

Dragon Toast

By Verna McKinnon

Boris the owl was cranky. Tupa tried again to cast a simple charm and once again, it fizzled, along with the owl's mood. Boris prattled on and on about magical discipline. Tupa tried to pay attention. Rays of golden sunlight poured through the open window, tempting him to escape and dance across thick green grass and munch on tasty dandelions. His fantasy ended sharply with a peck from Boris' beak.

"Ouch! That hurt!"

"Pay attention, Tupa. You're not listening. How can you learn to be a good familiar for your sorceress when you do not listen?"

"I'm gonna tell Nela you pecked me," threatened Tupa, rubbing his head with his paw.

"Go ahead. I will tell her you ate all the jam and hid the jars in the wood pile."

"Jam adds to my endurance for study."

"Adding to your chubbiness is more like! Nela spoils you far too much. Learn to focus and act like a proper familiar. Be serious!"

Tupa looked down at his round body. Big round ears, soft chestnut-colored fur and large eyes were anything but serious. Tupa sighed, "I am sorry, Boris. But it is nice out and I want to play!"

A hint of understanding briefly registered in Boris' golden eyes. "If you enchant the candle, you may play for one hour before tea."

"May I have toast and jam with my tea?"

"I will check the larder for a jar you may have missed."

"When are they coming home?" Tupa asked, hoping to change the subject.

"Hopefully today," Boris answered, flying up to his perch near the window.

"What was their mission? Nela and Rhoran would not tell me. They said it was going to be a surprise. Nela said it was too dangerous for me to go."

"As a result I became your sitter," Boris added. "My sacrifices are never ending."

"The tower is lonely without them." Tupa whispered, looking out the window again, hoping to see them riding down the road toward home. The tower was usually a

happy place, full of warmth and fruit pies on holidays. He loved his sorceress, Nela, who made magic fun. Boris didn't like fun.

"I know, Tupa. I miss them too, but they will be home soon. Now practice your spell."

He usually loved to practice spells in the sorcery chamber. The room was painted dark blue and the ceiling stars shapes in bright silver. Tomes and crystals gave off an iridescent glow. Potion bottles reeked of possible power. It was fun to do magic. Lately, the grind of study had become tedious, even the magical type. There was never any excitement!

He took a deep breath and cast the enchantment. The sparks of magic bubbled briefly. For a heartbeat, the candlewick flamed and he bounced around it, long fluffy tale swishing. "I did it!" he shouted. Then the faint fire sputtered to a smoky memory.

Tupa knew he would get a lecture on focus and concentration.

He was not wrong.

Later, in the kitchen with the kettle boiling and the bread toasting on the hearth, Tupa was contemplating making an interesting paw print in the butter dish when Nela and her father finally arrived home. Boris magically flipped the toast onto a plate and moved the kettle off the fire, the objects floating in air at his command, and he flew out of the kitchen a blur of brown and white feathers. Tupa leapt off the long wooden table to follow, running to the front door just as it opened.

Nela's father, Rhoran, red-faced from carrying a mysterious large metal box with holes in it, placed it on the long table in the main hall. Nela removed her cloak and smoothed her long braid of dark red hair. The instant she saw Tupa, her deep blue eyes lit up with joy. She picked him up with soft warm hands, "Oh, Tupa I missed you!" she cried, and he covered her face with sloppy kisses.

"I was getting concerned," Boris admonished as he perched on a chair beside his tired sorcerer.

Rhoran replied, "I'm sorry to inconvenience you, Boris, but we have had our hands full, literally, with that!" he countered, pointing at the box. He sat down on a chair and added, "I could really use a tall, cold beer."

"Father, you should eat something first."

"I made toast for the furry one," Boris offered.

"I will get the tea in a moment, Father," Nela offered. "I think it is time to introduce our guest."

“There is a guest in the box?” Tupa asked, sitting on Nela’s shoulder, sniffing. It smelled strange, like burnt toast and magic. “May I see? Is it weird?”

“He is sleeping, finally,” Rhoran warned, “maybe we should wait?”

“Dad, Tupa should meet him now.”

Curious, Boris peeked through the holes in the iron box, “It’s being unusually quiet. Are you sure it’s alive?”

Nela carefully lifted the lid. Tupa’s nimble paws balanced on the edge of the box to get a good look. Burrowed in a nest of flannel blankets curled a tiny, blue-scaled baby dragon, red-tipped wings serenely crossed over his face, sleeping quite soundly.

“This is Kree, our guest.” Nela whispered. “He is only a week old.”

Rhoran said, “The baby dragon’s mother is on a mission for the Sorcerer’s Federation, so we are looking after him for a few weeks. An honor, I’m informed.” Rhoran put his long legs on the table, “I am sure they will be honored when they get the bill for the damage this critter will do to my home.”

“Dad! You offered to do this,” Nela reproved, “and move your feet! You’re getting scuff marks on the table.”

Looking at the sleeping dragon, Tupa scratched his head, “That’s a dragon, huh? Not very impressive is it?”

The small dragon’s golden eyes fluttered opened, looked right at Tupa and burped flame, singeing the end of Tupa’s fuzzy tail. “OUCH!” he screamed, leaping down to the long table and beating the small fire down. The tip of his glorious, silky tale smoking and burnt, he cried, “Baby dragon is bad. Very bad!”

She gathered the little familiar in her arms and soothed him. “Poor baby, I’ll get some ointment,” Nela offered. “Boris, watch Kree for me while I treat poor Tupa.”

“Only from a distance, my dear. If he looks like he is even going to burp fire, I will retreat to the rafters.”

The following days did not improve the disposition of Kree or Tupa. The days were different now. Before, Tupa had always been the baby. Now everyone’s attention was on taking care of that dragon hatchling with scorchy breath. He did not know how to react to this. Boris told him that the dragons have been suffering with a type of sickness and fewer eggs hatched over the years. They are a rare magical species and many fear they may become extinct. He felt bad when he learned this, but he was still jealous.

The dragon did not have a chance to spew more fire at Tupa, because he took great pains to avoid Kree. Playtimes with Nela were less frequent too, since she was

busy caring for the dragon and had her own studies, both academic and mystical. Not only that, they used a great deal of sorcery making a special room for the dragon. Tupa didn't have a special room. Nela told him he needed to be kind to the dragon because he was so far away from his mother. He did not object to being kind-he objected to the little runt roasting him.

The baby dragon avoided him too, and everyone else for that matter. Nela and Rhoran were concerned and made special meals to tempt him, though Tupa found it hard to consider burnt meat appetizing. Kree stayed in his chamber, often hiding in the little cave or curled up on the heated rock by the window, silently looking for his mother.

One afternoon, Tupa was very bored, as he was avoiding yet another lesson from Boris, and decided to look at the magical room they created for Kree. It sounded fantastic and wanted to ask if he could have it when the dragon returned home. Finding the door ajar, Tupa tiptoed in very quietly, not wanting to be torched again. The fur on the end of his tail still needed to grow back.

The room smelled of magic.

Ethereally charged with mystical residue, it made all his senses tingle with warmth. Sorcery created a mock little mountain in stone with a cozy cave and a little water fall that fed into a small pool for him to bathe in. (dragons do not need to drink water, but they do like to swim!) The large room had a domed high ceiling, painted now to look like soft blue sky and fluffy clouds moved gently across the top. The golden sun painted in the middle bloomed with rays that shimmered with magic, and the mock mountain looked so real! Walls painted with trees gently shifted with imaginary winds and rains or bloomed green leaves on twisted boughs. In the far corner, there was a discreet sandbox made to look like moss-covered stone. Tupa ventured further into the room, enjoying the feel of magic and the glow of sunshine from the large glass window.

Then he saw Kree. He blended in so well with the heat stone he could not tell he was there until the long tail moved and he uncurled his body from the rock. He settled again on the rock, looking out the window, his scaled back to him, wings drooping, silent and alone. Tupa looked at the solitary dragon and realized how sad he was.

He remembered when his mother told him he was a familiar, like all his family. He was sad then, knowing he had to leave his mother. Then he met Nela. They bonded quickly and he loved his new family. Nela did not have a mother anymore too, but that was a strange situation. Her parents argued a great deal, which is all Boris would say on the subject. Then one day she left the tower for good five years ago, leaving both husband and daughter. Rhoran and Nela had each other, and Tupa and Boris too.

The dragon was alone.

“Do you want to play?” he asked bravely. “I like to play. I know you are a dragon. Do you know what I am?” The dragon did not reply. Tupa sighed, and continued, “I’m a wampu. I am very fuzzy and not immune to fire. I love jam and games. What do you like?”

The dragon looked down at Tupa. They stared at each other for a moment, and Tupa fervently hoped he was out of Kree’s fire range. The dragon simply turned away and resumed staring out the window.

Tupa wanted to say something. Then the booming voice of Boris echoed throughout the tower, commanding Tupa to his lessons. It did not even ruffle him the way it usually did. Grateful he avoided burns, he obeyed Boris’s summons and left the dragon alone.

The next morning he woke up, curled above Nela’s head on the pillow. He stretched his body and groomed himself with pristine care while thinking about what to do about Kree. Nela stayed up late last night mastering a new spell that involved scrying for someone. He did his part and hid in the tower while she worked the spell until she found him. It was fun. He did not want to wake her too early. A sorceress needs her rest. He patted her on the head and deftly leapt down and ran out the door. It was sunrise, and everyone was still asleep. Even Boris, nocturnal by nature, snored on his perch in Rhoran’s bedchamber when he checked. Tupa ran to the sorcery room on the third floor. There stacks of scrolls and books were piled into high shelves, colorful crystals floated, maps of mystic stars and planets lined the walls. Spell boxes filled a shelf. The spell boxes were tricky, he remembered, each one held an active spell and contained in boxes of stone, wood, gems, silver, gold, or iron. Forbidden to touch them, when he was a baby though, he could not resist the temptation. He had snuck in and lifted the lid on a box of ornately carved birch wood. A rush of magic lifted him in the air, and he floated for three hours. It was particularly embarrassing, as he needed to piddle. Nela found him when she came to fetch him for supper. Nela gave him extra chocolate pudding for his suffering that night. Boris, however, laughed so hard he shed feathers into his soup.

He avoided those boxes and went to the low shelf where novice enchantments were stored. He took one of the slim volumes of bound in a soft mushroom shade of velvet, written in dark blue ink on lemon-colored paper. In the spell book, he found what he was looking for.

Tupa knocked on the door, not wanting to frighten Kree into gushing flames. He stepped inside when there was no reply. “Kree?” he asked in a whisper. “Do you want to come to the kitchen for breakfast? I think Rhoran is making pancakes. Have you ever had pancakes? They are yummy, especially with maple syrup or jam. I like jam.” No

sign of the little dragon. “I learned a new spell. Do you want to see?” Tupa plopped down on the floor and wondered what to do next. Then, inside the shadowed mouth of the miniature cave, he saw the hint of a snout peeking and the glow of two eyes. Oh well, might as well do it, he thought.

Tupa concentrated and waved his little paws as he wrote in the air, causing an aftermath of shimmering green writing as he did so. He spoke the incantation and tiny little balls of bright colors, berry red, cobalt blue, sun yellow, and sea green, danced incandescent around Tupa. “See, I made little balls of light. Watch what they do!” They began to bounce around the room, making little musical squeaks when they hit the floor. Kree’s nose became more visible through the opening. Too confident, Tupa focus wavered just enough for things to get chaotic. Engrossed in showing off, the bouncing balls began to speed up at a dangerous pace. Tupa’s control slipped into panic as they began to crash around the room, some of them hitting Tupa on the head, sparking just before they vanished. “Enough!” cried Tupa, covering his head as the balls of light flashed around him, pelting him with flashy light. “Ouch! Stop!” Then the spell vanished. Well, so much for impressing the dragon. He was a failure.

The dragon did not seem to mind. Tupa had not seen Kree crawl out of his cave, sitting there watching him with an odd expression. His blue wings folded back and his little arms crossed over his tummy. Then without a hint of fire or a word, the dragon turned around and crawled back into his little cave.

Tupa sighed and slowly walked out of the room, ears and tail drooping with defeat. He did not even see Nela waiting for him outside the room. She scooped him up in her arms, surprising him. “Nela, how long have you been here? Did you see? I hope not,” he added, burrowing his head in her shoulder.

“Tupa, you did a very nice thing. I am so proud of you,” she answered, gently lifting his drooping little head up with her fingertip so he was looking at her. Her smile was warm and her dimples especially prominent.

“Spell bombed,” he sighed with defeat. “Dragon thinks I’m stupid.”

“I think you made progress with him. It was a nice thing to do,” she emphasized gently. “I am going to leave Kree some breakfast and then we will make something special to eat.” They made their way down the tower steps toward the kitchen, “Now, what kind of jam would you like on your pancakes?”

“Blueberry,” he answered with conviction. He only hoped there as some left.

After breakfast, Rhoran was washing the dishes while Nela made a fresh pot of coffee. “You have flour on your trousers,” Rhoran pointed out to Nela.

“I know. Cooking is a messy art,” she replied mischievously, brushing the residue away with a dishtowel.

“Such a charming scene of domesticity,” a strange voice commented from the open backdoor of the kitchen, and Tupa saw a short, pudgy man leaning against the doorframe. Clean-shaven with wavy black hair, he was clothed in bright purple silk robes, thick with elaborate embroidery. “Hello Rhoran. Invite me in for a cup of coffee?” he asked casually with a grin.

Rhoran threw down the dishtowel and marched toward the kitchen door, “I do not invite badly dressed magicians into my home,” he sternly replied. “I live in the middle of nowhere for a reason. I do not like peddlers, beggars, and bad influences in my home.”

“My fellow sorcerer, calm down! I see a vein throbbing in your temple. I am merely passing through. It would be rude to turn away another sorcerer who is travel weary and seeks the company of his own.”

Rhoran was visibly fuming. Nela and Tupa anxiously watched the exchange, not noticing the boiling coffee pot. This was both exciting as they rarely had visitors, much less one so undesirable.

“Do you know who he is, Nela?” whispered Tupa.

“No. But I haven’t seen Dad this angry since he last saw Mother.”

The coffee pot bubbled over before Nela could take it off the fire. The pot softly glowed and it lifted off the flames by itself, then it gently lowered to the terra cotta heat plate. Tupa knew without looking up it was Boris. The owl silently flew into the kitchen and landed with deft precision on his sorcerer’s shoulder.

“Hello, Boris,” greeted the stranger.

“Greetings, Herburon. Now get out,” the owl replied menacingly.

“Where is your familiar?” Rhoran asked suspiciously.

“Marta is outside, soaking up the morning sun,” Herburon replied. “She is exhausted. The poor thing is molting.”

“Your poor thing is a nine foot long red crystal snake.” Boris pointed out. “Reptiles get cranky when they molt. Keep her outside. There a children in this house.”

“I’m not a child. I’m seventeen, Dad,” exclaimed Nela with indignation.

“Oops. Bad move, Nela,” Tupa sighed.

Rhoran turned to Nela and Tupa, and replied firmly, “You two are to go to your room and wait there until I call you.”

“You had to say it,” grumbled Tupa. “Now we will miss the good stuff.”

“Sorry, Tupa,” Nela apologized and reluctantly left the kitchen.

Once safely in Nela’s room, Tupa leapt to the window, hunting for the elusive serpent Rhoran and the stranger spoke if. “What is a crystal snake? Are they made of sparklies?”

“No, it is just a name. I hear they are dangerous though.”

A little grunt startled Tupa and Nela. Peeking inside the door was the dragon, yellow eyes wide and wings demurely folded.

Surprised but determined, Tupa said, “Hi there, Kree. Want to play a game?”

“Play?” whispered Kree, “Dizzy colored-lights play?”

Tupa puffed out his furry little chest with pride and replied, “My spell?” he said surprised. “Sure. We will have fun.”

That afternoon, they amused Kree with dancing lights and a game of hide and seek, then put the tired little dragon down for his nap. Nela and Tupa had late tea but did not get very good answers to their questions about who Herburon was.

“He upset you, Dad. Who is he?”

“Someone who annoys me. I have known him on and off for years. He is trouble. Nothing more need be said.” Nela looked unsatisfied with his answer. Rhoran pleaded, “Sweetheart, I am not keeping anything from you. You can drop the inquisition. I can have a past without divulging all of it to my daughter,” he emphasized dryly.

“What else is bothering you, then?” she probed, taking a large slice of egg pie stuffed with mushrooms and cheese.

“I just find it strange he chooses now to show up, with Kree under our protection. Young dragon hatchings are valuable on the black market. They can be hand-raised and trained to be battle dragons. So be careful. If you see him again, come and get Boris or me immediately. Promise me.”

“Yes, Dad,” she assured him.

“You too, Tupa.” Rhoran emphasized with a stern look. “He can be very persuasive. Watch over your sorceress.”

Feeling the call of his guardianship, Tupa nodded vigorously and feeling he needed the strength, asked for a second helping of pie.

Kree began to play with Tupa every day. They played traditional games like hide and seek, tag, and magical ones too. Tupa did the dancing lights often because it was the dragon's favorite, and usually Kree liked it best when the spell went haywire.

After a spry sport of leapfrog, Tupa and Kree were sprawled on a large boulder looking at the ocean below, enjoying the late afternoon sun.

"I'm sorry," Kree said.

"About what?" asked Tupa, rolling onto his back, exposing his soft furry tummy to the warm rays of sunlight, eating cinnamon bread.

"I set your tail on fire that first night. It was an accident. I really didn't mean to."

"It's ok. The fur is growing in again."

"I had indigestion. Burping fire does not bother dragons so much because we are immune to fire." Kree hung his head, "I was also not happy. I missed my mother."

"I understand. You will see your mother soon. Then you will be happy again."

Tupa shared a piece of his cinnamon bread to cheer him up.

The little dragon munched on the sweet bread, "Bread is mushy." Kree looked at the piece of bread and exhaled a slow wisp of fire over it, toasting it. He then ate the rest of it with more satisfaction, "Better toasted," he approved.

"Will you toast mine," he asked, putting the bread on the nearby rock. Just let me stand back so I don't get roasted."

Kree giggled, snorting little tufts of fire, and they both laughed when it sizzled to a crisp square on the rock.

"I think it is a bit well done," Tupa commented, poking the blackened bread with a stick.

They were laughing and rolling on the ground when a heavy net fell over them both. Tupa stiffened with panic and Kree cried out, gushing flames at the net, but it did not burn or melt.

"Tupa!" cried Kree, struggling in the net made of thin metal.

The netting cut into Tupa's fur sharply but he was concerned about Kree. "Stay calm," Tupa said, "I will protect you!" He took a breath, concentrated and sent a magical call to Nela. "Help, bad men trapped us in net," was all he could manage.

Nela's voice immediately returned, soothing his fevered mind, "We are coming."

Several bulky men in leather armor moved in from the cover of bushes. One of the strangers whistled, signaling gryphons from their hiding place below the cliff. The

man holding them captive in the net mounted one and flew away. As they rose higher in the sky, Tupa struggled to see Rhoran and Nela running from the tower after them. Waves of dark green sorcery fired from their hands against the soldiers armed with crossbows on the ground. Tupa prayed very hard that Nela and Rhoran would not get hurt, or worse. Boris tried to pursue them with swift wings, and Tupa could hear his curses, but the speed of gryphons was faster and they all disappeared as they flew away from the tower.

“I’m scared, Tupa!” Kree cried, and began to hiccup wisps of flames.

What was he going to do? How could he fight? He did not have any great magic or strength to fight these nasty men. With false bravado, he told Kree, “They will save us. I will keep you safe.”

They flew for several miles over forests and passed over a secluded meadow by a small waterfall, where he saw a large colorful tent in the middle. They landed in the clearing and the men unceremoniously dump them on the ground, still bound up in the painful metal net.

“Tupa, where are we?” whispered Kree, shaking in terror.

“I do not know, but I think I know who they must work for.” Tupa replied angrily, remembering the overdressed sorcerer who upset Rhoran when he visited. The reference about dragon hunters was disturbing. The soldier dragged them toward the tent.

Tupa’s heart beat very fast, and he whispered to Kree, whose fear had shifted to rage, judging by the brittle hard look in his eyes, “Best to stay quiet and see who it is. I know it is hard. They want us alive. We just need to think of an escape. I know the others are searching for us. Trust me.”

The inside of the tent was dim. Mingling with the deep scent of green from the forest, Tupa smelled smoky fire from the tall copper brazier, perfume, magic, and a bowl of tantalizing fruit close by. Reclined on a silk draped sofa was a woman with a wealth of glorious red hair in a rich red brocade gown and matching slippers. Her green eyes narrowed with annoyance when she looked down at them, and she spoke to the soldier briskly, “Idiot, you were only to bring the dragon. This wampu is not worth anything, even if he is a familiar. He can make trouble too.”

“Lady, the dragon was never alone. Every day we tried- but the furry creature was always with the dragon. And you know we could not breach the tower, the wards of protection were too strong.”

“I should have done it myself.” Slim fingers flexed with frustration, the large pearl ring on her hand glowed in the firelight as she paced in thought. She turned to the

soldier, who stood stony-faced and Tupa thought, a little afraid. “You are dismissed. Stand guard outside in case the brave furry one decides to make an escape.”

He left quickly and the woman knelt before them, smiling. Kree spewed fire at her, which vaporized into nothing against her sorcerous shield. He continued to do it anyway. Tupa knew it made him feel better.

“You are a bad sorceress,” Tupa bravely stated.

She laughed, “I know. It’s a quality I polish. The other eggs I have collected are in stasis, at my fortress. This one hatched early, which is why he slipped through my fingers. I am glad he is a fire-breather. Their price is highest of all. But what am I to do with you?”

Tupa and Kree clung to each other in the net. They heard someone else outside. Not rescue. Rescue would be noisy. He knew what his sorcerers smelled like, and it was not them. Tupa sniffed, “I remember that heavy cologne.”

The overdressed sorcerer stepped inside with a flourish. He looked quite pleased.

“Herburon, you took your time,” the woman scolded, then folded her arms around him. “We need to move on now that we have our prize. Where is Marta?”

“I missed you too, Lydia.” He kissed her lips and said, “Marta is resting. She’s still molting and not very good company,” he explained. He looked down at Tupa and grinned, “We will leave for your fortress tonight with the baby dragon. Get the box for him. In the meantime, I will take care of the furry rodent for you.”

“I am not a rodent,” fumed Tupa. His anger turned to terror as Herburon knelt and untangled the net with a wave of sorcery. Thoughts a tangle of half-remembered spells and incantations flooded his mind. Kree was busy spitting little tufts of fire when the woman tried to grab him.

Tupa bit her smartly on the arm. “Oh, you little monster,” she hissed, detracted from the dragon, a sizzling ball of black sorcery blossomed in her hand, “I will make a muff out of you!”

“Lights!” Tupa invoked in panic.

Little balls of colored energy magically appeared around her, buzzing like bees. “Get them away,” she wailed. Then they began hitting her.

Herburon waved a hand, dispelling the bright attack. He pulled her away from Tupa and stroked her hair softly. “Lydia, my dear, I told you I would handle this.”

Outside, a thunderous cry vibrated, followed by an earth-shattering thud that rattled the tent and everyone in it. Tupa and Kree tumbled over and rolled away. Outside the screams of men and gryphon mingled. Fiery smoke filled the air.

“It can’t be!” the woman cried, “How could it know where I was? She will burn us. We must run!”

Herburon smiled. Taking a pair of metal cuffs from his robes, he quickly snapped them around her slender wrists.

“What are you doing?” she screamed, “Are you a moron? What are these things?” She had a strange look on her face, and then shocked disbelief. “Oh, I can’t use my magic!”

Herburon shook his head, “Of course not. The handcuffs are forged from sorcerer bane metal. You can’t do magic while wearing them.”

Eyes wide with shock and intense rage, she hissed, “You betrayed me! Why?”

“You broke the law, my dear. Now the council has proof you stole the dragon eggs. We will return the eggs to their mother now that we know where they are. She just dropped in to collect her firstborn.”

Boris flew into the tent, “Are you two alright?” he cried, landing before them.

“Tupa was almost a muff,” Kree commented, and hiccupped.

“Nela!” cried Tupa when she burst into the tent, Rhoran at her side. She ran to the young ones and picked them both up, one in each arm.

Rhoran looked at the fancy sorcerer and said, “Hello Herbie. This was not supposed to happen. I didn’t want the young ones frightened-or endangered.”

“Sorry Rhoran, but she got ahead of both of us.”

Tupa and Kree clung to the young sorceress in relief. Nela looked at the red-haired woman with bitter tears in her eyes, “Mother, how could you do this?”

“How could I resist?” she replied.

“Sorry Rhoran, but she led us on a merry chase,” Herburon apologized. I just learned where she hid the other dragon eggs. They are in magical stasis now. Hopefully they will hatch without further problems once returned to the rookery.”

Nela looked at both men with indignation, “You could have let me in on this, especially when Herburon came to the tower.”

Rhoran put his arm around Nela, “I am sorry, sweetheart, but we had a suspicion your mother was involved and I just wanted to protect you. I did not want you hurt by

this. Herbie came to me because Lydia was in the area. He has been undercover for a year investigating her. He could not blow it by revealing we were friends, in case someone was watching. We didn't think she would go after one stray baby when she has a clutch of eggs waiting to hatch. Kree stayed with us for protection while Herburon and the mother dragon hunted for clues to the location of the other eggs. She was not far away, on her way to the tower as a matter of fact, when we sent out the distress call to her."

Slithering on the grass came a long red snake, her skin partly shed, very upset, "Herburon! Can we go home now? I feel terrible," she begged.

"Yes, Marta," Herburon replied soothingly, picking her up with his free hand and holding on to the bad sorceress with the other. "I am sorry you had to endure this. I will make it up to you."

Tupa was a bit confused and would have been frightened, but after the excitement, a long red snake was hardly worth the bother. The snake coiled about Herburon's body and sulked, but he assured them, "It's alright. She won't bite. Marta is just a bit uncomfortable."

"Oh, and one more thing," Rhoran said, walking to Lydia, his wife, and taking hold of her metal-cuffed hands, removed the pearl ring.

"How dare you!" she cried furiously, "that's my wedding ring!"

He raised the ring and replied, "And was my mother's ring. It now belongs to my daughter. Our marriage is broken, Lydia. You will stand trial before the Federation of Sorcerers. Never bother us again or you will lose more than a piece of jewelry." He turned his back on her and gently placed the ring on Nela's finger, while she shifted the exhausted wampu and dragon in her arms. "This ring has been in our family for generations, and now it is yours. I love you, sweetheart. "

"Thanks, Dad. I love you too."

"Nothing for your mother?" Lydia asked.

"Nothing," she coolly replied.

They left the tent. Herburon kept a firm grip on Lydia. Outside, burnt trees upturned and supplies scattered, and there was no sign of the gryphons or soldiers. Instead, an enormous dragon waited very patiently, sitting regally among the ripped-up and smoking trees. She was bright red, her wings though were blue and red, patterned like butterfly wings.

"Where did the soldiers and gryphons go?" asked Tupa.

The enormous dragon tilted her head, “They ran away. I do not know why,” she answered with a touch of humor.

“Scarlet, we have your baby back,” Nela said, and Kree’s whole being lit up.

“Mother!” cried Kree, bits of flame spurting out of his mouth and nose. Nela set them both on the ground. Tupa watched as Kree waddled over to his mother, wings flapping.

“I have missed you.” The dragon lowered her massive head, nuzzling Kree with affection. “We must now return to the great cave where the sorcerers will bring my lost eggs. When they hatch, you will have brothers and sisters to play with.”

“Really?” Kree cried, happy at first, and then sorrow overcame the little dragon, “I will miss my friends. I will miss Tupa.”

“Perhaps in time you may visit them. Now you need to guide your brothers and sisters when they hatch. Say goodbye for now.”

Tupa and Kree embraced tightly, not knowing when they would see each other again. “You will always be first brother,” Kree said.

“Yes, we are brothers,” Tupa agreed with his whole heart, wiping tears away with his paw.

Rhoran lifted Kree to rest atop his mother neck. The she-dragon, Scarlet, looked at the sorcerers and familiars, “Thank you for returning my son,” she said. She spread her great wings and flew away so fast; Tupa thought his heart would break.

Nela picked him up and cuddled him. “We will miss him too.”

“He was family, like we are, Nela.” He sadly laid his head on her shoulder, exhausted and full of too many emotions.

“Nothing will change that,” Rhoran agreed.

Boris waved his wings, “Now that we have established that, can we please go home? I have not even had my tea. Heroic rescue and spying is very tiring.”

Tupa hugged Nela, was glad to be safe and reunited with his loved ones, but would never be able to eat toast again without thinking of Kree.

THE END

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