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OAKLAND DRAGON BLUES

"I am happy to report," Officer Levinsky said to Officer Guerra, pointing to the dragon sprawled across the Telegraph and 51st Street intersection, "that this one is all yours. I've been off-shift for exactly seven minutes, waiting for your ass to get here. Have a nice day."

Guerra stared, paling visibly under his brown skin. Traffic was backed up in all four directions: horns were honking as madly as car alarms, drivers were screaming hysterically — though none, he noticed, were getting out of their cars — and a five-man road crew, their drills, hoses, sawhorses, and warning signs scattered by a single swing of the dragon's tail, were adding their bellows to the din. The dragon paid no attention to any of it, but regarded the two policemen out of half-closed eyes, resting its head on its long-clawed front feet, and every now and then burping feeble, dingy flames. It didn't look well.

"How long's it been here?" Guerra asked weakly.

Levinsky consulted his watch again. "Thirty-one minutes. Just plopped out of the sky — damn miracle it didn't crush somebody's car, flatten a pedestrian. Been laying there ever since, just like that."

"Well, you called it in, right?" Guerra wondered what the police code for a dragon in the intersection would be.

Levinsky looked at him as though he had suggested a fast game of one-on-one with an open manhole. "You are out of your mind — I always thought so. No, I didn't call it in, and if you have the sense of a chinch bug, you won't either. Just get rid of it, I'm out of here. Enjoy, Guerra."

Levinsky's patrol car was parked on the far side of the intersection. He skirted the dragon's tail cautiously, got in the car, slapped on his siren — for pure emotional relief, Guerra thought — and was gone, leaving Guerra scratching his buzz-cut head, facing both a growing traffic jam and a creature out of fairytales, whose red eyes, streaked with pale yellow, like the eyes of very old men, were watching him almost sleepily, totally uninterested in whatever he chose to do. But watching, all the same.

The furious chaos of the horns being harder on Guerra's normally placid nerves than the existence of dragons, he walked over to the beast and said, from a respectful distance, "Sir, you're blocking traffic, and I'm going to have to ask you to move along. Otherwise you're looking at a major citation here."

When the dragon did not respond, he said it again in Spanish; then drew a deep breath and started over in Russian, having taken a course that winter in order to cope with a new influx of immigrants. The dragon interrupted him with a brief hiccup of oily, sulphurous flame halfway through. In a rusty, raspy voice with a faint accent that was none of the ones Guerra knew, it said, "Don't start."

Guerra rested his hand lightly on the butt of the pistol that he was immensely proud of never having fired during his eight years on the Oakland police force, except for his regular practice sessions and annual recertifications at the Davis Street Range. He said, "Sir, I am not trying to start anything with you — I'm having enough trouble just believing in you. But I've got to get you out of this intersection before somebody gets hurt. I mean, look at all those people, listen to those damn horns." The racket was already giving him a headache behind his eyes. "You think you could maybe step over here to the curb, we'll talk about it? That'd work out much better for both of us, don't you think?"

The dragon raised its head and favored him with a long, considering stare. "I don't know. I like this place about as well as I like any place in this world, which is not at all. Why should I make things easier for you? Nobody ever cares about making anything easier for me, let me tell you."

Guerra's greatest ambition in law-enforcement was to become a hostage negotiator. He had been studying the technique on and off for most of his tenure on the force, both on-site and through attending lectures and reading everything he could find on the subject. The lecturers and the books had a good deal to say concerning hostage-takers's tendency to self-pity. He said patiently to the dragon, "Well, I'm really trying to do exactly that. Let's get acquainted, huh? I'm Officer Guerra — Michael Guerra, but people mostly call me Mike-O, I don't know why. What's your name?" Always get on a first-name basis, as early as possible. It makes you two human beings together — you'll be amazed at the difference it makes. Now if only one of those books had ever covered the fine points of negotiating with a burping mythological predator..

"You couldn't pronounce it," the dragon replied. "And if you tried, you'd hurt yourself." But it rose to its feet with what seemed to Guerra an intense and even painful effort, and, with some trepidation, he led it away from the intersection to the side street where he had parked his blue-and-white patrol car. The traffic started up again before they were all the way across, and if people went on honking and cursing, still there were many who leaned out of their windows to applaud him. One driver shouted jovially, "Put the cuffs on him!" while another yelled, "Illegal parking — get the boot!" The dragon half-lumbered, half-slithered beside Guerra as sedately as though it were on a leash; but every so often it cocked a red eye sideways at him, like a wicked bird, and then Guerra shivered with what felt like ancestral memory. These guys used to hunt us like rabbits. I know they did.