

Dragon Girl

Hally was not too far from the encampment, but she was out of sight of the adults. They had not yet realised that she had wandered off, and Hally, at about five years old, didn't care. The girl didn't know it, but even someone who had been born on Terra would have been hard-pressed to distinguish the vegetation from Terran vegetation. In the lightly wooded area where the settlement was located, the shrubs and trees didn't look too different from Terran plants.

However, even in the short time that the humans had been on the planet they had learned to avoid certain plants and animals, so the girl detoured around a particularly prickly bush.

"Mmm, mm, mm," she hummed as she watched a bee-like creature sipping nectar from a flower. Then she walked on a bit, and came across a small stream. She sat down on the sandy bank intending to remove her shoes and socks and paddle in the stream. She didn't consider for one second that there might be creatures in the stream that could sting or bite.

The attack did not come from the water. The spot on the sandy bank where she sat down erupted and a creature that was about thirty centimetres long emerged. She had almost sat on it. It whipped a long tail over its head and stung the girl in the arm, then in flash of silver and blue it dived into the stream and was gone.

The girl screamed and scrambled up the bank of the stream and headed back to the human encampment and her mother.

"How is she?" asked Hally's Dad.

Hally's Mum looked at her.

"She's sleeping. She seems OK. Doc said that he wasn't too worried. Her arm is sore and a little swollen, and her temperature is up a bit, but not much. I hope there aren't many of those creatures around!"

"What did she call it? A lizard."

"No, Doc said that. She just called it a 'shiny thing'. She says it stung her with its tail!"

"Still, I'd better get to the Planning Meeting. Next steps. We'll be farmers soon."

"Yep. It will be great to start making our way in this world."

The doctor gently scratched at the spot on Hally's arm.

"Hmm, does that hurt?" He didn't think so, as Hally hadn't reacted.

"No, sir," said Hally, looking worried.

The doctor smiled. "Call me 'Doc', Hally. Can you feel anything when I touch that place?"

"Yes, Doc. It tickles a bit."

She considered. "And sometimes it fizzes."

"'Fizzes'?"

The girl nodded.

"Hmm." Doc measured the size of the spot and wrote it down. "Has it changed at all, Hally?"

"Uh, no."

She looked at the doctor with wide eyes, and the doctor pondered her case. His first instinct was to reassure the child, but it was hard to do that when he didn't know what was happening to her arm. When she had first been stung by the lizard-like creature, a month or two ago, there was no mark on her arm except the pinprick where the creature's sting had pierced her skin. Now she had a small shiny patch a millimetre or two in diameter at the site of the sting.

“Can you give us something to put on it, Doc?” asked Hally’s father.

“Huh?” said Doc who had been lost in thought. “Well, um, I’ll give you an anti-inflammatory cream, but I don’t think it will make any difference. The swelling has gone down and her temperature is normal. Just keep an eye on it, and bring her back if it gets worse.”

Hally and her parents went off with a script for the cream. They were slightly disappointed with him, the doctor realised, but he didn’t have any idea what to do. Doc reported to the ship, which was still orbiting above the little encampment, carrying the last few small groups of colonists no doubt impatiently waiting to land in their own designated areas. He discussed the girl’s case with the leadership team, and his recommendation to them was to proceed as scheduled. The next group of colonists would be deployed in ten days.

“So, the cream has had no effect?” The doctor hadn’t thought that it would. He looked at Hally’s arm, and measured the spot again. It was now about six or seven millimetres across and was blue and metallic looking. The doctor took a small magnifier and looked closely at the area on Hally’s arm. In the spy glass, the area was iridescent and there was a hint of scales.

“Hmm. Well, you can keep trying the cream, I suppose, but there’s not much that we can do about it.”

“Can’t you, erm, cut it out, Doc?” asked Hally’s mother.

“No!” shouted the girl, pulling her arm from the doctor’s grasp.

“Easy, girl, easy!” said the doctor. “No, we’re not going to do that, I promise.”

He scowled at the girl’s mother. “That was an irresponsible suggestion, Doreen! We won’t cut anything out unless we have to!”

“But what if it’s a cancer?”

“Really, Doreen! I will have to ask you to leave if you keep this up! Especially in front of the child! I’m going to scrape a few cells from the surface, and then I will send them up to the ship. They’ve got better instruments up there. Then we will decide what is necessary.”

In a small quiet voice, Hally said “I quite like it.”

“What?”

“I like it. It’s shiny, like a coin, or like a fish.”

“Or a lizard, Hally?”

The child smiled at him.

“Yes, sort of. But it’s not really like a lizard.”

Doc wondered what she meant.

“Hmm, Hally, how big is it now? Let’s have a look.”

The girl showed the doctor her arm. The spot was now two centimetres across, and even with his new microscope the doctor couldn’t tell where the spot ended and the girl’s skin began. It just sort of faded out.

“Look away, Hally, please.”

He touched the spot.

“How does that feel?”

“Um, you touched me?”

“And now?”

The doctor touched the girl’s unchanged skin.

“You touched me again.”

“Did it feel different that time?”

“Um, no? No different.”

“OK, you can look again, Hally.”

The doctor looked at the spot with his magnifying glass. The scaly look of the skin was more pronounced, and when he stroked the skin against the scales it felt a little rough. In the direction of the scales it was smooth, but the doctor’s belief was that the scales were not yet fully formed. The light glinted off the skin just like the scales of a fish or the skin of a lizard. The blue highlights were more pronounced. He sighed.

“I still don’t know what to do,” the doctor told the girl and her parents. “I could excise it, I suppose, but it will probably grow back.”

“No! I don’t want you to! Please, Mum and Dad, don’t let him!”

“Nurse, could you please take Hally out? I need to talk to her parents.”

The nurse took the girl out. Hally was still protesting.

“Don’t...”

The door closed and an uneasy silence filled the room.

“Can’t you...”

“Doreen! I am not going to cut it out! It doesn’t seem to be a threat to the girl, and she gets upset if it is even mentioned. No! At this stage I am going to let it develop. Do I have to remind you of the contract that you signed when you joined up for this colony? The decisions of the management team, which includes me, are final. We need to know about this infection, and at present, I see no reason to use surgery on her! Is that clear?”

“But...”

“Alan, I’m not going to change my mind!”

“OK, Doc.”

“Thank you. By the way, a family is transferring from settlement six, Their son was stung on the leg by one of those creatures.”

“He got stung too? He’s got a spot on his leg?”

“Yes. Though it only happened a month or two ago so his spot is smaller.”

The doctor ushered Hally’s parents out and returned to update his notes. He sighed. Hally’s shiny spot was only detectable by eye and in visible light. It didn’t show up on X-ray or on any type of scanner that the doctor had available. He decided to send Hally and, what was that boy’s name? Shay! He’d send Hally and Shay up to the colony ship, to see if the big medical scanners up there could detect anything. He’d bet that they couldn’t.

Somewhere a long way away from the human encampment, eggs began to hatch a few centimetres below ground level. Small brown four-legged creatures ate their way out the eggshells and burrowed upwards towards the surface. Their first meals were the small roots that they encountered on their way to the sunlight. One or two lucky ones came across small bulbs and gorged themselves.

The army of small creatures climbed up the stems of the first plants that they came across. Those lucky enough to come across a tree climbed steadily towards the sun, eating the lichens and mosses, the fungi and moulds that they came across. Those that didn’t find a tree or shrub dropped to the ground and tried again. All the creatures shed their skins and set out to eat anything that was edible, even members of their own kind.

They started out brown but as they grew, their colouring changed, and their backs became mottled, and they were almost invisible against the bark. No other creature was safe from them as they scuttled about the trunks of the trees, actively hunting the smaller creatures that were their prey.

They shed their skins every so often as they grew. When they reached the size of mice, they made their way down from the trees, and hunted at ground level. They slept in holes and burrows and hunted with teeth and claws during the day, getting bigger and bigger. They stopped shedding their skins, which became silver with blue highlights, and they grew tails with stingers.

“Hey, Lizard Girl! What do you get for question two of the homework?”

Hally fumed. Her schoolmate, Paddo, was always teasing her, and she hated it. She’d grown quite a bit, and was shortly due for her fourteenth birthday.

“Don’t call me that, Paddo!”

“What are you going to about it, Hally! Beat me up?”

Paddo was much bigger than her, and fat, she thought, but she couldn’t fight him. She smiled.

“I couldn’t beat you up,” she told Paddo with a smirk, “but I could bite you. Infect you.”

Paddo flinched back.

“You wouldn’t?”

“Leave it, Hally.” said Shay. “It’s not worth it.”

“Well. OK, Shay. Anyway, Paddo, it’s ‘Dragon Girl’, not ‘Lizard Girl’.”

She pulled up her sleeve and revealed her arm. It looked like she was wearing a silvery-blue sleeve from just above her elbow almost down to her wrist. Her schoolmates gasped as she had always kept her arm covered, and they had never seen the full extent of the affected area of her arm.

“Come on, Hally. Leave it,” said Shay, dragging her away.

“I will, I swear it. I’ll bite him!”

Shay sighed and urged her away. They walked through the encampment.

“Did you hear that an adult in settlement seven was stung?”

“No! When was this?”

“About a month ago. Nothing happened to him. Well, his arm hurt for a day or two, apparently, but there was no silver spot.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. And they excised the spot on a boy who had been stung. It took three people to give him the anaesthetic, apparently. Anyway, it was a waste of time because the shiny spot came back.”

“Wow! What’s Doc say?”

“You know Doc. He’s still letting this thing run its course. Hands off, he says. Oh, yeah. The scientists caught one of the creatures. It’s in a big tank in the Biology dome.”

“They’ve got one? Let’s go and see it!”

“They might not let us see it, Hally.”

“Yes, they will!”

She was right. The biologist in charge of the dome that day was one of the younger ones, and inclined to be helpful.

“Here it is,” he said. “Did you know that some people call them ‘dragonlets’, guys? Others call them ‘stingers’.”

“Where is it, Pioty?”

The tank was made of clear plastic, and took up much of the ground space in the centre of the dome. The lid slid to one side to open the tank, which appeared to be empty.

“There. By that white and red rock. It’s well camouflaged. It changes colour slightly, like a chameleon.”

“Ooooo. I see it,” said Shay. “See it, Hally?”

“Yes! Does it move about at all?”

“Well, we put some of those frog-like things, the freddos, in there, and it stayed still like that, and then suddenly pounced on them and ate them. We thought that it would sting them with its tail, but just jumped on the freddos, and bit them.”

The creature was larger than the one which had stung her, she thought. Suddenly the creature moved. It ran to another rock, scrambled up on to it, and surveyed its surroundings, turning its head on its long and flexible neck. Its long flexible tail waved from side to side for a moment or two, then became still. The sting was like a curved dagger, with a bit of a hook.

“Oh, it runs on its back legs!”

“Yeah,” said Piotyr, “and it balances with its tail. Stands upright. Look at its hands.”

The little creature spreads his hands, and they could see that creature had very long digits which were webbed.

“We think it’s growing wings,” explained Piotyr. “There’s slack skin in its armpits, and it waves its hands as if it was trying to fly. That’s why we named them dragonlets.”

“Yeah. You’re right, Piotyr. It does look more like a dragon than a lizard,” said Shay.

“It’s definitely not a lizard, or rather, a lizard-like creature. For one thing, it’s warm blooded. Exothermal, like mammals,” Piotyr told them.

The creature finished surveying the tank and hopped down the rock. It stopped moving and, in spite of its shiny scales became camouflaged against the rock.

“We’ll know more in a day or two, when we dissect it.”

“What? You can’t do that!” Hally was shocked.

“Sorry, Hally. We have to. We need to know more about it. If it’s dangerous, for example. We need to study it, so that we can reverse what it has done to you and Shay.”

“Reverse... Oh, right. Let’s go, Shay. Thank you, Piotyr.”

When they were safely away from the biology dome, Hally turned to Shay.

“We have to help that poor thing, Shay.”

“But Hally, we can’t...”

“If you won’t help, I’ll do it by myself.”

Hally crept quietly through the encampment, passing the various domes that the scientists had set up. Meteorology. Geology. Oceanography. She approached the Biology dome.

“Hsst! Hally.”

She froze.

“It’s me, Shay!”

“Shhh! Quiet! So you decided to come.”

“Yeah. What’s your plan?”

“I’m going to let the creature free!”

“How?”

“Well, I...”

Shay nodded.

“I thought so. I’ve brought a sack, and a pole.”

“Oh, yeah. Brilliant! Let’s go! I hope that Piotyr left the door open.”

Shay snorted. He reached out and turned the key which someone, probably Piotyr, had left in the lock.

“They don’t lock the domes, Hally. Though they might do after this.”

He opened the door and crept into the dome. He clicked on a torch.

“No torch, Hally? Follow me.”

The reached the tank and Shay scanned it with his torch.

“Where is it? Where is it? Ah, there!”

Hally slid the lid of the tank to one side and climbed in.

“Give me your sack, Shay.”

“OK. I’ll make it move towards you, with the stick.”

It was unnecessary. The creature ran towards Hally and, avoiding the sack, it climbed up on her arm, wrapping its long tail around the girl’s arm.

“Did it sting you?” asked Shay. He was worried.

“No, it’s just sitting here. Hey, buddy, we’d better get you into the sack, OK?”

She carefully plucked the creature from her arm and put it into the bag. It didn’t struggle.

She climbed out of the tank and the lights went on.

“What do you think that you are doing, Hally?” asked Piotyr.

She scowled at him.

“I’m letting the creature free. I’ll not let you dissect it!”

Piotyr held up his hands in a soothing manner.

“I’m not going to stop you, Hally. I’m not keen on dissection myself. But I’ll have to tell them who did it.”

“Thanks, Piotyr. We understand,” said Shay. “Come on, Hally.”

“You do realise that they will catch another one, sooner or later, and they will start locking the biology lab?”

Hally paused.

“At least we saved this one. Thanks, Piotyr.”

“I believe that this creature was found by the river south of the encampment. There’s a smaller stream up north, and if it was me I would let it free up there. Do you know where I mean?”

Shay and Hally nodded, and left the dome with the sack.

Doc, who was one of the most senior of the scientists, put in a request for some surveillance equipment from the colony ship, and they sent it down. He and Piotyr deployed some movement sensing cameras around the encampment.

“Look at this, Piotyr. There are dozens of the dragonlets. They’re smaller than the ones that stung Hally and Shay and the others. That one went down a burrow!”

“Yeah, Doc. Their stingers are not well-developed, are they?”

“Hmm, no, they’re not. Same species or a different closely related one?”

Piotyr considered. “Hmm. I’d think that they are the same species. Just immature. I’ll see if I can find any tomorrow.”

One morning Hally noticed that there were shiny patches on her legs and the arm which hadn’t been bitten. She checked with Shay, and he had noticed the same. His left leg had been bitten and his right leg and arms were now affected.

“Let’s avoid Doc,” she suggested and Shay nodded.

But the doctor called her in. He made her parents stay outside while he examined Hally, with his nurse acting as chaperone.

“Mmm, Hally, what do you think?”

“I think that it won’t be much longer before I don’t have any ordinary skin left.”

“That doesn’t worry you?”

“Not really. I like it. I love my dragon skin!”

“There are other changes, Hally. Hold up your hand, girl.”

She held up her hand and the doctor did the same. His fingers were a centimetre or two shorter than Hally’s. Her fingers were also slightly webbed.

“I need to X-Ray you,” said the doctor. “I’ve just had a new machine installed. Do you mind?”

“They did that when Shay and I went up to the ship.”

“I know, but this machine is better than those.”

Doc didn’t tell her that he had put in a special request for the machine. Hally submitted to the process, and the doctor muttered to himself as he viewed the image. He turned to Hally.

“Good, good. Thank you my dear. You’re, what sixteen? Hmm. You must have been wondering what was happening to you, but you don’t seem worried.”

“No, Doc. Should I be worried? I think that I’m changing into a dragon.”

“Well, Hally, we don’t know what going to happen, but you may be right. You’re not in pain?”

“No, Doc. I do have some aches, though. Round my shoulders. My teeth ache too, but not too badly.”

“Hmm, let me look. Yes, yes. You seem to have some teeth coming through. Nothing to worry about. Let me know if the pain becomes too bad.”

The doctor sat back and looked at the girl.

“Well, erm, there’s nothing we can do. Firstly, we don’t know how to combat this so-called infection. Secondly, we need to know what happens to those who are affected. Others are going to be stung now, and then, and we will get other cases. I’m afraid that you are going to be a guinea pig, of sorts. I’m sorry.”

“How many people have been stung, doctor?”

“About a dozen. Half of them were adults, and they are not affected. It’s like a bee-sting for most adults. All the kids that have been stung are developing ‘dragon skin’ as you called it, and they are also experiencing other changes. Extra teeth. Long fingers.”

“It doesn’t matter, Doc. I’m not worried.”

“Yes, and that is strange. It’s possible that the process that is going on inside you is suppressing your natural fear.”

Hally hesitated. “Fear? Um, it feels normal to me, and I know that’s odd. It feels right. I want to see where this is going too. It’s exciting.”

But the doctor wasn’t really listening.

The dragonlets reached the size of a medium-sized dog. Attrition had reduced their numbers to a very small fraction the original horde, and the remaining few were wily killers. But something flicked a biological switch in their bodies, and they stopped preying on anything that moved. They formed a roving band, searching for something, driven by instinct.

“This is odd, Piotyr.”

“What is it, Doc?”

“We had that automatic camera following those simianoids, remember?”

“Yes, They were heading west weren’t they? What are they doing now?”

“They’re terrified of something. Look!”

The simianoids were racing away from the camera, bounding out to the end of branches of the tree, screaming in their thin voices.

“Look there!” Piotyr pointed at something on the screen. “A dragonlet! A big one. Is it chasing the simianoids?”

One of the simianoids pushed a dragonlet and it fell out of the tree. It twisted and turned and hit the ground hard. It didn't move.

"Wow," said Piotyr.

The other dragonlets were closing in on the simianoids. The monkey-like creatures were bouncing on the branches, trying to dislodge the dragonlets, but no more dragonlets fell. The simianoids fell quiet and waited, with only bursts of screaming, as if they had accepted their fate.

"What? The dragonlets are retreating? They're giving up?" Piotyr was incredulous.

The dragonlets turned and descended the tree. They disappeared into the undergrowth. It wasn't until Piotyr reviewed the recording of the automatic camera in slow mode, that he saw the dragonlets sting the younger simianoids before they retreated.

Hally was chewing on the corpse of the chicken when the Doc came looking for her.

"Hally. How are you?"

"OK, thanks, Doc. Phfft!" She spat out a mouthful of mangled feathers. Her speech was distorted.

Doc looked at Hally. She was perched on a rail around the chicken run, her altered feet wrapped around the rail. She was crouched over the chicken, her claw-like fingers wrapped around it. She stretched one hand and the membrane between her fingers and her body billowed. The remaining patches of human skin looked wrong, as if they were diseased, and Doc could barely discern any traces of her human shape.

"Can you please stop stealing chickens, Hally?"

Hally considered. "I'll try," she said.

"Because people are talking about, um, shooting you and Shay."

"OK. I prefer the local 'pigeons' anyway."

Shay came hopping and skipping through the woods. He hopped up onto the rail and switched the creature he was carrying in his jaws to the claws of what were once his hands.

"What's up?" he asked.

Doc looked at the two of them. Only a few patches of human skin showed on their bodies, and Doc could barely understand them when they spoke. Their skulls had changed. They had developed muzzles full of teeth, and their ears had migrated to the tops of their heads. Their eyes seemed larger.

"Doc wants us to stop eating chickens."

Shay shrugged. "That's OK by me. They taste all fluffy. Get in my teeth."

Hally looked at the Doc. "We'll probably be moving away soon, Doc."

Doc nodded. "That would be advisable. Please keep in touch. Would you carry a communicator?"

Shay and Hally looked at each other.

"I guess," said Hally.

She let the Doc hang a device on a lanyard around her neck.

The Doc watched as they glided down to the path leading away from the chicken run. He wondered how long it would be before they started flying.

The dragonlets dispersed into the undergrowth. Doc, Piotyr and the other scientists didn't follow them with the cameras, so they missed the dragonlets' next change. The creatures stopped running on their back legs and reverted to four legs. Their tails fell off, leaving just a stub. They put on weight and changed to a diet of grasses, roots, and fallen fruit. In short, they became the creatures

that the settlers would come to call 'porkers'. The creatures didn't lay eggs but gave birth to small porkers.

"Come on," said Shay. Although they were losing the ability to speak to humans, they could still understand each other.

Shay turned and started to run and hop down the slope, spreading his arms as he did so and the membranes between his fingers and the large membrane between his elbow and his body grew taut. In short, he opened his wings, and skipping a bit, he glided down the slope.

"Shay, watch out for the drop," yelled Hally, but Shay hadn't noticed it and shot over the edge.

He roared. If he had still been human, he would have sworn, but he didn't fall. An updraft carried him high in the air, and he backpedalled and strove for balance as he was hoisted high over Hally's head. He side-slipped his way back down to her, spilling air from his wings.

"Wow! That was amazing! Try it Hally!"

Hally shifted from foot to foot. "I want to, but... Is it hard? It looks exciting!"

"I'm going to go again."

"Be careful, Shay!"

After a couple of runs by Shay, Hally took her first flight. Then Shay spotted a goat-like creature on the slopes, and they stopped for a while to feed.

Shay and Hally never truly flew, probably because they were too heavy, but they could glide long distances, and soar in favourable updrafts. The two former humans did not stray far from the human encampment at first, so Doc kept getting reports about them. As the bodies of the former humans changed, even people who knew of their origins referred to them as 'dragons'.

Doc arranged a meeting, well away from the encampment, over Hally's communicator.

Hally and Shay growled into the communicator, agreeing to meet him. They could no longer talk to him.

"There are two more cases of children getting stung," Doc informed them. "Altogether that makes thirty. Fifteen of you have left the encampments, so there are only one or two of you at each site. I'm sorry to say that there has been a rise in violence towards you, but the authorities are working hard to keep that down."

The two former humans shuffled along their branch and bobbed their heads. They opened and shut their jaws but Doc didn't know if they were distressed or angry, or merely amused.

"I don't know if we could have done anything different," said Doc, and the two dragons nodded. "No treatment that we've tried has any effect. Excising the area where a victim was stung has no effect. The patches of 'dragon skin' appear in other places."

He sighed and walked around. "Even removing the limb has no effect. Oh, we've not cut off anybody's arm or leg, of course, but one lad in encampment nine was involved in an accident just after he was stung, and we had to amputate his arm. He still started to show dragon-skin patches."

The two dragons looked at each other.

"Erm, yes," continued Doc. "His arm or wing or whatever shows signs of growing back. There are things happening here which are currently way beyond our current understanding of biology."

The dragon that had been Hally raised her wing to the sky, and Doc frowned.

"Mmm? Oh, the ship? That has left. The humans on this planet are on their own, for at least fifty years, and even then, the ship will be on its return trip from planting the other colonies and will only be able to carry information and a few specimens back to Terra."

The two dragons shifted on their perch, and Doc had to guess what they were thinking. The dragon which had been Hally hooked a claw into the lanyard round her neck and snapped it. The communicator dropped to the ground.

"I see," said Doc. "Well I don't blame you. You know where the encampment is, of course, so you can always return. We will probably be able to track you much of the time. You are big enough."

He looked at the two dragons and smiled. "Good luck to you, Hally and Shay. I hope that you will keep in touch."

Both dragons dipped their heads and trumpeted. Doc made a bow and then turned and walked away.

"Look at that simianoid, Doc! It's whole arm is dragon-skin, and I think there is some on its chest."

"Mmm. Let's see Piotyr. Yeah. Can you expand the image of its hand? Thanks. Definitely webbed. The other simianoids don't have webbed hands."

"These were stung by the dragonlets?"

Doc nodded, but there was really no doubt.

"It's only been two months," said Piotyr. "They're smaller of course, but their biology is probably different from ours."

Doc nodded. "And the virus or whatever it is might have more difficulty modifying our genetics. If that's how it works."

Piotyr nodded. "Yes, Doc. Hmm. The simianoids seem to be ostracising the infected individuals."

Doc reviewed the recording. He swiftly forwarded it and reversed it. "I see what you mean. But the infected individuals aren't grouping together. Can you put a trace on one or more of them?"

"Yeah, Doc. But only one."

Hally and Shay soared over the edge of the cliff, where the updraft was strong enough to keep them in the air. They could still communicate with each other, even though they could no longer talk to the humans. They didn't really regret this, but knew, somewhere deep inside them that this would probably be a problem in the future.

A few smaller dragons, twisted and turned in the air beside them. These smaller creatures were once simianoids who had been stung by dragonlets. They squeaked and sang short songs, and grunted, but they didn't talk.

"They will probably try to wipe out the dragonlets," commented Shay.

"Yes. They won't want their kids to turn into dragons. But they won't be able to wipe them all," said Hally. "Besides, there is the Exploration Ethical Directive. They aren't allowed to intentionally wipe out an indigenous species."

Shay thought for a while, as he scanned the depths of the gorge beneath them.

"I think you are right, Hally. Our dragonlets can thrive in almost any habitat. But the humans will change this world, and they might intentionally or accidentally endanger the simianoids. I foresee conflict. Anyway, are you ready?"

"Yes."

Hally dropped into the gorge, skimming the trees and broadcasting her eggs into the air as she did so. The mist of eggs drifted down, and of course, a fraction of them were harvested by insectoids and other creatures, but the vast majority reached the ground, and burrowed into it. They then became immotile and entered a dormant phase. At some time in the future they would hatch

into very small stingers, and a fortunate few would survive to become dragonlets, and if they found young simianoids or perhaps human children, new dragons would eventually take to the skies. Perhaps the stingers would contain hints of their human origins, and would target the humans, rather than the simianoids. Time would tell.
