

Dragon Tales & Stories



DREW HENRIKSEN

The Dragon Tales & Stories
Trilogy

Published by ArcheBooks Publishing

Book 1
Dragons and Wolves

Book 2
The Dragon & The Detective

Book 3
Dragons and Science

Dragon Tales
& Stories

Book Three

**Dragons
and Science**

By

DREW HENRIKSEN

Dedication

For Officer Glen Ciano, my friend since 1975, who died in the line of duty February 22, 2009.

A special thanks to P. J. McIlviane and Donna Blasor-Bernhardt, the two ladies that helped me the most.

Dragon Tales & Stories
Book Three

Dragons And Science

A Novel By
Drew Henriksen

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Dragons and Science



Chapter 1

THE LABORATORY

Poppi, as he was known in his youth, woke from his restless sleep. Rest was something he had done without for a week now. As he did so many other nights, he sunk his feet into his slippers and walked to the grand hall outside his room. All the guards knew not to disturb him or risk getting transferred to a not-so-stately outpost. He made it to the balcony and stared up at all of the stars in the night's dome.

Dragons and Science

What a long road it has been, he thought. I hope this isn't the time.

•

Vee had a big, no *monumental*, day ahead of her. The rest of her supplies were arriving at the lab this morning. Past experience taught her to keep an eagle eye on everything, or they'd become free pickin's for the rest of the buildings. Half of the last shipment was wrong and cohorts plundered the other half. Even with all those letters after their names, they were still spoiled brats. What worried her more were the clouds boiling up in the sky. Knowing her luck it would open up just as the shipment was unloaded from the truck.

Don't think about it Vee, she instructed herself. It will give you an ulcer.

Her McDonald's breakfast was sprawled out on the passenger seat of her new Expedition. There was nothing like the combined aromas of coffee, Egg McMuffin, and new car smell. She had become the ultimate eating and driving expert. Knowing where every pothole on the parkway was ensured a smooth, non-spilled, ride. At this rate she could be at the lab by 7:00 and...

Karpunk!

At that point she hit a new pothole in the road, a doozie at that, too. The whole car shifted to the side, but

Drew Henriksen

her coffee decided not to go along with it. All sixteen ounces of hot liquid caffeine landed in her lap.

“Damn it!” she screamed, and pulled off onto the grass.

She could feel the coffee burning not just her lap, but it was now running down her legs. She grabbed the napkins and quickly pulled her skirt up to stop it from scalding her anymore. The small postage stamp napkins were way too small to clean up the mess, so she started to use the paper wrappers. This just made more of a mess since it seemed to move the coffee around instead of absorbing it. At least by now though, the temperature had cooled. Then she noticed the state trooper standing next to her window and screamed.

“You OK, ma’am?” he asked from behind his Ray Bans.

Vee, with her skirt hiked up to her stomach and dripping with coffee answered with a smile, “Oh yes, officer, I’m just friggin’ peachy.”

•

Her worst dreams were realized as the skies opened up just as the shipment truck pulled onto the compound. At least her lab coat covered her ruined skirt. You would figure that a world renowned institution such as Palindrome Laboratories would have a better loading bay, one with a roof. Granted the men worked quickly to get

Dragons and Science

the boxes inside, but she was peeved that they wouldn't let her help.

"Sorry Dr. Vroom. Can't let you lift anything. Union regs," the foreman informed her.

Vee could not for the life of her understand how the union would mind her making sure that thousands of dollars' worth of equipment was taken care of safely. At least they didn't make the usual pun about her name.

"Vroom-Vroom, she's revved up boys," he cracked two seconds later.

"Vroom-Vroom, you're a jackass. Now get my order inside!" she blurted, sending the rest of the crew into hysterics.

"You're lucky I like ya, Doc," the foreman replied cracking a smile.

"What's there not to like? Now move it!" she instructed.

•

By 9:00 the supplies were safely in her own lab. Thanks to God's wonderful creation of plastic wrapping, the shipment fared well against the rain. Colleen and Emily, being the good grad students that they were, showed promptly at 8:16 and 8:21 to help with the unpacking. Any other self-respecting scientist would have reprimanded them, but Vee remembered what it was like

Drew Henriksen

to be twenty-three and single. She would be a hypocrite if she came down too hard. And they would never call in sick or show up past 8:30, so a few extra minutes in the morning was worth having two workers that would both be loyal colleagues in a few years. With their help, all the reagents were accounted for and dated by lunchtime.

“Dr. Vroom, would you like anything from the Salad Hut? Colleen and I are heading there for lunch.” Emily asked, throwing the last of the reagent boxes in the hall.

“Our treat,” Colleen added.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you want something,” Vee cracked, looking at the boxes of equipment to be unpacked.

“No, it’s just general brown nosing,” Emily informed her.

“In that case, get me the normal pieta surprise. Times two, of course.”

“How do you keep that weight off?” Colleen asked. “You have the metabolism of a humming bird.”

“It’s those karate classes she takes. Are you a master Kung Fu type yet?” Emily asked.

“It’s Kempo and I’m a third dan. Hey, I was just a few years younger than you when I started,” Vee said, noticing a peculiar box sitting on the equipment pile.

“I’ll pass, I have enough to do with all the papers due next week,” Emily said, putting on a rain slicker.

Dragons and Science

Hundreds of little whales decorated it, all blowing water and smiling.

“Don’t forget, I need one of you two to lecture for me Thursday night!” Vee suddenly said. She had forgotten and meant to remind them all morning.

“I’ll take it,” Colleen volunteered. “I want to shut that loud mouth up again.”

“Be nice. Howie’s a tuition-paying student. Once I get tenured, then my guest speakers can be rude,” she politely informed them.

“I can’t call him a dick?” asked Colleen.

“Next year, hon,” Vee responded.

With that, the two grad students left the lab, letting Vee’s attention return to the box. It didn’t seem to belong with the rest of the shipment. Even the cardboard was a different shade, older looking. There were no labels on it, only “Fragile! Handle with care” was stamped in faded red ink. Curiosity took its normal control over her and she took it off the stack. Bone dry, it must have been on the bottom of the pile outside. But then it would have been crushed. Another mystery at Palindrome; Lord knows there were enough of them.

The large copper staples gave way with little effort. Inside was a mass of browned shredded paper, instead of the usual Styrofoam peanuts. *More paper*, she thought, expecting to find a tiny flashlight bulb or one test tube. She reached in and did discover smooth glass. Not re-

Drew Henriksen

calling what she could have ordered, she pulled the glass bowl out and was underwhelmed. A plain glass bowl, there was not even a measurement on it. She checked the invoice and found no bowl on the list and deduced it was leftover from someone else's shipment and got mixed in with hers.

Well, finders' keepers.

She placed it away in one of the dozen cabinets and went back to her inventory. Then, ever so faintly, she heard a wail. Once in a while she would hear Burn's chimps throwing a fit. Yet, this was different. Keeping totally still, she waited and she heard it again.

However, it wasn't a wail. It was a howl.

•

“Who are they?” Colleen asked Emily in the parking lot.

“They have to be government. Suits, sunglasses, sedans, and crew-cuts. They're not selling Amway,” Emily answered, unlocking her aging Toyota.

When they left Astray building, they had immediately noticed the three identical brown four-door cars parked in front of the central office. A half-dozen men all dressed identically stood perfectly straight around the sedans scanning the lab's campus.

“What do you think is going on?” Colleen asked.

Dragons and Science

“Who’s doing government work?”

“I think it’s Burns. She just got a dozen chimps sent to her.” Emily said, opening the car door, sending out a resonating squeal.

Like robots, every head turned and looked right at them. The two girls froze as the agents stared at them, unmoving. Colleen wondered if birds were going to land on them. She raised her hand and waved to them with her fingers. They all went back to scanning, except one with a crew-cut so blonde it almost appeared white.

“Get in the car!” Colleen shouted from across the roof.

The agent rotated his head away and resumed looking over the compound. The two of them hopped in the Toyota and started the engine.

“That last one really scared the crap out of me,” Emily confessed, not wanting to look behind to pull out.

“They all scared me,” Colleen added, as Emily looked behind to make sure no one was coming.

The two remained quiet as she pulled out and slipped the car into drive. The simple task of leaving seemed to be a laborious effort to escape. When they finally passed the main gates, each one took a deep breath.

•

Drew Henriksen

God these doughheads are slow, Burns thought to herself. She had given up trying to explain viral RNA reverse transcription and DNA insertion. For a project this monumental she needed someone with at least freshman biology under their belt. Why they sent her security yahoos instead of scientists baffled her.

“Dr. Burns, we don’t need to know the details of your work. Just an explanation of your staff,” Stown pressed her in a pique of arrogance almost as intense as her own.

“I *am* explaining my staff. I need every last one. Each person has their own job, from sequencing to culturing. The less they know as a whole, the better. You should like that.” She explained in the most basic linguistics she could.

“It doesn’t take much to copy information off a hard drive. You have to cut your staff,” Stown insisted.

“No, and as a matter of fact I no longer wish to converse with you. Tell your superiors to send in one of their top lab geeks who has an IQ in the triple digits. *You* no longer talk to me,” Burns commanded, then turned away.

The two of them stood in Burns’ lab without saying a word. Burns started to fill out forms and acted as if no one else was there. Stown finally turned to the two agents behind him.

“Start interviewing the others,” Stown ordered.

Dragons and Science

“And I want close attention paid to Dr. Vroom. Her work is the most similar to the project.”

“And how would you know that?” Burns asked sarcastically from her clipboard.

“Our people have been keeping an eye on everybody’s work here. Your work with vaccines will go hand-in-hand with the project,” Stown gladly announced, just to give her that little jab.

“No it won’t,” she quickly snapped.

“I thought you were not conversing with me?” he shot back.

Burns peered over her clipboard with her glasses on the tip of her nose. This was her favorite condescending look. Whenever one of the custodial brain trust would leer at her, she gave them the same treatment and sent them scampering. It did not have the same effect on Stown.

“Dr. Vroom happens to be a close friend of mine. No doubt your records show we both attended Jewett College together. You probably already know I was the maid of honor at her wedding. Yes, she is close to the project as a consultant. But her knowledge of what I am striving for is nil. There is no need to bother her.”

“Security on the project is my concern, not yours,” he countered.

“I *am* the project. Don’t forget that,” she warned.

From the other room, Melissa started to scream

Drew Henriksen

again. The presence of all these people had undoubtedly frightened her. The doctor took that as a cue to escape from the gaggle of morons invading her lab.

“Now kindly leave,” she asked in a softer tone, for she began to realize that butting heads with this oaf was not going to work.

Stown turned to the agents and told them again to start the interviews. When he turned back, he only caught Burns’ lab coat flapping behind her like a cape as she went to check on Melissa.

Better watch it bitch! I’m no lab rat, he warned her in his thoughts.

•

Vee had just opened the first box of glassware when the agent spoke behind her.

“Dr. Vroom?” he asked.

Having a mild coronary and almost dropping \$500 worth of graduated cylinders, Vee gasped and turned around to the monotone voice. Before her was a man in a black suit and sunglasses. His hair looked almost bleached white.

“Jesus Christ! Don’t you believe in knocking?” she demanded, trying to catch her breath.

“I did ma’am, but you didn’t hear me,” he replied in the same fashion, with just the hint of a southern accent.

Dragons and Science

“Oh, then I’m sorry. By the way, who the hell are you?” she asked putting the box down.

“I’m with the NSB. I need to ask you a few questions.” he told her, reminding her of the evil male computer from *Star Trek*.

“NSB? Is that a cross between NBC and CBS?” she asked scrutinizing him.

“National Security Bureau. We’re overseeing Dr. Burns’ security.”

“In sunglasses? Or are they secret magneto glasses to make sure I’m telling the truth?” she joked.

The agent stood there motionless.

“OK then, how may I help you? Burney and I go way back,” she added, realizing he had no sense of humor.

“Yes, we know. This is just a standard interview to see if anyone is trying to solicit information from you.”

“Buddy, no one’s been soliciting me in years,” she instinctively joked. “I have nothing to hide. I hope you don’t fall asleep as I explain my lifestyle.”

“Your assistants, Gallagher and Suamby, have they been seeing you socially?” he asked.

“We’ll have lunch once in a while. We don’t go out and slush down margaritas if that’s what you mean,” she said, seeing if she could get one hint of a facial expression.

“How about the class you teach? Any of the students

Drew Henriksen

approach you?”

“Of course they approach me, they have questions. Nothing about Dr. Burns and her work. I’m only there Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“We know. And the karate school you attend?”

“They know I’m a scientist. They never ask any questions. I don’t think they even know what I study. If you want to come by at around nine tonight, you can spar with us.”

“That’s alright ma’am, but if anyone should approach you, please contact us.” He gave her a card. “Also, if anyone does happen to approach you, please do not engage them. They might be dangerous.”

“Dangerous? What the hell is she doing up there?” she asked only to get a blank stare.

She looked down at the small card and saw it only read NATIONAL SECURITY BUREAU 1-800-555-1122.

“Oh this is great! Nothing else? You never did give me your name,” she protested.

“That is correct ma’am.”

“Should I be worried about my safety?” she asked in all seriousness. “If you are this concerned about people approaching me, I’m going to get a gun or a pit bull the size of Secretariat.”

“Ma’am, I’ve seen your file. You have nothing to worry about.”

Dragons and Science

Was that a joke or being serious? Serious.

“Once again, please inform us of anything unusual,” he repeated.

Vee burst out laughing, but quickly quelled it. “Thank you sir. I’ll let you know immediately.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” the agent replied.

As he left the lab, Burney walked in with Melissa in her arms. Vee saw the disdain in her face for the man. Both exchanged looks but neither one spoke a word.

“Burney, what the hell are you doing up there? Gene splicing a new super villain?” Vee asked, petting Melissa on the head.

“How’d you guess? Make sure you don’t tell anyone. G. I. Joe might get pissed,” she answered in a whisper.

Melissa turned her head and rolled her big brown eyes to Vee, immediately melting the doctor’s heart.

“And how are you precious?” Vee asked, and the chimp reached her arms out to her. Vee took her from Burns and nuzzled her.

“She made it through the trials,” Burns said. “She turned out to be the control.”

Vee eyed her old friend. This was not like her. “Are you actually getting a soft spot?”

“Only in my head. But I admit it, I’ve grown attached to the little fur ball,” she confessed.

“What happened to the rest of them?” Vee asked, letting Melissa play with the collar of her lab coat.

Drew Henriksen

“Classified, Vee,” she replied with a smile.

“I’m going to get Boris and Natasha stalking me because of you?” Vee asked, becoming serious again.

“Don’t worry about it. The brain trust is overreacting,” she sneered with her usual dislike.

“Famous last words.”

•

Emily and Colleen weren’t in the mall for five minutes when Colleen noticed they were being spied on.

“Em, I think we were followed!” Colleen insisted as she grabbed Emily’s sleeve.

“What are you talking about?” Emily laughed.

Every day they would come to the mall to choose from the various smorgasbord of dining establishments, then head for the salad hut. Having Dr. Vroom as their mentor meant certain liberties that other students would never see. Yet, if you didn’t know your shit, you were out on your keester. Now they were paying a small price for working with one of the nation’s top molecular immunologists. They were losing privacy.

“Those men from the lab. They followed us here!” Colleen reiterated.

“And where are they?” Emily asked putting her hand over her brow like a ship’s watchman.

“Look behind you!” Colleen snarled.

Dragons and Science

Emily smirked and looked behind, then gulped. Two men in identical suits and sunglasses were standing behind them like statues. Colleen, not liking being spied upon, marched over to them, leaving Emily behind.

“If you want to know, we’re heading to the Salad Hut.” she told them as she approached.

Unflinching, the men stood their ground.

“Then maybe I’ll go get some feminine pads! With wings!” she announced.

The men just looked at her and continued their silence.

“Well, say something!” she cried out, getting the attention of several passersby.

Nothing.

“Augh!” she cried, and stomped back to Emily. “Come on. We need clothes!”

Emily looked back to the men, then followed Colleen on a shopping spree of every dress shop and department in the mall.

Bravely, the agents followed without hesitation.

•

Elias watched as the strangers swarmed his lab like an infection. Things were fine just the way they were. There was no need for interlopers. The others were bad enough, defiling his immaculate lab. To have this pesti-

Drew Henriksen

lence was unbearable. If he had his way, Burns would be in charge instead of those stuffed shirts. She was the only one that had her shit together. Her friend could handle things if she had to, but she couldn't hold a candle to Burns. For the life of him, he could not understand why she would let Uncle Sam into their lab. Funds were the only reason why she must be keeping a tight lip.

Elias was wise to the ways of the world. He knew money didn't grow on trees. He knew that even a brilliant scientist like Dr. Burns had to suck up to the man. That's how the world worked. When her work was complete, by Jove, they'd be licking her lab coat. Not too many people were worthy of his respect, but she met all the criteria. Not only was she brilliant, she was a lady through and through. Always smiled and said good morning. She never thought about "*who she was.*" All the others paid him no mind. If it ever came down to it, he'd back her to the hilt. And someday, he would get the chance to show her his allegiance. And that day would be soon.

From down the hall he saw Burns leaving Vroom's lab. She held Melissa in her arms like a Madonna. Shame that she never had children. Just as well, no man would have been right for her. If he had only been forty years younger. She looked up and her sparkling smile immediately spread across her face.

Dragons and Science

“Morning, Elias, or should I say good afternoon?”

“It’s afternoon, Doctor,” he returned, dipping his mop into the bucket. “How are things going for you?”

“Same old gar-bosh. You know how it is,” she mused. “Thanks for cleaning up after Melissa. These government types are just upsetting her,” she said, patting Melissa on the head.

“All too well, Doc, all too well.”

“Listen, I have a big favor to ask of you.”

“What is it?”

“I’m going to be here late tonight. Can you stay and clean my lab after I leave? Some of the board members are inspecting the facility tomorrow,” she asked with a smile.

“Of course, no problem.”

She slid over and talked to him from the side of her mouth, like she was letting him in on a classified secret. “I’d ask one of these other dunderheads, but they’ll break something.”

“No doubt,” he confided back.

“And can you incinerate the red bag waste too. I don’t think it can last to Thursday.”

“No problem.”

“You’re the best,” she said with a smile. She took Melissa’s hand and shook it at him. “Say bye-bye.” Melissa jerked away and screeched.

“Have a good day, Doctor,” Elias replied, recoiling a

Drew Henriksen

bit from the little beast.

“Call me Burney, cut the doctor crap,” she told him plainly.

“Have a good day, Burney,” he gleamed.

She went on her way, knowing that the lab would be the cleanest it had ever been the next morning.

And all the evidence would be gone.

•

By 1:30 Vee had lost her fondness for her two grad students. They were gone well over an hour. Being late a few mornings was one thing; this was plain old contempt. On top of that, the cafeteria was closed and she couldn't get lunch. When the two of them finally arrived without lunch, Vee was all set to send them packing.

“Thanks for lunch!” Vee said calmly and sarcastically, and then noticed Emily near the point of tears. “What happened?”

“I'm sorry, Doctor, those zombie agents followed us to the mall. I got pissed, but Emily was pretty shaken by them,” Colleen explained with some venom still on her tongue.

“Did they say anything to you?” Vee asked.

“That's the worst of it,” Colleen recalled. “They never said a thing. They just looked at us with those dark glasses on. It was like giant bug eyes that could see

Dragons and Science

360 degrees. The whole thing was just creepy.”

“It’s just a precaution. Dr. Burns’ research is highly classified. I’ll probably have a swarm of them following me around too. It won’t be forever,” she assured them while out-and-out lying. “In a few weeks you’ll probably be dating one of them.”

“Is that after we become zombies?” Colleen asked.

“No, it’s after you quit whining and help me with the equipment,” Vee quipped, mostly to get their minds on something different.

“Sorry for being a sissy Mary, Doctor,” Emily said. “I was just startled by the whole thing.”

“You must be real fun at horror movies.” Vee laughed.

“Don’t even go there! She watched “Abbott and Costello meet Frankenstein” from behind the couch!” Colleen said.

“You *are* a sissy Mary!” Vee cracked.

“Don’t listen to her,” Emily yelled with a smirk.

“Now that you have your composure back, can we finish this?” Vee asked, being serious. Despite the insect-eyed zombie agents, the supplies had to be taken care of.

“Sorry, Doc,” Emily and Colleen said at the same time, and then began to unpack, all under the eyes of Stown as he watched them from the surveillance camera the agent placed there earlier.



Chapter 2

IMMUNOLOGY 406 AND THE BUSHIDO DRAGON

Nessa was cutting the crust off the toast as she always had for Helena for the past forty years. This time she stopped for no reason at all. She had grown to love the old woman as a mother; then again, half the country felt the same.

Something was not right.

After putting down the knife, she went to the small bedroom down the hall to check on her. She probably

Dragons and Science

could have been in a larger home with better facilities for her old bones, but Helena insisted on staying in the house where it all happened almost eighty years ago. Nessa opened the door to the room slowly so as not to disturb her charge. She peeked in like she was peeking in on her own grandkids, only to see Helena seated in her rocker. Like always, she was looking out the window at the small slice of life outside.

“How are ya feeling, mum?” she asked her.

Helena, with her long white hair braided into a rope, turned her head to the caregiver with a warm smile. “Same old aches and pains, dear. How are you?”

This was odd; she never asked how she was doing. Nessa was forever the ‘Young Girl’ who came to cook and clean. She was eternally young and healthy to her.

“Fine, mum. I just had a chill and thought you were in trouble,” Nessa said.

“As long as your nose wasn’t itching. That means a fight,” the old lady joked. “And how could I ever be in trouble?”

“Even you could be in dire straits,” Nessa quipped back.

“And what would be the outcome? Oh, do not fret over me. I am one of the few on this Earth that you never have to worry about,” she reassured her.

“That’s very easy for you to say, mum.”

“Trust me, dear.”

Drew Henriksen

Nessa was at ease now and decided to go finish the meal she was preparing. She took great pride in her meals. With all the dietary restrictions she was under, what she created was a marvel. She even thought about writing a cookbook of her recipes, but thought it would be in bad taste considering her position. So Nessa left the door ajar and went back to the kitchen. Just a few feet away, the thought of something dark filled her again. She looked back just in time to see the door slam shut on its own.

The damn wind, she thought at first, then realized that the window was closed. Nessa rushed back to the door, only to find the knob would not turn. This was strange since even when it was locked, the knob would turn in her hand a bit. Now it was frozen solid.

“Yes, Mother,” Helena’s voice spoke from the other side.

Nessa didn’t like this. Helena’s mother was dead at least sixty years. She pounded on the door.

“Helena!”

Helena answered in a death scream that seemed more powerful than her frail body could manage. “*NO!*”

There was immediate silence after the cry. The cold knob miraculously gave way. Nessa pushed the door open to find Helena lying on the floor. Her angelic face was twisted into a permanent scream so horrible, Nessa herself screamed from fear.

Dragons and Science

One of the most blessed of people had just been scared to death.

•

By five of six, Vee was wheeling into the biology parking lot. Running late to her class, she still wore her lab coat to cover the mess. The Expedition smelled like an old rug; there must have been a leak while it rained. The CIA zombies were spying on her, and she now had to deal with the self-righteous student from hell.

What a life, Vee!

Luck was on her side a bit. All the midterm reports she graded were spared from water damage. Howie would explode in front of her if his master report were damaged. Then the fiendish thought of purposely dropping it in water ran through her gray cells, but only for a moment. The humiliating grade of B+ should be enough.

With five minutes left, she ran into Fredonia Hall of Jewett College, her alma mater. Deep down she was proud of the fact that she was a professor, more proud of that than her research and martial arts. The other two were close behind though.

The lecture hall was the same one that she sat in for freshman biology with Dr. Manti, a thousand moons ago. Now it was her voice that filled the hall. As usual,

Drew Henriksen

Darren sat in the front row next to Janet and Rudy. All the others sat further back, except for Howie. Howie always sat square in the middle. Nobody else would sit by him. Vee saw enough in her life to know this was intentional. He was one of those people who drove people away on purpose. Goatees and long hair do flatter the looks of many men, but it just made Howie look more annoying. Once after class when he was complaining about his grade, she caught a whiff from him that could kill oxen. Again, she got the impression that this was intentional. The only person she ever saw him with was Darren. It appeared they knew each other, but were not the best of friends.

“As I continue with monoclonal antibodies, I wish to discuss the different aspects of hybridomas,” she started to lecture.

Immediately Howie’s hand went up.

“Yes, Howard?” she asked, knowing he hated being called that.

“I still don’t understand why we’re still working with such an archaic method? It hasn’t been shown to work!” His attempt to assault her with words started in early tonight.

She smiled and saw Darren roll his eyes at her. For every bit of annoyance Howie had, Darren made up with charm. It amazed her that neither Emily nor Colleen ever asked her about him.

Dragons and Science

“Because, Howard, it shows promise. Just because it is not performing as we had hoped, doesn’t mean we give up on it. Very much like some of my students,” she zinged. One thing she did like about Howie, she always got the better of him.

A soft laugh went through the class and Howie retreated for a while. Just as she drew breath to speak again, the back doors of the hall opened. Two of Stown’s men walked in. In what might have been a sign of respect, they had their glasses off. One of them was the light haired agent who had interviewed her earlier. He stared at her with eyes just as frosty and pale as his crew cut. Every head in the class turned and looked as the two of them stood in the back of the room like stone pillars.

“Don’t mind them, class, they’re my dates for later on,” she joked and the class turned back to her. Even Howie managed to remain silent. More than normal.

•

After she handed back the papers, Vee waited for the usual student complaints about the grades. It was customary to do battle over grades, although this time only Howie stuck around to talk to her.

Figures.

“How could you possibly give me a B+?” He asked

Drew Henriksen

in total disbelief.

“Because your conclusion was based more on opinion than on data. The shortage of vaccines is due to a lack of research and funds and, yes, greed. But this is not a Social Problems class. You were supposed to write a science paper, not express your personal views,” she conveyed in the most diplomatic way she could.

“But you’re missing the point!” he snarled. “It’s up to the science community to address this problem.”

“Yes, you are correct. But this is a science *class*. If you look in your curriculum guide, it will tell you that in here we learn about immunology. If you look under sociology, you’ll see oodles of classes where you get to argue your point. Not here.”

“You just don’t get it!” he hissed. She envisioned steam about to spew from his ears.

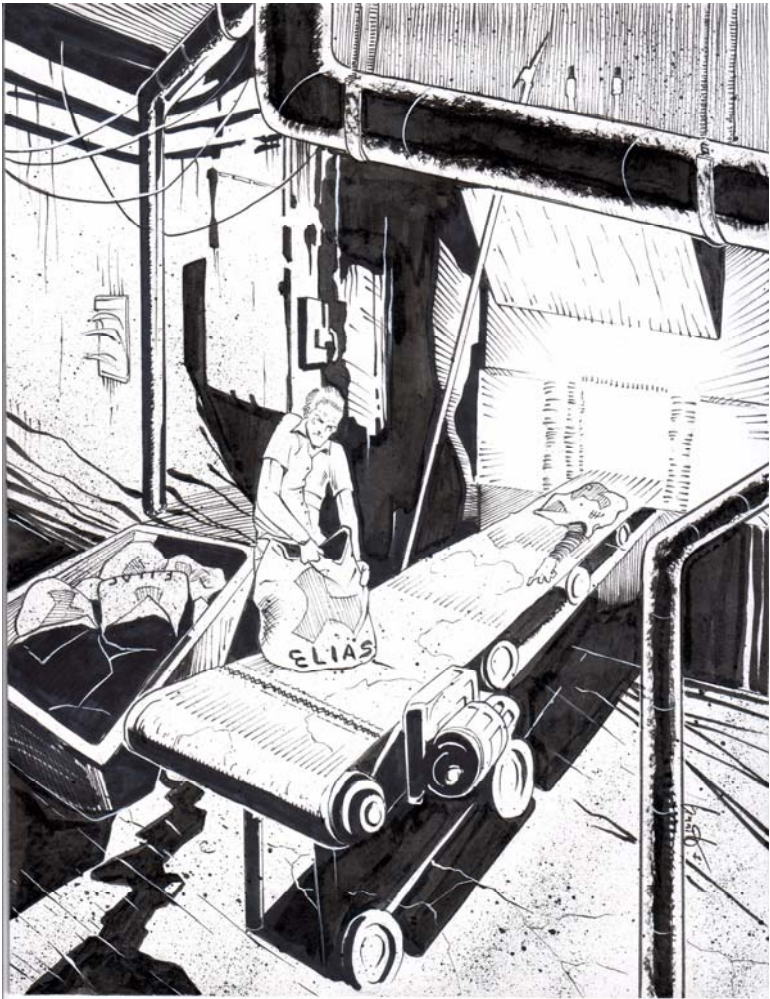
“Don’t bring my personal life into this!”

“Make light of it! Your kind always does!” he growled and stormed up the stairs and out the doors. The two soldiers watched him leave then turned back to her.

“Would he fall into that suspicious category of yours?” she asked them.

They didn’t reply.

Dragons and Science



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Drew Henriksen

As night fell, Elias had finished scrubbing the lab floor down for Burns. He could understand why she wanted all red bag waste burned early. It smelled awful. Now that she was finishing up her work, she was dissecting most of the animals used in her experiments. Not something you would want around. Piled in the corner, there had to be at least twenty bags with that weird biohazard symbol on them. Why the hell they couldn't just write "biohazard" was a mystery to him.

He had wheeled the big bin up from the incinerator room and now he wondered if he could manage it all in one trip. If it was anyone else asking him, he would have told them to go take a flying leap.

No use in dilly-dallying, time to work. His father had always told him that a man's work is what makes a man. He wheeled the bin over and, with gloves on, he grabbed the first bag. Immediately he felt the ribs of the monkey's dead body. It felt like the stuffed raccoon his dad had in the living room as a kid. Handling dead animals was nothing new to him, but the chimps were so much like people it did put a chill in his bones. A quick nip of Philadelphia whiskey took care of that, *tout de suite*.

One by one he loaded the dead monkeys into the bin. On some of them he could feel the open body cavity through the bag. Then, one bag twitched in his hand. He dropped it immediately on the floor. He stared at it as it

Dragons and Science

lay still on the green tiled floor. The red and green looked like a putrid Christmas decoration. It didn't move. He touched it again with his fingertips, then his palm. All he felt was a lifeless backbone and shoulder blade. He wondered if he should open it and see if the little critter was still alive. Pushing the thought out of his head, he grabbed it and threw it in the bin. Nearing the bottom of the pile, he realized that he would be able to take it all in one run. He seized the next bag and felt a sharp jab in the middle of his palm.

“*SHIT!*” he yelled and yanked his hand away.

Sure enough, he saw the little hole in the glove, and red blood seeping between his hand and the latex.

“God damn it, you whore!” he hollered and ripped off the useless glove. He immediately started to massage his hand to get it to bleed more. The extra blood, supposedly, would help wash out the wound. Out of instinct, he licked it. After all, that's what a dog does when wounded. Within a moment, the bleeding stopped. Before his eyes, it almost looked like the hole healed itself up. There was no pain and if it weren't for the hole and blood in the glove, he never would have known he was pricked. Sure enough, the bag on the ground had a syringe needle sticking out of it. Burns must have accidentally thrown it into the bag. If he'd been working slower, he probably wouldn't have poked himself. Very carefully, he picked it up and placed it in

Drew Henriksen

the bin.

The next bag was empty, ripped in half. Five minutes later he was done and happy to get out of the lab.

•

The incinerator was in the basement, mercifully in their own building. The other guys had to wheel their crap from all over the complex to use it. On a Friday, they would line up for an hour just to get their load on the conveyor belt. For that reason Elias always waited until nighttime. That way he could just dump the shit on the belt and let it get carried through the iron doors, only to be reduced to ash. Tonight he couldn't wait to hear the doors clang shut and seal off the blasted bodies forever.

The feel of that bag twitching was still in his fingertips, it had covered up all thought of the needle stick and began to consume him. He watched the bags carefully as they plopped onto the conveyor belt from the bin. Each one landed with a dead thump and started its journey into the flames. If he could only speed it up like on "I Love Lucy," then this whole mess could be over with. He recognized the bag that had twitched before as it fell onto the belt. He watched it as intently as he did before. No movement. Just like all the others, it laid motionless

Dragons and Science

as it made its way to eternal combustion. Far in the back of his mind, he saw flaming monkey corpses jumping out of the incinerator and hopping after him, a high-pitched scream yelling bloody murder as they came descending on him. Before he knew it, the dreaded bag was at the doors and dropping off into the furnace.

With that out of the way, he relaxed and looked at the last of them moving to their end. Now all of them looked like they were moving. Elias froze with fear. He couldn't tell if they were moving on their own or if it was just convection from the heat ruffling the bags. His mind told him it was nothing, but the growing fear told him it was the living beings inside. Just when he felt he was going to explode, the last bag fell in and the large doors sealed them off.

Solace warmed his veins as the nightmare was suddenly over. His stomach rang in its two cents, demanding steak, very rare steak. Elias looked back at the shut doors; enjoying the fact that all that fear was now gone with the flames.

And if his hearing had been better, he might have heard the screams from the other side.

•

Sensei Greg's dojo was sandwiched between a biker bar and a Laundromat. On any given night the parking

Drew Henriksen

lot would be full of Harleys with enough space in front of his karate school for his students. The bikers learned long ago not to invade his space during class time and they had lived in harmony ever since.

The adult class started at 8:05 sharp and was the last class of the day. Religiously, Dr. Anne Vroom had been a student at the Bushido Dragon for nine years. Her other marshal art schools were by far inferior and impersonal money gobblers. Whether she cared to admit it or not, this school had become her family. After being a research scientist and college professor all day, the Dragon had a way of putting her right back into place. Her real family was gone from the earth for over a decade now and even her ex, whom she stilled cared for in a way, was out of her life forever.

The fates were playing with her tonight; she actually got to the school early. Through the huge glass windows, she could see Sensei still working the Kindergarten Karate. Watching the kids in their little white uniforms was one of the most adorable sights and always brought a smile to her face. Even the army androids to follow would have to smile at them.

She felt ridiculous walking into the waiting room with her smelly lab coat. She was going to have to have the car's inside cleaned tomorrow; it was skanking up everything. Of course Ariel was in the waiting room watching the news. Vee wondered what she was going

Dragons and Science

to comment on first, her outfit or smell. Ariel reminded her of Colleen and Emily. The three of them together would probably tear up the town. They all had the attitude, but Ariel had the power to kick major butt. Being Sensei's girlfriend had its perks. Vee tried to sneak into the dressing room when she heard her start sniffing the air. Ariel turned around with a grimace and looked at Vee.

"Hai, Ariel." Vee bowed, pronouncing it in an abrupt 'hi'.

"Hai, nice smelly lab coat, girl," Ariel joked.

"It's been a long day," she almost whined. "I have to tell you and Sensei something important."

"You mean those government folk that's been watching you?" Ariel smiled.

"They've been here?" Vee asked.

Sarcastically, Ariel put her fingers to her temples. "No, I saw it in my mind." She closed her eyes and started to hum. "I see many men running after you and you not getting a single date." She sniffed the air again. "I wonder why?"

"Tell me all powerful annoying one, did they cause any trouble?" she asked.

"Nah, they weren't anything. They just asked about the other students. Greg asked them if they wanted free classes. They didn't even answer."

On the TV, the screen showed a shipping yard with a

Drew Henriksen

ton of cops frisking bad guys against a half dozen creates. The voiceover from the reporter caught both women's attention: "Today, DEA agents seized a cocaine shipment hidden in two tons of chocolate."

"Oh my God! Did you hear that?" Vee cried.

"Good Lord!" Ariel responded.

"Find out what they're doing with that chocolate as I get changed."

"No problem. And if you want, you could take a shower too." Ariel added.

Thank God it's early, Vee thought. Normally, the dressing room would be packed with kindergarten karate kids. With the stench of wetness on her, they would be moaning and whining. She adored children, as long as they went home. She just finished slipping on her gi uniform when she heard the onslaught of children storming the dressing room. As usual, the door flew open and a bewildered child stood there staring at her.

"Thanks for knocking, kid," Vee chided the little girl.

The door slammed shut, to be followed by a knock.

"That's better, it's safe."

The door flew open again, followed by Sensei's voice.

"Girls first, you knuckle heads!"

Vee tried to squeeze out as the room filled with little girls no higher than her waist.

"Eew, it smells just like Spot when he's all wet," one

Dragons and Science

of them cracked.

“Out of the way, munchkins, Iz’a comin’ through,” she told them as she made it to the door.

“Are you going to kick Sensei’s butt tonight, Vee?” another kid asked.

“Only if he trips and falls flat on his face,” she told him laughing.

Back out in the waiting room, the TV was showing the Pope talking at St Pete’s.

“Vee, the Pope confiscated all of our chocolate,” Ariel chuckled bowing onto the dojo floor.

“Then I guess it’s time to become Hindu,” she bowed onto the floor.

•

The black belt class was as grueling as usual. Way back when she first started as a white belt, she never thought she could finish a single class much less become a third degree black belt. It was second nature to her now, but it was still exhausting and wrenching to her body. She was very grateful on the nights that Sensei took it easy on them. This was not one of those nights. After the sixth round of spinning back kicks, the flag on the wall began to sway all by itself. And to think she used to do this in her twenties with a hangover. Those days were *long* gone.

Drew Henriksen

“Come on! Chamber those legs! You’re black belts!” Sensei yelled.

For anyone else on the planet she would have given a flip answer. Not Sensei. On her last pivot around Vee got her foot the highest it had achieved in weeks. Satisfaction filled her as she completed the perfect kick with her exhausted leg. Then she saw the agents watching her from the waiting room. With her concentration broken, she shifted her weight and fell flat on her ass. The force of the thud slammed her teeth together, missing her tongue by a millimeter. Candy, a first degree black belt, and Ariel immediately stopped; Andrew gave his usual Simpson’s laugh.

“HA ha.”

“Jesus Christ Vroom, you scared me,” Sensei teased.

“Sorry sir. Our visitors distracted me,” Vee mumbled with her teeth still vibrating.

“What happened to your concentration girl? I’d expect that from a green belt or Andrew!”

“Hey, I resemble that remark!” Andrew added.

Vee jumped to her feet then gave a look to Blondie in the waiting room. It took all her inner chi not to flip him the finger. She continued the class and decided to beat up Andrew again. She loved him like the little brother she never got to beat up. The drawback was that she had to listen to all his wise cracks about built up sexual frustrations, and loved every minute of it. These were her

Dragons and Science

closest confidantes. Years ago it was Burney; they were inseparable. She always wondered if she was jealous of her when she married Steven. Now both were pretty much out of her life, funny how things turns out.

“Where’s your head at, woman?” Andrew asked throwing a round kick to her head.

“Memory Lane, Louie,” she countered, blocking and throwing him on his back. Louie was her term for loser.

“Must be a long, long road in your case,” he fired back. “So who are the suits out there?”

“Government folk,” she said, helping him up.

“Think they want to come out with us tonight? We’re heading to Coppersmith’s,” he said, getting back into a fighting stance.

“Not if I go home to bed. And that’s exactly what I’m doing.” She smiled, and then leg swept him.

“What are you doing in that lab of yours?” he asked from the floor again.

“Don’t ask or they’ll be at your doorstep,” she warned, giving him her hand again.

“Any of them female?” he inquired with a devious grin.

“No.”

“Face your partners and bow,” Sensei called out.

They complied obediently. Vee couldn’t believe how fast the hour went. She always started a class exhausted and finished invigorated. It would be a hassle getting to

Drew Henriksen

sleep tonight, the brain was going to be in overdrive.

“Bow to Sensei,” Ariel called out.

They all bowed to Sensei Greg Santos, one of the few people Vee actually respected. She had a respect for most people, but Sensei was one that actually earned it, MDs and PhDs included. Not too many people could get her to bow.

“Thank you for being my students,” he told his class and meant it.

Most of the class left the floor as Vee stayed behind to talk to him.

“Anne, whatzzzzz up?” Sensei asked, flopping his tongue out. She also never told him she hated being called Anne.

“I hear my new-found friends have paid you a visit?” she asked.

“Nice guys, anal retentive as hell,” he added, watching the class trying to maneuver the waiting room around the agents.

“That’s primarily due to the flags up their butts,” she answered, scientifically.

“Nothing wrong with loving your country,” he said in his Confucius voice.

They both looked to the agents, only to see Andrew making finger devil horns behind their heads. Blondie turned his head like a mechanical part to catch him. Andrew just grinned and slinked away to the dressing

Dragons and Science

room.

“Are they going to be here every night?” Ariel asked, walking to them.

“You got me. I’m just as much in the dark as you. I hope they don’t disrupt your classes.”

“I don’t know. Billy Idol there is kind’a cute, in a robotic kind’a way,” Ariel remarked, and then shifted her eyes to Greg.

“Don’t even try it. I’m immune to your mind manipulations,” he advised her in his Confucius voice again.

“Well if they give you any trouble, let me know. Not that I can do anything about it, but let me know anyway,” she said before leaving.

“Will do, Doc.” Ariel answered.

In the waiting room, Vee was surprised that the agents were not the center of attention. All were looking up at the TV. She conformed and saw that the news anchor was still on. Breaking News was scribed under her. Something serious had happened. With the life she led, she had little time to pay attention to the outside world. Lately though, it had been making itself known.

“More violence in the Sudan as bombs have gone off in several mosques throughout the area. Some speculate that it is in retaliation for the bombings of the Israeli temples earlier today,” the anchor intoned, as footage of both bomb sites appeared on the screen. Both scenes of

Drew Henriksen

the bombings showed people crying over the bodies of dead children. Suddenly, Vee's smelly car and busy schedule did not seem important. Greg and Ariel watched her from the other side of the glass.

"I'm worried. Should we follow her?" Ariel asked him.

"No, she can take care of herself. It's the new ones we must watch," he replied showing no emotion.

The agents waited patiently for her to leave, then followed.

•

Vee pulled into her driveway with the windows wide open. It had been a long day indeed, and her nice comfy bed awaited. A good hot shower would relax her muscles and free her of any residual smell. In the rearview mirror, she saw the agents' car pull up behind her. She still had enough energy to give them a talking to, and a thorough one at that. In her ripe lab coat, she marched over to the car. In anticipation, the passenger window began to slide down, revealing Blondie.

"Yo, Malibu Ken, If you want to give yourself a break, you can log down that this my bed time. If you'd like, you could sit on my couch and make sure I don't spill any secrets in my sleep," she proclaimed.

"Not necessary, ma'am. Have a good evening," he

Dragons and Science

droned in that monotone southern drawl.

The window slid back up, sealing him off from her. Silently the car pulled off down the street. She hated the fact that he didn't even acknowledge her anger. Remembering her meditation exercises, she calmed herself down.

Her beautiful home beckoned to her. The single story ranch with all its warmth and coziness was all she needed. Putting the day behind her, she left the night outside and went in.

Ten minutes later, the back door of the Expedition popped open and the creature slithered out. Its fur was wet and matted to its skin. Blood dripped from its mouth as its newly formed fangs kept slicing its gums. They would toughen up in time. The new legs were a hundred times stronger than the old ones, with sharp claws that could slice any prey to ribbons. And prey was what it now craved. The bananas that were its mainstay would no longer suffice. It lifted its nose to the air and smelled the prey inside. If her neighbor had seen the thing creeping on her lawn, she would have thought it a mutated dog on steroids. As it reached the lit bay window, it saw the silhouette of the woman on the other side.

Time to pounce.

It licked its lips, slicing its tongue and not caring. It rejuvenated immediately. As it leaped, the other creature swooped down from the sky and grabbed the thing in its

Drew Henriksen

talons. Inside, Vee heard a yelp like a dog. She looked out to only see her quiet front lawn.

•

With a cup of decaf in hand, Vee clicked on the tube from her comfy sofa. Life was grand at that moment. The TV flickered on and the news reporter stared back.

“We have Vatican confirmation now, Sister Helena, The Living Saint of Bellamere has died at the age of 96. She was the last of the Bellamere Four who reportedly saw the Virgin Mary nearly ninety years ago. Recently, Pope Pius Leo flew to Bellamere. Many believe that Sister Helena withheld a secret that was to be disclosed only to the Pontiff himself at the time of her death.”

“Oh great. Just what we need,” Vee said out loud while she flipped to HBO.

Dragons and Science

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