

## Introduction

Dragons like me. I'm not really sure why and when I ask them I get very enigmatic answers, mostly along the lines of "We like you because we like you". I have the idea they like me in the same way a human likes a puppy. It's weird being considered a pet, but since I like them too, it all works out.

So, since I know a few dragons, I thought it wouldn't be a bad idea to let others in on some dragon facts as well as a few stories about them. They really are very interesting companions. I hope you meet one someday. You'll never be the same again.

## Guardians of the Skies

Sitting on a boulder on the side of a mountain, overlooking a beautifully serene valley was very relaxing, right up to the point where fire bloomed all around me. It shifted and flowed in a warm, ever changing display, but didn't burn. I jumped but did not scream, as this had happened more times than I cared to remember. I sighed, tried to look stern and turned to look at the dragon who is my best friend.

"Geez Larry, do you have to scare the crap out of me *every* time you see me?"

*"Of course I do. It's funny."*

I growled. I do know that isn't a proper method of expressing myself, but I did it nonetheless. I put it down to spending too much time with dragons and too little with people. "To you maybe."

Larry laughed, *"Oh come on, admit it. You find it funny as well."*

Much as I did not want to admit it, it was true. Larry's ability to sneak up on me so easily was as entertaining as it was mystifying. After all, he's about 30 feet long, has a wingspan of about 40 more feet and his feet are huge with really long claws. I'd asked him a half a dozen times how he could so easily sneak up on me and the only answer I ever got was, "Magic". It suddenly dawned on me that maybe I'd been asking the wrong question.

You see, Larry (like all dragons) could teach a Zen master lessons in being cryptic. In fact, I think they did teach the original Zen masters, but that's just my suspicion. I've never been able to get a straight answer from Larry on that particular subject either.

One of the things that made it so easy for Larry to sneak up on me was that he didn't smell like what I thought a dragon should smell like. Here we were in the mountains where I had gone for a nice relaxing hike. Even with Larry there, all I could smell was pine and fresh air. Larry didn't smell like anything at all.

I felt like an idiot. How did I not notice this before? The thing he most didn't smell like was fire. How could this be? He'd just shot out enough fire to set the forest ablaze had he aimed it at the trees, but no smell.

"Hey Larry. How come you don't smell like fire, dude?"

Larry smiled. *"You just now noticed?"*

I rolled my eyes but did smile back. "Well, what's the answer? And if you say magic, I'll scream."

*"But that is the answer".* After my scream, Larry continued, *"Here, I'll show you."* Larry leaned back his head and shot a plume of fire into the air. He was careful, as this was fire season and the last thing we needed was more mountain fires. I could feel the heat of it, but there was no smell whatsoever.

"The fire's magic?"

*"Yep. How else do you think I can breathe it without hurting myself? It is fire, and it does come out of my mouth."*

I was truly amazed. "That's just awesome. Can you turn it different colors?"

*"Sure."* Larry demonstrated with a fire show that made fireworks look positively mundane.

Before I could quiz him more on the various aspects of magical fire, Larry plopped on the ground, sighed and laid his head on the boulder on which I was perched. Another big sigh followed. These were wind-tunnel sighs. Sighs to make the angels duck. Sighs that could blow the paint off a Ford.

"What's up Larry? I thought you were going to a Renaissance Festival this weekend."

*"I was going to, but it just seemed so boring. I'm bored."*

I looked at Larry in alarm and the more I looked the more my concern grew. He looked droopy and his scales were dull – not a good sign. Larry's scales were usually bright blue, iridescent and colorful.

Dragons are immune to almost everything except wizards, other dragons, and their own boredom. The wizards and dragons had opted for a cease fire a long time ago, so that wasn't currently a problem, but dragons did disappear. If they weren't killed, they didn't die; but they did disappear if they got too bored. None of the other dragons could ever find them again. None of them had ever returned.

It usually took a few decades between the onset of Dragon Ennui to the disappearance phase, but once the boredom set in it was hard to drive away. This was a problem.

When I first met Larry about 10 years ago, he had just started to feel the Ennui. For some reason, meeting me had pulled him out of it, but if it was starting again, I had to help him. I was happy that I was entertaining to Larry and I fully intended to keep it that way because he was not only fascinating, he was also fun.

But what do you do to keep a creature who is over a thousand years old interested in life? I thought about it for a while and then inspiration struck. I spun around on the rock, put my hands on either side of Larry's huge snout and shared my great idea.

"What you need Larry, is a job!"

*“What?!”*

“A job, you know. Something you do to keep from being bored!” He looked appalled but that was better than bored, so I decided to make my case. “Look, studies have shown that lots and lots of humans die shortly after retiring from their jobs. So, by extrapolation, having a job might make life worth living. We need to figure out a good job for you and maybe even your friends.”

*“Ahhh, you’re worried about me.”* I swear if he had hands Larry would’ve patted me on the head.

“You bet I am. I like you Larry. I want to keep you around.”

Larry smiled and curled his humongous tail around me in a sort of dragon hug. It was comforting and frightening at the same time. Dragon scales are hard and sharp.

*“You’re so cute.”*

I tell you, it’s pretty weird being a dragon’s pet and that was certainly how Larry seemed to think of me.

*“I’ve never had a job. What kind of job do you think I could do?”* Larry’s tone was both amused and skeptical. *“And it has to be something I do, not just arrive and be in a parade or a decoration on a Renaissance Fair entrance.”*

“How about movies? People are interested in dragons again. There are all kinds of movies with dragons in them. You could save producers millions in special effects fees.” I stopped talking as Larry contemplated the possibilities.

*“Okay, what do we do?”*

“I don’t know. I guess I need to do some research. I’ll meet you back here tomorrow.”

*“Deal.”*

The next 24 hours were a nightmare. Having determined that the first action for any new or aspiring actor was to get an agent, I spend hours and hours trying to find one for my friend. You try wading through rabid receptionists to get to an agent and then explaining to them that you needed them to represent a dragon! They wouldn’t even talk to me. Several times I was pretty sure that if I’d been in their office, they would have called the funny farm and had me taken away.

With laughter from a dozen agents ringing in my ears and my fingers sore from dialing so many numbers, I changed tactics. I looked up all the recent movies and television shows that

featured dragons. I researched the people involved. Producers, Directors, anyone I could find. I printed off their pictures. Larry and I could figure this out, I was sure we could.

The next day when I met Larry, he was actually looking much better. His scales had a bit more of the iridescence that marked a healthy dragon.

“Okay Larry, we have to get a bit creative. If I show you pictures of certain people, do you think you could find them?”

*“Probably, if you give me some idea of where to start. Then once I know who they are, I can find them at will.”*

“Really, that’s interesting. How does that work?”

*“Everyone has a sort of psychic signature. It’s like a personal wave length but on a much finer scale. Once I meet someone, I can look for that signature using magic, and find them in a heartbeat. That’s how I always know where you are.”*

“Hmmm. I actually kind of understand that. It’s sort of another sense. Like the feeling I get when I just know someone is watching me. Like that?”

“Yes.”

“You always know where I am?”

“Yes.”

“That’s kind of cool.” I contemplated that for a moment and decided I’d think about it later because it started to give me the creeps. “Okay, let’s get started.” I showed Larry pictures of the producers and directors I had googled. Rather than show the pictures directly to Larry (they were really tiny even though I had printed out 8x10s of each) I carefully studied each one while he looked into my mind. It tickled a bit, but though it was slightly unsettling, it wasn’t too bad.

“So, here’s what you do Larry. Find those guys then this weekend we’ll see if we can waylay a few of them and offer your services.”

*“You got it boss.”* Larry disappeared and I drove back to the city to do some of my own work. I am a game designer, so can set my own hours. Guess what my games feature?!

When the weekend rolled around, I met Larry outside the city and we got started. One of the directors was going fishing for the weekend and we decided to start with him. Since he would not be surrounded by crowds of people, theoretically making contact with him should have been a fairly easy thing. Larry and I went to the lake and waited until he was out in the middle of the lake in his boat. I figured we would have him as a captive audience if he couldn’t

run away. Then I had Larry do a Nessie imitation by keeping the majority of his body underwater and only showing his snout and part of his back. Well, we definitely got the director's attention. He and the actor who was fishing with him were busily taking photos of Larry as he came closer and closer.

When Larry rose up out of the lake next to the boat, I truly wasn't expecting them to freak out. Being in pictures, I thought the director and his friend would figure it was some sort of special effect and at least tried to figure out how it worked. I thought wrong! You would think that people who spend their lives creating fantasy worlds on film might be a little bit more open minded about fantastical creatures. Don't these guys have any imagination?

Suffice it to say that the answer to that little question is a resounding, "NO." It took me an hour to calm him and his fishing buddy down. When I finally did, they were so amazed at seeing a real live dragon that it took me another two hours to get their attention so I could explain why we were here. Then the wheels started to crank.

They were starting a new movie project that did involve dragons (which I knew from the internet) and would be delighted to have Larry's services. A month later we headed off to Hollywood and found out how movies were made.

The day we reported to the set was one of the most entertaining days of my life. The director and producer, who had been clued in to the new "actor" for the movie, had gathered the entire cast and crew in the field where they were planning to shoot a number of the dragon scenes. The director asked that we come in and land near where everyone was gathered, so we did.

The gamut of reactions ranged from sheer terror through stunned disbelief to wild enthusiasm. As soon as I dismounted I was swarmed by prop guys, who started peering and poking and prodding to figure out just how I had put this astonishing "prop" together. Larry let them explore for about two minutes and then put a stop to it by rearing back and snorting a plume of smoke from his nostrils.

The prop guys were undaunted. The head guy came over to me as his compatriots were inspecting Larry's claws and scales. "Hello. My name is Robert."

"I'm Deanne and this great beast is Larry."

He laughed, "Wow, you named it Larry?"

"No actually, he named himself." Robert laughed. "No, seriously, he did."

I happened to glance over as one of the prop guys was trying to pry up one of Larry's scales. "Hey you! I wouldn't do that if I were you. You might piss him off." The amused chuckles that greeted my warning were abruptly cut off when Larry grabbed the guy, picked him up, held

him at eye level and shook his head in the universal “NO” gesture. The guy looked Larry right in the eye, realized that there wasn’t a prop in the world this good, and promptly apologized.

*“Your apology is accepted.”* While many of those circled around didn’t hear Larry’s words, many did. For some reason the Director didn’t until the last week. I don’t know if he was just too caught up in his own world or what. I didn’t worry about it too much, as I was getting a nice big fat fee for being Larry’s coach. I was even acknowledged in the credits of the movie as the “Dragon Wrangler” much to my amusement. Larry got a pretty good kick out of it too.

“CUT!” the director shouted. He then turned to me, “Hey Dragon Lady. Can you get the dragon to come on over here? I have some directions for him.”

I resisted the urge to slap him. I have a name, so does Larry. And really, shouldn’t he be showing a bit of respect to a creature that was not only saving him bucket loads of money, but was pretty amazing to boot? I called Larry over and he landed right in front of the director.

My friend Larry is one of the mellowest persons I had ever met. However, I could tell that the director was starting to get to him.

The director looked at Larry and asked, “Could you try to fly a bit more majestically?”

I looked at Larry and he looked at me. Even though his face never changed in my head I heard, *“Can you believe this guy?”*

I put on my best poker face and said, “He says he can try.” Unfortunately the director wasn’t done.

“Can you have him make the fire a little more intimidating?”

I suppressed the urge to laugh. “I’m pretty sure he could.” I turned to Larry. “How about it? Could you make the fire a little more intimidating?”

Larry had obviously had just about enough. *“I can do that.”* Larry launched himself into the sky, flew over the little pond next to where we were filming and let forth a stream of fire that was so hot, bits of what looked like lava dripped from the flames. He boiled the pond in about 5 seconds flat. Great clouds of steam lit orange by the fire rose into the sky. Larry then flew through the steam and gently landed in front of the director. *“Like that?”*

The director actually heard Larry’s voice that time and didn’t miss the dripping sarcasm. He paled and nodded. “Yes that would be just fine. Thank you.” We even got footage of Larry’s temper tantrum because one of the cameramen had been waiting for Larry to do something unusual. When I spoke with the cameraman after, he said he could tell things were about to go south when he saw the fire in Larry’s eyes, so he filmed it all. They even used it in the movie.

After that things went much smoother. More than a few of the actors and support people came up and thanked me later. Apparently the director was more than a little hard to get along with and they were delighted that Larry had knocked a bit of the arrogance out of him.

I was more than a little relieved that our portion of the movie only took a month to film. I swear, the magic that appears on the screen is just plain hard work in the trenches. I met more prima donnas, drama queens and just plain unpleasant people than I ever wanted to meet in an entire lifetime. While we met some truly delightful people, there were plenty of others who thought that the universe revolved around them. And really, when you're working with a real-life dragon, who *is* the most important person (creature) on the set?

Once we finished that particular project, we both agreed that this was not the job for Larry. On the bright side, I was delighted to see that he was now in the spirit of the whole "Let's find a good job for Larry" project. His scales were practically glowing and his interest was definitely back.

Larry's rise in interest continued over the next couple of weeks. Although he got more engaged, I myself experienced a few heart-stopping moments.

The first incident was when I was walking back to my car from the symphony. My car was only a few blocks from the Concert Hall, so I wasn't really worried about walking back to it after the show. I said goodbye to my friends and set off. As I turned the corner, I met some very unsavory types. There were three of them and they had those overdone scowls and that "hip" bad attitude that assured me that they were up to no good.

Even as I experienced a spurt of fear, I had the presence of mind to shoot out a sort of mental 911 call to my friend Larry, who let me know he would be there in a jiffy. Yes, he did send *Jiffy*. Larry loves slang. Did I mention that he's a really young dragon, only a little over a thousand years old?

"Hey bitch," the first one growled, "give me your purse." If I hadn't known that Larry was on his way, I really would have been frightened, but as it was, I found myself calming down. Help was on the way. In fact help arrived just as he was growling out his demand. Larry landed quietly on top of the building behind me. The miscreants were so intent on their thievery that they didn't even notice.

The guy doing the talking seemed like a bad imitation of a thug. He wasn't even handsomely broody or anything, just thuggish.

Knowing Larry was just above me gave me courage. "No, you can't have my purse"

I could tell by the startled look on his face that this was the last thing he expected. So, pushing my advantage I continued, "And I think you should just call it quits and go home and have your dad buy you some beer."



Let me tell you. That was definitely the wrong thing to say. He went off like a nuclear bomb. Spit showered me as he yelled, "Give me your purse or I'll kill you." There were more words after that, but I'm not going to repeat them. Some people have so little imagination. Curse words featured almost exclusively in his tirade. Thankfully he was more intent on intimidating me than in doing me physical harm.

I looked at him very calmly and said, "That's probably not the best idea you've had this year."

The guy was more than a little confused. "What are you talking about, you crazy bitch?"

I didn't say another word. I just pointed to where Larry had landed. There he sat with his wings spread out to their full extent and just a little smoke curling out of his nostril. Just to complete the effect he hurled a little fire at a dumpster, which glowed red as the contents burst into flames.

Have you ever seen a tough-guy wannabe faint? It's a sight to behold. The other two probably broke Olympic records getting out of there. They looked like the roadrunner in the old Saturday morning cartoons.

I started laughing and couldn't stop for about 10 minutes. My sides hurt. My eyes were watering. I couldn't breathe properly. I was gasping for air.

Larry and I both had a great laugh. "Man o man Larry. Those guys thought they were so bad. You really took them down a notch. The look on the leader's face was priceless. Maybe they might think twice before bothering someone else."

*"They'll probably decide it was the drugs they were taking."*

*"You're kind of cynical, my friend."*

*"Well, you're a little naïve."*

"That may be, but just because I hope for the best doesn't mean that I'm not surprised when it doesn't come out that way. I guess I'm just a cynical optimist."

*"No, you're just an optimist. You always think the best of people, you always have hope for things getting better."*

*"And what's wrong with that?"*

Larry didn't say anything for a very long time. *"Nothing really. It might be an interesting way to live. I might try it for a while just to see what happens."*

*"Well in the meantime, how about we put out this dumpster fire and call it a night?"*

Larry looked at me quizzically, *"How? I just start fires; I've never put them out."*

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

It didn't take us long to figure out how to get the fire out (Larry smothered it with his wing) and we took off just as we heard the fire truck sirens. It was definitely an interesting ending to a night out.

The next incident occurred when I was flying to Los Angeles. One of the gaming companies I work with was having some difficulty with one of my games, so I was flying in to sort it out. Normally when I want to go somewhere, I just go with Larry. He is much faster than any airline, but the company was sending someone to meet me at the airport and explaining Larry as a mode of transportation was just a bit much. Easier to take a plane. Wrong!

I picked the wrong flight. One of the engines caught fire at 30,000 feet about halfway into the flight. I thought the championship game when the Broncos beat the New England Patriots was loud. Not compared to the panicked screaming that I heard that day.

I silently sent out a call to my friend. He arrived instantaneously. He was barraged by all the thoughts that were running through everyone's heads – mostly “Oh My God I Don't Want TO DIE.” He cut through the cacophony and asked me what he could do. I didn't really know, so I told him to see what the pilots were thinking.

The plane was still in the air and though listing, wasn't plunging towards the ground, so the sounds around me abated somewhat. It made it easier to concentrate on what Larry was telling me.

The “fasten your seatbelts” sign came on with an announcement that the pilot had activated it along with verbal instructions for everyone to fasten them. Duh!!!

Apparently, the pilot was keeping the plane in the air, but needed to know what kind of damage there was to the wing. Larry could see the entire wing, but didn't know enough about airplanes to assess what damage was critical and what didn't matter. He needed more data from the pilots.

“So Larry, just ask them.”

*“I'm trying. They don't hear me. Not many people listen to dragons. They just dismiss us as odd voices in their heads.”*

“Okay, I'll take care of it.” I unbuckled my seatbelt and ran for the front of the plane. I was seated in the first row and the attendant was near the back of the plane checking

everyone's seat belts, so he wasn't quick enough to stop me. I got to the locked door of the cockpit and grabbed the phone to the pilot.

"I can help you find out the status of the wing if you'll let me in."

The pilot was well versed in terrorist tricks so didn't open the door. He did, however, ask me what I was talking about.

I sent a message to Larry to fly up towards the front of the plane, which he did. I then instructed the pilot to look out the window. "My friend there can find out what you need to know but he has to relay it through me because he says you can't hear him."

You have to love pilots. When they are sitting on that line between life and death, they don't waste a lot of time asking stupid questions like, "Is that what I think it is?" The pilot was willing to believe his own senses because there was a short silence and just before the flight attendant arrived to drag me away, the door clicked open and I slipped in.

I was relieved to see that the pilot looked old enough to be my father. That meant he had probably handled more emergencies than I had ever imagined. He reassured the flight attendant who had called him on the same phone to make sure everything was okay then turned to me.

I pointed out the window at my friend and said, "Larry says that you need to know how much damage the wing has sustained. If you'll tell me what you need to know, I'll get him to look. It would be easier if he didn't have to go invisible again, so if you could get the passengers to shut their window shades so he can work without being seen, we can figure this out."

The pilot dutifully got on the intercom system to instruct the passengers to close their window shades. His bogus, want-to-protect-you-all-from-any-flying-debris explanation worked. It's amazing what people will believe when they're terrified. All the passengers were more than happy to do what he asked and we got on with it.

The pilots asked about rips in the metal covering the wings. They had Larry check to see if there was any damage to the underlying structure, if anything was leaking, etc.

Larry checked everything out and cheerfully reported back. When they were trying to determine just what was dripping out of the plane's wing, Larry even tasted it to find out. Good thing he's got an iron stomach, because what he was tasting was apparently hydraulic fluid mixed with jet fuel. He told me he'd tasted worse, which was just odd.

As Larry was doing his flying diagnostic tool bit, the pilots were bringing the plane down to a lower altitude, radioing in their emergency and trying to find a landing field that they could reach. There was no good news in any of this. With the fuel leaks, we wouldn't be able to make it to an airport with a sufficiently long landing field. The wing was damaged in such a way that the flaps wouldn't work and there were several rips in the wing that were widening. This would make landing more like crashing. I'm not very fond of crashing so I thought as quickly as I could.

“I have an idea. Let’s see if Larry can grab onto the plane and just fly us down or glide us down using his wings.” I knew we were going to get to the ground one way or the other, but I really wanted to walk away from this one.

The pilot frowned and asked, “Do you think he can hold up that much weight?”

Larry heard the question and replied, “*Sure, I can do that. This plane is a toy compared to some of the things I have flown with.*”

I just looked at them and shrugged, “Well he says he can.”

The co-pilot looked incredulous and shook his head. “How is that possible?”

I laughed and raised my hands palms up in a dramatic gesture. “He’s a dragon. He’s flying over 500 miles per hour. He’s been eating jet fuel and hydraulic fluid with no adverse effect – I don’t know how any of that’s possible. But if he says he can do something, he probably can.”

The pilot smiled, “After this is over, I really want to talk to the both of you.”

“Okay.”

Larry grabbed the damaged wing and used his own wings to help guide the plane to the ground. After getting us down safely he promptly disappeared before any of the passengers got a glimpse of him. There were some witnesses who thought they saw some sort of creature wrapped around the plane, but the reports were generally put down to hallucinations due to smoke inhalation.

I gave the pilot, David, my number and expected that to be the end of it, but I was incorrect. I got a call 2 days later.

“Hello. This is David, the pilot on your flight.”

I smiled. He just sounded so friendly. “Hello David. What can I do for you?”

“Actually, I called for two reasons. First off, I’d like to know what you and your dragon friend would like for saving all of us. If he wasn’t a dragon, I’d take you out to dinner, give you a reward and free flights for life. But, I’m pretty sure your friend would like to keep a low profile and I’m pretty sure he doesn’t need any plane tickets. So, I was wondering if there’s something he really likes that I could give him. Got any ideas?”

I thought for just a moment. “Well, he really likes gold, but he’s got lots of that. His favorite things are chocolate, beer and country music.”

There was a long silence on the phone. I could tell that David was trying to figure out if I was jerking his chain or not. “Hmmm. I would never have guessed that.” He thought for just a bit and I could hear him muttering to himself, “I could call Bob, who knows Melinda who works for

the Grand Ole Opry House . . . yeah, this could work.” Then to me he said, “Can I call you back in a couple of days?”

“Sure.” I was sincerely intrigued by what he was planning. He hung up and I realized that I didn’t know what the second thing was that he wanted to talk to me about. Oh well, I’d just have to find out in a couple of days.

Sure enough, David called me back two days later. He sounded excited, which is saying something because I have found that most pilots are the least excitable people I have ever met. They seem to take in anything with a dreadful calm that I can never seem to emulate. “What are you and your dragon doing tonight?”

“I don’t know. What do you have in mind?”

“A surprise. Can the two of you meet me at Redrocks Amphitheater tonight at 7?”

“You bet. Will Larry like it?”

David laughed, “He’s gonna love it.”

I called Larry and he agreed to pick me up just before 7. For those of you who have never been to Denver, Red Rocks Amphitheater is a natural rock formation of sandstone – red of course that has been turned into a theater. It is nestled in the foothills west of town and rock concerts, plays, graduations and other events are held there regularly. There is a spectacular view of Denver from the higher seats. It is one of my favorite places to go to concerts because the acoustics are amazing and the setting is peaceful.

Larry and I arrived at just before 7 and David and several other people were waiting for us by the stage. Other than them, the park was deserted. There were big signs and police keeping people out. We saw them as we flew over.

I had neglected to introduce Larry to David on the day my plane went down, so I rectified that immediately. The other people with him were the flight crew of the plane Larry had saved. Introductions were made all around. They all gave him hugs and thanks, which I thought was pretty brave of them. Then David asked him to find a comfortable place to settle in. Once we did, David had a giant vat of beer and several carts of chocolate of all kinds rolled over where he presented them to Larry. Larry’s scales shimmered as he looked at this largesse. He was actually really surprised that all this was being done for him. He even had me tell everyone they could help him eat the chocolates and we all did.

Then the lights came on and out came Home Free, one of Larry’s favorite groups. They sang all of Larry’s favorite songs. Larry slurped up the beer, munched on the chocolates (which the flight crew happily unwrapped for him) and even got to meet all the guys in the group, which really topped off the night. I have never seen Larry happier.

When it was all over, David came over and sat with us. I told him how much Larry really liked his reward. David smiled and said, "That's the perfect lead in for the second thing I'd like to talk to you about. When our plane had trouble, Larry was there almost instantaneously. I assume that means he can do that anytime, correct?"

I nodded.

"Well, I'd like to hire him as a sort of guardian dragon for the airline industry. If we could figure out a way to alert him in a true emergency, no one would ever have to die in a plane crash again."

Larry was very interested. *"Does this mean that people would know about us again?"*

David looked a bit chagrined, "Well some people would have to know, but we could keep it somewhat quiet if that's what you want."

"Wow," I said, "You can hear Larry?" I truly thought I was the only one who could.

David was as surprised as I was, "I guess I can."

We both looked at Larry. *"Anyone can hear me if they want to. It's just that most people don't know I exist and even when they see me are usually so disturbed that they don't listen."* He nudged me affectionately, *"You listened."*

"Yes I did, Larry, and I'm glad. Okay, enough of this aahww moment. What do you think Larry?"

*"I'll have to check with the other dragons as this affects us all."*

I thought David was going to have a heart attack right then and there. "There are more of you?!"

"Yes."

"How many?" David asked. I myself had never been able to drum up the intestinal fortitude to ask Larry this question.

*"Fifteen of us are left."*

Neither David nor I knew what to say. When you're talking dragons, fifteen is both a lot and at the same time a very small amount. I asked the next obvious question, "How many did there used to be?"

Larry just looked sad. *"Before I was born there were tens of thousands. No other dragons have been born since me."*

"So that means you're the littlest dragon. That's awesome." I turned back to David, "Thanks David for a wonderful evening. We'll get back to you after he talks to the others."

The dragons had their conclave. I heard they hadn't had one for about 300 years. They decided they would like to be guardian dragons. They were interested. They wanted to learn about airplanes. And so, Dragon Aviation Services was born. The dragons worked out a schedule. David and his friends worked out a sort of dragon signal which they had installed in every airplane in the world (using some of the dragons' gold) and the skies are now safer than ever.

The hardest part about the whole thing was figuring out how to pay the dragons. Between them, they have more gold and gems than all the countries in the world combined. We asked them repeatedly what they would like for being our guardians. The answer was all about them not being bored. So, we built a giant movie theatre with drinks and snacks for all the dragons. Even though they don't have to eat, they really like snacks. We show them whatever movies they want. All fifteen of them show up every week. They seem particularly fond of stupid comedies. Would you believe it? Dragons love *The Three Stooges*. It's painful, it really is.

We also hold concerts for them of all different kinds of music. Other than Home Free, none of the performers know who is listening, as we tell them that the audience is made up of reclusive millionaires who don't want to be seen. The performers get paid pretty well, so they don't ask all that many questions. We have a screen that allows the dragons to see in, but the musicians can't see out. We've even done a few plays. The dragons are not bored.

The best part of the whole thing for me was that I got to meet all the other dragons. They are a very interesting group.

So now a few more people know about the dragons. It's not a problem, but sometimes I still worry about it. Not that humans can harm the dragons, but people can be weird. I don't know what they would do if they knew about my friends. So, we help people, and we stay out of sight. The dragons feel useful. I guess helping others really is the way to a richer life. Well, at least that's what the dragons think, and I tend to agree.

## The Business of Dragons

You have no idea how many businesses have to be started to care for such a small group of dragons. First there was Dragon Aviation Services to protect the airlines. Then there was Dragon Entertainment Industries to build the movie theatre and rent the movies, get the popcorn and drinks, etc. for the Dragon's entertainment. It's a really big theatre. 15 Dragons take up a lot of space.

Then there was Dragon Antiquities, Inc., which was the company we started to sell off some of the dragon gold to fund the other enterprises. The dragons had coins that were so old

and in such good shape that antique dealers were darn near wetting their pants when we showed up. We had to be careful to put small amounts onto the market at a time so as not to crash the antiquities markets. Then, to explain how these things appeared in the first place, we had to open Dragon Treasure Explorations.

I had to buy boats, jeeps and all-terrain vehicles (which is great fun when you have unlimited funds), hire people, buy dive equipment and on and on and on. This was so that they could go and “find” all these lost treasures.

Oh, and I *had* to test drive all of the above, at least that’s what I told everyone. The dragons really loved it though. They got to figure out places to hide the gold that would make it hard to find, then we’d plant rumors for treasure hunters to chase down. We funded their explorations for a portion of the find.

We actually used Dragon Treasure Explorations as a way to boost the economy of some very poor places. We’d find some area that needed a serious boost, then we’d start rumors about treasure in the vicinity. Then our guys (and other treasure hunters as well) would go to that place and spend lots of money on food, lodging and locals to act as guides. We’d then put together these great brochures when the treasure was “found” about the area, and tourism would definitely pick up.

As things started rolling, I had to build a headquarters for everything complete with entrances for the dragons and hallways wide enough for them to navigate. Well, I didn’t build it myself but you get the idea. Lots and lots of new projects every day.

The only real downside of this was the paperwork. Each business generated mounds of paperwork. Paperwork that could keep a small army of secretaries busy were generated regularly. Did I mention that I really truly hate paperwork?

I was sitting at my desk doing paperwork, and bitching about it in my head, when Mildred appeared. Sometimes I thought maybe I shouldn’t have made an office the size of a small hanger where my dragon friends can pop in whenever they want. But, since I was doing paperwork, this was not one of those time. I cheerfully put down my pen and looked up.

Mildred didn’t look so good. She looked positively gloomy.

“What can I do for you Mildred?”

*“We want you to start showing movies or TV every night.”*

“Why.”

*“Well, we’re still pretty bored.”*

“What about your job helping the airlines?”



*"It's great and all, but I only work 1 day a week. And, there are hardly ever any emergencies. I'm not unhappy about that, it's just not very exciting"* She looked at me with big droopy eyes. Her size sort of ruined the "poor me" affect, but I did appreciate the effort. *"So, can you open up the theatre every night?"*

"No." I absolutely refused to turn the only remaining dragons on Earth into couch potatoes. That would just be wrong. Mildred knew exactly what I was thinking.

*"How about 4 nights a week? That wouldn't turn us into sofa tubers."*

"Two!"

*"Deal."* Mildred smiled. *"So, I guess you need to find me another job or something to do for the rest of the time."*

"Hey, I do not recall being made the Entertainment Director or the HR director for all the dragons on Cruise ship Earth." Mildred just looked at me. The droopy eyes were gone. She was starting to look fierce. Dragons are actually pretty scary when they get mad. "Okay, Okay," I said. "Don't get your tail in a twist." Mildred just looked at me. I thought my "tail in a twist" comment sounded pretty good, but Mildred completely missed the reference. I guess converting human slang into dragon slang isn't my strong suit.

I grabbed a legal pad and pen from my desk drawer and did my best super secretary imitation – all formality and false perkiness, "Okay Mildred, what skills do you have?"

*"Skills?"*

"Yeah, skills. Employers need to know what your skills are."

*"Well, I can fly."* I dutifully wrote that down. *"I can breathe fire."*

"Got that." I wrote that down as well. "Anything else?"

*"I'm really strong."* I wrote that down as well.

"Anything else?" I waited patiently – at least that's how I tried to look. This whole thing was pretty foolish in my mind.

*"No, I guess that's about it."*

"Okay. Got any people skills?"

*"What do you mean by people skills?"*

"Things like, 'good at customer service', 'good at handling disputes', that kind of thing."

*"No, no people skills."*

"All right. Now what kind of a job would you like?"

*"I don't know. What kind of jobs are there?"*

"Well, let's look." I grabbed my computer and pulled up Craig's List. "Hmmm. Jobs for dragons. MILDRED, THERE ARE NO JOBS LISTED FOR DRAGONS!"

Mildred looked a bit taken aback, *"You're a bit testy today."*

I rolled my eyes, "It must be the paperwork." She just sat and looked at me. Since I knew it was no use trying to win a staring contest with a dragon, I gave in. "Okay, let me tackle this a different way. What do you like, Mildred?"

Mildred thought about it for quite a while. *"I like fish. I like whales – they are really cool. I like swimming. I like to be helpful. I like jewelry . . ."*

At that point I sort of tuned Mildred out as an idea started to swirl through my head. After I caught it with my mental butterfly net, I tuned back in.

*" . . . I like stars. I like the taste of chocolate. I like fireworks."*

"Okay stop. I have an idea. I'll call you when I have it worked out."

It took me almost a week, but I finally had it all arranged. I called Mildred and we met her potential employer on a very out-of-the-way beach. We'll call him Mr. Smith for confidentiality reasons. He had no idea that the applicant was a dragon. I had her land behind a large group of rocks and asked her to stay there while I walked out to the beach to meet him.

"Why all the secrecy?" he asked.

"Well, my friend really does want to help the whole environmental cause. She truly loves whales, but she's a bit controversial."

He laughed, "We do controversial."

I just raised my eyebrows and smiled. "We'll see."

At that point I whistled and Mildred jumped up over the rocks she had been hiding behind. Mr. Smith's eyes almost popped out of his head as his jaw dropped and he started backing up. The closer she got the further his jaw dropped. He backed up right into the water and just kept going. He didn't stop until he was about 10 feet out at which point he couldn't seem to settle on whether he wanted to stare, try to swim away or what. He kept rubbing his eyes and looking at Mildred. He didn't even seem to notice the waves crashing around his legs. Aliens could have landed to the sound of trumpets and he probably wouldn't have noticed. He kept pointing and saying, "Is that a . . . a . . . That's a . . . No, that couldn't be a . . ." He couldn't seem to get the word dragon to come out of his mouth. I was wondering if there would be a

complete sentence anywhere in my future, but it didn't seem that one would be coming anytime soon.

I shrugged eloquently, hands turned up and out in a "what's the big whoop" sort of gesture. "Hey dude, don't you appreciate the delicious irony of a really, really endangered species helping you to save other endangered species?"

He stopped stuttering and somehow managed a complete sentence. "How - how can he help?"

"First off, he is a she. Mildred, I'd like you to meet Mr. Smith."

She merely stopped next to me and dipped her head in a greeting. Mr. Smith started navigating back through the water toward her. He was shaking head to toe, but he kept coming. I had to admire his pluck.

"As for how she can help," I continued, "There are lots of ways. She's freakishly strong and she could pick up any beached whale or dolphin and put them back into deeper water in a heartbeat."

He stepped a bit closer and took a good look at her claws. "Without hurting them?"

"Yes, without hurting them. She can be really gentle when she wants. She even has a pet poodle."

He came closer yet. I don't think the poodle comment even registered. Mildred really loved that stupid dog. I have to admit, I was pretty fond of him as well.

"And another thing, you wouldn't have to put your ships at risk. Can you imagine any whaler ignoring a warning from her?"

"Uh . . . no." He finally made it out of the water and slowly looked up.

"And if they don't get the message immediately, she can breathe fire!" Mildred did so. I thought he was going to pee himself. Actually, he may have done just that, but his pants were already wet from the water so I can't be sure.

He finally looked her in the eye. "So, you want to help us?"

*"Yes, I do. I like whales."*

His smile was slow to start but had a great wide grin at the finish. "I do too." He stood there for a full minute just smiling and shaking his head. I was a bit surprised to see the smile suddenly drop away. "Hey," he asked Mildred, "what am I going to pay you?"

Mildred looked at me expectantly. I threw out my hands in frustration. "What? Am I supposed to know **all** the answers?"

Mildred continued to look at me expectantly. Mildred is the master of making you talk by just looking at you. “Fine. Mildred, what do you think would be good pay for helping these guys save the whales?”

*“Jewelry. Pretty, pretty jewelry. Humans have all kinds of nice jewelry. We just have the jewels. I’d love to be able to wear them.”*

We both looked at Mr. Smith who looked very perplexed. “I don’t know where to get Dragon jewelry.”

Mildred looked crestfallen. I snorted. “Of course not. There isn’t any such thing. You have to figure it out. Don’t you have someone in your organization who might be able to make some jewelry on a very, very large scale?”

“Hmmm. I just might. It might be a bit expensive to make though.”

“Don’t worry about the money. We have plenty and if you have people who can make jewelry, we can set them up in business and they can make it for the other dragons as well. I suspect they would all like to get in on this one.”

Even as the words escaped from my mouth, I was cursing myself inwardly for starting yet another business. Just what I needed, more paperwork. I really needed some help.

I ended up hiring a tremendous personal assistant and an entire flock of super-secretaries who do the paperwork. It took them a while to figure out that they were setting up businesses for dragons. Well my personal assistant knew, but the others were mostly kept in the dark – at least for a while, but they eventually caught up. It became a sort of company joke. The old hands that knew what we were doing would take bets about how long it would take one of the newer employees to catch on while dropping hints that were so obvious that only the fact that “everyone knew” that dragons aren’t real kept the new guys from picking up on the hints sooner. When they finally did realize what was really going on, there was always a big party, attended of course by one of the dragons or several of them depending on the day. Most of the dragons loved parties. For creatures that had been out of sight for so many years, they really were quite sociable.

When the reports of a dragon protecting whales hit the internet everyone thought it was a cleverly photo shopped hoax. I was a bit worried at first, but decided to just leave it be. After all, the dragons were helping people. Who in the world would object to that?

Next up was Harley. He was one of the older dragons. I was setting up the movie theatre one night when he cornered me. *“Can I talk to you?”*

“Sure Harley, what’s up?”

*"I want to do something useful."* He then sighed loud enough to startle birds out of trees in the next county. I'm telling you. Dragons really have that sighing thing down to an art form.

I wanted to sigh myself and bemoan my fate. Thinking up jobs for dragons isn't the easiest thing in the world, but really, like the Queen in "Through the Looking Glass", I did like thinking up impossible things, so it always worked out.

I made an appointment for Harley to come see me the next day in the office, then finished setting up the movie for the night. We both enjoyed the movie along with our friends. As the night drew to a close, I wondered what I would do for Harley the next day.

I hadn't spoken with Harley much so I was a bit nervous when he arrived. The older dragons were very intimidating for a number of reasons. For one thing, they were much larger than my friend Larry. They had also survived the times when the wizards and the dragons had been at war, and I was never sure if they had truly gotten over it. After all, my people had killed quite a few of theirs. Of course, it went the other way as well, but none of the humans involved were still alive. The older dragons were, but since it was a very long time ago, we had a sort of don't ask, don't tell arrangement. Even so, I did find them a bit frightening. I tried to keep my thoughts to myself, but of course that didn't really work.

The first thing Harley said was, *"Worry not little girl. We're not the same dragons as we were, and you are certainly not the ones who attacked us."*

I sighed with relief. "Thanks Harley. I have to say you're a lot more forgiving than I might be in your shoes." Harley merely inclined his head. "Now, let's find out what kind of a job you'd be good at."

I started asking him a lot of the same questions I had asked Mildred, but without the sarcasm. He interrupted me pretty quickly.

*"I've been talking with Hexley and he's really enjoying his work with the children."* Hexley was the first dragon I had met when I was a teenager. He loves to be read to, and he gets children to read to him wherever he goes.

I chuckled, "Wow, he's still doing that?"

*"Yes, he is. Apparently, the children love him. He says it is one of the most surprising and joyful things he has ever experienced. I have to say, that is an intriguing concept for me. I can't remember a time when someone loved me. I would like something where I could have a sort of human family so to speak. I would like to be loved."*

I blinked back tears from my eyes and continued. "Okay, let me think about that one. I'll get back to you." After Harley left, I actually broke down in tears. Imagine living for thousands of years and not feeling loved. Well, that was going to change and right now! I spent the entire night researching, thinking, coming up with ideas and rejecting them before I finally settled on a solution.

The next day when Harley came back, I was all prepared. “Harley, I have an idea. All night I kept coming back to your basic abilities - breathing fire and being able to fly. That added to your incredible strength gave me an interesting idea. I’m thinking that we could go to one of the poorer countries that have villages high up in the mountains. Some of these places have brutal winters, and very little infrastructure. If a place like that had geothermal energy to tap into, or in your case dragon-thermal energy, to power things as well as heat things, it would make all the difference in the world. They could set up greenhouses and grow food in the winter and they could add tourism to the mix with hot springs. That along with the capability of getting supplies in easily and any produced goods out, and it’s very possible that the people of the village could turn their attention to something other than bare survival. If that were the case who knows what might happen.”

Harley mulled it over for quite a while. He finally looked up. “*Okay, how do we find a village?*”

“We could do flyovers of the areas I am thinking of and just see if we see one that needs help where you’d be willing to live.”

Harley was most definitely in. It took us two weeks and I got to see some of the most beautiful mountains in the world from a vantage point no one else has ever had – the back of a dragon. It was awfully cold, but well worth it. We went to Tibet, Peru, Mongolia, Nepal, China, the Appalachians and Africa. Harley settled on a small, almost inaccessible village in Nepal, where a recent earthquake had devastated the town. Half the buildings looked like they would fall down if you dared to sneeze, and the people looked just as broken as their homes.

We landed in a field at the edge of town and just waited. Harley’s really good at waiting. Me, not so much.

In Nepal dragons are traditionally held in high regard. However, a theoretical dragon and a real one are worlds apart in the overall scheme of things. I was pretty impressed that it didn’t take very long for the people of the town to come investigate. What brave people these were. I was even more impressed that they had gathered several baskets of flowers as a gift for Harley. Where in the world had they found flowers in the midst of all that devastation?

I don’t speak Nepalese so couldn’t follow the entire conversation between the town elders and my friend, but I got the gist. They were delighted to have Harley come join their community and could certainly use his help. As soon as Harley told me they were planning to throw him a party, I called Larry (mentally of course) and had him bring along some food, well actually a lot of food. The village was preparing to use what little they had to welcome their new friend and I thought we should contribute as well.

As they were preparing the feast, I saw one little girl walk up to Harley and throw her arms as far as she could around his face. I had to wipe the tears away once again as I saw Harley’s reaction when she followed the hug with a kiss, right on his snout. He couldn’t have

been more stunned or more pleased. I could tell that he was going to love his new job. It's great when you find the right job for the right dragon.

Harley's doing great now and the village is thriving. With Harley's help they cleared the rubble, started building, put up greenhouses and bath houses and made the place shine. It is now a major tourist destination and everyone thinks the local legend about a dragon who saved the town is very quaint. Not too many people know it's true.

Several weeks later Larry and I were lounging by the outdoor pool at the Dragon Enterprises main compound, when Melissa suddenly appeared. Of all the dragons I think Mel is the most beautiful. She's coal black, but with an underlying iridescence that ripples across her scales like flowing water whenever she moves. The tips of her wings and some of her scales are lined in a brilliant gold. She headed straight for Larry and me. After landing she gave me a pitiful look and said, *"Hey, we could really use your help."*

I could hear the underlying (attempted) con as soon as I heard her voice in my head. She wanted something that I'm pretty sure I wasn't going to like whatever it was. I replied suspiciously, "What's going on Mel?"

*"Well, Doug and Pete –"*

I cut her off immediately. "I don't even want to know. I'm serious. I am not responsible for those two reprobates. I don't even want to know what they're up to. If they're doing something they shouldn't be, you guys have to handle it. I'll find you all jobs, I'll play you movies, I'll even arrange live entertainment, but I refuse to be the Police Chief for bad boy dragons. Really."

Mel thought about it for a bit. *"I see your point. We will take care of today, but you really have to find them jobs. Maybe that'll keep them out of trouble."*

"I doubt it, but I'll give it a shot. Send 'em over tomorrow and I'll see what I can do."

Mel nodded and leapt into the sky. Larry looked at me and asked, *"You really don't want to know?"*

"No, I really don't. They are *not* my monkeys and I am *not* the Ring Master for their particular circus!" Larry just chuckled.

When Pete and Doug arrived the next day, I just looked at them and shook my head. "So, what do you guys think you should be doing?"

The two of them looked at each other. Looked at me. Looked at each other. Looked at me. Tilted their heads like a couple of innocent puppies and in unison thought, *"We don't know. What do you think we should do?"*

"I don't know. You guys seem to be driving the other dragons crazy. They think if you had a job, you'd be happier and would cause less trouble."

Doug's head came up instantly. "*We don't cause any trouble!*"

"Really? Who accidentally flooded an entire valley because you were having a contest to see who could melt the most snow in the shortest amount of time?"

They both looked a bit sheepish. Doug offered his very best justification, "*We did dry it out.*"

"Yeah, with fire!"

Pete replied, "*We only lost a couple of trees.*" I just glared at him and he shut up. Doug wisely said nothing.

"And who scared the crap out of the space shuttle guys with some flaming lightshow?"

Silence.

"And who has been appearing and disappearing and flitting by aircraft thus making people think that aliens are flying around in our skies?"

Doug rested his head on my desk and sighed, blowing all the papers off the desk and onto the floor. "*Well, that would be us.*"

"My point exactly," I said while ignoring the mess he had just made of my office. "You two need something useful to do." When they both agreed I did my standard dragon job interview on them and then kicked them out so I could think.

---

So, that is the first part of the book. As a note, Pete and Doug do get a great job.

In future chapters we find out why there are so few dragons on Earth and what happened to them. We also find out what really happened in the year 536, which most historians agree is the worst year in human history.

Wizards enter our story and we learn that most of them are not friendly to the dragons. So, Deanne helps her dragon friends put together a base on the moon so they will be safe. She also enlists their aid to help put a moon base together for humans who do like the dragons, to start reaching for the stars. The wizards are not invited to the moon.

Dragons start arriving from elsewhere when Deanne figures out how to help the dragons thrive again, while working to broker a lasting peace between the humans and the dragons.

This and much more are part of this book. It just needs a name!