

More Irksome Than Not

After another hour of roaming around the forest, Leaky and Oakland emerged and saw their home. Within the pine forest, Leaky's village was a series of tall, slender houses built up between the towering evergreens. The abodes resembled a group of watchtowers, packed in the spaces between trees. Leaky's home near the far west side of the village was four stories tall, one of the tallest buildings in the village of woodcutters and loggers. Lines of laundry hung between the houses and small baskets filled with edible plants hung overhead, as close to the sun as they could get. A small chimney ran up the center of Leaky's home and plumes of grey smoke spiraled up through the very tip of the roof as she and Oakland walked through the snowy path.

Oakland pushed the back door open and stripped off his winter boots, pulling his coat off last. Leaky carefully removed her cloak, dropping it in a pile at the edge of the door and removing her snow boots by stepping on the heel. The first level was the family's personal kitchen and a small sitting room for guests and entertaining. Strong smelling herbs wafted through the air, brightening the normally stuffy kitchen, and the warm fire was a welcome relief from the snow outdoors. Leaky's mother was standing opposite the siblings, glancing over her shoulder and glaring.

"Leaky! Where have you been?" Their mother always appeared harried and rushed, even if she was just sitting or stitching clothing together. Leaky and her mother had the same, light-colored hair, but the older woman tied her hair up in a bun with a couple of stray hairs drifting around her ears at all times.

"Sorry, Mother." Leaky began, shuffling the small package in her hands. "I was with Oakland and—"

"Again? Leaky, I know you are invested in your brother's work, but you also have to focus on your future. You can't expect to marry if you can't keep a home."

"Lots of women are unmarried, Mother."

"Not women in our family!" Leaky's mother turned and saw the swaddled bundle in Leaky's arm. "Don't tell me you found another animal..."

Leaky tensed up, talking quickly. "I know what you're thinking, but I can explain. Irk is—"

"Goats and Grass, you named it?" Leaky's mother groaned, dropping her cooking

spoon onto the tall table by the fireplace. "Oakland! Oakland Dale! Did you let your sister take home another pet?"

"You know how she can be when she's got her mind on something, Mother," Oakland said, already at the staircase. "She'd bicker with the Unicorn if it would do her any good."

"Mother, he's just a baby..."

"Alright, fine!" Leaky's mother sighed and threw up her hands. "At least it prepares you for motherhood. What is it this time? A squirrel? Bird of some kind?"

"Well...not really." Leaky peeled back the coarse blanket and Irk glanced around the room, eyes wide and curious.

"Leaky!" Her mother gasped, taking a step behind the kitchen table. "What are you thinking? What is that?"

"It's just a little dragon—hardly hatched!"

"I don't care if it's still in the egg! Are you out of your head? Oh, never mind. Just fix the damned beast and get it out of our house, is that clear?"

"It might take a little while--"

"Fine, fine!" Leaky's mother huffed and went back to the stove. "Do what you must. Just don't let this turn into that damned raccoon again!"

"Why does everyone keep bringing that up?" Leaky grumbled, carrying Irk up to her room. Leaky passed by her father's large chair in the sitting room and started climbing the stairs that wrapped around the inside of her house, rocking the dragon hatchling in her arms with a light chuckle. Spiraling up passed her parent's room on the second level and nodding to Oakland as she passed by his room on the third floor, Leaky finally made it to her room at the very top floor. She pushed her door handle down with her hip and nudged the door open, careful not to jostle the baby dragon.

Leaky's room was sparsely furnished. She had a set of shelves built into one wall and a larger trunk at the foot of her narrow bed. Unlike her mother, Leaky loved having her window open, despite the fresh layer of snow. One of the large pine trees in their yard stretched out, almost touching her windowsill with its thick branches. With a chair next to the stone chimney, Leaky would often sit and read there to enjoy the warmth from the fire in her mother's kitchen below. Cradling Irk in one arm, she walked around the room

and lit a few fat candles to push back the encroaching night.

Leaky set Irk down on her bed and brought one of the short, fat candles over to Irk. The little dragon watched the flames with wide eyes, bright yellow candlelight reflecting off of the large, jet-black pupils. Leaky waved the flame around the dragon's eyes, smiling when the dragon watched it intently. "OK," Leaky said, rubbing his neck. "Let's see. Hold still..."

Carefully, Leaky held the dragon's leg and touched along the bone. Irk struggled and snarled, but let her work. After a few prods and feeling with her fingers, Leaky decided it was a clean enough break for a splint after she reset it. In a quick twist, Leaky put the leg back in order. Irk cried out and struggled, but quieted when Leaky shushed him.

"I know, I know..." Leaky whispered, quietly calming him and stroking the little wings. Once the dragon was still, Leaky started rummaging through her trunk to find something to make a splint with. Irk called out and Leaky turned back in time to see the cause of the little dragon's distress.

"No, Bandit!" Leaky chided, waving the raccoon away. Bandit scampered away, rushing as best he could. The raccoon was dark grey with black stripes, with one dark band right over his eyes. Bandit was in fine health, except perhaps for being a bit on the heavy side from Leaky always sneaking him food. Leaky scooped up the raccoon with a huff and set him on the floor to keep him from bothering Irk. The portly creature grunted and waddled around on the floor, looking for a way back up to the exciting, new thing.

"Here we go." Leaky whispered, rubbing Irk's wing again to calm him. "Nice and easy. This part won't hurt, I promise."

Leaky managed to fashion the splint from an old knitting needle she snapped into pieces and as much thread as she could get her hands on. Her mother would scold her for misusing the materials, but Leaky was too focused on her work to dwell it.

"There we go," Leaky said, tying the last pieces of the splint together. "That should hold nicely while it heals."

Leaky gently lifted Irk and sat on the bed, rubbing her fingers along his forehead. The dragon perked up and purred. "My, my...we like the attention, huh?"

Irk made a noise halfway between chirping and a gargle. It felt strange.

Everything she had read said that dragons were vicious and dangerous. She'd heard a thousand stories about dragons kidnapping fair maidens or attacking heroic knights. With Irk in her arms, young as he was, it was a different experience. The dragon still felt cold to the touch but knew to burrow close to Leaky's stomach for warmth. She tensed slightly, but relaxed a little more as the dragon purred in her arms. Leaky set Irk down on the bed and rushed over to the door. "I'll be right back. Bandit?" Leaky added as an afterthought. "Behave yourself."

Rushing downstairs, Leaky could already hear Irk groaning through the floorboards. She grabbed a bit of meat from the birds her mother was cooking by the flames and sliced it into thin pieces for the dragon to eat. Irk moaned louder and Leaky rushed back up the staircase before Oakland or the others could complain.

"I'm here, I'm here...stop your fussing," Leaky assured the infant dragon. She sat on the mattress again and took Irk in her arms. She held a bit of the meat and the dragon turned his head toward it, sniffing.

"What's the matter? Not hungry?"

The dragon sniffed the meat, suspicious. Bandit pawed at Leaky's foot catching her attention. Leaky tore a little piece off and let Bandit eat some, making sure Irk watched. "See?" Leaky pointed at Bandit. "It's not so bad."

Irk hesitated for a moment, but took the meat between his tiny teeth and chewed. Irk swallowed the meat quickly and stretched out for the next morsel.

"Good to see you like it," Leaky laughed. She fed him some more, occasionally allowing Bandit to have a bit. Leaky picked up the dragon and sat with him by the fire, she hummed a quiet folksong and ran her fingers along Irk's spine. The baby dragon purred, watching the tip of a nearby candle with drooping eyes.

"Irk," Leaky grinned, smoothing out her skirt. "Such a good boy. Your leg will be all healed up in no time. A couple of weeks...maybe we can make it last a month. We'll see how long we can stretch it out, huh?"