

Day 1

I am going to die.

We were harvesting food from the human colony again, and at first all was going smoothly. My comrades swooped in and started carrying off food, and when the humans got agitated enough to start using their rock throwers, I dove in to level them with bursts of deadly violet. When I was started on my pass though, everything went horribly wrong. I wasn't paying attention, and must have flown too close to the light because one of the humans somehow caught sight of me for long enough to take aim and throw a web.

One second I was finishing up banking out of a dive, and the next I was barreling toward the mountain with my wings pinned to my side and a horrible stinging that wrapped around my body in stripes like the tendrils of a man of war. I tried to twist myself free from the awful strangling thing, but instead I just twisted myself so that I slammed against a tree on the way down. It still throbs where the tree struck me (well, I guess I struck the tree), and every spot that the web touches burns and chafes horribly. The only thing that doesn't seem to hurt is my left tail fin, which I can hardly feel at all.

I've been sprawled out on the ground for a while now, with my wings bent back by the web in a terribly awkward position so that they've gone prickly. I hope the same thing happened to my tail fin, because the numbness is really starting to worry me. Not that it really matters. Human web might not be sticky like spider's web, but its heavy and easy to get tangled in, and unbelievably tough. If the past few hour's struggle is any indication, getting out of it alone is near impossible; and No one is going to be coming to my my rescue. The others are safely back to the roost by now, and I have a habit of disappearing for days so by the time they miss me I won't be more than carrion. The best I can hope for now is a quick death by some lucky predator instead of a slow and agonizing one from thirst.

Its almost dawn. The sky is shifting from black to blue, and shadows are beginning to form. This could very well be the last day of my life. Its a shame I won't be able to see my last dawn through all of the trees.

Day 2

I must have fallen asleep some time after daybreak, because I was woken up by a pressure on my side. I heard something panting, and realized that the lucky predator I hoped for had arrived. Still groggy from my half sleep, I decided to keep my eyes closed and wait for the problem to magically go away. Instead the problem continued its panting a few feet away from me, and eventually I worked up the courage to face it. I opened my eyes, and stared in horror at the source of the panting.

A human was staring back at me with a wild look in its eyes, reared up on its over sized hind legs. The creature's head was massive compared to the rest of its spindly body, a furred dome that was far larger than the face attached to it. Out of its back and shoulders sprouted shaggy brown fur that hung down its sides like molted skin. Its legs and underbelly were covered in a fine coat of motley green fuzz the same color as the forest; and its face and front paws were completely bald, revealing soft mammalian skin the color of bone. Those ebony paws were horrible, with unnaturally long skeletal digits that seemed to move independent from the body they were attached to.

Far more terrifying though was the long, unnaturally shiny claw that those paws were grasping. I had heard about human claws from the others, but never actually seen one up close before. They aren't like the claws of a normal animal, because all the other beasts in nature have their claws firmly attached.

Instead humans shed their claws and use those wicked front paws to grip them, letting them throw claws the same way they throw webs. As I looked at it, I realized it was much smaller and pointier than the glimpses of claws I had seen on other humans. It was more like a fang, smaller than a claw but straight and pointy. Oh so very pointy.

One strike from that and I would be dead, ready to be dragged back to the colony and (presumably) be eaten, or whatever humans do with their prey. The creature looked hesitant, like it didn't know where to strike. Then it started making odd murmuring sounds and flipped the tooth over in its paws so that the point was facing downward toward my throat. It snarled at me and raised the lethal glinting fang high in the air as I stared up at it, unable to look away. Instead of striking though, it stared back at me through rounded mammalian eyes, as if gloating. *Please, don't play with me. Just strike and get it over with.* It ignored my silent plea's, faltering several times as if conflicted before giving me a look of what I swear was conviction and raising its fang one last time. Unable to watch any longer, I pulled my head away and closed my eyes, my pounding heart waiting for its flame to be snuffed.

My flame stayed lit. After a few infinite seconds, I heard it make a defeated sounding mumble-hiss, and felt it move away. *Maybe its a hatching that doesn't know how to kill yet, and it needs help from an adult. That would explain why it looked so scared, and why its tooth is so small.* Suddenly, it bounded back to me, and my eyes flew open as I felt the fang scraping against my side. *Oh please no, it doesn't know how to kill me properly, so its just going to start cutting me up while I'm still alive. Except, wait, I don't feel any pain, just a slight pressure. Its not cutting me, its cutting the web!*

I waited until the web felt loose enough to shake off, then pounced on the dumb beast that had released me, pinning it against a rock with one forepaw. The tooth lay detached from its owner, out of reach of its paws. It was completely defenseless. *Now its your turn to be terrified* I thought; and it was, gasping for breath like a fish on land. *I should kill it, or it'll tell the rest of the colony about a great new food source it found in the woods, and they'll hunt me down.* I could feel its little heart beating under my paw, pumping as furiously as mine had been when I was the prey. I glared at it, and it stared back with its round eyes, now wild with fear instead of gloating. They were green, the same color as my reflection's. I drew back, sucking in a great breath of air for my flame...

...and roared right at the humans face as loud as I possibly could, before bounding off to go search for a clear spot to take flight. It had spared me and freed me from the web, so I was simply returned the favor. Of course, it probably hadn't actually meant to let me escape, but regardless of its intentions, the outcome was that I was free.

As I leapt through the forest I realized that something was wrong. Every time I tried to use my wings I would start out straight, but then twist after a few flaps and crash into a tree or plummet back to the forest floor. *Maybe I'm just sore, after sleeping contorted for that long. Except that my left tail fin is still so horribly numb. Like its not even there. No, no I can't think that. I'm just tired and sore, thats all.*

A sudden rush of sunlight dispelled all of the bad thoughts. *Finally, an opening in the trees!* I picked up speed, readied my wings as I hit the ground, and pushed off from it ready to return to the sky. For a second, all seemed well, I was flying again like nothing had happened! Then, I twisted to the left just like before, and the earth rushed to meet me like I had been away for months. I looked up to discover that I was surrounded by rock, I had fallen into a great pit in the ground with sheer wall on all sides. After an hours worth of futile attempts to fly, leap or climb out, I finally decided to take a look at my numb tail fin.

It was completely gone, like it never even existed. A scab running down part of my tail was the only clue that there had once been a fin there in the first place. That, and the horrible a-symmetry that my remaining fin created without its twin.

Its getting dark again, which means that I will probably be able to see another dawn. Humans sleep during the night, so I don't have to worry about them hunting for me until daybreak. Assuming that I manage to get out of this hole, I might live through many dawns to come, but I'm not sure that I want to. Even if I live through them, I will never be able to truly see them ever again. Not from the sky.

Day 3

When I awoke, I could hardly move for how sore I was. And tired. And hungry. Being away from Mother for so long hasn't helped much either. Somehow, being around her makes a person feel happy in a horribly hollow way, but a day away from her and they feel sick and depressed without any reason. I think its something do to with her sickly sweet smell, as if it can control a persons feelings. Thats probably why we all put up with her. That and the fact that she lives on the only spot hot enough to hatch eggs on within a moon cycle's travel from our fishing grounds. The whole thing is unwholesome, which is why I usually spend as much time away from the roost as possible. I've found that the unnatural sadness fades after a day, so if you leave for several at a time, you're only miserable for one of them.

Now that I'm stuck on the ground, I won't ever have to put up with that smell again, or worry about her eating me if we don't bring enough food back one night. I worry about my friends though. With me gone, they will have a tough time harvesting from the colony, and thats the most reliable food supply. I hope the ocean is kind enough to let them make up the difference with fish. My own situation is looking slightly better, but still hopeless. For a hole in the ground my new home is quite pretty, with water falling into a freshwater pool surrounded by grass and bushes. There are even some fish in the pool, although so far I haven't been able to catch any without being able to dive at them from above. Even if I can catch them, It'll only delay my starvation by a few small snacks.

I probably will live long enough to starve too, since I'm fairly certain that the human I released hasn't alerted its colony. I found it watching me today, while I was looking for a climbing path out of the hole. I had just about given up after a morning of failing to scale the walls and snapping at fish in desperation, when I heard a clattering stick fall from above. I looked up for the source, and saw the human from the day before hunkered on a ledge close to the top of the pit. We locked eyes again, and stared at each other long enough for the shadows to change. The way it kept my gaze was disconcerting. Most animals run away when you stare them down, but this one mirrored my stare until we both tired. It was probably smart enough tell that I wasn't a threat, so was taunting from its ledge. Yet, the only impression I got from its body language was curiosity.

Eventually it got up and left, and I waited for its larger brethren to jump into the pit and tear me into little pieces. They never came though, and now the moon has come out to wrap the world in shadow wings, and the humans are all asleep in their hives. For what ever reason, the human hasn't shown me to its fellows. I realize now that its probably the owner of the web that left me flightless, since its scent was strong on the cursed thing. Maybe it wants the credit of my kill all to itself, and its just waiting for me to weaken before it strikes. That would explain why its keeping me secret, but I doubt humans are even capable of that level of thought. It also doesn't explain why it set me free yesterday, or why it

seems so... friendly.

Day 4

I made a friend today.

The human came when the sun was highest, and I was ready for it. This time, it brought something that wasn't a claw or a piece of bark. Its smell was the first sign of the human's arrival; a big succulent fish, freshly split open and still running with oil. The human appeared in one of the cracks at the base of the wall, hiding behind a giant multicolored scale. He slid the fish a few feet away from his hiding place and crouched down low. *Does it seriously expect me to be lured over to the fish when its standing right there? Only crabs are greedy and stupid enough to fall for a trap that obvious.*

Apparently it realized this as well, and emerged from the crevice; leaving its scale lodged between the gap. I lay flat against the top of a boulder, watching as the slender creature retrieved its fish and started slinking toward the pool, scanning for danger. My mouth watered at the thought of sinking my teeth into that fish; but the idea of fighting a human, even a juvenile, was not a pleasant one. *Then again, it doesn't look like its trying to hunt me, or if it is it's doing a terrible job of it. Maybe it thinks I've left because I didn't take its bait. Anyway, it shed its scale and its fang is nowhere in sight. If it decides to fight I can probably snap its little neck before it hurts me.*

As it wandered closer, I slowly rose off of the rock and slunk down to its level. It spooked a little when it saw me, but surprisingly it didn't run away or try to fight. Instead it became very still and raised the fish toward me as if in offering; shrinking away slightly as I crept closer toward it. It let me approach and I figured it was giving up it's fish to avoid conflict, so I carefully leaned closer and opened my mouth to take it.

Then, I saw a slight glinting in the humans furry side and the faint smell of blood filled my nostrils. It had its tooth still, tucked away in its fur! I let out my own teeth and scrambled away cursing. *How could I be so stupid! Its a wild animal and a human at that, I can't just drop my guard and expect it to willingly give up its food.* The creature parted the fur that the fang was hiding under and reached for it. "Hey! Don't even think about it!" I said, growling menacingly.

It hesitated, then ignored my warning and gingerly grabbed the base of it with two slender digits, holding the terrifying thing away from its body. Then, it dropped it on the ground. *Is it... willingly giving up its defenses?* I was taken aback by the gesture, but not convinced. I motioned with my head, "if this is a trick, I'm not that dumb. You can still reach it from there". Amazingly the human complied, deftly flicking the evil glinting point up in the air with its hind paw (which I suddenly noticed was rounded and solid like a deer's) and kicking it into the water. Astounded that it had actually listened to me, I relaxed a little and decided to go for the fish again.

I crept right up to it, beckoned by the sweet oily smell of the delicious thing. Taking food from such a dangerous predator was insanity, but by then my stomach had wrested control from my brain, and all it cared about was how empty it was. I opened my jaws again, checking for any other glinting horrors lurking in its fur, before snatching the fish out of its paws as fast as I possibly could. There was a satisfying crunch and an explosion of flavor as I bit it in half, then the satisfying feeling of something that finally wasn't water sliding in my gullet as I greedily swallowed it down. It wasn't much more than a snack but oh did it feel good to finally have food in my belly!

I looked back at the human in curiosity. De-clawed it looked harmless, its huge head and spindly legs

reminding me of a foal. I'd never appreciated how silly looking humans are until then. They have an odd grace to them too, the way they balance so perfectly on their stick legs. The one standing before me even managed to look cute. *And tasty*, my stomach pointed out. *No, that's a terrible thought! I can't do that to something that just gave me food, it's impolite.*

I walked up to it, taking in its scent and trying to judge its intentions. It had the general smell of all things with fur, layered with a more distinct scent that marked it human. It also had a scent similar to the one that marks a buck as male. *So it's a 'he'*. 'He' didn't seem to like me getting that close, and kept backing up until he was pressed against a rock, making adorable little worried noises all the while.

Suddenly I remembered my manners and was embarrassed at my selfishness for eating the entire fish instead of sharing. Showing manners to an animal is a little silly, but the little human was small enough for that fish to constitute a whole meal, and skinny enough that he certainly needed it. This might be his only meal for the day, and I was cruel enough to eat the whole thing in front of him! *Well, it's not too late to make up for it.* I managed to force my greedy stomach to relinquish part of the fish, and spat it onto his front.

I sat back on my haunches the same way he was and waited. He held the fish in his paws but didn't even acknowledge it, instead continuing to stare up at me warily. *Maybe he thinks I'll be angry if he eats my fish?* "That piece is yours, I gave it to you. Eat it, I won't be mad!" He looked down at it finally and after a slight pause, raised it to his mouth and took a bite. I expected him to eat his lunch after that, but instead he held the bite in his cheeks, and offered the rest to me again. *Perhaps he isn't hungry. Did he bring the fish here just for me?* I motioned for him to swallow in case he still didn't understand he was meant to eat it, and after a few tries and some unhappy sounds he did.

Afterward he scrunched up his eyes and shivered, then looked up at me and bared his teeth. At first I thought he was mad for making him eat, but the rest of his body showed nothing but friendliness. The way his teeth were bared was strange too, his lips were curved up instead of down. *Is this how humans show thanks?* I decided to try and mimic what he was doing, keeping my teeth hidden in my gums. It felt weird, like trying to close one eye without moving the other, but I think I managed it well enough. "Thanks to you to, both for the fish and for not killing me when you had the chance." The remaining fish was still untouched, but I decided not to press the matter. "I guess you don't like fish all that much." Or maybe he was put off by it having been in my belly. I'm still not sure.

Suddenly I noticed him slowly bringing his paw toward my face. He wanted to touch me with his creepy skeleton paw! "Hey, no touching!" I drew back and clumsily glided to the opposite side of the water. He probably meant no harm by it, but there was no way I was going to let him get that close to me with paws that could throw webs and hold claws and start fires and I don't even know what else. And I didn't care to find out when they were inches from my face.

I made a scorch ring in the ground and laid down, trying to get some much needed rest. The noise startled a bird tending to its nest, and it flew off mocking me with its chirps and its perfect, undamaged wings. *You wouldn't be so cocky if I climbed that tree and ate all your eggs you stupid pest.* It wasn't worth the effort though, just like trying to escape the pit. Nothing matters much to a flightless dragon.

I turned around to see what the human was doing, and was surprised to see him sitting a few feet from me. "Well, you're a lot stealthier than you look. Now leave me alone, I want to rest." I hid my face with my lonely tail fin and hoped he would grow tired and leave. He scooted closer. And closer. *He better not be trying it.* The sound of scooting came again. *Of course he is.* When I finally lifted my

tail fin to glare at him, he stood up abruptly and started off aimlessly in a poor attempt to hide that he had been trying to touch me. Again.

Fortunately there was a big tree root growing out of the wall tall enough for me to hang on without being pestered. Once I was satisfied that he wasn't going to try touching me again, I slowly fell into a light sleep that came and went in bursts. Every time I woke up the sun was flying a tad lower in the sky, and the human was still there watching me at a distance. He had another brown square of what I assumed was bark with him, and most of the time I checked on him he was scratching at it with a burnt looking stick. I made sure to check on the fang also, and it was still glinting underneath the surface of the water. The human's scale was still wedged in its crack as well; he had made no attempt to reclaim either of them.

When the sun was low enough to start scorching the sky with its flame, I noticed my friend was intently scratching at the ground with a much larger stick. *What are you doing now silly?* I walked over to where he was sitting and saw he was making long, connected lines in the dirt. As he scratched I realized that they had a symmetry to them, they were forming a pattern. It reminded me of the guide symbols that people use to mark spots of interest on the charts. The shape of the lines was different though, more smooth and flowing. *Its me! He's drawing the lines that make up my reflection in the water. Can humans even do something like that?* The answer, apparently, was yes.

As he finished my eye, I decided to show him humans weren't the only ones that can make symbols. I found a sapling to use for my stick and set to work tracing the air currents around the island. I knew them well enough to picture them in my mind, so tracing them with a stick sounded straight forward enough. I started on the east side with the human as the island, and a few seconds later came to the sudden realization that I had no idea what I was doing. I couldn't let that stop me though, so I continued on as best I could, making sure to at least look confident in whatever shape was coming out of this. When I was 'finished', I stepped back to see what sort of symbol I had made.

Whatever it was, I knew what it was not: the island air currents. In retrospect, I probably shouldn't have tried to copy him by using a stick for scratching when my claws work fine; the stupid thing was weighted oddly and forced me to tilt my head so I couldn't even see what the tip was doing. Not that it mattered, because being forever stuck to the earth, humans probably don't even think about air currents, so my hard work was completely lost on him. Why didn't I choose something simpler, like a rock? Then again I'd probably have messed that up too.

He stood on his haunches and looked at my curving snake lines in bewilderment, apparently still thoroughly impressed despite my lack of talent. He was probably just surprised I could make shapes at all, like I was when he scratched my reflection. Then, he stepped on my hard work with his big clumsy deer paw! "hey, watch where you're stepping!". The growl in my voice made him quickly lift his paw, but then he looked me in the eye and set his paw right back down. "step on your own blasted lines you little jerk!" Again, he took his paw off when I growled, but the second I stopped he went right back to standing on my symbol. *Oh I see, this is a game like the ones the little people play. "lets see how much I can annoy the big grumpy dragon before he tries to eat me"*.

He tired of the game before I did, and began to make his way out of the snaking lines as if they were actual snakes. The way he twisted and spun to avoid stepping on them was oddly graceful. There was a method there, a tempo that made his movements seem to flow. It was like sky dancing, only in two dimensions instead of three. His dance drew him closer toward me but facing backward, and before we collided I stopped him with a snort.

He turned around and looked up innocently, before extending his front limb yet again. “how many times do I need to tell you, no touch!” He retracted it and backed off, looking confused. He reached out a second time, only now he turned his head away and stopped a foot from my face, holding his paw there. I had assumed his obsession with touching me was out of curiosity, or some other more unfathomable human behavior; but this seemed... different somehow, more poignant.

I stared at the quivering appendage. Without its blood scented fang it seemed soft and delicate. The digits had ceased their constant fidgeting and were spread to show there was no hidden danger, nowhere fire or spines could spew forth. I realized that a human's paw alone is harmless, it needs to be wrapped around a claw to become the lethal appendage all creatures fear. Whenever I got close to him he had always held his paws raised. Normally that would be threatening, but to the human it was a sign of trust. He was showing me that his claws were sheathed like my teeth, and he wasn't going to bring them out.

Touching a paw to someone must be the ultimate sign of trust for humans. He's showing me that his paws are empty and harmless, but he also has to trust me not to maim his only way of defending himself. What makes him so sure I won't? A moment ago I was thinking about eating him.

His paw was close enough to touch with ease, or bite clean off. I did the polite thing and touched it. He was much warmer than I had expected, even for a creature with fur. I inhaled slowly, taking in his scent again and this time paying closer attention to the details. Mostly it was a vague haze of human smell, but there were a great variety of other scents mixed in I hadn't noticed before. Some of them were recognizable, like fish and ocean air. Others were completely new to me, bizarre alien smells from the human colony. One scent stood out in my mind though, a smell that until now I've only ever associated with people. It was the scent of fire past, of flaky ash and burnt things.

I opened my eyes and withdrew, the scent tickling in my nose. The special moment had passed, so I found a nice rock to lay on and continued to observe him from a distance. By then the fire in the sky was beginning to die into the black coals of night; and after a few moments my new friend left through the crack in the wall to sleep for the night.

And he is my friend. At first I thought his bizarre behavior to be some sort of deception, or that I was imagining deeper meanings where there were none. Maybe I still am, but after today I'm certain that at the very least his intentions are harmless. Whether he shared his fish to avoid a fight, or out of some responsibility he felt for maiming and trapping me I do not know; but no matter his reason, I will simply take it as a gesture of kindness.

Its odd to think that a creature as dangerous as a human could possibly be friendly, but then my human isn't very dangerous anymore. I know now that what makes humans deadly isn't their paws, its the claws and fangs that their paws hold. And my friend doesn't have his fang anymore, he shed it into the water out of trust. He's toothless now.

I think that's what I will call him. He needs a name, and toothless is exactly what he is. Of course he still has plenty of teeth in his jaws, but those seem only good for eating. He's toothless in the sense that he doesn't have any bite. All of the bite he had is lying in the pool now, winking at me under the water.

I might be forever trapped on the ground, but at least now I have a friend that's trapped with me. An amazing silly little toothless human friend that likes scratching pictures in the sand. Maybe its days

like this one that will make my new life as a ground dweller worth living. Maybe tomorrow I'll try to escape this pit again. Having the whole island to roam is nothing compared to being able to spread my wings in flight, but at least then I will be able to spread my legs. The pit is starting to get boring.

Day 7

Today, my friend gave me my flight back.

For the past few days he's shown up at the sun's apogee bringing only food and goodwill; confirming my initial suspicion that he wants to help me. Thankfully he realized that the first fish he gave me wasn't very much, so now he arrives with a full meal's worth. He brings it in a sort of carrying pouch that seems build like a bird's nest, only larger and sturdier. I think its made out of a finer version of the web humans use to catch prey, but I can't be sure. Its so well constructed that so far any attempts I've made to dissect it have been unsuccessful. I could probably rip it apart if I really wanted too, but its owner gets upset when I try, and I don't want to ruin the thing he brings my food in.

After the meal, he usually starts scratching pictures on his bark square, and I watch him while pondering various ways to climb the pit. Occasionally he becomes very interested in my damaged tail, playing with the remaining fin and pressing small strands of web against the ribs. Its a little disconcerting considering he used that same web to mutilate it just a few days ago, but he's always gentle so I humor his curiosity.

When he emerged from the crevasse carrying what looked to be the dessicated leg of a deer, I knew that today was going to be different. "Toothless I hope you don't expect me to eat that, it looks like its been dead since last snowfall." He ignored me, continuing to hold it against his side as he set down the pouch and presented my food to me. Whatever Toothless was doing with that leg could wait, I was starved. Surveyed the pile, I picked out the choicest fish to begin my meal: a particularly large mackerel, its belly split open.

As I bent down for the first bite, there was a sudden flash of bright color accompanied by a scent synonymous with death. An eel, with stripes of yellow and a venom strong enough to kill a person fifty times over! I cried out, startled, and backed away from the cursed thing before it had a chance to strike. Toothless crouched down right next to the thing without seeing it, confused by my outburst. "Toothless what are you doing? Get away from it before it kills you!" He finally noticed the eel, and to my horror started reaching for the wretched thing. "what ar- **Don't pick it up**, are you crazy!?!"
Strangely the eel didn't react at all, and I noticed how limp it was in his paws. *Oh, its dead. That explains why it was in with the fish. Still, their venom remains even after death. Did he really think it was food?*

He held it out to me and I grimaced. "yea, I know its dead. I'm still not touching it." He got the message and tossed it away from the rest of the fish. The ones that had been near it still smelled slightly of the yellow horror, but I was hungry and they were still fish. As I ate, I noticed there was something odd about the shriveled leg Toothless was holding. It was far to large to belong to a deer, and there were a series of ribs attached to the main shaft. It looked more like a wing than a leg, and it didn't smell like anything I was familiar with. *Toothless must have made it, like the bird's nest he keeps the fish in.*

I felt slightly uneasy when Toothless started to circle behind me with the thing, but I trusted that he wasn't about to use it for anything malicious and continued my meal. There was a familiar pressure on

my tail: Toothless wanting to play with it again. I made sure to swish it around to give him more of a challenge. As I licked out the last oils from the fish pouch I was interrupted by a different sort of pressure, one far stronger than anything Toothless had ever managed.

I didn't even need to look to know it was the 'deer leg'. Somehow Toothless must have attached it firmly to the base of my tail, just before where the fin started. I shook it experimentally and was surprised to find that it was actually quite comfortable for how tightly the thing gripped. Even more strangely, the added weight felt pleasant and familiar, as if it was meant to be there. It made me feel... *complete*. The feeling acted like the final line in one of Toothless's scratchings, and I suddenly saw the completed picture with perfect clarity. My heart leapt as I realized what Toothless had attached to me, and all of the implications that went with it.

Of all the bizarre things humans are capable of, the ability to create replacement limbs for themselves is probably the most unique. I had heard descriptions of humans with wicked claws where their front legs should have been, but since I didn't need to directly engage them I never gave it much thought. I certainly wouldn't have thought it possible for a human to make something as complex as a tail fin. Yet what other explanation was there? Toothless had been so thorough in his examination of my remaining fin that it couldn't have been just play, and why else would he attach something that looked very much like a wing where the missing one used to be? It was too perfect not to be true.

I had to test my theory. I didn't even look behind me for fear of ruining the magic, I just sprung into flight. In a single fluid motion I spread my wings, inhaling deeply as my whole body tensed in preparation. I was ready to soar again, the wind catching at my full wingspan in eager anticipation. In one huge push I was up in the air, almost high enough to see the world that awaited me outside of the pit.

As I tried to gain more altitude there came the all too familiar sensation of tilting to the left, and the ground was suddenly much closer than I was comfortable with. Then, right when I was about to become part of it, My body magically straightened out and veered up toward freedom. It was as if the sky herself had willed me back into her cloudy beauty. I shot upward and out of the pit, bursting over the treetops and into the wonderful salt wind of the ocean.

When people regain anything lost, they often compare it to flight after having been grounded. Now, I understand why. I was finally alive again, with the wind in my wings and the sun's heat on my back, warming my wings as they beat in rhythm with my heart. On the ground I had felt like prey, like a rabbit, helpless and utterly defenseless. I couldn't even find food for myself; If it weren't for Toothless I would've starved. Now I was the fastest thing alive, impossible to catch and armed with an unstoppable violet fire that always flies true. I was a Shadow Wing again.

Toothless was still clinging to my tail. Unfortunately I couldn't bring him home with me, so I turned back to the pit one last time to drop him off. The turn felt oddly sluggish, but I was probably just not used to my new fin yet. I flew as close to the water in the pool as I could, and turned sharply where it was darkest, forcing my unwanted passenger to let go. *Sorry friend, but I need to go home now and let people know I'm still alive. Maybe we can play again tomorrow.*

I hadn't made it halfway across the pond before I lost control and plummeted like a very dismayed stone. The shock of cold water wasn't nearly as bad as the shock of having my flight taken away again so quickly. *What went wrong? Did Toothless damage the replacement fin when I threw him off?* I brought my tail to my face to investigate. Toothless's fin was a perfect brown copy of my own, fused

seamlessly to me by the band wrapped around my tail. Its skin was from a deer, its strength and softness somehow preserved in death, and its ribs were made not of bone but of the same sparkling substance that formed Toothless's fang.

It was a beautiful replica, but it hung limp and lifeless next to its natural brother. The fire that exists in all things living was missing, there wasn't even a spark. Toothless must have been controlling it while he was on my tail, and without him it had folded up, lifeless. Humans might be able to create a near perfect imitation of flesh and blood, but it seems even they can't breathe the fire of life into their creations. That is something that only the earth and sun can provide.

I sat forlorn in the cold pond, defeated by the pit yet again. Meanwhile Toothless was giddy with excitement from his first taste of sky, splashing around in the freezing water and hooting in joy. His happiness was contagious and soon I found myself joining in the celebration, sending off huge waves with my wings that almost knocked him over. *At least one of us is having fun.* I tried not to be discouraged by the shortness of my brief stint in the clouds; flying for only a moment before crashing back down is disappointing, but still better than no flight at all.

We both waded out of the water, dripping wet, and walked over to where the sun shone in order to dry ourselves off. My wings dried quickly, but Toothless, being covered in fur, was still wet and shivering. Right when I was wondering how to dry him off properly; he suddenly shed his entire fur coat in one piece and began to squeeze the water out of it!

I'm no expert on animals with fur, but I do know that fur is solidly attached to an animal's skin, so the only way for Toothless to shed like that would be if he skinned himself. Except instead of bare exposed muscle I was expecting, underneath there was more of the same moss green fuzz that he had on his front legs. To my shock he proceeded to tear off that layer as well, revealing bald ivory skin like his paws. I had to find out more about this strange shedding, so I grabbed the brown shaggy coat Toothless had placed on a rock.

Separated from its owner it smelled different somehow, like it wasn't even human. And it wasn't! It was ox fur, attached to long dead skin that had the same unnatural alive feel as my new tail fin. I spat it out in disgust and turned back to Toothless in wonder and revulsion. He had also removed the fur on his hind legs, and his hoof like back paws were popped off to reveal strange pink ones that had been hiding inside. He was totally bald except for a brown patch on his head and a gray one wrapping around his pelvis. *So this is what a human looks like naturally.* He was a specter, slender and ethereal with skin so light I could almost see through it. *He must use the skins of other animals in order to protect his own. Its so thin I'm almost afraid to touch it.*

The other furs didn't look at all like ox hide, and I decided to determine what they were. The fuzzy green one was closest, and when I picked it up I could tell right away it hadn't come from any animal. It tasted and smelt similar to human web, but it was so fine I couldn't even tell whether it was intertwining strands or one solid piece. Toothless didn't like me touching his outer layers, but I ignored his chattering. He couldn't exactly stop me, as vulnerable as he was. The rest of the skins were also made of web, but they all had different colors and flavors, like they were all made differently. Toothless's fake hind paws were the most interesting, made from deer skin but incredibly solid, as if they had their own little skeletons inside. I wanted to split them open, but Toothless would probably get upset.

He was already mad at me, trying desperately to make me spit out his fur. "relax Toothless, I didn't eat

it. See, look.” He took back the fur and glared at me, clearly not relaxed. He was even more upset when I investigated the hair on top of his head to see what animal it came from. Apparently it was his, because he gave a hurt yelp when I tugged it. There was a look of worry on his face afterward, like he thought I was trying to eat him or something. “Don't worry Toothless, I'll only eat you if you make me angry. You don't even have enough meat on you to make it worth picking off your bones.” He was unconvinced by my morbid reassurance, eying me with suspicion as he reapplied his fur.

I gave him a big lick just to freak him out. He didn't react as badly as I thought he might, but he still backed away a bit, groaning uneasily. As he was encasing his real feet back inside of their hoof bodies, I decided to play chase. Crouching low, I stalked my prey. “I'm gonna get you, Toothless. Then I'm gonna eat you up!” He didn't want to be chased and stood his ground, whining nervously. “Do you know what happens to prey that doesn't run, Toothless?” I pounced on him, careful not to knock him down too quickly. “They get eaten!” I licked him all over, keeping my fangs retracted so as not to scare him too badly. Realizing it was a game, he bared his teeth happily and attacked me back with soft paws.

Eventually he freed himself, and retrieved his fish sack to leave. It was early, but he was still slightly damp and shivery from the unplanned swim, so probably wanted to warm up back in his nest. Instead of leaving right away though, he walked up to my tail and started toying with his fin. He wanted to remove it and bring it back with him. At first I was hesitant, but it wasn't going to do me any good the way it was, and he might try to improve it for tomorrow. Once it was off he rolled it up and disappeared into the passageway, leaving me in solitude.

The tantalizing prospect of renewed flight has reminded me of the roost. I still don't care for it at all, but I'm starting to miss the friends I made there. Most of the people in the clan are either older than me or blindly obedient to the mother; but a precious few share in my hatred of her. They were the ones that helped me when I arrived half starved during a storm. They fed me and welcomed me into their group even though I was young and small and the only Shadow Wing in a thousand kilometers. They genuinely cared about me when the others only wanted my fire for the harvests. If it weren't for them I probably would have left years ago to find another clan, one that hadn't made a pact with fat lurking evil.

I hope they've been catching enough food to appease her. It will be a while before another harvest becomes necessary, but when it does and I'm not there to destroy the towers... The mother doesn't listen to excuses. And she always gets fed, one way or another.

Day 8

Toothless arrived early again, completely out of breathe. He was carrying not only my fin and food, but also a large human scale, covered in the hide of an unfortunate yak. It was oval in shape, and looked to be much lighter than the one that Toothless had gotten lodged in the wall. Thick strips of preserved skin hung from it like the tentacles of some deformed brown squid.

There weren't any nasty surprises hidden in my fish this time, and I ate fast; eager to see if Toothless had done anything new to the fin. He picked it up to inspect it and I could see there was a long strand of web attached to the back that hadn't been there yesterday; but instead of fastening it to me, Toothless set it down again and held up the scale instead. “Umm... is that supposed to be for me?” He presented it earnestly, shaking the thing slightly so its tendrils wiggled. “I already have scales silly, I don't need another one!”

He walked up to me and tried to place it on my back. “Toothless come on, I need flight, not protection.” I hopped away before he could get it on, and grabbed his fin. “See Toothless, I need this. Don't you remember yesterday?” It took him a while to catch on, but eventually he got the message and took it from me, dropping the scale. Once it was on my tail I looked it over, trying to see what had changed. Aside from the web, it seemed that nothing had. It was still as limp and lifeless as the fish I had just eaten. *Maybe I have to be in the air for it to work?* A quick test flight proved me wrong, yielding nothing but a bruised leg.

Toothless held out the scale again questioningly, making little begging sounds. “okay fine, you can give me a new scale. But you'd better work on my fin after this.” He trotted up to me happily, but I decided to make him work for it and darted away. “whoa there, you're not getting your way that easily. You need to catch me first!” He was more than willing to oblige and chased me all around the pit with the scale held above his head. It was a bit pathetic how slow he was, so I barely had to work to keep ahead of him. When he started to slow down even more, I took pity and let him 'catch' me. He was very proud of himself.

The scale was apparently supposed to attach to the space between my wings and my neck, so at least he was adding protection to somewhere vital. It fit well enough, but then Toothless decided he had fasten it to me with those nasty strips of skin; which wouldn't have taken that long, except that he also insisted on tightening them all carefully, one at a time. “You don't need to make this perfect Toothless, its just a scale. Mine fall off all the time.” He continued to fuss with it, and as he worked I noticed that it would be near impossible to remove without paws as nimble as his. “I hope you aren't planning on leaving me like this Toothless, its already starting to itch.” There was no response. I would just have to trust him.

After what felt like ages, he finally stopped his fiddling, apparently happy with it. “well Toothless, what now?” In reply, he took hold of the web that hung from the replacement fin, slunk up to my side, and leapt onto my back. “Woah, hey! Is this revenge for me stalking you yesterday? If it is, its not really working, you're much too small to pounce on me.” With some grunting he scrambled atop the scale he had given me, then he spun around until he faced the same way I did.

As he got comfortable, I wondered how this was going to let me fly again, and prayed it wasn't just some game he had thought up. It dawned on me that Toothless would have noted from the last time how well I had flown when he was controlling the fin, and how easily I had supported his light frame. Yesterday he had also discovered the freedom of the open sky, so he was probably eager for another taste. Knowing this, I realized that if he had figured out a way to get the new tail fin working, it would probably involve him as a passenger.

The purpose of the scale he had affixed to me became clear: it wasn't added protection, it was to keep him from falling off my back when I flew! The strand of web he was holding would then let him steer the fin from a distance, the way tendons work to move your claws. Either that, or he wanted a better view. For all I knew, this could be part of some bizarre new way of catching fish, and he wanted me to spin in circles or something.

Toothless grunted rather forcibly, and started prodding my sides with his back legs to get my attention. Whatever the plan was, apparently it was time to carry it out. “Okay Toothless, I'm going to assume you want me to fly again. Are you holding on tight?” He gave a reassuring sounding chirp. “Well then, try not to fall off!” I crouched down and spread my wings, exaggerating everything to make it

extra clear to my passenger what was about to happen. Toothless shifted around, making his own preparations for takeoff.

I transitioned into flight slowly out of consideration for Toothless, running to get up to speed and spreading my wings with a small hop when I reached the water. I felt him pull the fin open wide, and matched its shape with my natural one to fly in a straight line. At first I faltered, but I managed to adjust with the rest of my body before I went off course. It didn't seem nearly as smooth as what I had remembered from the day before, probably because the web wasn't holding the fin as steady as Toothless could when we gripped it directly. It kept changing shape, and compensating for that took all of my concentration.

The opposite wall was getting closer, and I started to wonder how exactly we were going to turn before it met us. Before I could form any sort of plan though, Toothless decided he would do the turning for me. I felt him lurch forward slightly, and suddenly I was flying sideways, completely out of control. Before I hit the unforgiving earth I had just enough time to fully appreciate how much pain I would be in for the rest of the day. Fortunately we were still over the pool, and the hard ground turned out to be soft, freezing cold water. Toothless surfaced a fair distance away from me, apparently having fallen off when we turned. That was probably why I lost control so suddenly, the fin had folded up again without him there to hold it open.

We both dragged ourselves out of the water and sat in the sun for a while to warm up, Toothless shedding most of his collection of furs on the rocks again. I realized that this was probably far from the last time I would take an unwelcome dip, given that the replacement fin is far from perfect and Toothless still has no idea how fins even work. Still, this pool makes for a better crash landing than the ground, or the ocean for that matter, so its probably best if we start slow. Falling to ones death is by far the least dignified way to leave this world.

Once most of the water was off me I wanted to have another try, but Toothless seemed out of sorts from the crash. He looked to have been badly winded from the force of impact, and his various coats of fur and web were still damp, making him cold enough to shiver even in the sunlight. I made sure that he took off the scale and fin before he left, they were soggy and had begun to chaff.

Regaining flight will be a lot harder than I first thought, but hopefully Toothless will decide to stay longer tomorrow. I will also have to be more careful when flying now that I have a little passenger; Toothless has as much flight experience as a hatchling, and he's even more fragile. And if he gets injured, I lose my flight.

Day 9

I finally escaped the pit!

At least, for one glorious afternoon. I've (with a considerable amount of persuasion from Toothless) decided to continue living here until I fully regain my flight. Its cold rock walls may stifle the wind and suffocate me, but they also seem to do a good job of hiding me away from roaming humans. I can put up with the horrid closeness of this place if it means not becoming a meal, or having my skin stolen.

Of course, this place would turn from sanctuary to prison again in an instant if not for Toothless. My flight and my freedom depend entirely on the whim of a juvenile human. I mean, its obvious he wants

to help me fly now, but what happens if he loses interest? Or when he grows up and his little tooth turns into a wicked claw?

He's really intelligent for an animal, but does he truly grasp the weight of my predicament? That I'll surely starve to death if I can't fly? Is he even capable of that sort of thought? His symbols and planning suggest he can think like a person in some ways, but I'm not sure how much planning has to do with empathy. Ants have fantastical mounds even more complex than human colonies, but they aren't good at much else. Their interaction with other creatures mostly consists of biting and stinging.

For now I should probably just focus on teaching Toothless how to be a proper tailfin instead of worrying about the storm clouds in my future. For the moment he's invested a lot of time into this acting as my tailfin business, and I should take advantage of it while it lasts.

He gave me quite a scare today when he showed up without the scale. My first thought was that yesterday's crash had scared him away from the sky and he was trying to get the fin to work by itself, but then he started to leave as I was eating, without even putting it on my tail! I pleaded for him to stay, blocking his exit and even threatening him a bit. I got him to attach the tail fin, but the second I turned away from him he disappeared into the crack in the wall.

I tried to fly with just the tailfin, but it was just as useless as before. He hadn't even made any changes to the thing. I tried controlling it with the web like he had done, but nothing I did could reproduce the magic of yesterday. Eventually I lost hope and resigned myself to sprawling forlorn near the waters edge, watching the fish that were just out of reach and thinking unhealthy thoughts.

My unhappy reverie was interrupted when I heard a familiar noise coming from the crack in the wall. It was Toothless! And he was carrying something... the scale! He must have gone back for it, and it was easy to see why. The strange brown thing was now almost the size of Toothless, and it now adorned with two giant glittering rings of that odd material only humans are known to make. I think for the now I'm going to call it blood stone, because everything I've seen made from it smells faintly of blood. Toothless himself was now sporting a new skin, wrapped around his chest the same way his fake scale wraps around mine.