

Idiot's Guide to Dragon Slaying and Child Care

Novel Excerpt

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Lupe was in the library, eyeball-deep in the metabolic processes of cells, when a death metal screech tore through her head like claws. Three nights of Red Bull and no sleep had savaged her nerves, so she was set to bite the head off whatever moron forgot to silence their phone. But then she tracked the buzzing to the snowdrift of printouts on her own table. Javi must've changed her ringtone as a prank again.

She slapped the phone to shut it up and checked the caller ID.

It was Eddie, her Guild contact. *The hell?* He was calling, not texting, which meant a job. But she'd told him she was off the clock until after the exam. And according to her phone, she had less than six hours to cram eighteen weeks of amino acids and protein functions into her underperforming gray matter before she flunked, lost her scholarship, lost the apartment, lost—

She sucked in a breath and held it for seven heartbeats before letting it shudder back out. She was *not* having a panic attack. Not today. There wasn't enough time. She'd pencil one in sometime after the exam. Next week, perhaps, or next millennium. Tomorrow at the earliest.

Tomorrow. The day rent was due.

Lupe stood, startling a group of math majors huddled over their graphing calculators, and swept her notes into her backpack. She'd taken a desk in the farthest corner of the library, so she had to worm her way around tables piled with books and notes, like altars to which panicking students paid desperate fealty.

When she reached the bathroom—mercifully empty—she dug her phone from her pocket and hit send. Eddie answered after the first ring.

“It's big,” he said without preamble.

“How big?” she asked.

“Eighteen feet.”

She pressed her forehead to the cool tile wall. Inhale. Seven heartbeats. Release. Damn. The last monster she'd fought was only about fifteen, sixteen feet at the outside, and she'd come out of that one with a second degree burn on her back and a mangled arm that should've seen stitches but didn't. And this one was even bigger. Older. More dangerous.

The part of her that still clung to sanity screamed at her to say no, to go back to her desk and bury her head in her notes, to pass this test then maybe go downtown like a normal twenty-something on a Friday night and in no way, shape, or form do anything that might get her gutted or deep fried. But the thought of cracking her textbook squeezed her stomach and revved her pulse, and between that and the promise of a paycheck, the job was looking like the better option, mortal danger or no.

"What's the payout?" Lupe asked.

"Today's rate? Eleven, twelve hundred."

"Susan meeting me there?" Susan Jones was Lupe's hunting partner. The two of them often shared the toughest kills--and the resulting pay.

"Negative," Eddie said. "She's on a call out in Cherokee. You'd be on your own for this one."

Lupe ran her tongue across her cracked lips. Soloing anything over eleven or twelve feet was tantamount to suicide, but she'd done it before. And it meant she didn't have to split the bounty. Even after the guild's cut, that'd be something like a grand. A thousand dollars would pay the bills and keep her and Javi fed for a month, maybe longer. It'd be nice to have some pocket money for a change. Or something to eat other than Maruchan and Campbells.

After a brief crisis of conscience, hunger won out against common sense. Anyway, it wasn't like she could fail her exam any harder than she was already going to. What the hell. Literal dragons were easier to kill than figurative ones.

"I'm on it," she told Eddie. "Text me the details."

"Will do. And... Lupe?" He sounded almost hesitant, which gave Lupe pause.

"Yeah?"

"Be careful."

"Always," she said.

She hung up and texted her brother: LIVE ONE. CELEBRATE 2NITE? Then she sallied forth from the restroom, nearly bowling over a girl teetering under an armload of books on her way in. She made it out of the library without further adventure, but outside the late November breeze socked her in the jaw and left her shivering at the top of the stairs down to the quad.

The browning lawn below hosted the usual assortment of Frisbee players, picnickers, and even a sunbather, whose bare flesh exposed to the chill made Lupe revise her estimation of the average college student's intelligence. A Fae Rights protest was going strong over by the Lit and Lang building. From this distance, those assembled appeared to be mostly slim and pointy-eared, but there were more than a few human supporters listening in. Lupe might've been there herself if it wasn't for that exam. And now the dragon.

She crossed the quad and took a set of concrete steps down to street level, where her Steed was stabled in a nearby parking lot. Lupe patted the hood fondly before getting in—the old girl served pretty well considering she was older than some retirees and drank gasoline like a boozier. If you overlooked the chipping powder blue paint and decades of haphazard repairs, you could kind of tell she used to be an old Mustang. At least, that's what Lupe told people.

When she pulled up to the apartment building a few minutes later, she took the stairs up to her second floor room two at a time. She dumped her backpack on the couch and headed for her room to prepare for battle.

She dropped to her knees by her bed and tugged from beneath it a bedraggled canvas duffel bag. She rifled through it, identifying the smooth plastic casing of the first aid kit. Had she remembered to restock after treating that burn last time? At the bottom of the bag coiled a length of thin, strong chain. Satisfied, she zipped the duffel and hefted it onto the bed, then unearthed a polished aluminum case from her closet. She unsnapped the case and peered at the rifle inside, unable to prevent herself from looking over her shoulder as she did so. Having the gun in her apartment violated so many tenets of her lease that her landlady wouldn't know whether to have an aneurysm or spontaneously combust. It wasn't even your everyday rabbit hunting sort of rifle-it was a custom job .300 meant for putting a hole through something with the resilience of concrete. When she had it ordered when she turned the requisite eighteen, her mother had disapproved.

“What are you going to shoot with it, *m'ijita*?” she demanded. “Elephants?”

Lupe had grinned and exchanged a knowing look with her stepfather, Hal. “Something like that.”

She checked the safety and the magazine. She kept the gun unloaded, a habit drilled in by her coach during all those gun safety lectures. But the dragon wasn't going to take a time out for her to prepare before it tried to slurp out her intestines, so she'd need to load it before she went into battle. She was about to put the gun away when she heard footsteps in the hall.

She spun towards the door, shifting into a firing position. Then she glimpsed the intruder frozen in the doorway and lowered the gun, scowling.

“Holy shit, Javi,” she said, latching the gun back in its case, “I could’ve shot you.”

“It’s unloaded,” Javi said. He held his hands in the air like a cartoon criminal. He’d pulled his ratty toboggan hat down over his ears, as usual, and his clothes looked suspiciously slept in.

“It could’ve been loaded,” Lupe retorted, “And that’s not the point. Why aren’t you at school?”

He rolled his eyes and dropped his hands. “Because I’m skipping, Lu.”

“No shit. I mean, why are you skipping?”

“Well, I...wait a second, what are you doing back? I thought you had some test to take.” He looked past her toward the bed, and his brows shot up at the sight of the aluminum case and the duffel bag. “You got a job?”

Lupe heaved a sigh. “Yeah, I got a job. Look, get your stuff and get to the car. I’ll drop you back at school on my way out.”

Javi lifted his chin. “Not happening.”

“What?”

“Rule number one: don’t go out alone. I remember *that* from Dad’s lessons. Besides,” he said, grinning, “you promised you’d take me on a hunt.”

“Not on a school day,” she said, but he just jerked his head in the direction of her backpack on the living room couch.

“Come *on*, Lu. What’s the real reason you don’t want me to come?”

“I mean, no offense, Javi, but you’re—”

He crossed his arms and stared at her, daring her to say it.

“Too young,” Lupe finished, but that wasn’t what she was going to say and they both knew it.

They stared each other down for a long moment. His eyes wrenched at hers like a prybar at the windows to her soul.

Lupe broke first. She was *such* a sucker. “All right, fine,” she said. “You can come. Somebody’s gotta man the phone.”

At her words, the sun rose in Javi’s eyes, transforming his already beautiful face into a vision that’d make Michaelangelo snap his paintbrushes. Although they shared the same mother, Lupe and Javi looked hardly anything alike. He was darker-skinned, which made his gorgeous smattering of freckles ridiculously unfair. Meanwhile, Lupe’s lighter skin, the only memento she had of her father, burned rather than bronzed in the sun. Javi had eyes the color of sour-apple Jello and a head of dark waves in stylish disarray; Lupe’s hair and eyes were the same boring brown. Most people acted surprised when they learned the two of them were related, but maybe that had something to do with their...other differences.

Fidgeting under Lupe’s gaze, Javi shoved a hand under his hat to rake at his hair, exposing an ear that tapered to a slight, but noticeable point. He saw her looking and yanked the cap back down. “Hey, don’t we have a dragon to kill?”

“Right, let’s go,” Lupe said. She returned to the bedroom, slung the heavy duffel over her shoulder, and picked up the aluminum case. They locked up and made the quick trip across the parking lot to the Steed.

After stowing her gear in the trunk, Lupe slid behind the wheel and popped Javi’s door open. He settled in the passenger seat and removed his gloves, tucking them into his coat pocket. Once adjusted, he asked, “Where are we headed?”

She tossed her phone to him and put the car in gear. “Eddie said he’d text the deets.”

Javi thumbed the phone awake and read out an address.

“Violet Hill?” Lupe repeated. “That’s a thirty minute drive.”

“What’s your hurry? Got a date?” He raised his eyebrows suggestively.

She socked him in the shoulder. “My exam’s at five. And I need to study more.”

“Lupe, if you study any more, your head’s going to explode. Is the world really going to end if you get a B?”

“It might.”

He didn’t respond as she eased the car out of the lot. “Anyway, what about you?” she asked. “You really shouldn’t miss any more class this month.”

“You said I could come,” he said. Seeing her frown, he raised his hands in surrender. “It’s lunch now, and after that I’ve got a free period. If we wrap this up quick, I can make it to AP Stat.” He said this last bit with heavy revulsion.

Lupe wanted to pry into that, ask if he’d brought up his grade. Instead, she asked, “Ed say anything about what we’re up against?”

He turned back to the phone. “Um... it says, ‘Black in color, no reported flight capabilities...’”

“Firebreather?”

“I don’t...yeah. Says it roasted up some guy’s livestock.”

“Excellent,” Lupe muttered, and for once it wasn’t pure sarcasm. Property damage meant a chance the landowners would give them a stipend out of gratitude, in addition to what the monster brought in bounty. This might be her most lucrative hunt yet.

She hit Interstate, headed out of the city and down the mountain to the rolling foothills farmland. The old girl’s engine grumbled oddly, and Lupe frowned. That frown deepened into a scowl when Javi echoed the Steed’s grumble with a sneeze.

“You take your medicine today?” Lupe asked. He nodded, staring away from her out the window. “You should really be wearing your gloves,” she said. She searched his hands for a sign of an allergic reaction.

“I don’t need them.”

“Javi...”

“Really, Lu. I’m not touching anything iron. I’ll put them on before I get out of the car, okay? Sheesh, when did you become—“

Our mother? She knew what he was asking, just as he knew her answer: When did Lupe start being their mom? When their mother stopped.

The address Eddie forwarded led them to a two story house at the base of some forested hills about thirty miles outside of town. Immaculately trimmed azaleas hedged the yard, and a vegetable garden was visible beyond the corner of the house. There was even a garden gnome to greet them at the head of the gravel drive which bordered the property then disappeared into trees farther up the slope.

Lupe reigned in the Steed and disembarked. Her legs’d kinked up driving and she was trying to work them out when she heard her brother murmur, “Oh.”

“What?” she said, kneading her calf.

“You feel that?”

And suddenly she did. “Shit,” she said. “Place is sitting on a Bleed.”

It’s hard to explain a Bleed to someone who’s never felt one. The best metaphor Lupe could come up with was drawing on a stack of paper with a sharpie. If you pick up the top sheet and look at the next one, you can still see ink where the pen bled through. Bleeds were like that,

only the pieces of paper were parallel universes: the human one and Faerie. And the “ink” that bled through? That was magic.

To Lupe, magic felt, well, *wrong*. And vaguely painful. Like putting a shoe on the wrong foot, only for the whole body. Of course, opinions differed. Javi swung his arms and stretched like a cat in a pool of sunlight.

“What?” he said when he caught her glance. “Feels good.”

“You start breathing fire, I’m disowning you,” she said. He just smirked.

On the porch sat a man wearing an unbuttoned shirt that framed a pudgy belly they could see from yards off. He hauled himself to his feet as they stood gawking and crossed the lawn towards them.

“You the exterminator?” he grumbled through a mustache like the end of a pushbroom. Exterminator, he said. Like she was here to set a giant mousetrap.

“Something like that. Got a dragon problem?”

“Little girl like you’s going to kill this thing? Sucker’s nigh twenty feet long.”

Lupe wanted to retort that she was 5’10” and twenty-three years old, and therefore neither little nor a girl. Instead, she popped the trunk and cracked the aluminum case, flashing gun-barrel steel. “My friend here doesn’t care how big the dragon is.”

The farmer nodded and stepped back. The firearm was Lupe’s badge of office as much as a weapon. Show a gun like that and people figure you know what you’re doing. It especially worked on old rednecks.

“So, where’s the dragon?” Javi asked as she freed the rifle and strapped it on.

The man pointed farther up the gravel drive. “Terrorizin’ the livestock, most like. Got a field up there, and thirty head. Or I did. Thing already killed Bessie by the time I saw it. God only knows how many more it got.”

“Bessie?” Lupe said, a stupid grin on her face. Did people really name cows Bessie? She thought it was an urban legend. Like naming your dog Spot.

“She was my best,” the man said. “Won a blue ribbon at the fair last year. You kill the son of a bitch that killed her and I’ll make it worth your time.”

Ah. The negotiation. The guild would give Lupe a portion of whatever the corpse was worth, but you could always stand to make an extra buck or two in client gratuities. *If* you knew how to sweet-talk them. You had to be firm, let them know you weren’t backing down until you get what the job’s worth. Or else you could try and charm them, get more money out of them that way. Her usual partner Susan was a natural at that. Lupe just didn’t have the knack. Susan said Lupe always looked so damn serious, that’s why. Nerved them out, put them on their guard.

But this time Lupe had an adorable curly-haired kid to act as a spokesperson. If she could just get him to—

“We won’t do it for less than a grand,” Javi announced. Shit. What was he doing?

“Feller on the phone said standard fee was two hundred.”

“That’s for a fifteen-footer,” Lupe said, trying to regain control. “You said this one was twenty.”

They haggled for a minute longer before the man threw his head back. “Tell you what, you kill the thing before it roasts any more o’ my cattle and I’ll give you three bills.”

“Done,” Lupe said. “Javi, grab the duffel. We’re going in on foot.”

“We’re not going to drive?” He pondered that for a minute, then brightened with insight.

“Because the car noise will alert the dragon. It won’t hear us if we walk?”

“Of course it will,” she said. “I just don’t want to risk my car.”

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They smelled the cows before they saw them.

The field was a square patch the size of three or four football fields hacked out of the side of the wooded hill. A barbed wire fence separated it from the gravel drive on the bottom edge and the tree line on the other three. A herd of brown-and-white cattle crowded close to the lower fence, stamping their feet and sending agitated looks in the direction of a large, weathered barn midway up the slope. When Javi and Lupe arrived at the fence, the cattle parted like a bovine Red Sea and shuffled along the fence to either side. None of the cows ascended the slope toward the barn.

“Three guesses where the dragon is,” Lupe said. She grabbed the nearest wooden fence post and vaulted over, jeans catching on the barbed wire. Feet planted on the other side, she swung the rifle from its strap on her shoulder and cradled it in her arm, barrel nuzzling the tips of the longest blades of grass. “All right, hand me the bag,” she told Javi.

“What?”

“Hand me the bag, and you stay here.”

“But I could—”

“No,” she said, invoking a note of finality. “I want you out here with the phone. This goes sideways on me, you call the guild and an ambulance. And then you get the heck out of here.”

“Lupe—”

“Yeah, I know it’s not a glamorous job or anything, but it’s what a hunting partner does. You listening?”

“Lu,” he said, sliding the duffel strap down his arm. He gave her a timid smile. “I was just going to say, ‘good luck.’”

Lupe reached across the barbed wire and squeezed his shoulder, a sort of *we who are about to die* gesture. Then she slung the heavy duffel bag over her back. Before she could chicken out, she forced herself to start walking toward the barn. The cattle gave her a large berth as she passed, regarding her with thirty identical doe-eyed stares. Thick grass snaked around her shoes and nearly tripped her. Eventually the grass gave way to a natural path worn down by the cattle, all hard-trampled dust. As she neared the building, something in the dust caught her eye—a long, shallow scrape several inches wide leading into the dim interior of the barn. At first she thought it was the tire tracks of some piece of equipment, but the pattern looked all wrong. Then she saw part of a claw print in the dirt to one side and she realized what it was—the track left by a dragon’s scaled tail and underbelly as it slithered through the door.

The doorway had to be ten feet tall, and if her new lizardly friend had to *crouch down* to get through it, then—well. Eddie’d told her the thing was eighteen feet long. But now it occurred to her how damn *big* that was.

The shadows were so thick in the barn that she could only see a couple inches past the doorway. No way that was natural. Had to be some side effect of the Bleed, some kind of creepy mojo leaking through like goo, or maybe the dragon somehow did it on purpose? Some people claimed dragons had special powers. Ones other than the claws and wings and poison and fire breath. Just to give them a sporting chance. So Lupe felt great going in blind with some chains

and a rifle and her only backup a scared fifteen-year-old with a cell phone. But if she was going to feed that fifteen-year-old for the next month, she'd have to suck it up.

She stepped through, into the darkness.

Inside she paused, waiting for her eyes to adjust. She sucked in a breath to steady herself—and then nearly coughed up her lungs to rid them of the cocktail of smoke and the stench of charred flesh. There was something else, too, a musky reptilian smell so thick and cloying it coated her tongue.

The inside of the barn felt ten degrees hotter than outside. The air was stifling still and deadly quiet. Lupe's neck prickled with sweat. She raised the rifle and shifted into a shooting stance, forcing her movements to be slow and measured as she scanned the dim barn. The floor was covered in a thin layer of straw and wood shavings that crunched softly beneath her feet. Much of it had been swept aside in whorls, as if a huge snake had slithered through. In some places, the straw was blackened and curled.

Something bulky sprawled in the sawdust a couple yards away. She nearly brought the rifle to bear before she realized what she was looking at. Bessie, or what was left of her, wasn't much more than a lump of wet beef. A whole back haunch had been torn away, and jagged white ribs clawed their way skyward from a ruin of bloody flesh and fur. A horsefly clambered out of her nostril and scurried across her sweet, blank face to nibble at one glassy eye.

Good thing Lupe had a strong stomach or she might've found that a little disgusting.

The air felt electric. The hairs on her arms stood up like they were racing her eyes to catch sight of the beast. Was it above her? She clutched her gun and stared hard into the shadowy loft. Her breath came out in wheezes. Her arms trembled. Her sweat-slick fingers struggled for

purchase on the stock of her gun. The duffel bag slipped from her shoulder, landing with a clank she barely heard over the roaring of blood in her ears.

No. If she panicked she'd be dead in seconds. A misfired gun could kill as surely as a beast's teeth. Despite the dragon somewhere nearby, Lupe forced herself to stop and focus.

Years of her coach's advice flooded her head—ways to steady her hands, ways to correct her aim to account for anxiety or a cramp, how to shoot between breaths. All good advice—and none of it useful. Her breathing hitched. Her chest squeezed. A drop of sweat traced a path down her chin. She inhaled smoke-smell and dragon-stench, counted seven thuds of her heart against the underside of her ribs, and blew the air out her nose. The ritual calmed her, and if she'd had an extra second, she might've been ready when the dragon attacked.

But she didn't, and she wasn't, and a big chunk of the blackness in the back of the barn got up and *moved*.

Without thinking, she leveled the gun and fired. She missed—well, no, duh, she couldn't see what she was firing at. The sharp report stung her ears, and distantly she heard moos from the panicked citizenry. She backed away from the shape in the darkness. Her heel caught in something, and she stumbled backwards and landed with a sharp pain on her rear end. For a second she thought she'd fallen into Bessie, but then she realized she had tripped over the duffel.

The duffel with a twenty-five foot dragon-killing-chain.

As she fumbled for the zipper, a huge black form slunk out of the shadows, emitting a sound half between a growl and a hiss. Lupe got the sense of a long neck, an open mouth, and before she could even look straight at it, she grabbed the gun and fired again.

The gun leapt in recoil. Straw fluttered down from the new hole in the loft. Another miss. This was getting embarrassing.

The thing skirted around the edges of the barn, the shadows clinging to it like cobwebs. Before Lupe was aware of what was happening, the doorway, her only source of light, went dark. The dragon had cut off her escape. Now it coiled to strike, silhouetted against the outside sun with its wings half unfurled like the sails of a dark ship.

Lupe never got used to seeing dragons, even though she'd had a faerie stepfather who told her all her life they were real and not just make believe. The idea of them felt slimy in her head, like they were oil and the rest of the world was water. Even so, Lupe had seen enough of the scaly monsters in her life to notice details.

Despite its length—probably closer to nineteen feet—the dragon looked somehow shrunken. Its scales were dull and patches of them sloughed off about the shoulders and the base of the long tail, like a snake caught mid-shed. The hide was stretched tight across the creature's flank, the lines of its ribcage evident beneath the taut skin. The broad leathery surface of its wings cracked and peeled.

Wherever it came from before, there wasn't much in the way of food. From the looks of things Bessie was the best meal in the critter's miserable life. Lupe felt a surge of empathy. And jealousy. *She* couldn't afford steak.

Damn. She was starting to feel sorry for the thing. She needed to kill it so she could collect her pay and then get back to studying for that exam.

The dragon cracked its jaws and reared to strike. In that moment before it skewered her, she fisted her hand inside a pocket of the duffel and flung a handful of stuff into the dragon's face.

Bent nails, thumbtacks, metal shavings. Trash, really. Or, as Lupe like to call it, Dragon Repellent.

Where the metal shards pelted the monster's armored snout, they began to sizzle. Some landed in the open mouth and began chewing through the purplish flesh inside. The dragon recoiled, shaking its head to rid itself of the burning shrapnel. Lupe's stepfather Hal once told her the reason faerie creatures reacted so dramatically to iron was that it disrupted whatever magic it was that kept things like them alive. Her professors said it had to do with grounding out specific electrical signals between faerie nerve cells. All she knew was, it hurt them a hell of a lot and, if you were lucky, weakened them. Wherever the iron touched, burned. Like hitting Superman with kryptonite dipped in acid.

Rifle banging against her chest, she seized the chain at the bottom of the bag. The chain was only as thick as her thumb and a three foot section somewhere in the middle had gone slightly melty in a previous encounter. But there was no tool Lupe would rather have on her side, outside of the rest of her high school rifle team. All she had to do was—

At the sound of clinking metal the dragon whipped its head up, jaws unhinging. Its breath ignited with a crackle-hiss. Without thinking, Lupe flung herself to the side. The sawdust where she'd stood disintegrated in a gout of blue-white flame. The dragon cocked its head to examine the spot where she had been. Lupe swung the chain. It wrapped around the neck just behind the head and the dragon bucked as the softer hide of its throat began to burn. It heaved backwards, wings beating the sawdust into a whirlwind, and the chain ripped free of her hands.

There was a sudden roar behind her in the darkness, and for half a second she thought there was another dragon. Then the back of the barn erupted in flames.

Unfazed, the dragon advanced, baring yellow fangs the length of pencils. She swung her rifle around, lined up the shot almost mechanically, and fired.

Black ichor spewed from the dragon's throat and the monster shrieked, but it kept coming. The best way to take down a dragon was a shot to the back of the head, but Lupe couldn't get a good angle.

The chain dangling from its neck glinted in the firelight. If she could just tie that to something, so it couldn't move--

Recovered from the nuisance of a hole in the throat, the dragon bunched its muscles like a terrifyingly huge house cat and pounced.

Lupe threw herself into the shadow of a nearby support column. Claws scraped the dust behind her. She leaned ever so slightly out of cover and fired once again. She must have hit something sensitive, because the dragon pitched to the side and fell, its shoulder digging into the ground. It struck blindly in Lupe's direction. Instead it got a faceful of wooden column.

The column that was supporting the blazing loft.

The beam groaned. Then cracked. Whatever sound it made after that was drowned out by the sound of the entire burning loft caving in over her head.

She tried to scramble out of the way but a smoldering two-by-four dislodged itself from above, slammed into her shoulder, and gouged its way down her back. She screamed but managed to keep her feet—until a thick snakelike tail swept her legs from under her. She landed on her elbow in the rapidly kindling sawdust. Her arm spasmed upon impact, and the gun was no longer in her grip. The dragon, hunkered not three feet from where she lay in the dust, tossed its head, trying to free itself from—

The chain.

The free end of that beautiful, life-saving string of metal was caught under a fallen beam. The dragon flailed, trying to slip its collar, but the end held fast and the chain dug deeper into its throat.

Now was her chance.

She rolled to her side, fumbling at the strap around her neck. Her fingers caught on something jagged. The cheap-ass plastic clip had broken. Figures her fatal flaw would be penny-pinching. Her one and only chance to take this thing out and her gun was—

There. In the dirt, a foot from her face, barrel glinting like a glass eye. A wonder it hadn't misfired and put her out of her misery.

Lupe grabbed it for it, twisting into a prone shooting position. She aimed for where the dragon's head had been—

But it was gone.

And then it wasn't, and two tons of angry reptile loomed above her.

It tilted a head the size of Javi's guitar case, trying to get a good look at her. The two-timing piece of shit chain had come loose from the beam and now dangled from the dragon's neck like a hangman's noose, tantalizingly out of reach.

The dragon's maw lolled open so that she could see the dribbling wounds her Dragon Repellent had left. A stench of rotting meat mixed with kerosene rode at the vanguard of its hot, wet breath. Lupe screwed her eyes shut, waiting to feel its teeth pierce her skin or hear the crackle of its breath igniting.

Instead she heard something way more terrifying.

"Lupe!"

Shit. Javi?

Lupe's brother stood in the doorway, regarding the scene of her impending demise with his mouth open and his eyes wide.

“Run! Get out of here!” Lupe shouted at him, or tried to, through a mouthful of sawdust.

He did run. Just in the wrong direction.

As Javi's frantic footsteps drew near, the dragon turned to face the new threat—and dragged the chain across her chest.

She seized the chain and pulled, hard.

The creature's head dropped onto her chest. Its surprised *huff* of breath fluttered the hem of her t-shirt. The weight of it crushed her arm and forced the wooden stock of the rifle into her stomach. She surfed a rising tide of nausea. Why couldn't the dragon have landed on the steel barrel?

“Run!” she repeated to Javi. She tried to savor her last half second of life before Puff the bullshit dragon ripped into her large intestine. At least she wouldn't have to take that test. Nothing mattered to her so long as Javi was safe—she twisted her head to see him stooping to pick up something in the sawdust—

The dragon's head jerked up and away, out of her lap.

Toward her little brother, who clung to the very end of the chain with all his might.

“Lupe, shoot it!” Javi yelled, but Lupe was already taking aim before he finished her name.

It wasn't ideal conditions. The target was moving. Burning wreckage rained down on her from the loft. Her arms were cramped and bruised and her pulse was having a nuclear meltdown. She held her breath, but she didn't count seven heartbeats.

Javi didn't have that many left.

Lupe sighted down and pulled the trigger.

The shot took the dragon through the base of the skull, severing the spinal cord.

She knew this because the dragon crumpled to the ground like scale-and-bone Jenga tower. And decapitation, Hal always told her, was the only surefire way to kill a dragon.

“Javi!” she shouted before the dust settled. “Javi, you okay?”

The room was rapidly filling with smoke. Lupe sneezed a rather attractive wad of blood and soot. Then she hauled herself to her feet and stumbled in the direction of the dragon’s corpse.

“Javi, where are you?” In the roiling heat of the fire, ice slid down her spine. What if she hadn’t shot the dragon in time?

Someone coughed in the dimness to her left, just beyond Mount Dragon. “Here, Lu.” His voice was weak. But alive.

“Come on, we gotta get out of here,” Lupe said. She steadied herself against the dragon’s rough flank as she stepped carefully over its curved neck. “This place is coming down. Javi?”

“Just a sec—*ow!*”

Lupe rounded the eighteen feet of reptilian roadkill and found Javi in a crouch, a length of the chain he’d used to save her life dangling between clenched fists.

“Javi, what—”

Face contorted, Javi uncurled his hands, letting the chain slip from his fingers to pool on the ground. Where the metal had touched his palms, the flesh was blood red and sticky, and his skin swelled and split.

He looked up at Lupe, caught between grin and grimace. “Guess I should’ve worn my gloves.”

###

Stepping out of the smoke-and-carrion-choked barn into the autumn breeze was a breath of pure freedom—until Lupe saw the gunmen. Six of them ranged in a semicircle about ten yards from the barn, wearing what looked like military-grade tactical gear bleached blindingly white. Most of them wore a visored helmet that reflected Lupe’s stupefied face back to her. One or two carried some kind of transparent riot shield, emblazoned with a sigil resembling a sword cleaving a snake in two.

Lupe noted these details mechanically, if at all, because her focus was on their companions—high powered semi-automatic assault rifles.

“We’ve got movement,” called one of the helmeted men. “Looks like civilians, Lieutenant.”

“They’re armed!” one of the others shouted, and all six of the guns oriented in the direction of the lump in Lupe’s throat.

Lupe’s rifle-strap was looped over her arm. Slowly, she extended her hands palms out, a gesture of harmlessness. Javi balled his fists, kept his eyes low.

“Put the gun on the ground,” said a new voice from just outside the firing squad. The newcomer had neither gun nor helmet. He looked mid-twenties with hair buzzed to military perfection and dark brown skin that stood out against the white body armor, making him look solidier, realer than his faceless companions. His armor was ornamented with silver. Between that and the deferent nod given him by one of the helmetheads, Lupe pegged him for an authority figure. The lieutenant, she presumed.

“The hell are you,” Lupe asked, but the venom she’d intended was betrayed by a falter in her voice.

Javi stirred. "See that symbol on their helmets? They're the Knights of St. George."

"Who?"

"That group on the news? Remember, they picketed the grave of that fae actress."

Now that he mentioned it, Lupe did remember something of the sort. Some vocal faction who'd been complaining about everything related to the Bleeds since the first fae crossed over two decades ago. Recently Eddie'd mentioned something about them nosing around the guilds in other cities, pushing for organization. At the time she'd figured them for some kind of nutso fringe group. She didn't realize they had the firepower of a minor nation. But what the hell were they doing here?

"Drop the weapon!" the lieutenant repeated. His hand quested at his belt and settled on what could only be the hilt of a sword. Lupe nearly made a quip re: knife, gunfight but kept it down on account of his heavily armed friends.

Javi shifted behind her. "Lupe, just do what they say."

Lupe slipped the gun from where it dangled on its broken strap and held it crosswise before her. Slowly, she emptied the magazine and dropped the ammunition into the grass.

"There, you see? Harmless."

One of the distant "knights" approached from downhill. He was an older white guy with hair graying stylishly at the temples and eyes that looked underlined for emphasis. Watching him, Lupe got the sense of power-- not sheer physical might like the lieutenant, but authority and the potential of violence: a gun concealed with the safety off.

The lieutenant stepped aside and snapped into a salute. "Captain. No sign of the target, but I found these civilians inside the perimeter. They were armed, sir."

"By target, you mean the dragon?" Lupe asked.

The captain regarded her as if he couldn't believe he had to acknowledge her existence.

"You are a freelancer, am I correct?" His tone was heavy with disgust.

Lupe decided somewhat arbitrarily that she did not like him. "That's right."

"What's the target's status?"

"Dead," Lupe said.

"You killed it with that rifle?"

"No, I killed it with my bare hands. Can we go?"

"Lieutenant," said Captain Asshole, and he gestured toward the barn. The Lieutenant strode past Lupe with his naked blade in hand, followed by two of the faceless knights carrying black canisters attached to hoses. One of them sprayed gray-green foam onto the flames gnawing at the corner of the barn, which guttered out with an unhappy hiss. As a path was cleared, the Lieutenant and co. stepped into the ruin, disappearing into the haze.

"Lu..." Javi said in a voice barely more than a breath. His hands were trembling—either a pain response or some new horrible type of reaction.

"Are we done here?" Lupe asked Captain Asshole, who stared after his flunkies. "There's someplace we need to be."

He did not respond, so Lupe took a couple steps down the hill. A couple of the armed knights barred her path.

She was beginning to contemplate repurposing the rifle as a bludgeoning instrument when the lieutenant and his buddies crunched out of the smoldering wreckage behind her.

"Report," said Captain Asshole.

"Slain," replied the lieutenant.

"Are you certain?"

“It did not respond to the touch of iron, sir. Still, to be sure, I cut off its head.”

The words were out of Lupe's mouth before she could help herself. “Why the fuck would you do that?”

The lieutenant jerked like she'd taken a swing at his face, but Lupe barely noticed. She prided herself on leaving corpses intact-- you got more money that way, once the guild retrieved and sold the body. Chopping the head off, especially with a steel sword that would mar the flesh, probably knocked off a fifth of her pay.

But right now that wasn't her biggest worry. Every moment she spent standing around, Javi wasn't receiving medical attention.

“Look,” she said. “I don't know who you are, but the dragon's dead, and that's what you wanted, right? So we can all go home now? Because we've kind of got to go to the hospital.”

“Are you injured?” said the lieutenant. His eyes raked over her for a sign of hurt.

“It's my hands,” Javi said, startling Lupe. “I, uh, got burnt.”

“And we really should go get that checked out,” Lupe said.

“I'm a fair hand at first aid,” said the lieutenant.

“No,” Lupe said, too quickly. It would be easy, even to an untrained eye to tell that Javi's injuries were not the result of burns, and from there figure out his true nature. And while she wasn't certain the rumors were true regarding the Knights and their treatment of fae, it didn't seem worth testing. “We'd, uh, just prefer a professional opinion, you understand.”

The Lieutenant was nodding, but then the Captain spoke up, his tone cold. “No,” he said, the command like iron doors slamming shut.

Anger surged through Lupe's veins, but the Lieutenant was already looking at his superior oddly. “Sir?”

"These civilians trespassed on an emergence zone. It is possible they are contaminated."

"Even so, sir," said their unlikely champion, "We can't allow harm to befall them because of us-- our mission is to protect the people from the monsters, not the other way around, am I right?"

"Lieutenant King, am I to take this as insubordination?"

"No sir. It's problem solving. The civilians need to be kept under observation, and they also need to go to the hospital."

"And you propose?"

"I propose I go with them. I'll keep eyes on them, sir, then you can deal with them as you see fit after the Order has finished up here."

"No way," said Lupe, just as the captain said, "Very well."

Lupe wanted to argue, but she wasn't about to waste this out, no matter how poor an out it might be.

"All right fine. Whatever. Come on."

She gripped Javi by the forearm-- careful about his hands-- and started down the slope towards the road.

"That was impressive work in there, by the way," said the lieutenant, ambling easily behind them. "Two shots to take it down?"

"Three," Lupe grunted, leading a slight detour around a pod of agitated cattle. And that wasn't including the times she'd missed. She made a mental note to go back to the range some in preparation for the next hunt. Whenever she scrounged up enough to cover the entrance fee.

Javi shied up at the barbed wire fence, shifting his gaze between the metal, the splintery wooden post, and his injured hands.

"You, go on over," said the Lieutenant to Lupe.

"What? Why?"

"I'll lift him up and you help him down on the other side. If that's okay with you," he said, turning to Javi.

Javi nodded, so Lupe clambered over the post. Anticipating a problem with the gun barrel, she slung the rifle around to her back, then lifted her arms to catch Javi as the Lieutenant hoisted him across the fence.

It took the three of them several minutes to walk down the gravel drive to the Steed, during which time they passed a number of white, blocky armored vehicles marked with the Sword sigil the lieutenant and other Georgies wore on their uniforms.

"You just gonna drive behind me or what?" Lupe asked.

"Oh, no, I can't drive one of those," King replied, "I don't have the proper license."

Lupe stopped. "Then how were you planning on following us to the hospital?"

"I'm riding with you," he said.

"Like hell you are," Lupe retorted.

King winced but then shifted his weight and stood taller. Lupe groped for her gun.

"Not to interrupt or anything," Javi said, his voice thin and wheedly, "but could we maybe argue about this later?"

A sheen of sweat glistened on Javi's forehead, and his skin had taken on a sickly pallor. Lupe dug her fingernails into her palms.

"Fine, come on then," she said, and, dragging Javi, raced to the Steed.

###

When they screeched into the lot Lupe double-parked and hauled Javi out of the car toward the ER. The lieutenant disembarked but made no move to follow them, and Lupe put him out of her mind.

Javi's hands were puckered and red all over. Oozy blisters built up in his palms like the yolks of giant eggs. He'd been deathly quiet the whole ride over, which meant he hurt, bad. Even the time when he was eleven and he'd snapped his wrist trying to pull a Tarzan out of the big oak in the backyard, he'd joked with Lupe while Hal drove them to the clinic. This time, though, all he did was take these hissy little breaths through clenched teeth that made Lupe want to go back and put another couple of holes through that dragon's skull--and maybe one through her own, for good measure. She shouldn't have let him tag along, and she definitely shouldn't have let him follow her into the barn. Her baby brother's hands were about to rot off and it was her own damn fault.

The automatic doors slid open on a crowded lobby. Lupe shepherded her brother past magazine racks and red-upholstered benches to the front desk, where a scrub-clad middle-aged white woman was typing into a slim laptop. Her nametag, worn in a lanyard around her neck, declared her to be "Lisa."

"Name, please," she said when they approached.

"Javier Mendoza," Javi said. His voice had only a slight waver.

"What is your emergency?"

"Allergic reaction." Javi presented his hands, but Lisa ignored them.

"Take a seat. We'll be with you shortly."

"He needs immediate attention," Lupe insisted.

“So does everyone else,” Lisa said, gesturing with a jeweled hand at the rest of the room. Lupe slammed her hands on the desk. “He’s fae,” she said. “He touched metal. He needs help.”

Lisa eyed Javi, frowning. Lupe tugged off Javi’s hat, exposing the pointed tips of his ears. Javi grunted indignantly, but it faded around the edges and became a whimper of pain. Lisa stared harder, slid her gaze from Javi to Lupe, then back again.

“Very well,” she said. “Go through the double doors and wait on the bench. I’ll page the specialist.”

Javi nodded numbly and toddled off in the direction of the doors. Lupe turned to follow.

“Wait,” said Lisa. “What is your relation to Mr. Mendoza?”

“I’m his sis—his legal guardian, Guadalupe Mendoza.”

She squinted at Lupe, who held the gaze, feigning confidence. “I see. Have a seat, Ms. Mendoza.”

“I’m not leaving him alone,” Lupe said.

“His injury did not appear serious and you’ll only be in the way. The specialist will tend to him and we will let you know when you may go in to see him. Please sit.”

Lupe forced herself to relax. Javi was fifteen, not five, and this was a hospital. He’d be fine.

She turned to look for somewhere to sit. A baby squalled on the floor of the waiting room, with no responsible party in sight. The folks perched on the chairs looked everywhere except at the baby, who squirmed along the ground on all fours, its fat pale fingers questing among the dust bunnies under the chairs.

Without thinking, Lupe bent down and scooped it up. It buried its face in her shoulder, wailing. The familiar baby-ooze of tears, spit, and snot soaked into her sleeve, but Lupe just

rocked it a little in her arms to shush it. Lupe could soothe Javi when he was a baby faster than anybody, so surely this wouldn't be a problem. Anyway, its mother or somebody had to be there somewhere. Nobody'd leave an infant all by itself in an emergency room waiting room, right?

Lupe spun to take it to the front desk when someone shrieked behind her.

A diminutive, brown skinned woman with her hair in a severe bun advanced on Lupe from the direction of the bathroom. A large white crucifix dangled from a chain around her neck and bounced with every stride.

Lupe held out the baby like a peace offering. "I was just trying to help--" she said.

The woman snatched the baby from Lupe's arms, leaving a silhouette of its head outlined in baby juices on her shirt. The child safely pinned under an arm, the woman brought the volume down from air raid siren to megaphone. "¿Qué está haciendo con mi bebé?"

Lupe blinked. "Woah, hold on," she said. "Más despacio, por favor. Yo no--yo no hablo español muy bien."

"¿Usted es latina, no?" the woman said, gesturing at Lupe with a finger like a loaded gun.

"Um, yes, pero--"

Before Lupe could explain, the woman launched into a tirade from which Lupe caught only every third word. Lupe *had* learned some Spanish growing up when Mama forgot herself and started thinking aloud *en español*, but she'd always spoken to Lupe and Javi in English. In high school Lupe tried to take introductory Spanish but they wouldn't let her, said she had an unfair advantage over the other kids, when in reality she didn't know much more than the average Dora the Explorer fan.

Lupe held her hands up and stepped backward, bumping her legs into the chairs behind her. Tiger-Mom annexed the territory Lupe ceded, balancing the baby on her hip.

Over the woman's shoulder Lupe saw a man in an ironed blue security uniform advancing across the lobby. Well, shit. She stretched her mouth into some form of a smile at him as he approached. Tiger-Mom launched into a bilingual account of how Lupe was trying to spirit Junior away. Lupe tried to cut her off.

“Sir, this is a big misunderstanding, I was just--”

“Mendoza?”

Lupe blinked. “Yes?”

The security guy's hand closed around her elbow. “This way. Now.”

Lupe's first urge was to fight, but all her combat expertise was tied up in her rifle. So she let herself be piloted away from the still-furious mother and toward the double doors.

On the other side, there was a bench, like Lisa had said, but Javi was nowhere to be seen. The security guy, who wore no nametag but looked like a Biff, directed Lupe into a small room on the left, and closed the door after her. There were a couple of chairs and a small, empty desk in the room with her, but she stood, numb, and tried to think things through. What the hell was happening?

She was still wondering this several minutes later when the door opened and a petite, blonde woman in a navy pantsuit sashayed in and sat, without acknowledging Lupe's presence, behind the desk.

The woman placed a briefcase on the table and withdrew from it a file in a manila folder, which she began to peruse.

“Ms. Mendoza?” the lady said at last, her voice a slippery purr. “My name is Anita Khonda. I'm here to talk to you about Javier.”

“What about him?” Panic crested inside her. Had his hands gotten worse?

“I’m here to ensure there is no evidence of neglect or abuse.”

Wait. What?

“What is this?” Lupe demanded. “He just had an allergic reaction, that’s all.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about, do you Ms. Mendoza?” Khonda gestured to the chair opposite her desk. “Have a seat.”

Grudgingly, Lupe sat.

“You are Javier’s sister?”

“I’m his guardian,” Lupe retorted. “I have been for a year now. It’s all legal. The court records should be on file with the Child Protective Services, if you want to check.”

Khonda exhaled sharply. “Very well: in *addition* to being his legal guardian, you are the patient’s sister, am I correct?”

“Yes.”

“Are you full-blooded siblings?”

“Half. We have the same mother. Different fathers.”

“Your mother is foreign.”

Lupe furrowed her brow. “She’s Cuban-American.”

“And when did she immigrate?”

“She didn’t. She was born in Miami.”

“What about your grandparents?”

“They left Cuba sometime in the fifties, I think. When the Revolution was going on or whatever.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“That’s all I know. I never met them.”

“Why is that?”

This was feeling less like a conversation and more like an interrogation. “Mama said they didn’t want anything to do with her after she shacked up with my dad. But I don’t see how this is any of your business.”

“My business is to help Javier,” Khonda said. She stressed the syllables oddly, like she couldn’t get his name out of her mouth fast enough. “Tell me more about your father.”

“We have different fathers,” Lupe said. “What does mine have to do with Javi?”

“Part of my job is ensuring the stability of the child’s home life. I will decide what is and is not relevant. Now tell me about your father.”

Lupe sunk farther down the back of her chair. “What about him?”

“What is his name?” Khonda prompted. “Where is he from? What does he do for a living?”

“He’s dead,” Lupe said. She paused to give the agent time to say she was sorry or one of the platitudes therapists and social workers always trotted out. All she got was silence. When she looked up, she met Khonda’s cool stare. It gave her the willies, so she shifted her gaze to the opposite wall. The agent gestured with her chin: go on.

“His name was Robert. He died before I was born,” Lupe said. “In Iraq, the first time we had a war there.”

“And what ethnicity was he?”

“He was white, I guess. Does it matter?”

“You’re being awfully vague about your answers, Ms. Mendoza.”

Lupe pressed her lips together and stared holes into Ms. Khonda’s perfectly-complexioned forehead.

The social worker, or whatever she was, scribbled something in the margin of her paper. Her pen tap-tap-tapped against the legal pad for a few minutes, then she picked it up to twirl it between her fingers.

“So am I to understand that you yourself have no fae heritage?”

“No,” Lupe said. “That’s Javi. The one who’s in the emergency room right now? I’m just plain human. So can we stop with the third degree?”

“Very well, Ms. Mendoza. Tell me about Javier’s father.”

“His name’s Haladrial. He was like my stepfather.”

“He was married to your mother?”

A dumb question. “They had a civil partnership.”

“And he was hae?”

“Ears and everything.”

“And where is this Haladrial now?”

“I can’t answer that.”

“Did Haladrial have any other part-human children?”

“I—“ Lupe faltered. “No. I don’t think so.”

“Ms. Mendoza, my paperwork indicates your mother is in an assisted living facility after a suicide attempt. Am I correct?”

The weird jump in topics made Lupe feel like a zipliner whose line got cut midway through and was now clinging desperately to the thread. “Uh, yeah,” she said. “Amity Plains Recovery Center, outside of Charlotte.” In her head she saw the carpet of pansies outside the facility’s front office, the ugly plaid pattern of the sofa inside her mother’s room. She did not

think of the thin, pale woman reclining on that ugly sofa, or of the nurse carefully counting out the allotted pills each day. At least, she tried not to.

“Ms. Mendoza, I have here a psych eval from your university guidance counselor suggesting you suffer from an anxiety disorder.”

Lupe clenched her fists. Was *nothing* confidential? “How did you—“

“In this evaluation, you are reported as saying that when undergoing one of these anxiety attacks, you, quote, ‘want to die.’”

“That’s a figure of speech. I would never—“

“Furthermore, these documents lead me to believe that you have an anger problem. You find it hard to hold your temper and have been inordinately attracted to firearms since high school.”

Lupe surged out of her chair. “How dare you—“

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Khonda said smoothly, “but aren’t suicidal ideology and antisocial behavior the primary factors that precluded your mother from guardianship?”

Lupe’s trigger finger spasmed. The world contracted to include only the space between herself and Khonda’s leering face. Her breaths came raggedly, and she fought to steady them. “I won’t listen to another single—“

Khonda just spoke over her. “Ms. Mendoza, I’ve come to the conclusion that you are not fit to care for Javier.”

Lupe’s teeth clicked together so hard she tasted blood.

“I don’t see,” she said, her voice shaking, “what I have done to cause you to think that.”

“My dear girl, it’s statistically proven that psychological disorders are highly heritable.”

Lupe growled at this. Audibly. As the sound echoed in the tiny space, Khonda smiled in victory and Lupe's heart sank. She fought to control herself, but couldn't help the urge to lunge across the desk. Khonda seemed to be aware of this; she slid her eyes toward the door, where Biff the security guy no doubt stood waiting. It was a subtle threat—a twitch of a tail, not a roar and slavering jaws—but a threat nonetheless. Lupe counted heartbeats and focused on choosing her next words.

“I'm pretty sure it's illegal to hold my mother's condition against me in the absence of other proof,” Lupe said, her voice a careful monotone. “Can you provide any concrete evidence of my instability?”

“There is the matter of your lack of a stable job—“

“I have a job,” Lupe interrupted. “I'm a freelancer for the—for a local business.”

“And what business is that?”

Lupe scowled. Several seconds ticked by, and the silence between them festered.

Lupe felt like she was staring down the dragon once more. She was alone in the fight and out of ammunition. To win, she'd need a chain.

“Ms. Khonda,” Lupe finally said, hoping she sounded more confident than she felt. “You have no legal right at the moment to counteract my legal guardianship. If you would like to challenge it properly, you may go through official channels or speak with my attorney.”

Khonda's mouth drew up to one side in a serpentine smile. Lupe glared back, trying to look like someone who actually had an attorney and not like someone who wanted to jam her fingernails into the agent's throat. After a long moment, Khonda pushed her chair back from the table.

“Very well. You have a three-week trial period to prove me wrong.” Khonda placed the file back into the briefcase and stood, smoothing her pantsuit. “If, at the end of this period, I am not *completely* satisfied, I will begin legal proceedings to take custody of Javier. Good day, Ms. Mendoza.”

Khonda lifted her chin and strode out of the room. Lupe listened to the sound of high heels striking the tile floor until it was drowned out by the clamor of her heart.

Later, after Javi returned, hands bound in gauze mittens; after mountains of insurance paperwork were scrutinized, panicked over, and signed; after a blunt missive signed *A. Khonda* serving notice of a wellness check in two days’ time was delivered to Lupe by Biff, the siblings Mendoza finally stumbled out to the Steed to find a parking citation pinned under a wiper blade and a conspicuous absence of a certain Knight-Lieutenant.

Several hours after that, while Javi slept off his allergy meds on the couch, Lupe realized she’d missed her exam.

The next morning she left Javi channel-surfing—his hands needed to heal a day or two before he returned to school—and drove to campus. Two issues monopolized her mind. First up: salvage her academic record by throwing herself on the mercy of her biology professor. It took some persuasion—and Javi’s plastic hospital bracelet—but she convinced Dr. Aldin to take “medical emergency” as an excuse for missing the exam. Instead of a zero and a failure in the class, her sentence was commuted to a remedial research paper, due in a week.

Her second concern was rent. She’d called Eddie late the night before to ask when she could expect the check for her kill.

“Never,” he’d said. She could *hear* him massaging his temples on the other end of the line.

“What do you mean never? I need that check, Ed. The rent’s due tomorrow.”

“There’s no check because there’s no corpse, Lupe.”

She stiffened. Her cellphone slipped from where she’d pinned it between shoulder and ear. She caught it, pressed it back against her face, and said, “What do you mean?”

“I sent some guys to retrieve the body, same as usual. When they got there, the barn’s in ruins, the field’s all torn up with tire tracks, and there’s not a sign of a dragon anywhere.”

“I killed the dragon. I *did* my job.” The words stumbled off her tongue. She knew she sounded pathetic, but she couldn’t help it. “I need that check. I’ve got rent and the hospital bill—”

“I feel for you, I do, Lupe, but I can’t pay you if I don’t have the body.”

He’d said a polite goodbye and hung up while Lupe’s desperation kindled into rage.

Body missing. Tire tracks. Knights and armored cars. It didn’t take a college education to parse this one. Lupe was going to have some strong words with Captain Asshole, very soon.

But while she was waiting for her knight in shining armor (so she could put a bullet in him), there was still the matter of the rent. So after talking with her professor, she cut across the quad in toward the campus bookstore. With any luck, that Anatomy and Physiology textbook from last semester would net some change.

Twenty minutes later, she left the bookstore with fifty dollars cash stuffed into the front pocket of her university hoodie. It wasn’t as much as she’d hoped, but combined with the dwindling remains of her bank account it should, just barely, cover the rent.

She was on her way home to fix something for Javi’s lunch when she encountered a commotion in front of the campus bus stop.

“I’ve had just about enough of you people,” a heavysset balding man was saying—braying, actually—to a fae girl clutching an armload of flyers. His voice carried across the brick sidewalk.

The fae looked eighteen, nineteen years old, wearing a ragged denim jacket with its zipper cut away. Her skin was cauliflower-pale and bruised green under her too-large eyes. She had hair black and jagged as dragon’s scales—her crown was unkempt, but she’d chopped the sides so that her long, pointed ears were visible like delicate white knives against the dark background. What drew Lupe’s attention, though, was the silvery stud in the girl’s left nostril. Had to be fake. Plastic. There was no way a full-blooded fae could wear jewelry, not when Javi burned his lips just by eating with a metal fork.

“It’s bad enough you come into *our* world and take homes and jobs that could be for *normal* people,” Baldy continued, gesturing with a pudgy finger, “but now you want special treatment? If you’re so damn cold and hungry, why don’t you get a job? Or go to a shelter, like all those good, innocent *humans* that are homeless ‘cause of you!”

“We can’t go to human shelters,” Nose-ring said. Her voice was feather-soft with crystalline edge. “Our needs are different. We need clothing without buttons or zippers. Beds without metal springs. Organic foods—“

“Organic?” the man demanded, stepping closer. “You say you’re so needy and you want *organic*? Next you’ll be telling me you elves are too good to drink from the tap, and you need taxpayer dollars to buy fancy bottled spring water.”

Nose-ring drew herself up to her full height—which couldn’t have been over five feet. “*Don’t* call us elves.”

“Yeah, what are you going to do about it? Give me a paper cut?” Baldy grabbed for the flyers. The fae wrenched them away, but some tore off in the man’s ham fingers. Frustrated, he tossed them to the pavement. The girl backed away, and he stepped right back into her space. Nose-ring’s gaze seemed to be drawn to the man’s arm, so Lupe looked—he was wearing a stainless steel watch. Lupe thought of Javi, the chain, his hands. For an instant, in her mind, Baldy was taller and had significantly more teeth.

“That’s enough,” Lupe said, stepping between them.

“I don’t need your help, round-ears,” Nose-ring said, at the same time Baldy said, “Mind your own business.”

So nice to see them agreeing on something. “Look, I’ve called the campus police,” Lupe lied, turning to Baldy. “You better go bother someone else before they show up.”

He glared at her for another thirty seconds or so before shuffling away, grumbling.

“You okay?” Lupe asked the fae once he was gone.

“Fine,” Nose-ring said, straightening her flyers. “You can quit pretending to care now.”

“I do care,” Lupe said.

“Uh-huh,” the fae said, unconvinced.

Lupe tried a softer tone. “Look, I have a brother who’s like you. Or half. But you know. I understand.”

“You understand,” said the fae. “You understand. So you know what it’s like to burn inside and out all day every day?”

“What—“

The fae sneered, wrinkling her nose so sunlight glared off her stud. “There’s iron in this world’s plants and meat, you know. We eat your food so we won’t die, but your food eats us back. But you have a brother like me, so *you understand*.”

“I—“ Lupe mumbled.

“I’m collecting for a fae shelter outside of town. We protect and orient new arrivals from our world, and provide housing for any who can’t get by on their own. You wanna prove *you understand*? Put your money where your mouth is. “

“Well—“ Lupe fingered the roll of bills in her pocket, running calculations in her head. If she donated, could she still afford rent? The Steed was going to need a fill up soon, too—without that, she couldn’t afford to drive out to take care of contracts. Assuming she got any.

“Thought so.” Nose-ring’s face twisted in disgust. She shoved a flyer into Lupe’s hands. “Take this, in case you change your mind. Tell your brother to call me if wants to be with his own kind.”

She strode off, Lupe staring after her in stunned silence. Nose-ring only made it a few steps, though, before she cursed and quickly turned around. “*Them*,” she said under her breath. She gave Lupe an unreadable look and scuttled the opposite way into the crowd.

What the hell was that about? Lupe looked in the direction Nose-ring had started out. And forgot how to breathe.

Across the street, leaning against a low stone wall near the stairs up to the quad, was a Knight of St. George. And not just any knight. The lieutenant. Lupe would recognize that close-shaved head and those intense dark eyes anywhere, even from twenty yards away. Admittedly, he looked a little different than he did yesterday—less like an advertisement for army surplus and more like a running back with a gym fetish. He wore a too-small t-shirt

stretched tight across his muscled chest. His arms, encased in armor the last time Lupe saw him, were bare, and sculpted biceps stood out under polished mahogany skin.

He must have been following her. What other explanation was there?

When their eyes met, he hefted himself from the wall and crossed the street with a confident gait. *Shit*. Why the hell had she left her weapons behind? She glanced around for an exit, but the crowd was too sparse for her to disappear into and he was blocking access to the street. And anyway, why *should* she run? She'd wanted a chance to demand the Georgies give her her pay. Now lo and behold, she had it.

"*You*," Lupe said as the lieutenant stepped up onto the sidewalk.

"What were you doing talking to Puck?" he demanded.

Lupe blinked. "Who?"

"The female fae you were speaking with," he said. He cocked his head and regarded her through narrow eyes. "She goes by the name 'Puck.' She's a troublemaker. You're telling me you don't know her?"

"Just met her today," Lupe said. "Wait a second, were you following me or her?"

"Who says I was following either of you?"

Lupe rolled her eyes. "Please. You're not exactly a student here, are you. Now give me my money."

It was the knight's turn to look confused. "What money?"

"The money for my kill," Lupe said, increasing in volume. "You people took my dragon away, don't you deny it. And now I'm not getting my payment from the guild. So you give me the money. You might have taken the corpse, but I killed it fair and square."

“Quiet down for a second, will you?” He scanned the crowd like he was expecting to see someone. Not finding them, he turned back to Lupe. “Look, you deserve some answers. Is there anywhere we can talk? Somewhere a little less public?”

Oh hell no. There was no way Lupe was going somewhere private with this guy. Not without a gun and the element of surprise. On the other hand, following her instinct of running fast and far away wasn’t going to get her any closer to getting paid. She settled on a compromise she could—hopefully—live with.

“How about the café?” she asked. It was off the street, away from whatever—or whoever—the lieutenant was antsy about, but there were likely to be other customers around, so she wouldn’t be truly alone with him. At the very least, the knight wouldn’t try anything in front of the barista, would he?

The lieutenant searched the square one last time and then, ever so slightly, relaxed some of the tension in his shoulders. He nodded to Lupe. “Lead the way,”

The aroma of brewing coffee washed over them as Lupe led him in. The café was small—cozy, said the university dining brochures—and boasted a mismatched assortment of tables and chairs. The tacky black and green tile floor was chipped and cracked in some places, but the array of space-age chrome contraptions behind the counter bespoke professionalism. A couple students curled up with a laptop on the threadbare tartan couch in front of the wall-mounted flatscreen, which was tuned to the local news. Otherwise the place was empty. This was maybe the third or fourth time Lupe had been here in three years. As she told Javi, they had a perfectly serviceable coffee pot at home, and anyway she didn’t relish the idea of having to take out another loan to finance her caffeine fix.

To justify their presence, Lupe ordered a coffee, black, and regretted it immediately as the barista peeled a couple crumpled bills from her sweaty grasp. She half expected the Lieutenant to order burnt coffee grounds just to one-up her, and to spike it with something from a military-grade flask. Instead, he sat across from her at the window-seat with a cup of milk.

“I imagine you have a lot of questions for me,” he said.

“No fucking duh,” Lupe replied.

The lieutenant nearly choked on a mouthful of milk. “Starting with?” he managed, through the spluttering.

Lupe scalded her mouth on her first sip. Scowling through the pain, she said, “For one, who the hell are you?”

“My order is—“

“No,” Lupe interrupted. “I mean *you*. I can’t keep calling you ‘the lieutenant,’ it’s exhausting. Tell me you got a name with fewer syllables.”

He flashed a double row of teeth brighter than his drink. The guy was a damn good actor, Lupe mused. His smile seemed almost genuine. “My name is Moses,” he said.

“Moses.” Lupe snorted. “You pick that name out for yourself?”

He ducked his head like an affable yokel. “Actually, my mama gave it to me. Moses Henry King. She was going for a theme.”

“I think she missed Solomon and Charlemagne in there somewhere.”

‘Moses’—damn, that was going to be hard to get used to—barked a laugh. “Don’t give her any ideas. She might order me a name change.” His smile faded slightly and he leaned forward. “What about you?” he said. “I know your name’s Guadalupe, but what do you like to be called?”

“You’ve been checking up on me,” Lupe said. She felt hollow. What if he hadn’t been waiting in the parking lot last night because he was inside the hospital, gathering information on her? Maybe he knew everything about her. Everything about Javi. And if the rumors of the Georgies’ anti-fae leanings were true... She tried to avert her attention from these nattering thoughts to her breathing. One heartbeat, two, three...

The knight shrugged one massive shoulder. “It’s my job.”

“To stalk people?”

“To *protect* people,” he insisted. “You didn’t answer my question.”

She tried another sip and despised it worse than before. Shoving the coffee away, she said, “Lupe’s fine. Protect people from what? Dragons?”

“Among other things,” Moses said. He tipped his milk to his mouth. “Lupe. Lu to your friends?”

“Lu to my brother.”

“No one else?” He smiled under a milk moustache, and Lupe fought not to roll her eyes. Was this some sort of advanced Georgie interrogation technique? Get her guard down by acting like a dork?

“I have a gun,” she growled. “What other things?”

“Well, everything that crawls through from *over there*.” He gestured vaguely.

“You mean across the Bleeds?”

“You have to understand, it isn’t just dragons,” Moses said. “It’s everything. Anything that crosses through from *over there* is tainted. Corrupted. “

“I don’t follow.”

“You’ve felt it, haven’t you? That prickle across your spine when you lay eyes on a dragon? The choking sensation, the conviction that you *can’t* kill it, so why bother fighting?”

“We in the business call that *fear*.” Lupe said. “Epinephrine. Hell of a drug.”

Moses shook his head. “No, it’s something more than that. It’s... it’s evil.”

“It’s an animal. It can’t be evil, it’s not sentient.” Dragons were smart, yes, and they had that creepy magic feel around them, but they weren’t conscious, not like humans. Or fae. Even the fae who’d known and feared them on the other side could tell you that. Dragons were just apex predators, no different than their carnivorous analogues from this world. Like lions, but less cuddly.

“They’re not *just* animals. They’re... something else.” Moses reached for his milk but paused and stared into his glass like it was a magic 8 ball. “They need to be destroyed.”

“So if you want the dragons dead,” Lupe said, “why are you running my guild off their hunting grounds?”

“The selflessness and determination of your guild is admirable,” he said in a tone that sounded nothing at all like admiration. “But to fully protect the public it is best to leave it to professionals.”

“The definition of ‘professional’ is you get paid to do it. Which I would have, if it weren’t for you.”

He leaned back in his chair. “I know this may come off as patronizing, but civilians just aren’t equipped to handle the unique challenges that—”

“There’s a dead dragon somewhere that suggests otherwise,” Lupe said. “You’ll remember it was in the barn. Before you *stole* it. Thanks, by the way. It’s not like I needed that paycheck. I feel real protected.”

He scrubbed at his face with one calloused hand. “I’m not saying you don’t have the skill to kill the monsters. I’m saying you shouldn’t have to. It’s too dangerous—not for your physical wellbeing, but your spiritual one.”

“What?” Lupe said, articulately.

When Moses spoke again, his voice was lofty and his gaze faraway. “And there was war in heaven,” he said, every word reverent. “Michael and his angels fought against the Dragon, and the Dragon prevailed not. And the great Dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called Satan, and his angels were cast out with him.” He refocused on Lupe’s face. “Revelations,” he said, as if that settled it.

Lupe’s shoulders tensed. Was he serious? She said, dripping scorn, “What, you think dragons are *the devil*?”

Moses’ eyes crinkled. “No, I don’t think they’re *literally* Satan,” he said. “But it’s a decent metaphor. Dragons and serpents have been symbols of evil for thousands of years. The garden of Eden. The dragon described in Beowulf. The Hydra. St. George and the Dragon. Don’t you wonder why that is?”

“Because lizards are creepy and back then they had nothing to shoot them with?”

Moses exhaled. “The Knights believe all of those were dragons crossing the Bleeds, just like the one yesterday. And if that’s all those stories were, just big dumb animals wandering through, then it’d be okay to let civilians like you go after them.” He extended his hand toward her, across the table. She stared at it. “But in those stories—and in all the others—the dragons weren’t the whole problem. Where the dragons came out, other things did, too. Greed, terror, confusion. Things to warp minds and hearts and turn *men* into animals.” He smiled at her, but it was a pitying smile. “Why do you think so many dragon stories come from the Dark Ages?”

Lupe raised an eyebrow. “And you’re going to protect me from getting all warped?”

“I’m going to try.”

Lupe considered introducing one of her clenched fists to Moses’s chiseled cheekbones.

“What about fae?” she asked. “They come from the same place.”

“They’re the same,” he said. “Carriers of the plagues of humanity. Hate, fear, cruelty. How do explain the man at the bus stop?”

“Easy. He’s an asshole.”

“Or maybe he was reacting to something subconscious and insidious,” Moses said.

“Something he couldn’t fight. But the Knights can.”

“You’d fight fae the same way you do dragons?” she said, almost coolly.

“If it came down to it,” Moses said. “If they become a threat, if it would save *people*, then yeah.”

“People?” Lupe’s voice careened upward into pitches reserved for dog whistles and teen pop stars. “*People?* Jav—I mean, fae *are* people.” She crushed her coffee cup in one hand and thought about launching it into his face. The only thing that kept her from doing so was the thought of Khonda’s smug face as she scribbled another thing down in the *unfit guardian* column. So instead, she said, “That’s it, I’m going to—“

Except she never got to say what she was going to do, because Moses was staring past her, his face grim.

“What?” Lupe prompted. She turned to follow his gaze.

The other students’ laptop was abandoned on the ratty couch. Its owners huddled beneath the flatscreen TV, which was dominated by the image of a smoking [Town] skyline. The muted anchors mouthed their report, and Lupe was too far away to read the closed captions, but

she did manage to catch the scrolling alert at the bottom of the screen: [TOWN] METRO AREA UNDER MANDATORY EVACUATION DUE TO DRAGON THREAT.

“Turn that up,” Lupe demanded, lurching to her feet. The barista fumbled under the bar and came up with the remote.

“—confirmed in the vicinity of Pride Park,” the anchor was saying, a manicured hand clasped against her silk blouse. “The creature is reportedly in excess of twenty-five feet and is believed to be very dangerous. A reward is being offered for anyone who can capture or kill the creature before casualties or significant property damage occurs. Repeat: dragon sighted in---“

“I’ve got to go,” Lupe said, turning back to Moses.

But the milk glass was empty, and Moses was gone.

Lupe had to leave the Steed at an Exxon a half-mile from downtown. Vehicles fled the city in such volume that traffic directors had dedicated one of the inbound lanes to evacuees as well, and abandoned cars choked the only remaining path into the metro area. Lupe grabbed her rifle case from the trunk and headed in on foot, cursing herself for leaving the rest of her gear in the burning barn. If this thing was nearly as big as the news let on, it wasn’t going down without a hell of a fight. And the fight was going to be so much harder without a chain.

She pulled her phone from her pocket and called Javi. He didn’t answer, and when voicemail prompted her for a message she hung up. The last thing she needed was him trying to find a way to her. One time playing the hero was enough.

She passed a few people as she arrived at the first street of shops. They fled past her quickly, shoulders hunched, casting twitchy glances into the sky as they walked.

A couple blocks from Main Street, a dozen or so people were engaged in an altercation with a small phalanx of armored-and-shielded Georgies. Judging by their plain white uniforms,

none of them were the lieutenant. Both sides appeared to be armed, though the knights' assault weapons were a class above the shotguns and rifles wielded by their opponents.

Lupe fell in line with the group just in time to hear one of the knights declare, "The situation is under control. Your assistance is unnecessary."

"You can't keep us out!" shouted someone at the front. The speaker was a black woman in her late twenties, her tight curls tamed into a bun at the nape of her neck. Lupe recognized her immediately.

The lead knight bellowed, "It is the sacred responsibility of ordained Knights to destroy these demons. Your so-called 'guild' is a danger to itself and everyone else."

Lupe elbowed her way to the front through a thicket of faces she half-remembered from all those "mandatory" Guild meetings. Seemingly every slayer in the county had flocked to the scene, like buzzards to the choicest, fattest buffalo carcass. *Get your own dragon*, she thought at them peevisly. Which wasn't quite fair, considering they were all here before her.

"It's our job as much as it is yours," the woman was saying when Lupe fought her way out of the crowd and bumped the woman's shoulder with her own.

"The bucketheads don't listen, Suze," Lupe said. "Too much bullshit in their ears."

"Lupe?" said Susan Jones, turning to face her with a tight smile. "Shoulda known you'd show up. Haven't seen you in weeks, girl. Where you been?"

"Home. There's a... situation with Javi. I'll tell you later." Lupe indicated the Georgie, who regarded their reunion impassively. "I see you met the new neighbors."

"These assholes," Susan spat, jerking her head in the relevant direction, "won't let us do our damn job. Think they can muscle in on our territory; don't want us to earn an honest living."

“Tell me about it,” Lupe muttered. “I put down an eighteen-footer and these bastards claimed my kill. I didn’t even get paid.”

“Jesus. You okay? Your rent—“

“I’m fine. Any word on the dragon?”

Susan still looked concerned, but she nodded. “I got a contact who was downtown when it attacked.”

“I guess it flew in?”

“Well, according to the witness, this dragon don’t have wings.”

“But then how did it get downtown?”

“That’s the thing,” Susan said. “It Bled through.”

“It... what?”

“It crossed a Bleed. Right in the middle of town.”

“That’s impossible. There’s no Bleed downtown.” Lupe would have noticed if there was. Or if she didn’t, Javi definitely would have. All the Bleeds Lupe knew of were in rural areas: fields, farmland, forests. Lupe always figured it had to do with the presence of iron. What with all the cars and lampposts and things downtown, it just made sense that the Bleeds wouldn’t open there. Bleeds were a type of magic, after all. And nothing of the fae fared well in proximity to iron. Most fae avoided the more heavily urbanized areas entirely, and on the odd occasion she brought Javi downtown, he had to cover up his hands and breathe through a scarf to prevent agitating his asthma.

“Don’t matter if it’s *possible*,” Susan said. “It’s what happened.”

“But how—“ Lupe’s question was cut short by a distant burst of automatic gunfire. Someone, somewhere was killing her dragon. The assembled guild members gasped and ducked,

looking like they were about to rabbit. The Knights tightened their formation. “Okay, never mind,” Lupe said. “The point is, we need to take this thing down.”

Susan cut her eyes back to the immobile line of knights. “Yeah, but how? They’re not just going to stand aside.”

“What about Hazelnut street?” Lupe asked.

Susan shook her head. “Nah, they got a bunch of knights over there too. I checked. Wait a second,” she said, and her eyes lit up something fierce. “I’ve got an idea.” Susan pushed past and headed back the way Lupe had come. She made it only a few steps when Lupe grabbed her elbow.

“Not without me you’re not.”

“Of course not,” Susan said, smiling. “You’re my partner, after all.”

“Yeah, well, don’t spread that around or the others’ll get jealous.”

Susan flashed her a grin and then led the way down the block, where she took a left at Lupe’s favorite fro-yo shop and marched firmly down the next street.

Lupe hesitated. “Uh, Suze? Where we headed? Dragon’s that way.”

“You’ll see.”

Partway down the block Susan abruptly turned into what appeared at first glance to be a small alleyway but turned out to be the entrance of some sort of restaurant hidden away in a courtyard between office buildings. A sign nearby had the name of the joint in pretty French script that Lupe could neither translate nor later remember. The place was obviously one of those fancy cafes businessmen held their client meetings at, the ones that serve you crumbly bread and sour lemonade you have to take out a mortgage to afford. Right now the place was abandoned, chairs and tables upended, lacy tablecloths stomped into the dirt. Shards of broken plates caught

the gleam of the afternoon sun through the branches of the decorously extravagant willow in the middle of the courtyard.

“You never take me anywhere nice,” Lupe said.

Susan snorted and dragged a chair toward the high, black-painted wooden fence that served as the open-air I’s back wall. “We can go over this wall. Help me, Loop.” Together, the two of them fashioned a makeshift ladder out of a stack of chairs.

“You’re fantastic,” Lupe said, squeezing Susan’s hand. “This should put us on the street those assholes were blocking.”

Susan eyed the rickety construction. “Yeah, if we don’t fall and break our necks.”

“Sure hope we don’t,” Lupe said. “I’ve had enough hospitals for one week. Hold this,” she said, and handed off her rifle case. Susan balanced it on her hip as Lupe scrambled up the faltering tower of chairs, only barely managing to grab the top of the fence and haul herself up before the topmost chairs came clattering down. Susan handed back the rifle as Lupe judged the distance down to the ground on the other side of the fence, which turned out to be a small holding area for a couple dumpsters and a recycling container for some nearby business.

She swung her other leg over and sized up the drop. Shouts and gunfire erupted from the next street over, and she jerked her head up, ready for a fight. But she wasn’t ready at all for the thunderous *boom* that shook the entire block—wooden fence included. She pinwheeled her arms for balance but no luck—she plummeted face-first from the fence. The dumpster broke her fall. And possibly some of her ribs. When she regained awareness of her body, she was curled on the ground, wheezing.

Something slammed into the shattered asphalt by her head. “Lupe!” Susan’s face swam into view. Lupe mouthed something in reply but most of her interest was tied up in a forced reboot of

her respiratory system. Susan's brown fingers dug into Lupe's arm. "Lupe, you okay? Answer me, dammit."

"M'fine." Lupe sat up and brushed away the pebbles clinging to her bloodied knees and elbows. "Just practicing my new sport, the urban swan dive. What *was that?*"

"Some kind of explosion." Susan hauled Lupe to her feet. "Whatever it is, the St. George guys aren't too happy about it. Listen."

People were shouting now. Sounded less like combat orders and more like an argument. And what she didn't hear was just as unsettling: no roar, no scratch of talons on concrete. Where was the dragon? "Let's go see what happened," Lupe said. She retrieved her rifle case—somewhat scuffed from the fall but with no apparent structural damage—and staggered out of the alleyway, Susan at her back.

The alley opened onto the main street, about three blocks from where the Georgie roadblock had been. Across the street was a small park—more of a large median, really, a chunk of ground with some grass and a couple oak trees the city could never get the backing to chop down. The place had become a sort of gathering area, with a couple rows of concrete bleachers and a flat stage area where musicians and street performers could hawk their craft. This week, Lupe remembered, there was supposed to be some sort of petting zoo for the little kids. Right now, though, all that was there was splintered wood and ruptured plastic. Boughs and branches were broken off, hanging from the trees like nearly-severed arms. In the grass several white-clad figures lay moaning, attended by a couple of others, who were still on their feet. The whole scene was shrouded in a layer of oily smoke and punctuated by the dulcet sounds of a car alarm.

Lupe and Susan loitered a safe distance from the Georgies, out of sight behind a line of parked cars, and looked for some sign of the noticeably absent monster. They ducked back into the alley as two knights came by.

“This is Waylon’s fault,” one of them said. “If it weren’t for his car bomb trick—“

“The beast would have eaten us. That what you want?” demanded the other one.

“No, but—“

“We’re lucky Waylon and King were able to drive it off. Let’s just hope they kill it soon, before it hurts anyone else.” Anything else they had to say was lost as the two knights crossed the street to join their brethren.

Well, that explained the explosion. And the dragon’s absence. But where was it now? Lupe wouldn’t have thought you’d be able to misplace a two-story lizard, but here we were.

A loud rumble emanated from the south. Two streets over, a cloud of dust and stone-chips billowed up above the huddle of one- and two-story shops.

Lupe caught Susan’s eye and she nodded, and they took off at a run. The knights noticed them and shouted for them to stop, but Lupe ignored them like she ignored the pain lancing through her ribs.

They slowed a suitable distance from the park. Above the sound of her own panting, Lupe could make out shouting from the other side of a line of buildings, and an odd throaty rumble that could only be the sound of a dragon.

“What’s the plan?” Susan asked.

“The plan is... to come up with a plan,” Lupe said.

“You don’t have one?”

“That’s usually your area of expertise, isn’t it?” Lupe measured her breathing and tried to corral her thoughts. Charging the beast probably wasn’t a great idea, considering how well it worked out for her last time. Anyway, they didn’t have any way to immobilize the creature, which made close-quarters combat a no-go. So if Lupe was going to get in a perfect shot, like last time, to the back of the neck, she’d need—

“Higher ground,” she told Susan, at the same time Susan announced, “The roof!”

They made for a nearby department store, vacant since the seventies, which had a fire escape at the corner of the building. Susan launched herself for the bottom rung. Lupe handed up her rifle case then scrambled after. They clambered to the top and crept across the graveled roof. As they neared the other side of the building, which overlooked the next street, Susan froze.

“Holy shit,” she said.

Lupe followed her gaze. “The hell is that?”

Hunkered in the street below was a dragon. At least, Lupe *thought* it was a dragon—but if it was, it was like no dragon she’d ever seen before.

Where most dragons have a long neck and tail, like a brachiosaurus, this thing was built like a long-legged alligator, squat and stout with a wedge-shaped head and a thick club-like tail. Instead of tidy rows of green or black scales, its thick pink-white flesh divided into several armor-like plates. Instead of wings arching over its back, two knobby ridges of flesh ran the length of its spine. And, as it turned to investigate a sound, Lupe realized its hide was stretched over indentations in the sides of its head. Right where its eyes would be. If it had any.

“What *is* that thing?” Susan whispered.

“Some kind of cave-dwelling species, maybe. Like eyeless cave fish, or those salamander things,” Lupe said. Who said her degree would have no real-world applications?

“Is it blind?”

“Probably,” Lupe replied. “Doesn’t need eyes because it’s got other senses to make up for it.”

Susan pointed farther down the street. “What are they doing?”

Several meters behind the dragon—if that was even what it was—trailed a loose formation of Georgies, most of them armed. They followed as the dragon ambled up the road, picking its way among the parked cars.

“Why aren’t they shooting?” Lupe asked. The monster seemed at the least ambivalent to their presence. It was a golden opportunity. Why was no one taking advantage?

Well. Somebody was going to have to show them how it was done. *Let’s see how they like it when I steal their kill.*

Lupe dropped her metal case and knelt to retrieve her gun. Steadying herself on one knee, she lined up the shot.

“Careful,” Suze said. “Wait for it to turn its head, and—“

Just as it began to pass under a metal footbridge that connected two upper level shops, it raised its head, exposing a fleshy gap between the armored plates that protected its head and upper back. Lupe fired twice, ignoring the stinging of her skinned elbows. .

Two holes opened up in the back of the monster’s head, like the eyes it never had. The thing froze in place, one great foreclaw held up, midstride. It wavered for a minute then began a ponderous u-turn. None the worse for the wear for its gaping head wounds, it unhinged its jaws and faced the Georgies behind it with a silent open-mouthed bellow. Then a yellow-green fluid

sprayed out of its throat and arced the distance to the nearest knight. The knight screamed and began clawing at his armor, as the venom or what-have-you pooled at his feet and began to froth.

“I seem to have made a slight tactical error,” Lupe told Susan.

“We have to do something,” Susan said, her hand resting on the pistol holstered at her back.

Lupe moved toward the edge of the roof and lined up another shot. But before she could take aim for the creature’s open mouth, shouts went up from the assembled Georgies, and the bridge above the dragon erupted into a fireball.

The roar of the sudden blaze was drowned out by a screech of rending metal. Then the whole structure and parts of the buildings on either side collapsed.

The tremor threw her, and by the time she steadied herself the smoke had begun to clear. Lupe could see now the Georgies’ plan.

The bridge—the *iron* bridge—pinned the monster’s hindquarters to the ground, searing into the flesh. If she hadn’t shot it and altered its course, the bridge would have come down square across the back, immobilizing it. As it was, its head and front claws were free, and it strained in the direction of the band of knights, who worked feverishly to free their afflicted comrade.

“Shoot it,” Suze urged, but what could Lupe aim at? The creature had none of the weak points she usually took advantage of—no eyes, and, from this angle, no gaps in its armor. Plus, it had just shrugged off a double-tap to the back of the head, twice as much as it took to kill the firebreather in the barn.

The monster scraped its hook-shaped claws across the shattered asphalt and strained against the weight of the bridge. It arched its neck and spit another stream of bile at the knights.

Lupe wasn't sure whether the dragon-thing or herself was more surprised when one of the Georgies broke formation and flung himself bodily toward the gnashing jaws. The knight held no gun but instead, at arm's length like a beacon, a flashing sword.

Lupe had only seen one Georgie dumb enough to favor a blade over a firearm. "Moses?"

King, because who else could it have been, threw himself to the side as a jet of venom spewed past his helmeted head. He stopped, just inches outside the dragon's reach. The monster lunged, snapping, and King answered it with a shallow slash across its snout. The skin burned and split, but the monster hardly reacted.

Did it not have nerve endings?

King weaved back and forth, dodging the monster's ineffectual lunges and dealing light blows.

"What's he doing?" Susan asked.

"Waiting for his opportunity," Lupe said.

King's target was probably the back of the neck, where she'd shot it. But there was no way he could make it unless—unless Lupe caused a distraction.

If she shot the thing now, maybe she could help him. But why should she help the people who put Susan and herself out of business? Not to mention his self-avowed determination to fight fae like Javi as hard as he was this dragon.

She lowered the rifle.

"What are you—" Susan started, but then King made a misstep, and a haphazard swing took him another half-step closer to the dragon—

And suddenly the creature's jaws clamped down on the knight's shoulder. King's strangled shout echoed off the buildings. The monster lifted King from his feet and gave him a shake, like a dog trying out a new toy.

Lupe could've shot then, but she'd have hit King.

The other knights were shouting now, taking aim with their weapons, but they seemed to have much the same problem as Lupe.

Her stomach lurched. *I've killed him. I didn't help him, so I killed him.*

But then, just as the dragon began to drag him within reach of its claws, King tightened his fist around the hilt of the sword and drove it up into the creature's neck.

For a long moment they were locked that way, then, slowly, its jaws relaxed. King pulled himself free and stumbled away, his arm dangling uselessly. Behind him, the sword still burning into its throat, the dragon gave a feeble shake of its eyeless head and then slumped to the ground and became still.

Lupe turned away.

"Come on, Susan. Let's get out of here before they notice us." Lupe led the way to the fire escape, her insides torn by warring factions of guilt, jealousy, and relief. "We're not needed here."

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Sweat gummed her hair to the back of her neck. Her sinuses throbbed with an acidic sting. Lupe rocked back on her heels to observe her handiwork. The bathtub was free at last from the terrors of soap scum. She gave the metal faucet one last wipe and then replaced the handle's cloth cover.

“Why, no, Ms. Khonda,” Lupe practiced to the mirror, “that is not, in fact, an old sock. It is a professional medical device for Javi's safety and comfort.”

She put up the cleaning supplies and padded sticky-toed into the freshly mopped kitchen, where she caught her breath against the counter and trickled a bottle of water down her desiccated throat. The stove clock stared her down. 1:15. Forty-five minutes until Lupe had to prove to Khonda that she was a sensible, responsible adult capable of providing adequate care for a teenage boy.

A boy who was mysteriously absent. Lupe had awakened that Saturday morning to a note taped to the fridge—*Back by 2:00, I promise*. No hint where he'd gone or what he was doing. Not that Lupe would need this information or anything, what with the imminent arrival of a certain child protection agent. Lupe grabbed her phone from the counter and speed-dialed Javi's cell for the fifth time that morning. No answer. “Javi,” she told his voicemail, “you'd better be on your way home. I know you're having fun with your friends, but this is important, okay? You need to be here when Khonda gets here. Oh, and,” she added, “don't say anything about what happened in the barn.”

1:17. She rubbed her sweaty palms on her damp t-shirt and considered a change of clothes. First, though, she had time for one last pass with the vacuum.

She dragged the machine out of the hall closet and side-eyed Javi's bedroom door. Had he cleaned up last night like she asked? Yeah, not likely.

Lupe shouldered his door open and hauled in the vacuum, guiding the tangled coils of the cord with her foot.

"Javi," she groaned.

The floor was a carpet of dirty clothes, dog-eared paperbacks, and used Kleenexes. The bed was not only unmade but disemboweled, with sheets divested from the mattress and pillowcases half off the pillows. The desk festered under a layer of garbage, and on the nightstand a plastic takeout cup had grown an impressive bacterial culture.

Shit. She couldn't let Khonda see the place like this. Lupe gathered armfuls of clothes and shoved them into the tiny closet. That done, she set about clearing off the desk.

The laptop they shared sat open amid a nest of cellophane food wrappers. He'd taken it last night to do homework and play a game. Tonight sometime Lupe would have to requisition it back to get started on that research paper for Aldin. She jostled the computer as she cleaned out the trash and it flashed to life.

Onscreen was a dragon. It reared to strike, a tendril of flame frozen in its mouth.

It took Lupe a second to realize she was looking at the pause screen of a video game. Javi's character, a musclebound elf on a warhorse, waved a diminutive bow in the corner of the display. Lupe snorted. The dragon, in the exaggerated logic of videogames, had to be fifty feet long. Lupe wouldn't take *that* job with anything less than something fully automatic and a shit-ton of ammo. Who in their right mind would take on a predator the size of an eighteen wheeler with just a stick, a string, and a bunch of smaller, pointier sticks?

She thought about Moses hacking into that dragon's neck with just a sword and slammed the laptop closed. As she grabbed the vacuum hose and chased down errant crumbs at the back of the desk, she noticed a crumpled paper stuffed in the pencil cup.

At closer glance, she saw it hadn't been crumpled at all, but folded to a fraction of its size with sharp, angry creases. Curious, she smoothed it out. She wished she hadn't.

It was an AP Stats test, dated last week. The margins were filled with red ink and the letter D was scrawled at the top of the page, along with a note from the teacher: *This isn't like you, Javi.*

No, it wasn't. And the last time she'd asked about his grade, Javi made it sound like things were looking up. Why did he nearly flunk the test? More importantly, why did he hide this from her? Numbly, Lupe folded the paper and tucked it into her jeans pocket. After Khonda left, Lupe would have a few questions of her own.

She vacuumed what she could reach of Javi's carpet then yanked the cord. The appliance died with a whine that was drowned out by a furious pounding on the front door. Javi was back. Not a moment too soon—Javi's alarm clock told her it was nearly twenty til. She left the vacuum and its tangled cord in the hall and threw the door open.

"Where the hell have you been?" she demanded.

"Knocking. For five minutes now." Khonda's lipstick sneer was almost audible. She wore a grey business suit, almost identical to the one from last week, and her blonde hair had been tortured into a tight ponytail. Before Lupe could do anything other than mentally gibber *ShitShitShit*, Khonda insinuated herself past Lupe into the apartment.

Khonda's pale eyes dissected the small living area, with its lumpy beige couch, cracked dining table, and decades old thrift store TV.

“This room is rather bare,” Khonda said.

“Yeah, well, you know, I don’t have many hobbies,” Lupe said. “Other than providing a stable, loving environment for Javi, I mean. Uh, which isn’t a hobby; it’s a passion.” She swallowed. “But Javi has hobbies, of course. Lots of them. He’s very well adjusted.”

“I need to see the kitchen,” Khonda said.

Right. To make sure Lupe had enough food for Javi. She’d googled child wellness checks the night before, and this criterion had been on the list. She led Khonda into the kitchen and opened the cubby over the stove that served as the pantry.

Inside was a ten-pack of ramen noodles, a half-empty jar of peanut butter, a bag of sweet potatoes that come to think of it were probably past their prime, and a box of Javi’s favorite granola bars. Khonda hummed judgmentally.

“We, uh, don’t keep a lot of canned food,” Lupe said. “It’s hard to work a can opener in gloves. I mean, Javi says so, so I…”

Khonda had moved on to the refrigerator. It didn’t take long to inspect the contents: an outdated carton of milk, half a pack of shredded cheddar, and the bundle of blackened plantains Lupe had tried to rescue from rotting.

“Sunday’s grocery day,” Lupe said, kneeling the fridge closed.

Khonda ran a finger across a newly-cleaned countertop and rubbed it against her thumb. *Can’t say nothing bad about that*, Lupe crowed to herself. Khonda didn’t look pleased. But at this point Lupe doubted Khonda would look pleased if the president walked in and personally handed her a check for a billion dollars. Khonda scribbled something on her omnipresent legal pad and then, with a jerk of her head to indicate she had seen all there was to see, started off down the hall.

“Which is Javier’s room?”

Lupe lugged the vacuum away from where it still stood by Javi's door and shoved it into the hall closet. Khonda loitered in Javi's doorway, taking in the wadded bed sheets and the mountain of clothes sliding out of the open closet.

"It's a work in progress," Lupe said. "So, uh, is that all you want to look at, or...?"

Khonda breezed down the hall and peered into the bathroom at the far end. She made no comment on the sparkling cleanliness *or* the faucet cozies, and turned to look at the door to the remaining room, which was half ajar.

Lupe's room. Where...oh shit. Last night, unable to sleep after her marathon google session in preparation for Khonda's visit, Lupe had busied herself cleaning her rifle. She'd unloaded it, stripped it, and wiped down the components--which now lay spread on a blanket on the floor, exposed for the world to see.

The rifle was prohibited under her lease. If Khonda told Lupe's landlady...

As casually as she could, Lupe slipped in front of Khonda and tugged her door closed.

Khonda peered at the closed door the way a hawk watches a rabbit hole. "Is there a problem?"

"That's my bedroom," Lupe said quickly. "Javi doesn't go in there. There's no reason to look."

Khonda tapped her pen against her legal pad and sniffed. "Ms. Mendoza, I am here to evaluate this home for dangers to the child. I cannot be sure there is nothing to endanger Javier if I cannot check every room."

"Well, I'm requesting you not invade my personal privacy. That's within my rights." At least, it was according to her internet search. Lupe wished she could actually afford a lawyer.

“It is until I get a warrant,” Khonda replied with a feral smirk. “And trust me, Ms. Mendoza, you do not want me to have to get a warrant.”

“I *want* you to leave me and Javi alone,” Lupe said.

That ill advised statement hung in the air between them for several seconds. Khonda composed herself like an executioner assigning judgement and smacked her lipsticked lips together before she started to speak.

Luckily for Lupe, whatever Khonda was about to say was lost in the sound of the front door clattering open.

“I’m back!” Javi called from the living room. He shuffled around in there for a minute and then Lupe heard his sneakers clatter against the wall.

“Sorry I left without telling you,” he continued, coming into the hallway, “but now I guess I can let you know, I got a--oh.” He rounded the corner and stopped in his tracks at the sight of Khonda hovering outside Lupe’s door and scribbling something in her notes.

“Javier?” Khonda asked in a businesslike tone.

“Javi,” he said.

She took a couple steps toward him, away, blessedly, from Lupe’s room. “I’m Anita Khonda, your caseworker.”

“I know.” His shoulders squared like Khonda was armed with a gun and not a clipboard.

“Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

Javi met Lupe’s eyes over Khonda’s shoulder. Lupe nodded. *Remember what we practiced*, she mouthed. His brows furrowed. Did he understand?

“Yeah, uh, sure,” Javi said with a non-committal shrug. “Let’s go sit in the living room.” He headed back down the hall, where he collapsed on the end of the couch. Aconda alighted

beside him and leaned in with that feigned sympathy and interest people like that got trained to use with children. Lupe loitered behind the kitchen counter, willing herself to be calm. Javi was smart, he could answer these. She didn't need to worry.

She'd counted her seven heartbeats twice in a row by the time Khonda asked her first question.

"Do you feel safe in this household?"

Javi blinked. "Well, mostly."

"What do you mean, mostly?"

"I just meant--like, this house is safer than a lot of places for me." He dug his shoulder into the plush back of the couch. "There's covers on all the metal things, plus I've got my gloves. But sometimes I mess up, you know? I got to be super careful just walking through the parking lot. Nowhere's gonna really be safe."

"Let me rephrase that, Javier," said Khonda. "Do you feel safe with Ms. Mendoza?"

Javi scratched at the rough scars on his palms, making Lupe wince. "Yeah, of course."

Khonda noted something down. "Do you feel you get enough to eat?"

"I mean--yeah," he said, seeing Lupe's face. "I don't starve. Lupe gets us by." Khonda made a noncommittal sigh and wrote another note. Lupe started on her fourth round of heartbeats. Her nails made tiny scratchy patterns on the vinyl counter.

Khonda's next question surprised both siblings. "How is your schoolwork?"

"Um." Javi looked down. Lupe shoved a hand in the pocket containing the folded test.

"Has living here adversely affected your grades?"

"No!" He looked up. "I just...my grades are fine."

“I see.” Khonda stood. “Regretfully, Javier, Ms. Mendoza, I must take my leave. This will be enough for this session. I’ll return again in a week’s time. I want to see improvement, especially--” she turned to stare at Lupe. “I expect you to have some proof of employment. Good afternoon.”

Javi and Lupe remained frozen, silent. Khonda showed herself out.

Javi grinned at Lupe. “Well, that went well.”