difficult. She ran and jumped on to Cricket's back, yelled "go go go!" and Cricket took into the air.

There was a pause in the world as the ground lifted away and everyone recovered from what had just happened. Mish and Gillian looked at each other. A big grin began to form on each girl's face.

"Long time no see!" Said Mish. "Anything new?"

"Oh, you know. Same old, same old." Said Gillian, grinning back at Mish. "Nice sword."

"I know, right?" said Mish, waving the glowing sword about, and the two of them laughed.

"What?" said Cricket below them. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing." Said Mish. "We're just happy to be alive."

The two girls reached out and touched hands. Best friends, reunited at last. Mish had rescued the princess on a flying dragon, and had even found a magical sword in the process. The evil dragon was defeated, and they flew back towards the pirate ship and home.

That is, until a startled look flashed across Gillian's face. "What is that!?" she yelled and pointed behind Mish.

Behind them was the harbor with its row of royal ships. Mish looked back and instantly saw what Gillian was pointing at. One of the ships was glowing a brilliant emerald green. It was the small dark ship that looked like the big dragon.

Mish and Gillian watched as the black ship glowed and pulsed, the pulses coming faster and faster - and then with a flash the ship *transformed*. The instant it did so the screeching hum that they could still hear from the big dragon stopped.

"What's happening?" said Cricket. "What's going on?"

"The ship just transformed into a dragon!" Yelled Gillian.

"Another dragon? Do you think it is friendly?" said Cricket.

"I don't think so" Yelled Mish. "Hurry back to the ship! We're almost there!"

For they were indeed almost back at their ship. Mish recognized the shape of the two masts and saw with relief the sails were unfurled, the crew ready to sail.

"It's coming after us!" Yelled Gillian.

"Don't worry! Said Mish. "It looks like a small dragon - it won't be able to get us on the ship."

Just then Gillian let out a gasp. "What?!" asked Mish.

"It just vanished!" said Gillian.

Before Mish could reply, the dragon appeared out of thin air next to them. There was no portal, no sound - just a brief shimmering of the air - and the sleek little black dragon was flying beside them.

Without warning it swooped sideways and clamped its teeth around Cricket's body. Cricket let out a scream of agony and plunged from the sky.

Mish and Gillian fell with Cricket. The dragon had his jaws buried into Cricket's side, right by Mish's foot. She kicked hard at the dragon but it had no effect. Cricket continued to bellow in pain.

Bain saved them. With his superhuman strength he leaped from the ship and, with uncanny accuracy, collided into the side of the black dragon. His sword was not intact, and he could not bash the dragon from the sky, but it was still a hilt with a lethal sliver of metal sticking out of it, and Bain reached back and stabbed his broken sword into the side of the dragon.

The dragon reacted like a viper. Faster than Mish could follow, it let go of Cricket and bit Bain. "No!" screamed Gillian.

The bite did not get Bane full on the side – it was not the death grip that it had on Cricket - but Bain, for all his superhuman strength, was still human. He did not have green scales harder than most metal to protect him. All he wore was his usual black tunic, which did nothing to stop the teeth, as big as his hand, from penetrating his skin.

Bain lost his grip on the dragon and fell from the sky. The black dragon, apparently unharmed, broke off his downward plummet and let Cricket, Bain, Mish, and Gillian crash into the water.

The sudden impact knocked the air out of Mish's lungs, and salt water quickly took its place. Choking and flailing, she thrashed about, trying to regain her sense of direction. But even as she overwhelmed by the shock of cold, of collision with the water, of the inability to breathe - even as was in danger of drowning, her mind still functioned, and her thoughts screamed one thing at her - she had dropped her sword.

I dropped the sword, I dropped my sword! Her thoughts screamed. She thrashed about with her arms, hoping for the feel of metal, but there was nothing. She even attempted to open her eyes, even though she had never been able to see underwater, the salt stinging her eyes too much to keep them open. She looked and as expected, the salt stung her eyes, but it was impossible to see. The water was dark and her impact had filled the water with bubbles.

As survival instincts and gravity kicked in, Mish kicked upward. She burst into the air and spit and hacked out the stinging salt water. The sun was setting, a cold wind was rising up, the waves were high, and it was difficult to see more than a few feet in any direction. "Gillian! Cricket! Bain!" She yelled.

"Here!" Came Gillian's voice from a few yards to her side. "Help!"

Mish started swimming in the direction of the voice but the bulky dress clung to her legs and prevented her from swimming. She thrashed her way out of the dress and swam over to Gillian. Gillian was treading water furiously, apparently unharmed, but Bain was floating face up in the water,

his eyes closed. Gillian was trying to keep his head out of the water, but Bain was a big man and the result was he was pushing Gillian under.

"He's hurt!" sputtered Gillian as she struggled to keep her and Bain afloat. "Help me get him to the boat!"

Gillian swam over to Bain and tried to lift his arm over her head so she could tow him to the pier, which she saw now was about fifty feet off to their right. As she did so Bain let out a groan of pain. Mish thought about asking him if he could swim, but his eyes were closed, his body limp, and it was clear he could not function.

He was, however, somewhat conscious. To Mish's amazement, he still held his broken sword. He had somehow managed to hang on to it despite having stabbed the dragon, being bitten, and falling into the water. Years of training and habit had caused his body to hang on to its most treasured possession, even while he was semi-conscious.

"The sword.." Bain muttered. He opened his eyes a small amount and looked at Mish. "Take it..." With obvious difficulty, he raised it out of the water and held it up for Mish to grab. Mish grabbed it and Bain's arm dropped, the last of his strength expended.

As Mish grabbed the hilt of the sword she felt a warmth sweep through her body. It started with her arms, spread through her torso, and shot down her furiously kicking legs. The aches and difficulty of kicking the water suddenly vanished. It was almost as if her legs weren't there, or they weren't kicking the water. It was more like she was kicking the air.

Astonished, she looked down and saw that yes, her legs were still kicking, and yes, she was still in water, but it was as if the water offered no resistance. Even the weight of her own legs, something she had always taken for granted, seemed gone.

Experimentally she kicked a little harder and she felt her body rising higher in the water. This was amazing! She felt as if she kicked hard enough she could fly straight out of the water, into the sky, and onto the ship. She kicked as hard as she could. The water churned furiously and she rose out of the water, but only up to her waist. Super-strength had its limits.

She pulled at Bain with her free hand and to her surprise Bain rose out of the water as if he weighed nothing. The sword was giving her super-strength! She could swim to shore in seconds with this strength, carrying Bain, Gillian, and even Cricket!

She moved over to Gillian and with one hand lifted her out of the water onto her back. She grabbed Bain's arm and pulled it around her neck. "Where's Cricket?" she asked Gillian.

"I don't know!" Gillian answered. "He fell into the water!"

Looking around, Mish could see Cricket was nowhere in sight. She swam towards the ship and found she could move through the water with ease. Even with a sword in one hand, her other hand hanging on to Bain, and another person on her back, the water seemed to offer no resistance. She quickened her pace and found the boat approaching with alarming speed. She reached its side in

seconds. She instinctively felt she could have grabbed on to one of the ropes hanging from the side and with a mighty tug, sent all three of them flying onto its deck, but she was still not completely comfortable with this new-found magical strength, and opted for a more traditional way of climbing out of the water.

“You go first.” She said to Gillian, and Gillian leapt off her back and climbed up the side of the boat. Mish followed but Mish only had two hands and it was difficult to hang on to Bain, the sword, and the rope all at the same time. She managed to balance the unconscious Bain on her shoulders (*He’s so light!*) while she climbed up the rope onto the ship. She was just pulling both of them onto the deck when the dragon attacked.

The small black dragon slammed into Mish, sending her and Bain flying. Gillian had managed to scream a warning at the last second, and Mish had a split second to decide – should she throw Bain into the ship and take the hit, or should she drop Bain and save herself? She decided to throw Bain onto the ship, and a millisecond later she was slammed into the side of the ship with all the force of, well, a dragon. She reached up and managed to grab onto the rail, but as she did the sword slipped out of her hands and fell into the water.

Mish watched in horror as it plunged into the sea. A foolish fancy flashed through her mind that the sword would float, or maybe even hover above the water and fly back to her hand. It was a magical sword, right? But its magic was that of the strength-granting kind, not of the metal-floating kind, and the sword slipped into the water.

Mish knew it was hopeless to try to dive down and find it, not in this light, not when she could not see underwater, but she had to try. She let go of the rail and was about to slip into the sea when Gillian yelled “Mish!” and yanked her onto the boat. The dragon had swooped around and was coming back for another attack. Gillian pulled Mish onto the deck and the dragon whistled overhead, unable to get at them without landing on the ship.

Mish looked up and saw that the crew of the ship were all there. There was Costa at the helm. The ship was already under sail. Costa had seen the aerial acrobatics of Cricket and the big dragon, then Cricket flying towards them carrying Gillian, and ordered them to sail at once. They had been moving off the pier when the small dragon appeared and Bain launched himself at it to save them.

The ship was now heading out to sea. They had rescued Gillian, but there was still one problem. The dragon. It was circling overhead, obviously faster than the ship, and it was clear it was not going to let them go.

Everyone stared upward huddled under the masts in fear. If they went near the edge of the ship the dragon would dive-bomb and try to bite or claw at them. The dragon circled slowly, seemingly content to let them go. Just when Mish thought it couldn’t do anything to them, and they would get away safely, the dragon flew above the mast, hovered in the air, then opened its mouth wide and reared back its head.

“Fire!” Mish yelled. She had seen that motion before, and it always meant fire coming out of a dragon’s mouth. But instead of the gush of orange that she expected, a green mist issued instead. It did not fly - it hissed, it floated, it settled on the masts and drifted down towards the crew.

The crew started coughing and choking. “Poison!” Yelled Costa. “Cover your mouth!” Everyone tucked their mouth and nose into their shirt, but even as they did so, they realized this was more than just poisonous air - where it impacted the skin, it stung and burned.

“Not poison!” yelled Gillian. “Acid! Get away from it!”

The crew, including Mish, ran below deck or piled into Costa’s cabin. From there they looked at the green mist, now quickly dissipating in the sea breeze. They thought the attack had been rather ineffective, until looked upward at the sails. The main blast had hit the sails, which were now mostly green. The dragon was not trying to kill them. It was trying to destroy the sails.

“Bloody hell..” muttered Costa.

“Will we be able to move?” asked Mish.

“What do you think?” he replied. Indeed, Mish already felt the speed of the ship slowing as the sails were no longer fully catching the wind.

The black dragon had risen back up in the air and continued to circle. It did not even dive-bomb when any of them went near the edge. It just stayed up high, watching.

The crew came out and watched it and the sails. Holes appeared in the sails as the acid slowly ate through them. The ship was moving slower. After about half an hour it seemed the size of the holes had stabilized, as the acid wore off. The ship was damaged but still moving.

“What’s it waiting for?” asked Mish.

“I’m afraid we will find out soon.” said Gillian.

She was right. A roar was heard across the water. The city of Darmund and the land was still in sight, and from that direction they could see a black dot moving over the water. It was a dragon, flying straight towards them. The guards must have freed the dragon from the ropes and net, and now it was coming for revenge. Somehow the little black dragon was communicating with it, and had disabled the ship so it could catch them. To do what, though?

The crew could do nothing but watch in dread as the big dragon caught up with them. They had spears and bows but it was obviously futile against something so big and powerful. Something in its demeanor, the purposeful way it flew, told them it was angry, and it wasn’t going to mess about. They were right. The dragon dove at them with fire bursting from its mouth.

This was proper dragon fire, not the underdeveloped puffs that Cricket had done to cook Mish’s food. It was not the little fireballs from a young dragon. Even though it was only an imitation dragon, this

was full on proper dragon fire. The acid on the sails was flammable, and when the fire hit, quickly caught on flame.

The dragon didn't stop. It kept looping around and diving, spewing a tremendous gust of flame at the ship each time. The masts quickly caught on fire. Costa ordered the rowboat overboard and between blasts of dragon breath the crew piled into the little boat.

It was clear the ship was a goner. Half of the deck was already in flames. One of the masts came crashing down. Everyone was off the ship - everyone except Mish, Gillian, and Bain. Bain was still unconscious on the deck and Gillian would not leave him, and Mish would not leave Gillian. Together they lifted the huge man towards the rowboat. Costa came back and helped heave the big man into the little rowboat.

Mish and Gillian were about to jump into the rowboat when the small black dragon made its move. Its target was Gillian, and seeing her exposed on the edge of the ship and about to jump to safety, it swooped down and with a mighty swing of its tail knocked Gillian and Mish away from the rowboat, back onto the ship.

It followed with a mighty thump on the creaking, burning deck. Weakened planks shattered under its feet as it stomped its way towards Gillian. The large dragon stopped blowing fire on the main ship and attacked the small rowboat, a coordinated tactic between the two dragons to separate Gillian from the rest of the crew. Cries of alarm from over the side of the ship told Mish that the rowboat had in desperation cut the ropes and pushed off away from the main ship. Their means of escape was gone.

There was always the water though. Together Mish and Gillian ran towards the edge of the ship, but not matter which way they ran the black dragon cut them off. It trapped the two girls between itself and the flaming wreckage of the ship. The other mast burned down behind them in a flaming explosion of sparks and leftover acid. The dragon stood over them as they slowly succumbed to the heat and smoke.

Just as Mish felt her knees give way and was about to pass out, she heard a mighty roar. Well, mighty for a little dragon who couldn't do anything properly. It was Cricket, leaping out of the water and slamming into the side of the black dragon, knocking it away from Gillian and Mish.

"Run!" he yelled, but as he did so he turned to look at them, and the black dragon was on him in a second. Clumsy Cricket was no match for the lethal killing machine that was the black dragon. It was the exact size as Cricket, but where Cricket was slow it was fast. Where Cricket was innocent this dragon went for the throat. Which is what it did to Cricket. It bit Cricket on the neck and pinned him to the ground. Mish and Gillian had been running for the edge of the ship, but when Mish saw Cricket go down she stopped. Gillian ran on without her and jumped over the edge of the ship.

"Cricket!" she yelled. At this cry the black dragon snapped its head up and looked at her. It let go of Cricket and charged at her. But its goal was not her, but Gillian. Cricket had distracted it long enough to allow Gillian to escape, and the black dragon was determined to correct its mistake. It

ran right through her, knocking her down. Cricket collapsed to the deck. Mish crawled over to his side.

Cricket was bleeding from the side of his neck. He raised his head to look at Mish but then collapsed. His breathing was labored and he closed his eyes and said "Sorry, Mish.." Mish realized this was the first time he had called her by her name.

"No, no, no, Cricket, Cricket, you're going to be okay! We just have to get off this ship!" The ship was now fully in flames and Mish and Cricket were in the last little bit of the deck that was not burning. She would have to run through the fire now to escape, but the water was close. *The burns won't be that bad. I just have to save Cricket...*

Then Mish noticed the glow. Cricket was holding something in his little stubby claws. Two somethings. Two swords. One of them glowing a familiar orange and yellow glow, the color of fire and lightning. It was her sword, that she had dropped in the water when the black dragon had knocked Cricket out of the sky. In Cricket's other claw he held the remains of Bain's sword, that she had dropped mere minutes ago when climbing aboard the ship.

Cricket opened his eyes and pushed the swords in her direction "I think you dropped these." He said. "It was a fun game." And with those final words he closed his eyes and went still. Mish lunged forward and grabbed the two swords. The glowing one did the usual nothing - it just felt like a normal sword in every respect except how it looked. Bain's broken sword, as she grabbed it, gave her that same rush of warmth and strength spreading down her body.

She wanted to feel happy and excited and wanted to fight the dragons, but Cricket was still hurt and she would not leave him. She looked up and around for help, but all she saw was the large dragon swooping down at Cricket.

It had abandoned its harassment of the crew and had returned to kill Cricket. Cricket had attacked its kin and foiled their plan, and for that there would be no forgiveness. It opened its mouth and let out the fiercest blast of fire, a blast almost as big as the ship, directly at Cricket and Mish.

Mish saw the fire coming and knew this was the end. There was no avoiding this blast. The water was too far away. It would burn her to a crisp where she stood.

But Cricket had one last reserve of energy left. He threw himself at Mish and covered her with his body. Lying underneath him, Mish felt the huge blast of heat pass around her. It singed her face, her arms, and hair, but she was unharmed.

Cricket, however, was not. He had taken the full blast of dragon fire on his back. Dragons are naturally resistant to heat, and their scales can survive a blast or two before melting, but Cricket was injured and could not move. He had used the last of his energy to cover Mish. He passed into unconsciousness, pinning Mish to the deck.

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The fire had taken the oxygen out of the air, and Mish could not breathe. The air was so hot it hurt her lungs. She had managed to hang on to the swords - both of them - so with the sword's super strength she pushed Cricket off her. She stood up and saw the large dragon coming around for another blast.

"Cricket! Get up! Move!" she screamed, but the little dragon only lay there like a dead thing.

Mish tried to get under cricket to lift him, but could not get a grip on the wet dragon scales. His body flopped off her back onto the deck, and Mish barely had time to dive behind his body when the dragon fire hit her again. This time Mish was not fully protected by Cricket and the fire licked at her back and neck. She let out a whimper in pain, both for herself and for the unconscious Cricket who once again had taken the full blast of the dragon's fire. She looked at his helpless body and saw that it was glowing orange, already heated so hot it gave off light. His nose and face were black and burnt. Mish knew he would not survive another blast.

The dragon swooped around. Mish saw that it was going to attack again, and again, and again until Cricket, and her, was nothing more than ash.

Mish could not lift Cricket. She could herself barely breathe. The flaming wreckage of the ship was all around her. The deck gave a shudder as part of it fell away. The ship began to list as below deck, burning boards had given way and the sea rushed in to claim its prize.

The rowboat and the crew - whatever was left of it - was somewhere nearby. She could still make it. She would have to run through the fire, and it would burn and scar her, but she would survive. She just had to leave Cricket.

She turned and faced the water and fire. She took a deep breath, ignoring the sting of the smoke as it filled her lungs. She prepared to jump into the water.

Behind her the dragon was making its approach. This would be its last. It would open its mouth and shoot its deadly fire that would consume the ship. This would be the last the ship could take. The last Cricket could take. Before he died.

Cricket.

Cricket would die.

And Gillian. Gillian would die, or be taken away.

If Mish jumped into the water, she would not be able to fight.

She had to fight.

She had to fight now.

She turned and faced the dragon. It came with a roar, mouth open.

Mish took a step forward. She stepped over Cricket's lifeless body. In each hand she held a sword. In one a glowing magical sword which seemed to glow brighter than the fires around her. In the other a broken yet mighty sword that granted her super strength. She raised the swords.

The dragon saw her. As it reared its head back to summon its fire, it looked down at her with its glowing red eye. Its one, single, red eye.

The other eye was missing, taken by the very sword Mish held in her hand.

Mish pulled her arm back, and threw the glowing sword as hard as she could at that evil red eye.

Fueled by the magic strength from the other sword, it rocketed into the sky. It flew straight and true directly at the dragon's eye, even as the dragon reared forward and unleashed a mighty blast of flame directly at Mish.

The dragon bit the sword out of the air.

But in doing so it stopped its flame breath. It flew past Mish, the gust of wind fanning the ship's flames, feeding them, sending them higher.

Mish now had a hand free and tried again to pick up Cricket, but he was too big and she could not get her arm around him. She tried to throw him but it was a clumsy throw and ended up being more of a push. The limp form of Cricket slid across the deck - right into a fire.

The fire would not kill him, not right away, but it meant Mish could not get to him. She tried to run into the fire but the pain forced her back.

She had no choice anymore. She had to leave Cricket. She ran and jumped into the water.

She did not know where the rest of the crew was, or the other dragon, or even where herself was. All she could see was smoke, and waves, and the burning wreckage of the ship, and the large dragon coming around for another pass.

Again the large dragon it charged at the ship. Again it reared its head to blast Cricket and the ship to smithereens. In desperation Mish threw the broken, strength-granting sword at the dragon. But Mish no longer had her feet firmly planted on the deck of a ship. Now she was struggling in the water with salt and smoke stinging her eyes, and the dragon was not coming right at her, but was fifty feet away in a cloud of black smoke and flames. Super strength does not grant super accuracy, and the sword flew straight into the side of the ship.

She felt the strength flee from her body. She was exhausted and out of options. She could only watch helplessly as the dragon flew at the helpless Cricket, rearing its head back for the killing blast.

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The dragon thrust its head forward to spew its killing blast... but no flame came out.

Instead the dragon spasmed as if some great invisible fist had hit its side. It turned away from the ship and flew upward, and Mish could see something was wrong with it. One great spasm led to two, then many, and now the dragon was convulsing and thrashing about even as it tried to fly.

Its wings stopped pumping rhythmically and the dragon started to tilt and fall from the sky. Mish could see its stomach was glowing orange. The glow grew bigger and bigger, and as it grew so did the dragon's discomfort. There was a flash of red and yellow from dragon's stomach, and it fell from the sky.

Twisting and thrashing the whole way down, the dragon landed full on the burning ship. The impact was tremendous. There was a mighty explosion of steam and spray as dragon and ship and fire and water collided. Flaming splinters of wood flew right at Mish's face.

Mish dove underwater to avoid the flying, flaming debris. She felt the mighty suction of water as the dragon and ship created a vacuum that the surrounding water rushed to fill. She stayed under for as long as she could hold her breath then kicked upward. She emerged in a field of floating bits of wood, most of them on fire. Smoke stung her breath and salt stung her eyes. The lapping of waves, wood burning, and her own struggling in the water was the only sound.

Of the dragons there was no sign.

Mish treaded water and looked around. She saw a large chunk of wood floating nearby that was not on fire and swam towards it and grabbed it. It floated enough to allow her to hang onto it without sinking and give her tired legs a break.

A voice was heard nearby. "Helllloooo there! Little girl! Do you think you can give me a hand? I can't do this much longer!"

She turned her head this way and that, trying to use sound to identify the location of the voice, but no matter how she turned the voice sounded like it came from every direction at once.

"Over here, by this pile of junk!!" The unfamiliar voice called again. "I can see you so I know you can see me! Get over here and help me!"

Who is that? Was someone in the ship? How could they have survived that explosion? Mish swam towards where the wreckage was most dense. A small bit of the ship had survived - part of the front hull - and a pile of ropes, chests, buckets, and other supplies from the ship was floating nearby.

Mish swam up to the floating pile and saw nothing. She swam through the wreckage, pushing ropes and bits of cloth aside. *Maybe someone is floating on the other side of hull.* She thought.

"Yup, almost there! Hurry up or I'm gonna start sinking!" The voice called again. Mish swam towards a chest but again found no one. Was there a head poking out of the water somewhere midst all this junk? She was swimming through the remains of the theater supplies - colorful masks, a prop sword, bits of costume and fake jewels - and the whole while the voice kept talking to her, urging her forward. "Yep, keep on coming, that's a girl, almost to me, just a little bit more, comon.. No, stop, you passed me! Stop!"

Mish stopped swimming and looked around. There was no one there. "Where are you?" she called.

"Right here!" said the voice, very loud and nearby. "Right here.. you're almost touching me.. No, no, turn this way.. look! RIGHT! HERE!"

And to Mish's shock and surprise the prop sword that she had just swam by was flashing a bright green. The last two flashes came exactly when the voice had spoken its last two words. Mish reached out and grabbed the sword.

"Whew! Thank you!" said the sword, for it indeed was the sword that was talking to her. "I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life on the bottom of the sea! I mean, it's one thing to sit in the belly of a dragon and be melted, and its another thing entirely to be bored to death! Good thing you thought about floating swords when you did, else I would have been making friends with the lobsters for the next thousand years!"

Mish was still in shock, but through the haze of confusion she recognized the sword she was holding. It was her glowing sword, the one she had thrown at the dragon and it had bit out of the sky.

"I can see you're confused." Said the sword. "Don't worry, its simple. The dragon ate me and I didn't want to spend my life being slowly dissolved inside its stomach. So I burned my way out. I was hoping to find you. I knew you could hear me. Good thing you didn't die, eh?!"

"You.. You can talk?" stammered Mish.

"Well, not exactly." said the sword. "You're actually doing the talking for me. I'm inside your head."

"Inside my head? I'm imagining this?" *That makes sense.* Whispered her second thoughts.

"No. Yes. I can't talk, but you can hear me. Basically, you can read my mind."

"I've heard of magic metal with a mind of its own.. I didn't know they could talk to people though!"

"Look, I just said I don't talk... look, its not important. Oh hey, your friends are here!"

And just as she 'heard' the sword say that, she heard voices, real voices, and the sound of rowing. The boat containing most of the crew rowed its way through the wreckage, coming towards her.

Mish waved her hands in the air and tried to leap out of the water. They saw her and with a cry of joy altered their course and pulled her aboard. There was no room for her until Costa jumped into the water with a cry of "My babies!" and swam over to a chest floating in the wreckage. He pulled the chest back to the boat, lashed it to its side, and lay on top of the chest.

"To shore!" he cried and began padding. Mish saw that the rowboat had survived - barely. Half of it was blackened and charred and water was leaking through it, but it still floated. The entire crew could not fit in the boat - it was designed for only three people - so several of them were hanging on to the side of the boat and paddling along with it.

Bain was there, lying sideways in the back of the boat, his legs and one arm sticking into the water. He was awake but injured. Gillian was sitting next to him and holding a piece of cloth to his chest. Gillian greeted Mish as she was pulled aboard, and Bain gave a half-hearted wave before grimacing and closing his eyes. Mish asked how he was.

"Aye, he's alive!" said Costa. "He's too stubborn to die. And lucky as sin. Speaking of lucky..." and he reached into the water and plucked Bain's broken sword, still embedded in a plank of wood where Mish had thrown it, out of the water. He tossed it at Bain and Bain, despite his injuries and seemingly not looking, snatched it out of the air. He gave a tired "thanks" and put the sword at his side.

As they all paddled back to the city and its long pier, Gillian explained that when the big dragon fell out of the sky, so did the little dragon. The big dragon somehow controlled the little dragon, and when it broke, it was no longer able to control its child.

As for where the dragons were now, no one knew. Sunk to the bottom of the sea, they supposed. With that everyone turned back towards the wreckage of the ship and looked down into the water as if expecting the dragon to burst out of its depths at any second.

There was no shape hovering below the surface, but Mish thought she saw movement coming from the wreckage. A wave was traveling towards them, a wave where there shouldn't be.

"Look!" she said, and pointed. Everyone craned to see. There was indeed something swimming at them - something big.

"It's a dragon!" yelled Costa. There was a cry of alarm from everyone, but then it turned into a cry of joy as Mish yelled "No, it's Cricket!"

"I heard that." Said cricket as he splashed onto the boat, upending it and sending everyone, even injured bane, into the water. Mish hung onto her sword this time. As the crew struggled to flip the boat and retrieve the oars, Cricket said "What do you mean, 'no, it's not a dragon?' Are you saying I'm not a dragon?"

Mish just smiled and hugged his head as best she could. "Are you ok?" she asked.

"Tired." said Cricket. "Can't fly. Swimming now. I call it the swimming game."

Despite the injuries to Cricket's neck and side, Mish knew he would be okay.

The crew and dragon swam most of the night. They arrived back at the pier as the sun was coming up for the next morning. Exhausted and singed, they pulled themselves onto the pier and lay there, recovering.

Costa, as usual, was the first to recover. "Never fear, never fear, Costa and his chest is here!" He said with a little jig. The chest he had saved had contained his jewels and treasure, and he walked into town and bought them a ship. It wasn't as big or as fast as The Lucky Pirate, but it had room for the crew to rest. Bain and Cricket recovered from the bite marks on their chest and neck.

As for Mish's magic sword, it didn't speak or glow or do anything other than be a regular, unfinished sword. Mish shook it and demand it to speak, and thought she heard a voice in her head mumble "Shh.. I'm trying to sleep." None of the crew had heard anything. They hadn't seen it glow, and didn't believe Mish when she tried to convince them it was a magic sword that had burned its way out of the dragon's stomach.

She stopped trying to tell her story only after Costa threatened to take the sword and sell it. Gillian, though, had seen the sword glow, and believed her. When Mish asked her to tell the crew she wasn't making anything up, Gillian smiled her knowing little smile and suggested that it was better to keep magic hidden.

Gillian didn't have her magic ring that let her float anymore, but she said she didn't mind, if Mish would let her hold her magic sword and try to discover its magic. Every magic metal had its own powers, and part of the fun was trying to discover what it did.

Eventually the crew sailed away on their new ship, which they named The Stubborn Pirate, the joke being they, or at least Bain, were too stubborn to die. They would travel back to Valerian, but maybe they would keep going. Or maybe they would encounter some new adventure on the way.

Cricket declared he was going to stay with the ship and his human, and as the ship sailed back home, Mish and cricket flew high above it, flying into the sunset.

The End