

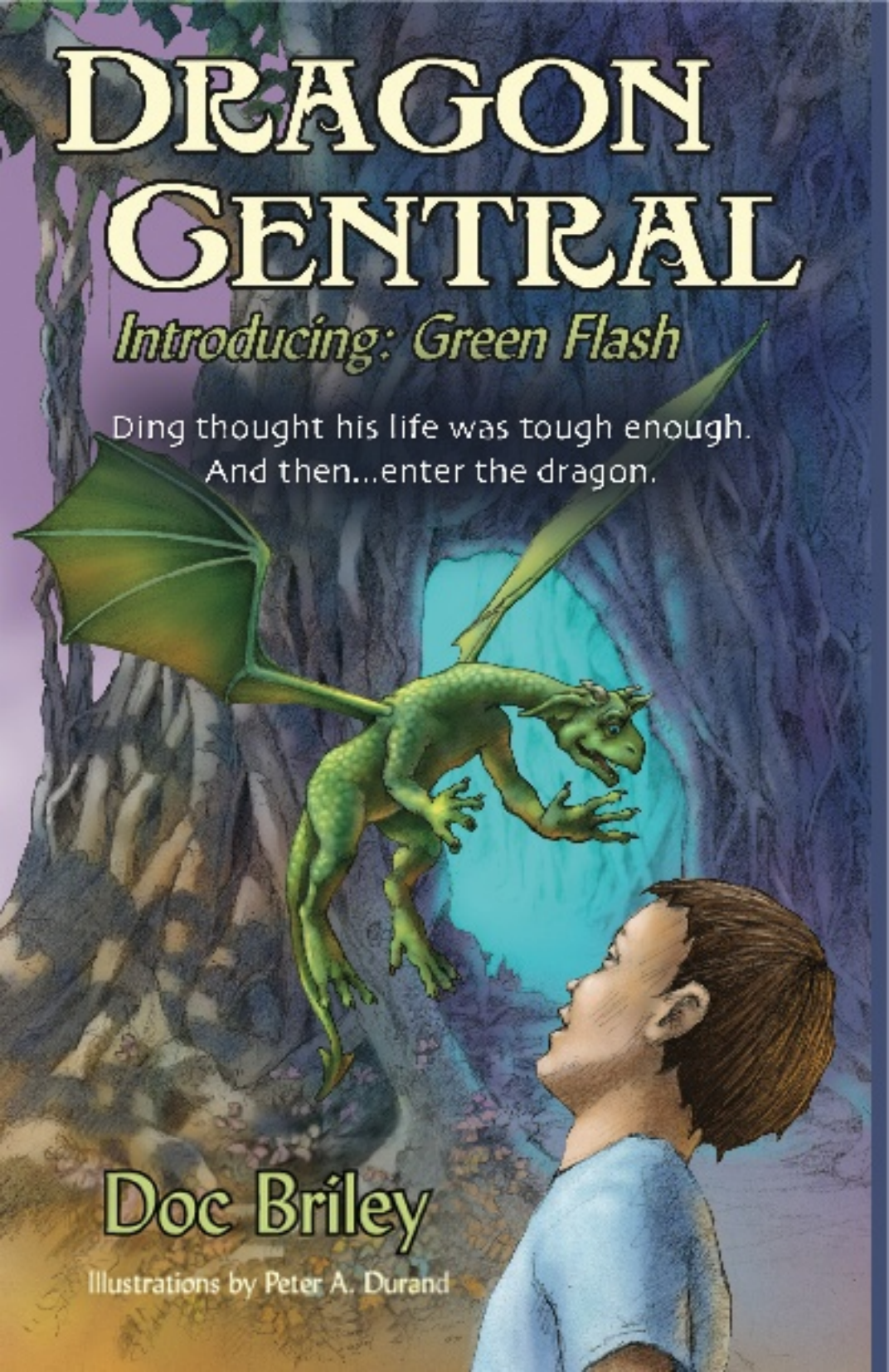
# DRAGON CENTRAL

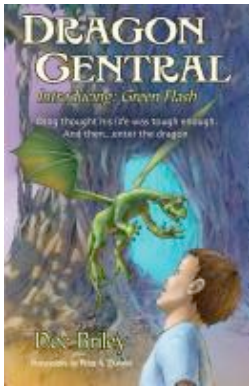
*Introducing: Green Flash*

Ding thought his life was tough enough.  
And then...enter the dragon.

Doc Briley

Illustrations by Peter A. Durand





*Ding thought he had problems - inside and outside the classroom, with a local gang, and with his father and little brother. He made bad choices due to a dark secret in his heart. A helper dragon, Green Flash, by mistake takes him to Dragon Central, a dangerous planet in a parallel universe. Even if Ding learns his truth, he might be stuck there forever...*

# Dragon Central: Introducing Green Flash

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“Look out, kid!” I heard the strange raspy voice holler. *Huh...?* Sitting on my butt, I looked up from the gutter. I’d slipped on the rain slippery curb while kicking crud out of a can.

“Huh?”

“Yeah, you kid; the one with his butt in the gutter! HEADS UP!”

The voice was so powerful I didn’t waste time saying, “Okay, okay, who said that?” I looked up as ordered. *Oh no Oh no Oh no!*

Too late. Voices screamed duet with a desperate wail of squealing brakes and my heart dropped somewhere around my ankles. I then understood what the claim “I was frozen with fear” meant; I found I couldn’t move as Death, in the form of a diesel-fed dragon, hurtled towards me, looming real big real fast. My mouth sandpaper dry, my body finally moved, but only to become Jell-O as I slipped on the curb and collapsed on the spot: and as for my brain and heart? Let’s just say they deserted me like everything else in my crud-filled life. But I *had* to move...and fast.

But I couldn’t.

I felt a sharp pain in my shoulder and blacked out...



I really dig the fantastic, gritty, whimsical, grounded, ungrounded world created by Doc Briley, and the illustrations are fabulous!

BRIAN KOHNE (Writer/Director) Most recent: *Get a Job*

John Briley is an imaginative and loving human who has nurtured children of all ages, as a pediatrician, as a family man, and as a storyteller—all his life. “Dragon Central” is as filled with surprising characters as he is. From earth to a parallel universe, Briley’s words will delight.

MARGO BERDESHEVSKY: Award winning poet, and Author of *Beautiful Soon Enough*, winner of Innovative Fiction Prize

This story deals with the insecurities that children experience, in this case the problems of the protagonist, Ding Diaz. The “wise- guy” talk is entertaining. The body of the story has a touch of the Irish, Cockney; as well as Trolls; Zombies, Fairies and Leprechauns, the intercultural similarities bind us all. I love Dunya (“Life and Mother of the World), of the long lost tribes of Sumeria, as Ding’s companion and guide.

NUANCE 2000

Anyone looking for a miniature superhero need look no further than DRAGON CENTRAL, where he or she will find the magical GREEN FLASH, Doc Briley's answer to every child's wish for a special friend and partner. Born out of Brileys's more than 40 years of experience treating children, Green Flash has seen it all and treated most of it in his dragonly way. Fire, anyone? Be prepared to enjoy a magical, mystical experience.

PHILLIP DREYER, School of Educational studies, and Psychology;  
Provost and Vice President Academic Affairs for Claremont  
Graduate University



# **DRAGON CENTRAL:**

## **Introducing Green Flash**

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First Edition



# **DRAGON CENTRAL:**

## **Introducing Green Flash**

by  
Doc Briley

Illustrated by:  
Peter Durand

## Chapter 1

“Look out, kid!” I heard a strange raspy voice holler. Huh...? Sitting on my butt, I looked up from the gutter. I’d slipped on the rain slippery curb while kicking a can.

“Huh?” I repeated, louder.

“Yeah, you kid; the one with his butt in the gutter! HEADS UP!” said a voice.

The voice was panicky so I didn’t waste time saying, “Okay, okay, who said that?”

Voices around me screamed as brakes real close to me squealed.

I looked up. *Oh no, oh no, oh no!*

Too late. My heart dropped to my ankles. I then understood what “frozen with fear” meant. As Death sped towards me I couldn’t move. Death came in the form of a diesel-fed dragon. The huge city bus loomed real big, real fast. My mouth felt as dry as sandpaper so I couldn’t say nothing. When my body finally moved...well, it was so weak I slipped on the curb and collapsed. I was dead meat for sure. Did I tell you I couldn’t move? Well, I couldn’t.

I felt a sharp pain in my shoulder and blacked out.

\*\*\*

Sorry. Look, I know I should’ve started from the beginning. But, hey, I’ll never forget that moment when I was going to die: crush by cross-town bus.

Anyways, the name's Domingo Diaz. But everyone calls me Ding (mainly because if someone calls me Domingo he's gonna get his kisser dinged.)

It all started after I tore out of Doc Kidder's office. The conversation was about me, and it was getting boring. Okay, not boring but Dad ticked me off, talking about me as if I wasn't there. And I was there. Funny how parents never notice that.

Doc wanted to talk to me alone, but Dad just had to chip in; and I don't have to take nothing from nobody, man; so I split.

"Domingo, come back!" Dad yelled. But I was already out the door, around the corner, and out of sight. Man, I gotta admire my own Olympic-class speed.

The cold rain attacking me from an angry sky couldn't cool off the anger boiling inside me.

*Stupid. Stupid. Stupid!*

I punched a red brick wall. Ow. I looked at my skinned knuckles thinking, "That was real smart, Ding" as my mood turned real black, real fast.

Anyways, I zoomed across a big street, almost getting creamed by a couple of honking cars sliding on rain slick to keep from smacking me. But like I said, man, I'm the fastest. "No one and nothing dings Ding," I yelled to the cars. Heh, heh... 'No one dings Ding'. Sometimes I crack my self up.

I zigzagged through a maze of alleys. The rain-soaked trash bins stunk like last week's garbage. Some cat yowled as I ran over its tail. With an angry hiss it jumped out of way.

My heart raced like a runaway subway train and I wanted to smash something-anything. I must have been running fast, because I had tears in my eyes from the wind. Yeah...from the wind, 'cause Ding don't cry,

I ran to a cemetery. Okay, so my mom happened to be buried there. I looked around; nobody had seen me.... I dropped my arm and let my balled fist relax.

Anyway, once there I felt I oughtta visit Mom. So I ran to her grave, the one with a stone statue of a guardian angel with outstretched wings cradling her tombstone. Throwing myself onto the grass-covered grave (I was tired from running, see), I hugged the earth. The wet aroma of earth and damp grass smelled...clean. Weird. That patch of graveyard felt as if it was my last friend.

"I miss you, Mom," I whispered. "I'm real sorry. It was my fault but I didn't mean it to happen, honest!" But telling the truth didn't help. I still felt real bad. My throat got tight and...*what's wrong with me?*

I got up and looked around. No one saw me wiping my tears.

I looked at my shirt and pants. *Madre de Dios*. Dad would have trouble getting out these grass stains. He never got our clothes as clean Mom used to.

Once out of the cemetery I ran so fast I was sweating like a boxer in the tenth round. I dodged down some piss-smelling alleys and screeched to a halt near some dented and grimy (and even smellier) garbage cans (dead rats must have been inside).

The reason for the sudden stop was because “The Gang of Three” blocked my way. They wanted to become “The Gang of Four” (with me being the fourth). Let me tell you, living in South Los Angeles was no picnic.

“Hey Ding,” Chivez sneered. “You ready to join the gang, or what?” I knew that nasty voice. It belonged to a tall, skinny fourteen year-old who liked to keep his hair oiled and swept back. He was with two other kids, the O’Doyle twins, both chubby and maybe a year younger. They liked to wear leather jackets and those gloves with the fingers cut off. They swaggered over. Their swaggering might’ve made them look tough if they weren’t acting so nervous.

I didn’t like the leader, Chivez much, but being in a gang might not be a bad idea, even if they were a couple of years older than me. But the guys were sorta okay. And a gang is, well, cool; like family, right? Though sometimes it seemed like a dumb idea. Like, I already had a family...my little bro’, my pop. I sighed; and at that moment I really didn’t know what to think. I mean, it just seems no one seems to know that sometimes life can be real confusing to a kid.

Chivez wore this black T-shirt that shouted in bright green and red: “Born to Kick Butt”. Which was sort of funny since he spent a lot of time getting *his* butt kicked. I suspected they were trying to get me to join their gang since the other two were getting tired trying to bail him out half the time.

“Look, you ready to join up?” Chivez sounded impatient as he swept his already swept back oiled hair.

“Yeah, sure, man,” I said. “You know me: born to rumble.”

“Good. That's real good,” Chivez said with an unpleasant smile.

“Yeah, we need you!” his two buddies said in chorus. They moved close to their taller pal. They looked like two small bookends on either side of a real big book.

Chivez gave a wicked grin and handed me a small box of matches. “All ya gotta do is go start a little fire behind the video store.”

“Uh, and why do I wanna do that, man?” I asked, puzzled.

“You don't get it, do you?” Chivez grinned.

“No, he don't get it,” the “bookends” echoed.

Chivez draped an arm over my shoulder, squeezing a little too hard. “Look, it's simple. You start a small fire behind the store and yell 'Fire'. Then, when all the jerks run out of the store, we run in and—”

“And grab us a bunch of video tapes,” one of the twins interrupted with a big grin, wiping his nose with his sleeve.

Chivez whacked the kid's head. “Shaddup, stupid!”

The kid whined, “Yo! What'd I do?”

Chivez scrunched his eyes. “Just shaddup and listen.”

“Er, I dunno,” I said very hesitantly. A gang was one thing...but stealing stuff? Fighting other kids is one thing, man, but a fire? It's uncool. Not to mention someone might get hurt. “I think—”

“Don't think!” Chivez poked my chest, knocking me back a few inches. “I do all the thinking around here, stupid!”

I felt my face burning. “Hey, man, don't call me *muino*!”

“Mu'...what?”

“*Muino*. ‘Stupid’. I don’t like being called ‘stupid’. ‘Cause I ain’t!” Losing my cool, without thinking I poked Chivez’s chest.

Uh-oh. Not only was Chivez bigger than me, there were his two buddies to figure in a fight. Actually, since I barely touched Chivez, what happened next didn’t make no sense till later. I’ll get to that later.

Chivez flew backwards over some trashcans, almost as if I had punched him rather than barely poked him. As the two buddies tried to help him, they too seemed lose their balance. Real sudden like, they toppled onto Chivez.

They sat there in the wet, smelly garbage with comical looks in their faces. They sounded comical too, each blaming the other, and me, for pushing them.

“I didn’t push you, guys. You all sort of...fell,” I pointed out. The gang, flat on their butts, looked like the three stooges (with rotten lettuce hanging from their ears). They crawled out of the garbage. From the dark expressions glowering on their faces I could tell they were planning to rearrange my face.

I put my fists up, prepared for them. Ding don’t go down without a fight.

Suddenly, they all fell over once again, back into the trashcans. And I didn’t even touch them that time either! Honest. No joke, they fell right back on their butts as if knocked over by some weird force.

I thought I heard a raspy voice chuckling. I jerked around to see who was there. More creeps in the alley? Another enemy?

But nobody was there. Huh? Man, this was getting weird.

*Madre de Dios*, I had taken my eye off the gang. I wheeled to face their attack. But they had had enough. They shook their fists at me. Scowling with a brave...(not)...promise of threat in their eyes, they took off.

Feeling real confused I walked towards the street. When I reached the curb, I looked back. "Well, so much for joining the gang," I muttered. On the other hand, suddenly they didn't seem so cool. But a gang meant "family", right? *Ai*, what a mess. I wanted to join. And yet I didn't. Confused, I kicked a half-crumpled aluminum soda can down the cracked sidewalk.

I then heard the raspy voice again. "Hey, kid," it said, real friendly like. "Did ya see the look on their kissers? Har, har...whatta buncha turkeys!"

"Hey! Who said that?" I swung to see where the voice was coming from, but once again no one was there.

Like, weird. Or maybe I was losing it and was goin' nuts. Not paying attention, I kicked the can off the curb and followed it into the street, still looking around for the stupid owner of the voice. Unfortunately, though, I wasn't looking in the direction I shoulda been watching: the street.

And that's where you guys came into the story, with me about to become road kill.

"Jump outta the way, kid!" the invisible, raspy voice screeched. "You're about to get creamed!"

Then I saw why the voice was upset, and *I* became upset: a humongous city bus rumbled down on me like a starved T. Rex on its victim. And that's when, like I said, I froze in mid step, slipped on the curb, and slid like Jell-O into the dirty gutter.



I did the only thing I could. I prayed; prayed real hard and real fast as the bus barreled towards me. It was now close enough for me to see the bus driver's eyes wide in panic. And since the "panic" was because of he thought I was a dead kid, I couldn't exactly feel sorry for him.

I heard the squeal of brakes and felt something sharp hit my shoulder. Suddenly everything became black, not to mention freezing cold.

\*\*\*

I had shut my eyes tightly. Hey, man, you would too if you thought you was about to mushed road kill. As I fell into freezing black space I still felt the sharp pain in my shoulder.

*So this is dead*, I thought. Maybe I felt a little scared, but just a little. Like I said, Ding Diaz wasn't afraid of anything. Man, it was odd. I couldn't see or hear anything. Where was "the big white light" everyone said you were supposed to walk into? All I could feel was this stinking sharp jab in my shoulder.

Then it hit me. Wait a minute! If I was dead and in heaven (I sure hoped) I wouldn't be feeling even a tiny bit scared. And I wouldn't be feeling any stupid pain neither. Right? And then there was the bit about no light.

"Argggghhhh!" I had been sent the other way! Dad, and Father Ortiz at Saint Theresa was right: if I didn't "mend" my ways I'd get into trouble some day. Big time. And worse, I would never see mama up in heaven!

After a split second whirling in freezing black space, my feet gripped solid ground again. My skin felt warmer.

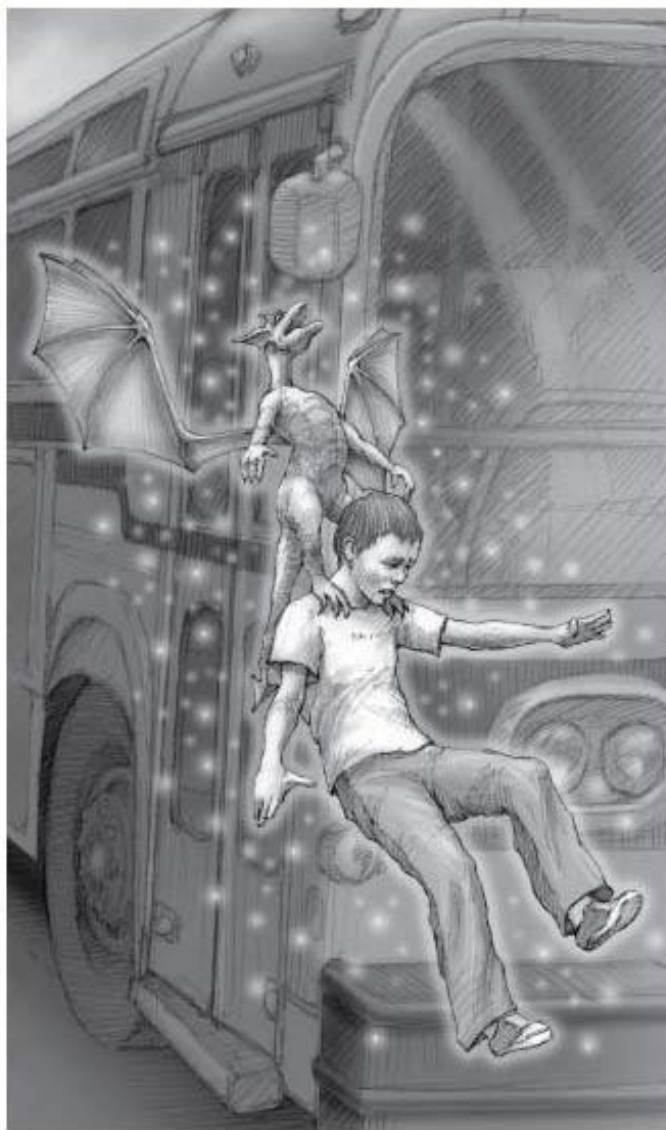
I slowly cranked open one eye.

I guess I sort of freaked out. And why, you wonder, would a cool guy like Ding Diaz freak out?

Because I was no longer on Planet Earth, and I'm not busting your *piñata*, man, I really wasn't.

*Madre de Dios!* I'd died and gone somewhere real hot. Hot? Jeez, I'd been sent to Hell.... I was alone. Now I was at least maybe a little "scared".

Opening my other eye, I looked around for a smirking, cloven-hoofed guy with the pitchfork. No devil stood before me. But what did was creepy. I mean it was real creepy. "Arrrggghhh!" I screamed.



## Chapter 6

“Don't worry, kid,” Flash said enthusiastically, it'll work!” This encouraged me until he had to add, “And you can trust me to do my part. Can't fail.”

I distracted the Droids by yelling and waving my little gold cross as Flash got to work. He flew to Dunya's ankles and chomped on her tethers of vines; with several quick snips they rustled free.

I jumped forward, holding the gold cross in front of me like I was facing vampires. Screaming in terror of the “sacred” metal, the Droids ran down the tunnel. Though they didn't forget to drag Dunya's tethers with them, fortunately Dunya was no longer attached.

I pointed to the opposite direction of the disappearing Droids. “Let's split this nowhere scene, man!”

“Er...split?” Dunya looked confused. “Scene?”

“In other words: Let's get outta here!” I explained while grabbing Dunya's hand and racing towards the surface.

By the time the Droids discovered Dunya was no longer their prisoner, man, we was above ground and long gone.

\*\*\*

The day-blooming Perfume Plants gave a sweet smell to the clean and clear Dragon Central air. As we traveled, Flash swooped close above us in lazy circles, loops, and figure-of-eights.

“Show off,” I muttered.

Dunya had said not a word since our escape. She kept her head down so her long black hair hid her face. She just shuffled along, following half-heartedly. In other words, she kept to herself.

I was confused. After all the trouble we'd taken (not to mention almost getting caught trying to help her escape) she was still resisting. "Not so much as a crummy 'gee, thanks for saving my life'?"

She didn't reply.

"I give up," I said to Flash. I wondered what the heck could make her want to stay with the Droods. I mean, it seemed real clear to me she didn't really want to. And then I found myself worried about getting home before my dad worried about me. I told Flash.

Flash pointed a boney fore claw at me. "Keerect me if I'm wrong, kid, but I thought you was mad at yer dad, "

"Well, I..." Again I felt confused and discovered that I couldn't explain my feelings.

"Don't worry, kid," he said. "Ya see, although Earth and Dragon Central occupy the same space in parallel universes, our time is different. If we plays our cards right, we could get ya home before he knows you're gone."

"Huh?" Great: more confusing information from green snoot.

Curiosity must have gotten the better of Dunya's insistence on silence. "I do not understand, either," she confessed.

Flash put on his 'teacher' tone of voice. "That's because you've never been to Planet Earth. Yer great-great-great-great-

and so on and so forth grandparents came here to Dragon Central from Earth t'ousands o' years ago. Earth time, that is. It was *hundreds* of t'ousands of years ago Dragon Central time."

Dunya looked as confused as I felt. "Pardon?"

Flash swooped down, hovered behind me, and whispered with a cackle, "Heh, heh. Knew that'd open her up. One thing about Sumerians—those buggers are curious." He winked, and then dug an elbow in my shoulder.

Flash went on to explain. "We dragons don't know how you Sumerians got here. Maybe it was due to some kinda weird time warp. On the other claw, dragons could get back and forth to earth by just wishing it. And by usin' the Gateway Tree, of course. The big dragons don't do it no more, but us small dragons still do. But then a dragon brain is a lot more powerful than a human brain. Anyhoo, we dragons have treated humans here on Dragon Central a whole lot better than humans treated us on Earth. And that's a fact."

"You mean the stories of dragons ain't so?" I asked, amazed. "About eating maidens? Wiping out herds of cattle and sheep? And burning villages? And..."

"All bald-faced lies, kid!" Flash waved his wings and screeched, clearly upset. "Lies made up by humans who liked to hunt and kill my bigger brothers. First, on Earth dragons can't make fire—no fire rocks there, ya see. And second, why the ding dong would they ask for trouble by eatin' people and their pets?"

"Hmm. I gotta admit," I said, "you got a point. Look, man, it's getting warm in this hot sun." I pointed to a forest of

green wood trees (like giant redwood trees on Earth, only with green trunks and blue leaves).

By now it was getting hot. “Could we go there for shade?”

Dunya just shrugged, once again on her sullen “keep-quiet” computer setting. I was beginning to feel more than just a little annoyed with this silent treatment. She was being about as useful as a car without an engine.

“Sure, kid.”

Dunya gave yet another I-could-care-less shrug.

We entered the forest and near a bubbling brook found a log to sit on. The musty forest smells were also a lot better than those of the underground river. And the musical chirps of the purple flying froglets seemed to calm me down.

“Anyhoo, about our times being diffrent: five minutes o’ Dragon Central time equals one second on earth, so lemme see now, that means DC is almost three hunnert times faster than Earth, which means...” Flash counted on his claw talons, “five hours on DC equals only one minute on earth.”

Dunya looked puzzled. “Umm... ‘DC’?”

I replied, “DC, for Dragon Central. You oughta hear the long version of the name in dragon language.” But I was thinking about what Flash said about the time difference on ‘DC’.

“Which means,” I said, chipping in while scrunching my eyes in thought, “one day here’s five minutes back on earth; and one week here only takes up about a half hour on Earth—thirty-five minutes to be exact. Wow, that’s wild, man!”

“Say, kid, that's pretty good figgering’.” Flash nudged Dunya. “Real sharp at arithmetic, ain't he?”

She didn't say nothing to break her silence, but I thought she looked a teensy impressed.

I felt my face blush at Flash's compliment. I had what school called a “learning disability” and, to tell the truth, I felt stupid 'cause I had to go to special classes. Classes some dorks called the “classes for dummies”. The rotten jerks.

When Dunya caught me catching her looking at me she scowled and lowered her head. What was it with her?

“At any rate. I got plenty of time to figure a way to get ya back home way before your dad knows you've been gone. So don't you worry, kid,” Flash reassured me, happily swooping back and forth and up and down.

I glared at him. “I hate it when you say 'don't worry, kid', because, for some reason, man, that's when I get real worried.

Then I saw something that made my eyes pop. “Hey, look! Gold! There are gold coins lying on the ground.” I pointed to small piles of gold that formed a line through the forest. “There...there...and...*there!*”

Grabbing my arm, Flash screeched. “Don't touch it, kid!”

“Huh? Why not? The stuff's just lying around, and...”

As I reached for some gold Flash said darkly, “Ya wanna be scorched by dragon fire? Ya will be if you touches that gold!”

I jerked my hand back real fast as I swiveled my head, looking for dragons with smoke pouring from their nostrils.

“Hey, I don't see no dragons. Besides, why would they—  
”



“Why ya think the Droods ain’t followin’ us?” Flash interrupted, sounding frustrated. “Why do ya think they live where they do? Do ya know why, kid? Eh?”

“No, man, but I got a sneaking suspicion you’re gonna tell me,” I said with a sarcastic snort.

“Well now I don’t want to,” Flash sulked, grumbling and sounding hurt. “So let Dunya tell ya.” I had clearly hurt his feelings somehow.

“No, you go ahead, Flash,” Dunya said, determined to stay clamed up. Dragons are much better story tellers.”

I threw up my hands. “Well, *someone* please tell me.”

“You talked me into it, kids.” It appeared this fun-loving little dragon could not be gloomy for long. “Ya see, dragons do not just love gold; we needs it. We sleeps on gold because it armors our scales and keeps ‘em shiny, healthy and strong. We collects gold from wherever we finds it; steal it, even...only if we *has* to, of course.”

“Aha! So *that’s* why the old Earthers took to disliking dragons so much,” I interrupted with a “gotcha!” tone of voice. “You ripped-off their gold!”

Flash shot me a dirty look. “Zip it, kid,” he snapped. “As I was *saying*...centuries ago the Droods lived above ground, and they too, hungered for gold. But, they had no real need for it, as we did. They was just plain ol’ greedy.”

“Not, of course, like some *dragons* I know,” I said, offering a little smirk since I noticed how he drooled when he looked at the little piles of gold.

“Ya say somethin’, kid?” Flash said, a dangerous look in his eye.

“Er, no.” I decided for my own safety to drop the subject. “So how come the Droods are afraid of it now?” I was puzzled. “It don’t make sense, man.”

“It will make sense if ya let me finish the story, kid!” Flash complained.

“Sorry.” As I apologized I grinned at Dunya. She surprised me by smiling back. It wasn’t a whole lot of smile, but it was still a smile.

“Anyhoo, dragons are magical. Did I tell you that yet?” Flash bragged.

“I sorta figured that out on my own.” My snicker and rolling my eyes got a giggle from Dunya. Which made me feel good.

Not appreciating my humor, Flash said, “Look kid, my turning invisible and being able to transport you from Earth to here ain’t nothin’; not compared to what the Great Flying Dragons can do.”

“Great Flying Dragons?” This was a new development.

“No, the little purple froglets,” he said sarcastic like. “Of *course* the Great Flying Dragons!”

“Just asking!”

“Stop carping at each other,” Dunya blurted, holding her ears. “Maybe then you could share ideas.” She said it in a bossy way. (Which meant she knew she was right, and man, I hate that.) “Sorry,” she added in a small voice, as if realizing she had just opened up. She hung her head again.

*Oh for feek’s sake.*

“Yeah, right,” Flash said. Now it was his turn to roll *his* eyes. “Anyhoo, the Great Dragons is always the kings and

queens of Dragon Central. The father of the Great Dragon King now in power put a curse on the gold. And this curse, ya see, makes the Droids *afraid* of gold. It makes ‘em *so* afraid that they never want to be anywheres near the stuff. And the only place there *ain’t* no gold is in the lava tubes underground. So that’s where the Droids choose to live.”

The light finally lit up in my head. “So dragons put gold at a distance around the opening to the underground river system? To keep the Droids away?”

“Bingo, kid.” Flash smiled warmly. “Ya catch on quick, for a human.”

It was too much for Dunya and she broke her silence again. “Must I remind you that dragons did it with the help of humans,” Dunya said in protest. She shuddered and added, “Do you think we humans here on Dragon Central *like* the cannibal Droids?”

“Well, I don’t know about you guys,” Flash said with a yawn, “but after our little adventure I’m ready for a little snoozeroo.”

“Good idea, Flash.” Though I felt a little tired, my curiosity about Dragon Central was stronger. “I’ll just stay up awhile; maybe look around.”

Flash didn’t hear me; he was already falling asleep. He later claimed if he had heard what I’d said and had known what trouble I would get into he never would have taken that snooze.

\*\*\*

Dunya and Flash were just waking up as I strolled back into the clearing, rolling before me the rock I’d found.

I announced my presence. “Hey, I’m back.”

“Swell. Yippy skippy. Terrific. Truth to tell, I didn’t know you was away, kid.” Flash rubbed his eyes. It sounding like a rough-grade sandpaper rubbing across concrete. We had slept most of the afternoon; and now the sky had darkened, with wispy pink clouds streaming southwest, pushed by the evening wind shift. It felt cooler.

Flash took one look at the rock and pointed at it with suspicion. “Where’d you find that?”

“I woke up and got bored. So I took a little walk, and, man, just lookee at the cool rock I found!” I pointed to the three-foot long, oval shaped rock.

“Oh, just a rock.” He looked relieved. “Ha ha ha. Phew...what a relief. For a second I thought it was a...”

I shook my head. “Kinda heavy for it’s size though. It’s covered with dirt and mud, but if you look on the bottom...” I turned the rock over, “See the cool rainbow colors!”

Flash paled. As a matter for fact, so did Dunya.

“Okay, okay. What did I do wrong now? I find a real interesting rainbow colored, smooth round rock and bring it back and you guys act as if I brought you a ticking atomic bomb.”



Flash's eyes got two sizes bigger. "Rainbow colored? Kinda...heavy...for...its size? No...no.... Say it ain't so! It ain't 'xactly 'round', kid. It's—"

"Not round? Say, you're right. No wonder I had trouble rolling it here. But, man, did you ever seen such neat colors? They seem to swirl: gold, green, blue, and...say, what's bugging you anyway, Flash?"

"It swirls in gold, green, and.... Oh-my-gosh!" Flash stared in horror at my rock.

"Oh no," Dunya said in her quiet anxious voice.

"That ain't no rock, kid. It ain't 'round' 'cause it's a dragon's egg. And that's a fact. So you just roll it right back where ya found it—and I means now!"

He turned to Dunya. I let 'em outta my sight for a minute and he steals a dragon egg!" His eyes whirled its odd gold flecks. I was to learn he did that when he either thought something was funny or if he was upset. And at that moment he wasn't laughing, which meant he was real upset...but about what?

"Too late," Dunya said, before I could ask. She pointed at the egg. "Can you not see a pink color beginning to swirl on the green? It is ready to hatch!"

"Oh, by the Eggs of Garenth, Kid. Ya really blew it this time!"

"Yes," Dunya agreed, jabbing a finger at me, "One does not go around stealing; especially one does not steal dragons' eggs!"

Now that pissed me off. Like I said, no one calls Ding Diaz a thief. I shook my fist in her face. “Don’t call me a thief or I might pop you one!”

Look, I wasn’t gonna hit her. My dad taught me better than that. But I guess Dunya thought I was going to. She grabbed my arm, twisted her body a funny way, and I flipped over her hip and fell flat on my butt.

“Hey!” I jumped up. “Like to see you try and do that again, girl!”

So she did it again.

And again.

Okay, okay. So it was embarrassing, but it also was pretty cool. And cool beats embarrassing. “Hey, you suppose you could teach me how to do that?”

She looked surprise. “You want me to help *you*?”

“Sure, girl; why not?” To tell the truth, I wanted to see the look on Blondie’s face when I pulled the trick on him.

She sighed sadly. “Because I am not safe to be around...”

“Hey, kids!” Flash interrupted before she could explain. “We sorta got a real big problem to deal with first. The dragon egg? Remember the dragon egg?”

“We have to get it back to its mother before it hatches,” Dunya advised.

“No kidding! Say,” Flash said to me with a groan, “how’d ya ever manage to steal it from under the noses of the guardians?” Despite his uneasiness he sounded curious. (I was to learn that sometimes Flash’s curiosity could cause a whole lot of trouble.)

“I didn’t steal nothing, man! I...wait a minute! Who the heck are the ‘guardians’?”

“Less talk and more walk. No—better to run,” Flash said as we hustled back in the direction I’d come from. Rather than rolling the egg ahead of me (which might cause it to hatch early), me and Dunya held it between as we made a stumbling run. Green snoot circled above us with a frantic flapping of his wings rather than his usual lazy swoops.

“Ya see, kid, no dragon will leave her egg.... Not never; not nohow; and don’t stop walkin’, kid!” he said, interrupting himself as I came to a halt to listen. “Keep running! You can listen to me and run at the same time! As a matter o’ fact, can’t ya run little faster?”

“You think it’s easy (puff, puff) to run with this heavy thing uphill, man?” Though I groused, I had a real uneasy feeling about the situation and tried to run faster.

All of a sudden Dunya went from silence to yakkety yak at light speed. “As Flash said,” she piped up, “no dragon will leave her egg. (Huff puff). And if she does have to leave, to go eat or whatever, her mate always takes her place. That way, the ‘kit’ is always covered and protected. At least one of them will always be there when the kit hatches...”

“Yeah, yeah. Keerect, girl,” Flash said, interrupting. “Forget the lesson on dragonology! I suggest we like move it, move it, move it! “

I thought, oh sure, *Dunya goes from saying nothing to being some kind of dragon expert*. “What’s a kit?” I asked (puff, puff). Dragon eggs sure were heavy.



“A kit’s a baby dragon, kid. To be more accurate, a newborn dragon is called a hatchling. (Don’t slow down, kid.) But in one single day, if it eats good, it can double its size. (Speed it up, kid.) So after the first day it is no longer called a hatchling. It’s called a ‘kit’. (Can’t ya go any faster, kid?)” Flash rolled all the information out in an almost one big sentence, forgetting to use his lecture tone voice.

“What I am curious to know,” Dunya said, “is how you managed to remove the egg? Without being scorched by dragon fire?”

“Tell us later, kid, and walk faster!” Flash said in the way of an order. “In a nutshell, kid, dragons take a real dim view towards anyone messing with their eggs. A *real* dim view. And that’s a fact.”

My stomach churned and suddenly *I* had a real dim view: about the pretty egg. Oh great...*just great*.

## Chapter 7

“Hey, man—I didn’t see no dragons hanging around.”  
Dunya grabbed my shoulders. “What? An abandoned egg? That is unheard-of!”

“What she means is no dragon pair abandons an egg. Unless...” Flash looked real hopeful. “Unless the parents are *both* dead. Here, lemme see that egg.”

“Can I put it down first?” I grumbled.

“Sure, if both parents are dead we got no worries.” Flash put a claw on the eggshell.

His green face turned pale.

Alarmed, I asked, “What’s wrong, Flash?”

“We got worries, kid! The egg is still warm. *Some* dragon has been sitting on it. Hoo boy, I got bad vibes about this.”

“One of the pair of dragons must be dead,” Dunya said. “Or the baby would not be left alone for even a second.” Being anxious must have overcome her shyness, because she was sure talking more now.

“True,” Flash said. “On the other claw, with the egg still warm, one o’ the pair of mating dragons is still alive. Quick! Stop goofin’ off kid; pick it up and start running. We gotta get it back, and fast! And I ain’t kiddin’!”

“Hey, man, make up your mind. You just told me to put it down!”

“Don’t do what I *told* ya, kid—do what I tell ya. I’m telling ya!”

“Huh?” Was Flash *loco*?

“Move it, kid!” Flash shouted.

“All right, all right. Stop shouting; I ain’t deaf. Man, what a grouch!”

“Maybe we can sneak it back on time,” Dunya said hopefully. “Maybe the mother dragon is getting a drink of water. Or maybe she is hunting. Or maybe...”

A monstrous roar interrupted her; a dragon roar; an angry dragon roar; a very angry dragon roar from a dragon headed our way.

Flash groaned. “That’s a mad momma dragon roar; Momma’s here, and Momma sounds real angry.”

“Maybe if we explain,” I said, sounding a whole lot more confident than I actually felt.

“Oh that’s a hot one!” Flash replied. “Gee Mrs. Dragon,” he said, mimicking me, “I’m so-o-o sorry I took your egg, ‘man’. I thought it was only a pretty rock, ‘man’.” Flash snorted, and said, “Oh yeah, she’s gonna reaaaaally buy that.”

Dunya pointed to the egg. “Well, when the egg hatches, and the hatchling runs to her, and is bonded to her, she will soon forget us.”

A cracking sound dashed my brief surge of hope. The egg was hatching; and the hatchling would not see its mother when he popped out of its egg.

“Oh no!” Dunya said, as if reading my thoughts. “If the hatchling comes now, it will bond to one of us first.”

“So what’s the big deal? We just split and leave the kit to its momma.”

“You don’t understand! It’s called ‘imprinting’. The kit will think one of *us* is its mother. And the momma will be exceedingly cross.”

“Cross?” Flash hopped from one foot to another. “It’ll be downright furious! She’ll be totally pissed off. She’ll make toast outta all of us. In a nutshell, she’ll—”

“We’re dead meat,” I groaned. The feeling of a knife twisting more in my gut, I set the egg down. “Run, everyone. Let the mother dragon find the hatchling when we’re long gone....like, I’m outta here, man!”

“Good idea!” Dunya and Flash agreed as one

But, as we turned to run the egg exploded, spraying us all with wet shell fragments. It seems that dragons hatch out of their eggs with one big burst; not slowly like Earth bird eggs.

“Too late!” Dunya cried.

And then the worst happened.

First, I got to explain that dragon hatchlings, which are about the size of a Saint Bernard dog, are real cute. Did I say cute? Downright cuddly is more accurate. At any rate, “cuddly” is the important word here. It is important because I’ve learned something about girls: they love cuddly critters. And that’s why the worst happened.

Dunya saw the hatchling, her eyes softened and her lips formed a smile.

“Uh-oh,” Flash said. “Us is in trouble now. Sh-e-e’s hooked.”

“Which one is hooked, Flash, the baby dragon or Dunya?”

“Dunya!” Flash warned. He then growled in a combination of disgust and complaint, “Oh terrific—it looks like the little dragonet is likewise hooked on Dunya. Leapin’ Anterian Fire Lizards, Ding, what a fine mess you’ve gotten us into!”

“Chirrrup?” said the brown hatchling, a small piece of shell revolving like a Frisbee on its shell-breaking beak. It instinctively looked for its mother.

“Oh-h-h, isn't it adorable!” As Dunya reached for the hatchling she burst forth with one of her rare smiles; a dazzling smile; but in this case that meant trouble. Literally tons of trouble.

Flash tugged at her. “No, girl. He ain’t adorable. Don't...”

Dunya gave it a big squishy hug.

“...touch it,” Flash ended too late. “Oh yeah,” Flash added in disgust, “she’s gone, all right.”

It was love at first sight for Dunya and it was love at first touch for the hatchling. As predicted, it took Dunya for its mother and chirruped happily.

Dunya’s face paled. “Oh no, I have done it now, haven't I?”

“You think?” I muttered, knowing this would not go over real well with Mrs. Dragon—the real mother who is a really, really big dragon.

“Well,” Flash said, gloom in his voice, “ya sure didn’t do us no favor, and that’s a fact.”

I said, “When mama shows up and sees junior cuddling up to you instead of her...well, this is sure gonna end up being a real short trip.”

“No kiddin’!” Flash said with a snort. “Another fine mess you’ve gotten us into, kid!”

“Me! That’s the second time you blamed me, green snoot. *You* brought me here in the first place!”

“Well *you* stole the egg!” he retorted.

“Did not! I argued back, “I only...” My words trailed off...a big, green, wingless fire breather galumphed into the clearing, roaring enough to shake the trees.

“It’s Mama!” Flash said, groaning.

“No kidding.” To me it looked sort of like the ugly twin sister of Snarf, except of a different color.

She was quick to notice her egg was no longer an egg but a hatchling. Her eyes became huge and wisps of smoke wafted from her nostrils. And when she further saw the hatchling chirruping happily and rubbing up to Dunya...well, like Flash predicted, she looked totally pissed.

Toast Central, man.

“Rrrowwwfff!” she snarled. (According to Flash, “Rrrowwwfff” is dragon for “BOY ARE YOU GONNA GET IT NOW!”)

“Hold it, Mrs. Dragon,” I said, trying to explain, holding my palms up. “This is not what it looks like. Well, I guess it does *sorta* seem the way it looks. But, though it looks bad, it really isn’t and...well, when you stop to think about it,” I added with a forced little laugh (more like a nervous squeak), “it *is* kind of a funny story—ha, ha, ha...you see...”

“Silence!” roared the enraged Mrs. Mama Dragon.

“Yessir, ya re-e-eally explained that real good to her, kid,” Flash snorted, jabbing a talon at me. “I thought I told ya,

kid—wingless fire breathers got no sense o’ humor!” Flash’s whisper filtered to me over Big Mama’s echoing roar.

“I heard that!” Big Mama growled.

“Wait a minute, guys,” I said, “How do we know this is her egg, anyway?”

“Er, kid, don’t go there...I mean about the not-your-egg thing!”

“Well look,” I pointed out, “The hatchling has wings and Big Mama doesn’t.”

“You idiot human!” Big Mama screeched.

Flash groaned. “That’s right, make her madder why don’t you!”

“Silence!” she snarled, sounding even madder.

It suddenly became real quiet real quick in that clearing.

“I’ll have you know, boy,” Big Mama growled, glaring at me, “that a wingless dragon can give birth to a winged one every now and then!”

“Hm, must be genetic drift, or mutation, or something like that,” I whispered to Flash. “Learned that in Science, too.”

“Kid, you’re killin’ me, literally.”

“So? Back to our little problem,” Big Mama interrupted with a menacing growl. “Stealing my hatchling, eh?”

“Well, not exa-a-actly.” Dunya then tried to explain. “You see, oh great one, we were taking a little nap when—”

“I said, *silence!*”

Dunya flinched, and it became even quieter. The birds and purple flying froglets stopped chirping. Heck, even the breeze seemed to stop.

When big, green and dumpy felt she had our full attention she said in a low rumble, “You shall all die the death of a thousand screams!”

Dunya said in a whisper, “This is not very promising!”

“Ya think?” But she had a point: a ‘death of a thousand screams’ sounded real uncool.

Flash gulped. “Well, there ain’t no way I can help you guys. And there ain’t no sense in all of us getting fried, so maybe I’ll just mosey off and fly outta here.”

“Flash—don’t you dare leave us!”

Dunya wailed, “We need you!”

“Spoilsports!” he sulked

“Look, Flash, you’re a dragon. Maybe you ought to explain!” I offered as a reasonable suggestion, eyeing Mama Dragon warily.

Too late.

Mama took a big breath to release a real scorcher. As I said before: Toast Central.

Then an odd thing happened. The baby dragon, seeing the danger, jumped between Big Mama and Dunya.

“Chirrup!” It spread its wings, protecting Dunya, and hissed warningly to Big Mama. When Big Mama stopped in surprise, Dunya acted.

“Quickly,” Dunya said, ordering us, “get behind me.”





“I totally get it! The baby dragon thinks you’re its ‘mama’ and is protecting you.”

I figured Dunya had been the first to touch it as soon as it was born. So to the baby dragon, the girl was its real mama, making Big Mama look like a strange and dangerous outsider dragon. All this because Big Mama hadn't been there when it had hatched and had not been the first to touch it.

I shouted to Flash, “Quick, do what Dunya says, get behind her!”

“No worries, kid. Dragon flames can’t hurt me.”

But I noticed that when I dove behind Dunya Flash got there first.

It was no surprise Big Mama was more than a teensy upset.

She hopped from foot to foot (a sure sign of rage in a dragon), making the ground tremble like a minor earthquake.

Big Mama snarled in angry agony, “Do you (growl, gasp) know what you have (snort) done? You have (shriek) impressed *my* kit! You miserable humans!”

“Impressed' it?” I asked.

“Chirrup?” echoed the hatchling kit.

“Yes,” Dunya said, her face unhappy. “Her kit is now bonded to me. So she is really angry.”

“Well, what happened?” Big Mama said with a loud shriek. “Someone had better talk fast! Someone or some dragon,” Big Mama’s scowl nailed the unfortunate Flash.

“(Gulp) Now, now, Madam,” Flash said, “let us not do nothin’ rash “

We then all talked at once in English, Sumerian, and Dragon.

“One at a time! One at a time!” she snarled. (Oddly, it turned out her name was 'Snarl'.)

“Uh, you go first, Dunya,” I said in way of suggestion. “You live here.”

“No, be my guest, you go first, Ding. You started this,” she urged.

“That's right,” I said, complaining, “blame the whole thing on me.”

“Now you sound like your little dragon friend,” Dunya said, frowning.

“Dragon friend? Friend? You gotta be kidding! He's been nothing but...” Hmmm. I thought it over. Of course! *Flash* would make the logical leader for our group—being a dragon and all. “Say, maybe Flash should go first. After all, he is fellow dragon.”

“Well,” Flash huffed, as he flew to my shoulder, “if you're gonna get *picky* about it...”

“*Enough!* Somebody better go first,” Snarl bellowed. “I am losing patience fast!” Indeed, her nostrils smoked again, and the smoke got thicker, darker, and hotter; and the kit hissed and stepped closer in to protect us.

I said, “Well, by mistake...”

“By mistake, you understand,” Dunya interrupted, trying to help. “He did not mean to take an egg.”

“Yeah, what *she* said.” I jerked my thumb at Dunya. “Anyway, I sorta walked off with your egg; but hey—it was a simple little mistake, man”

“‘Simple little mistake’? Sort of walked off...with my egg? A dragon egg? By 'mistake'? How could that happen? All humans on Dragon Central know better!” She paused, an eyebrow ridge arched in puzzlement.

“Well, that's just it, man, I'm not from here, I am, er, like I'm from Earth, and...er...”

Flash shot me a warning glance and said in pig Latin, “Ixnay on Earth-ay.”

I turned to green snoot. “Why can't I say I'm from Earth?”

“Well, truth to tell, kid,” he whispered behind a green, membranous wing, we ain't supposed to bring visitors from Earth, and I could get in a lot of trouble.”

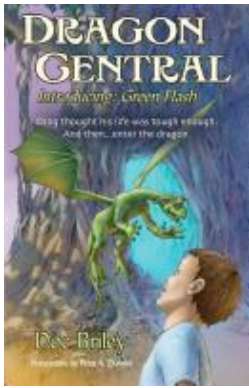
Big Mama growled at me, “I warn you, stop calling me ‘man’. I am a dragon. Not a puny man... Wait a minute! What do you mean you're from Earth?”

“Dang! Cat's outta the bag now, kid. That's not gonna go over real well.”

You see, it seems when there was that first infection (as the dragons called it) by humans three thousand years ago (when Dunya's ancestors came over), the dragons made a rule not to allow yet more humans to come to Dragon Central. The only reason the ancient Sumerians were allowed to stay was because they behaved good, didn't pollute nothing, and respected the dragons. Dragons are real big on respect.

When Snarl realized we'd broken ‘The Rule’, her tail switched back and forth like an angry cat's. The brownish irises of her eyes whirled in anger, sparkling with gold flecks (which is also supposed to hypnotize victims.)

We were in deep dragon doo doo. Okay, so now we were in even deeper dragon doo doo.



*Ding thought he had problems - inside and outside the classroom, with a local gang, and with his father and little brother. He made bad choices due to a dark secret in his heart. A helper dragon, Green Flash, by mistake takes him to Dragon Central, a dangerous planet in a parallel universe. Even if Ding learns his truth, he might be stuck there forever...*

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