

Of  
Desperation  
And  
Dragons

A Short Story

By

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Troy took several steps past the mouth of the cave and into the gloomy darkness, where the welcomed shelter it provided from the wind allowed him to light a torch. Although, the low, flickering light offered him only a small glimpse into the darkness as the air around him started to shift to a strange, humid warmth. But what he noticed above anything else, was the smell.

He didn't really know why, but he'd expected a cave with a creature that large living in it to smell, well... different. Perhaps something closer to the barn back home, filled with its array of large animals, and the scent of warm, flatulence. But this was nothing like that. And yet... it still had a similar undertone, while being frustratingly hard to really pin down.

It was odd, how the smell, more than anything else, had caught his attention and he couldn't help but chuckle at the absurdity of it. For a moment, he wondered why that was, letting the distraction ease his mind as he stumbled ever further into the cave. Maybe it was just because that's how he'd always remembered places, especially home.

His musing was cut short, however, as the sound of the great beast could soon be heard, not far ahead of him. Where the soft rumble of its steady breathing echoed down along the smooth, stone walls of the cavern. And, not for the first time, he told himself that this had been a very bad idea.

Troy even found himself half-turning to look at the entrance and consider going back for a moment. To take a bit more time to, perhaps, find another way, any other way. But he knew there wasn't, and any further consideration would only be a waste of time, and ultimately lead him back to where he was now.

So, he took a deep breath to steady himself and strode deeper into the cave, buckling down the fear that rose within him. Each step leaving the safety of the entrance, and his past life, further behind him. Still, it took a good half-hour or so before he began to see any real signs of the beast

The first of which was another sharp increase in the ambient temperature around him. Which was soon followed by the floor becoming littered with the detritus-like evidence of past prey, and the steady rumble of breath which soon grew to a dull roar. Until even the darkness of the cavern was replaced by a strange, almost ethereal, glow that lit the cave as though by dim firelight.

He readied himself for what was surely to come next. The torch was extinguished, as it had become redundant, and any unnecessary clothing, such as his cloak, sash, and belt, were removed to ease his movement. Not that he needed them, or ever would again, at that point, as the cave had become warm and almost pleasant.

After stripping down to just a simple tunic and pants, he again moved forward until he soon rounded a corner and halted at the mouth of a vast chamber. The walls of which spread out wide to create a space several hundred feet across at the very least, while rising up to a ceiling that lay in unseen, shadowy darkness. While here and there, great pillar-like stalagmites stabbed down from the gloom, some of which reached the floor to form massive columns.

Troy managed to swallow his mounting fear and took several steps out into the open. Where he'd expected a sudden flash of claws or burst of fire at any moment. But nothing happened, which gave him hope that it would at least let him speak before ending him. Although, the delay was far more unnerving than having the beast charging toward him from the gloom.

However, after a moment, the strange light seemed to dim somewhat to let the darkness edge in around him. Which left the far walls in near-absolute darkness, where strange shadows began to play along them. He spun several times while looking around with slow, terrified deliberation in hopes of seeing the lair's owner before it was too late.

It was then that he noticed the sudden silence that had fallen and felt the hairs on his neck stand on end. As though the large, hungry eyes upon him exuded palpable force.

"Why, hello there... little one," a soft, almost feminine, voice rumbled through the cavernous space, "And what brings you before me? Have you come to test your bravery, or are you lost and sought the warmth and safety my home offered. I'm sorry to tell you that the result may be the same either way, truth be told."

He could almost feel it edging closer to him and figured waiting any longer would be a bad idea. "Hello," he said as calmly as he could while he tried not to shake from terror, "I'm here to... to make you an, uh... an offer."

A leathery sound rippled around him and the creature's voice replied, now almost on top of him. "Oh?" it said with a dangerous note of amusement, "And what is it that you could possibly offer me that I don't already have? Or could easily get?"

"Please, hear me out!" he squeaked in fear as the sound of movement grew ever closer, then jumped as a warm gust of air blew against his back.

"All I see before me is mine," the dragon continued, "All that draws breath within my domain already belongs to me. So, what could you possibly offer me that would interest me, in any way?"

Expecting death at any moment and in near desperation, he blurted out, "I know I'm already dead, having come here. But the least you could do is listen to what I have to say."

A moment of thoughtful silence grew between them before a low sigh blew hot, fetid breath against his back. "Very well," it cooed into his left ear from just behind him, "I'm listening."

Troy spun in alarm and found himself staring into the twin, flared nostrils of the massive dragon. Its eyes glaring down along the long snout as it watched him. The sight sent him tumbling backward on pure reflex, not wanting to be that close to a mouth that could easily swallow him whole. Which allowed him to finally get a look at the creature.

The low light was still enough to illuminate the green of its scales and how they flashed with color as its body moved. Where little waves of purple, red, and even gold played in soft, subtle ripples across its head, neck, and body. That is, her body... so it seemed, if what little he'd heard from people talking about dragons and their coloration in the pub was reliable.

He cleared his throat and tried to calm down again long enough to form a coherent sentence. "Well, um... madam, I—"

A loud, mirthful sound rumbled up through her throat and cut him off. "Oh, there's no need to be that formal... although, such courtesy is likely to keep you alive far longer than not."

"Oh, um... sorry," he muttered, not knowing how else to respond. "Well, as I, er... as I was saying, I'm here to make you an offer."

"So you've said," she sighed as she reclined slightly onto her side and yawned wide enough to give him a good view of her mouth, all the way back into her throat. Which was done more to motivate him with a glimpse of his immediate future, more than anything else. "Alright then, let's hear it."

Troy closed his eyes for a second to push away the image of her sharp teeth and the thought of him trapped between them as they came together. Despite it being all but inevitable at that point, dwelling about it didn't help him at all.

"I was hoping that you could, um... perhaps keep our farm off the, err... menu. If it's not too much trouble... please..." he muttered.

He realized, even as the words left his lips, that there wasn't any reason she'd ever consider it. Nor would it be very likely she'd see what he offered in exchange a fair trade. He started to shiver, despite the heat, as his incredible naiveté about the chivalry of dragons came into clear and deadly focus.

A short, quiet prayer to Trallos escaped his lips. As he could sense his sudden death was, no doubt, racing ever closer due to his actions. Which seemed to be upon him as the dragoness licked her lips and laughed openly at his words. The thunderous sound of it bringing down small showers of stone from the far ceiling.

"That's a request, not an offer," she said as her head tilted in thought, "I thought humans were smart enough to understand that. Well, at least you asked nicely... I'm almost half-tempted to let you leave here alive as a reward, or give you a head start anyway."

"Wait," he interjected, a little surprised at how easily her words had injured his pride, "I do have something to offer in return."

Her head shifted a little closer as she found herself rather curious about it. "And... that would be?" she asked as an eyebrow larger than he was arched with interest while awaiting his reply.

He took a deep breath to summon what courage he could, then blurted out before he had a chance to reconsider, “Me!”

Her expression became incredulous for a moment. At least he thought that’s what it was, as a dragon’s facial expressions are hard to make out when one’s shaking with terror. For all he knew, she was angry at him for his candid assumptions.

Regardless of what it was, he pressed on before she could reply, determined to be heard. “I give myself to you, I’ll be your servant, your slave, or even a... a willing m-meal, if it comes to that. Just please... spare our farm, and... my family.”

He knelt before the great beast as her eyes bore into him for a long moment. Looking over his diminutive frame for any sign of the deception she was sure had to be there. Why else would he so willingly offer his flesh to her?

It wasn’t unheard of for some overly enthusiastic or desperate hero to take something rather poisonous, then jump headlong into the gaping jaws of a dragon. In fact, she’d lost a mate to just that tactic several winters ago. Of course, had the fool bothered to inspect his meal before passing it through his greedy gullet, then he’d have noticed the sickly green color the man was starting to turn.

Stag`nafir hadn’t been the brightest of dragons, but even he should’ve known that something was wrong. As humans usually aren’t that color or frothing blue foam from their mouth, and should just be flamed or crushed at that point.

So, her gaze roamed over the shaking supplicant before her, expecting to see the evidence of his deceit at any moment. All while letting a trickle of heat build in her throat, so as to flame him into ash when she did. However, her features softened as she was unable to find anything but seemingly honest intentions.

The realization that he was, in fact, serious about it washed over her, and something akin to sympathy for the young man stirred within her. “I see...” she muttered in thought, “...That *is* a rather tempting offer. But... you’re already here, all I need do is reach out to snap you up, and be done with it.”

“I know,” he said, his head bowed in defeat as he hoped she wouldn’t punish his family as well because of it.

Like a cat with a rather entertaining rodent, she couldn’t help but tease him a little about it. “Quite foolish of you,” she said, her tone soft and comforting yet still mocking enough to rattle him.

She watched him in silence for a time as he further drooped under the weight of failure. Enjoying the moment until she could no longer stand the sight of the pathetic little thing before her. While she may relish the act of reminding this ape where he belongs, she wasn’t so cruel to let him openly weep tears of despair. Besides, it would ruin the mood.

“However...” she added when he seemed as low as he could go without breaking down, “I shall consider it. Since you mustered the courage to climb all the way up here, and everything.”

His head shot up, suddenly buoyant from a small burst of hope. “Really? Thank you, I—”

“Although,” she interrupted with a stern glare that froze the words in his throat, “I wouldn’t get your hopes up.” A slight gurgle came from somewhere within her ponderous innards, and she continued, “That said, I think it’s time you show me your dedication. And willingly submit to the fate you’ve elected for yourself.”

A chill weaved its way along his back at her words and the hungry gleam in her eyes that came with it. “If... if that’s what you wish... then,” he swallowed reflexively as he tried to form the words, “then my flesh is yours.”

She rolled back upright and gazed down at him expectantly. “It always was,” she said as a claw rose to pick at his tunic, “Now strip.”

He looked at his clothing for a second, the shock of what was about to happen having led to confusion. “Why?”

She let the insolence of such a question slide, for the moment. “Why do you think?” she purred, “You no longer need such things, and something about clothing always disagrees with me. Gives me wind something terrible if they accompany you, and there’s nothing worse than a dragon with gas, trust me.” He still hesitated, so she lowered her head toward him and added with a growl, “Look, either you take them off, right now, or I will... with my teeth.”

The not-so-subtle threat of painful disembowelment was more than enough motivation for him to get moving. He quickly removed the last of his clothing, tossing them away into the bloom, and stood naked before her snout. As his bare flesh was exposed its nostrils flared to take in his scent, before blowing out her hot, humid breath over him.

It was a rather unnerving experience on its own, which had Troy shivering slightly despite the warmth of the cave and the hot breath blasting against him. It was somewhat understandable, giving that he was literally staring at the gateway to his own demise. But he didn’t shy away, or even consider trying. This was his choice, and if there was even the smallest chance that she would accept his bargain, then he would gladly dive into her maw as a willing snack.

She watched the little human for a moment as he stood before her, trembling and afraid. The scent of his fear rolled off him, so much so, that it tickled her sinuses and filled her lungs with each breath. But despite that, he stood firm, resolute, and, above all, willing to obey her desire.

The act pleased her immensely and worked to grow the grain of sympathy she had for him into something more substantial. To where she wondered if, perhaps, this one might be of some use beyond the simple distraction offered by her usual prey. He’d certainly earned an honorable death, if not a tiny amount of respect, for facing his end with such resolve.

Most of those who were unfortunate, or stupid enough, to wander into her mountainside home begged, argued, or even tried to fight her. To do anything they could in an attempt to prolong their inevitable fate. This was a refreshing change of pace, to have prey casually walk up and politely ask if it could become a meal for her. Such a thing was usually only reserved for the elders, lords of the greater domains.

Her head swelled with pride at the thought, that she had become mighty enough to garner such an honor. Perhaps others might follow this one, to beg for favors and mercy in exchange for flesh and services. Although, if that truly became a frequent occurrence, then it would no doubt make her too fat, lazy and unwilling to have the nighttime hunts she enjoyed so well.

She let her eyes roam over the young human's body for a moment as she calculated its nutritional value, while silently complimenting him for keeping in good shape. He seemed to understand what she was doing and his nervous quaking intensified somewhat. It stirred some pity and, for a heartbeat, she was tempted to end his short life with a quick and painless flick of a claw. To save him any further torment and, of course, the suffering that soon awaited him within her stomach.

As he'd more than demonstrated his resolve at that point and, again, she wasn't that cruel. Despite what those who happen to meet her might say to the contrary, if they still could. Yet curiosity stayed her hand, as it were, for she wanted to see if he really would go all the way. To willingly let himself be consumed without so much as a whimper or cry for mercy.

She gave him a warm, toothy smile. "Very good," she cooed softly as her breath blew his hair back, "I must say, you do make a rather mouth-watering sight."

"T-thank you," he replied while trying not to gag on the subtle scent of rancid meat and who knew what else that lingered in her breath.

"I see that little farm of yours keeps you nice and fit," she said as her gaze lingered on the slight curve of muscles here and there over his body.

"Yes... i-it, um... it does," he muttered with growing disconcertion at being looked at like he was a prize steer.

Her gaze was so intense, Troy could almost feel the pressure as it slowly raked over him. He tried not to think about it, focus his mind on anything else other than the ravenous predator eyeing him hungrily. It had rather mixed results.

"Good, I do so hate fattening meals, even ones as small as you," she said with as much of a shrug her frame could manage.

Part of her wanted to draw it out a bit longer, spend more time getting to know this mortal who'd sacrifice his life in such a way. All for the unlikely assurance that she'd spare the precious

farm of his. But her belly gurgled just then with a rather impatient edge that pushed all thought of delay aside.

She lowered her head so that it rested fully on the ground just before him. “Alright then, I think that about does it for the simple pleasantries. So, it’s time for you to fulfill your side of our... little bargain.”

Her maw hinged opened to reveal a dark cavern of wet, pulsating flesh, lined by a row of long, sharp teeth that stretched before him. A wave of dank, foul-smelling air blasted out from it as she exhaled, the searing heat almost painful against his bare skin. He tried to hold his breath, not wanting to retch and perhaps offend the creature who could make his death far more painful than it could be. But gave up at the realization that he would get a lungful of it at one point or another, so he might as well get used to it.

He took a tenuous step closer to the abyss as the tongue slipped out over her sharp front teeth. Where its wide, slimy surface danced with flashes of color, just as her scales did, in the strange magical light of the cave. In a way, it helped his anxiety somewhat as it would ease his passage into her mouth. Although, what was going to happen to him once inside was another matter entirely.

Several small pools of saliva had already formed along its center from the beast’s growing expectation to taste his flesh. While, here and there, thick tendrils of it stretched between various parts of her mouth. And yet, everything drew his eyes to the dark opening at the back, from which a low, hungry gurgle could somehow just be heard above the constant roar of her breathing.

It all had a strange effect on him, as the longer he watched it writhe before him and the heat of her mouth blazed against his flesh, the more inviting it seemed. Which dragged him forward several more steps, until his legs bumped into the tip of her extended tongue. Where the feeling of his shins being covered in a thick layer of hot drool jarred him enough to wake him from his trance.

Looking down, he watched the end of the long, muscular organ as it waggled back and forth against his legs, teasing out the first, succulent taste of him. He observed it for a moment in dazed silence, not sure how to describe the feeling. At one instant, it was impossibly slick and wet, while the next, it was rough and almost painful as her tongue twisted against him.

As though drawn to it, he leaned down and pressed his palm against its surprisingly soft, spongy surface. Which sank down and was soon submerged in a small pool of saliva that rushed in to fill the depression. The action was accompanied by a blast of hot breath and a thunderous sound of pleasure that surged out her throat and reverberated through her maw. The strength and volume of which rattled his teeth and almost blew him onto his back.

Her tongue slipped out a little further to press itself between his legs as the end flicked up a little. While it failed to toss him inside, he got the message that she really enjoyed whatever his taste was. So, despite wanting to draw it out, and extend therefore his life as much as possible, he started



to shift himself forward into her mouth. As he could sense the dragon's mounting impatience and didn't want to anger her, which would likely be a bad idea.

Troy's hand slid up her tongue and as he continued to lean forward until he lay fully on its surface. Where he braced himself for a quick, and hopefully painless, end to it all. As he expected to be pulled inside, sealed into sudden darkness as her massive jaws snapped shut around him. Then plunged down her throat with a quick, casual swallow, that is, unless she chewed first.

But none of that happened as her tongue stayed relatively still under him. The only movement being where it retracted just enough to no longer rest on the floor of the cave, while her mouth closed slightly which shut out a good portion of the light. The surprise at still being alive, let alone not on the way to her stomach, left him relieved but increasingly confused.

Which, as her head carefully lifted back into the air, led him to wonder if she'd only been testing him for some reason. That is, until he twisted his head enough to see her pulsing, eager throat not too far in front of him. Where a sense of dread formed in the pit of his stomach as it dawned on him that she actually expected him to literally crawl to the back of her mouth and slide down her throat.

It gave him a moment of panic at the thought and doubted whether he could truly go through with it. Where the urge to resist and even fight such a shameful demise rose within him. For it was one thing to let her eat him willingly, but another entirely to crawl into her throat with a grateful smile.

However, he managed to suppress it and began to edge himself over the wet, squelching surface of her tongue, toward the dark plunge pit that lay within the gloom ahead of him. Where each time his arm reached out to find what purchase it could to pull him forward, he expected to find only empty air. In which he'd topple over the edge and into the firm grasp of her hungry, waiting throat.

It was a maddening experience, knowing that with each jerking slide forward, he was willingly edging closer to his own death. One that grew more certain within him that she must relish in some way. That the end of his life was, perhaps, only seconds away, unless he somehow managed to survive in her stomach long enough to be mostly digested alive. A thought which only made the primal urge to flee grow within him that much stronger.

The sloshing, organic sounds inside her mouth and the roar of her breathing were all he knew at that point. Which only made things that much worse. To the point that he almost sighed in relief when he felt the flesh under him curve down from him sharply and his next shift transitioned into a steady slide forward. A slide that sent him off the back of her tongue and right into her gullet.

There was a slight tickle at the entrance of her throat as the little human started to slide from her tongue into it. She closed her jaws and tilted her head back, while reveling in the feeling his body made. Then, with one, smooth action, she swallowed the small creature in a single, powerful gulp.

Troy's steady slide plunged him down into her throat just as her head shifted and the last of the light was cut off. An instant later, her tongue surged and sent a deluge of thick, viscous saliva that had accumulated splashing his lower half. Which washed him forward and down her esophagus as the flesh around him resounded with organic, liquid thunder.

Her eyes closed as she focused on the feeling made by the little lump that rolled down her neck on its way into her massive body. She was indeed quite pleased at how unwavering his willingness to satisfy her had been. Perhaps she'd accept his offer, but as for now, all there needed to be done was savor the moment... and wait.

The trip through her throat may have been short but was excruciating and felt like an eternity. Where he had to instinctively fight against drowning in the sea of slime that encased him while incomprehensibly strong muscles threatened to crush every bone in his body. Which ended when he was squeezed out through a muscular ring and dumped into her roiling stomach.

He landed in a small pool, which consisted of a rather gooey substance that made him glad for the darkness. From the way it felt, it was likely the mostly digested remains of the last poor creature, or person, to have found itself in his position and he tried to edge away from it as best he could.

But the slimy surface of the flesh around him formed a small bowl that made it almost impossible to escape. Which was made worse by the constant shifting and flexing the stomach itself had started to do. Not that getting away from the fetid slop would have saved him from becoming the same after a short period of time.

However, it would be nice to not have to soak in it for the time being. So, after some desperate scrambling, he managed to clamber out and onto the bare, mucus-covered flesh of her stomach. Which only served to increase its rolling movement as it reacted to his feeble struggles.

He panted for what breath he could get amongst the thick, caustic air around him, as the sound of her body thundered all around him. Which had now been accompanied by the steady drone of her heart and a series of ominous gurgles from somewhere beyond his digestive prison. A prison that had already started to gear up so as to reduce him to the same nutritious paste he was coated in.

The flesh under him shifted with sudden violence as her stomach convulsed and groaned. It caused him to slide back down into the depression as a wave of fluid washed over him. Which tingled and itched against his skin, and he tried to wipe it off out of instinct. As he did, his hands came away covered in his hair as the digestive enzymes loosened it from his skin.

"Still devoted and willing to endure such a fate?" she asked, her voice booming yet somehow clear. "Don't worry, for it'll be short, I can promise you that much at the very least."

He was unsure how to respond, but it quickly became a rather moot point as waves of blinding fire overtook him. Spawned by the thick sludge that covered him as it began to eat away the flesh itself. The pain was like nothing else he'd ever known, and he writhed and thrashed against it while her gut continued to constrict further around him in a series of gurgling groans.

All while a quiet sizzling noise filled his ears. At least, that's the sound he could have sworn began to rise above her other bodily noises around him just then.

And yet, he still didn't cry out or otherwise give any indication of wanting mercy. His mouth only remained fixed in a long, silent scream of agony as his arms flailed against the soft, pliant flesh under him. Just hard enough to distract his mind from the pain while not alerting her to what might be thought of as being unwilling.

While it may no longer matter at that point, one way or another, he still summoned every inch of strength he had to bear it. For if there was even the smallest chance that his sacrifice would save his family then he'd willingly endure every agonizing second of it. Which, all said and done, had been mercifully short, as the dragon's digestive system was used to dealing with far tougher meals.

Where, after only another minute or two, the searing pain soon ebbed away as his skin fully sluffed off. Which left far less of him that could feel pain within the dark, organic world around him as it began to grow ever darker. His life starting to finally slip away.

His last thoughts were of his home, his family, and whether he'd managed to save either of them with such a reckless act. And if they'd truly understand his reasons for this, or if he'd been the optimistic fool many often thought he was.

The end came soon after, just before his body fell apart from her stomach having removed most of the tissues needed to keep it together. Which gave another groaning convulsion that had the now lifeless, organic mass mix in with the rest of the stomach's soupy contents. Where what little definition it had was quickly lost as it further dissolved into nothing.

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She yawned and stretched her long, serpentine body as her gut gave a low groan of gratification. Still enjoying the small, yet welcome, feeling of contentment the little human had given her. And, more than anything else, rather pleased at his dedication.

He hadn't made so much as a groan the entire time, from what she could tell. Perhaps she would give his offer some serious thought. After all, he'd fulfilled his part of the bargain, and done so with far more eagerness than she'd ever expected a mere human to provide. As despite him having been more than a bit naïve about it, she couldn't help but admire his bravery.

She let these and other thoughts drift around in her mind as she curled up and slowly fell asleep.



# Epilogue

Troy awoke with a start and suffered through a wave of panic as the memories of recent events replayed in his mind. The alarm was made worse by the dark, cramped space his body was curled up inside of. And for a brief, horrifying moment, he thought he was still somewhere inside the dragon's fetid guts.

But as his struggles were met by a hard, smooth surface rather than moist, slimy flesh, he realized that wasn't the case. Although, it was still quite hot. So much so that it felt as if the heat would soon cook him alive soon if he didn't manage to get out of wherever he was.

Which elicited another small bout of anxiety. As he was pretty sure the body with which to get cooked had just been digested, only moments ago. An apprehension that fermented into confusion and dread that perhaps this was just the next stage of draconic digestion.

Where his very soul was about to be broken down to feed whatever dark parts of her that required it. Doomed to an eternity of suffering and anguish. He'd never heard of anything like that, but it wouldn't surprise him to find out it was true. In fact, such a thing would likely be a fitting punishment for being so stupid as to try and bargain with a dragoness.

As panic rose within him at the thought, he pressed out at the walls of his prison in desperation, which gave just enough to offer encouragement to continue. So, he flexed his entire body against it while pushing up onto the top with every bit of strength he could muster. And was rewarded by a loud, sharp sound as the material broke, sending long jagged cracks down the sides that let in small shards of dim light.

It took several more shoves and a couple of hard punches before the cracks spread enough for him to break it open completely. Where he spilled out onto the hard, dirt floor of the cave and lay blinking against the painfully bright light. All while the sound of amused laughter filled the air with a deep, melodious murmur.

"Welcome back, little one," a low, familiar-sounding, feminine voice rumbled through the cavern from above him. "I was starting to wonder if you'd ever get around to hatching."

Troy looked up into the gloom at the vague dragonish shape, as his eyes were having trouble focusing for some reason. After a moment, his eyes cleared enough to see the dragoness standing over him in a somewhat protective stance. Which, for some reason, was rather comforting and calmed him enough to sit up.

"What... hatch?" he muttered as he gazed back at the large egg he'd apparently just emerged from. "But, how... that's..."

Her claw swung over to rub his back with slow, affectionate strokes. “It’s called magic, I’m sure even someone as rural as you must have heard of it,” she teased.

He was finally able to turn away from the remains of *his* egg and looked up at her with an expression of anxious confusion. “Of course, but... why?”

The dragoness’ snout split in a wide, toothy smile. “Think of it as a reward, for your faithful dedication... or something like that.” She lowered her head down until her large, goldish eye rested just before his face. “Besides,” she continued, her tone dangerously mischievous, “You did *give* yourself to me, after all. And it will take quite a bit more than what little service you gave me last night if I’m going to spare that little farm of yours. Which you neglected to specify which one it was, I might add. So, I needed to bring you back for at least that much.”

His expression grew blank and he blinked at her for a couple of seconds, too hopeful and thankful to speak. “So, that means...”

“Yes,” she said with a sigh, “I’ll honor your request for the time being. So long as you serve me, now and always, with your heart and soul. Do that, and I shall consider our bargain complete.”

Troy’s eyes welled with sudden tears and he was forced to bow his head to keep her from noticing. “Thank you,” he said, “I swear to serve you with all my strength and will, until my dying breath.”

She chuckled, its sound warm and soothing. “No need to be so formal about it, what’s done is done.” She rose and trotted over to an alcove, where she relaxed and curled up in a relaxed semicircle, then gestured to him with a claw. “Now come, lay with me. Enjoy my warmth and take what milk you can for now, as you’re still newly hatched and must recover your strength. So that, in time, you may grow to serve me... properly.”

He nodded, walked over, and climbed up onto her surprisingly soft, scaly body. Where he found a small depression and snuggled into it as her body’s immense warmth soaked into his own. After a moment, he felt her claw pressing against his back, nudging him forward with gentle, yet firm, encouragement.

It was then that he noticed the teat which had poked out through a gap in her scales, just above him, the size of his thumb and already dripping with a dark milky substance. Then, as though drawn by some instinct, he shifted enough to close his lips around it and swallowed several mouthfuls with enthusiastic hunger.

After he’d filled his belly with some of the strange fluid, he realized that he was indeed quite tired, and his eyes soon drifted closed to submit himself to sleep. As, despite the uncertainty about his future, other than likely becoming a frequent meal, he felt at peace. Because, for the first time in years, he knew that there was no need to worry. Not for his family or even himself.

However, something told him that there was far more to this arrangement than he suspected, and that he was going to be in it for a very long time.