



Daughter of Dragons

by Kathleen H. Nelson



<http://www.dragonmoonpress.com>

click here to order *Daughter of Dragons* from Amazon.com

As Lathwi padded down the cool stone passageway, echoes of her calloused footfalls scampered off in both directions. She walked with purpose, but not haste; and while the ochre gleam of rock light limned her path, she could have as easily found her way in pitch darkness. She was heading toward her mother's favourite chamber, a chamber which few others were privileged to visit. Lathwi had spent the better part of her short life in there.

The entrance to that chamber loomed to her right. Even though she had no doubt that Taziem had heard her coming long before now, she cleared her throat just the same, for it was never smart to surprise a full-grown dragon. Especially when that dragon was ensconced in a den full of diamonds.

Her mother's nest was resplendent, a veritable glacier of blue-white stones. A single glimpse of it inspired envy and awe in equal measure. Yet it was nothing but a trifling heap of pebbles compared to the black-scaled dragon who was lounging in its midst. She was magnificent: twice as tall as Lathwi at the shoulder, nearly ten times as long from head to tail, yet sleek and streamlined, an aeronautical wonder. The great membranous wings which carried her through the sky were folded now, all but invisible against the span of her sinuous back; and her whip-like tail was daintily coiled around her. Both sets of eyelids were closed.

As Lathwi waited to be received by the she-dragon, she projected a self-thought at her. On one level, it was merely a reiteration of her arrival; on another, it poked sly fun at her mother by insinuating that her senses were not as keen as they used to be. Lathwi took great pride and delight in her skills with dragon-speech. To her, well-wrought images were as pleasing as diamonds.

Although Taziem's eyes were shut and she had not yet deigned to acknowledge Lathwi's presence, she was not asleep. Indeed, she was busily contemplating Lathwi's last thought, the latest illustration of her bizarre imagination. To most dragons, nothing was more pleasing than diamonds. Even she, The Learned One, an advocate of logic and intellect, admired them to an extreme. And it would never have occurred to her to compare the star-like stones with something as dissimilar as dragon-speech. Yet now that she considered the notion, she saw how such a comparison might be drawn: both possessed a multi-faceted beauty which ranged from subtle to raw, both contained images for others to contemplate. The tip of her tail twitched approvingly. Clever Lathwi.

Her eyelids opened to slits, affording her a covert view of her unlikely daughter. She was a runt, magnitudes smaller and weaker than any dragon. She was also wingless, tailless and nearly neckless; dull of tooth and nail; and appallingly tender-skinned. The supple shell of scales which she wore to preserve herself against the casual violence of other dragons had originally belonged to a tanglemate who had lost its life to a fall. The claws she carried with her were cast-offs as well.

Lathwi, The Soft One. It was an appropriate Name.

A memory flooded her awareness. In it, she was sunning herself in a meadow far from her usual hunting grounds. Her belly was swollen to monstrous proportions by a

mad feeding binge and the clutch of unborn dragonets which had prompted such gluttony. Tomorrow she would have to return to her nest and stay there until she gave birth. She rumbled to herself, deploring that last and most tedious phase of pregnancy, then abruptly dismissed it from her thoughts. She did not intend to let tomorrow's woes spoil today's last snooze in the sun.

Her eyelids closed, the transparent inners first, then the scaled outers. Yet even as she began to drowse, a faint, arrhythmic thrashing dragged her back to awareness. The sound was not alarming, so she did not shift out of her comfortable pose, but she did continue to listen. The noise drew closer, then closer still. The sour stench of a red-blooded animal's sweat invaded her nose. This smell continued to foul the air long after the thrashing retreated. Curious, she raised her outer lids a notch and surreptitiously scanned the area. To her vast surprise, she found a human youngling staring at her from less than a dragon's length away.

Her curiosity flared like an itch in need of scratching. Never one to deny such impulses, she proceeded to study the creature.

Its eyes were its most remarkable feature. They were a glorious shade of blue, the colour of a cloudless summer sky; a dragon could almost take wing within them. But apart from those intriguing orbs, there was not much to see. It was a scrawny thing with a black mane and pale flesh. Its forearms were caught behind its back, seemingly entangled around a fat length of wood. A ring of wilted flowers hung from its neck.

Taziem was quick to grasp the youngling's significance: it was meant for her. She snorted, venting her scorn. What purpose was such a gift supposed to serve? She had already slaked her pre-birthing hunger, and so had no need for more food. And even if it had been otherwise, so scant a morsel would not have satisfied the least twinges of that boundless appetite. She eyed the youngling again, no longer bothering to disguise her scrutiny. In response, it gurgled something unintelligible and then displayed its flat white teeth.

The gesture intrigued Taziem. She had no doubt that the youngling was frightened, for its fear was as pungent as its sweat. Yet few of any race, her own included, had dared to meet her gaze so boldly. Prompted by this contradiction, she delved through her memory for more information on humans. One of her tanglemates maintained that they were dumber than cattle; her chosen, Bij, despised them as thieves. But that was all hearsay. The only things she knew for certain about humans were that they were a noisy bunch, and not very tasty.

Such ignorance was intolerable! She was Taziem, The Learned One; it was her lot in life to know more than other dragons. She decided then and there to bring the youngling back to her nest and study it during the last stages of her pregnancy. If it proved to be an enlightening subject, she would let it go just before the birth. Otherwise, she would feed it to her newborns.

Eager to begin her research, she lurched to her feet and overtook the youngling. It was then that she discovered that its arms were not entangled behind its back, but

deliberately bound. She hissed, wholly insulted by the implications. Did those who had left it for her really think that she could not have caught it otherwise? She hissed again, half-inclined to go and teach the fools a much-needed lesson, but then decided to save it for another day. Right now, she had the youngling to consider.

With a delicate swipe of her claws, she freed its arms. It yowled as the log thudded to the ground, but made no move to escape. Taziem hugged its feather-light body to her great chest, then unfurled her wings and invoked the secret Name of Wind. Aided by an obliging breeze, she then vaulted into the sky. Pride coursed through her veins like fire as she soared beyond the meadow and toward the distant jut of her mountain. She was Taziem, a dragon in flight: for the moment, nothing else mattered or sufficed. She celebrated that fact with an aerial dance, then bugled her joy to the world.

At that, the youngling loosed a squeal that defied its small size. Although she was sure that it was merely venting its fright, Taziem swung her long neck around to investigate. What she saw then amazed her. Its mouth was stretched into a toothy grin, its blue eyes were focused on some faraway point in the sky. As she watched, it squealed again, a sound of pleasure rather than fear.

So, she thought, the youngling liked to fly. Therefore, it had more intelligence than a cow. The distinction pleased and encouraged her. At this rate, she would know all there was to know about humans before the sun went down.

A whisper of movement in the chamber drew Taziem out of the memory. She returned to her covert scrutiny of Lathwi, who was still waiting to be acknowledged. She could not be faulted for her patience, the she-dragon granted. Or for her cleverness. Many a dragon had survived fortune's whims with no more than those two traits in their favour. But Lathwi had an extra advantage: Lathwi was smart. It was hard to believe that such a runt could possess so voracious an intellect, but the evidence was irrefutable. Long after her tanglemates had lost their appetites for learning and gone in search of other diversions, she was still living in Taziem's caves and coming to her for morsels of lore. Curious as to how much she could retain, Taziem had let her stay.

Until now.

"Lathwi." The image which accompanied the thought was deliberately harsh: soft and pink like prey. "Why are you here?"

Lathwi's eyes narrowed. Her mother was not in the habit of questioning the obvious. Therefore, something strange was afoot.

"I am here for knowledge," she replied warily.

"Know this then. It is time for you to leave."

Too shocked for subtle speech, she blurted, "Why? I have not yet learned all there is to learn."

Taziem snorted. "That is certain. Not even I can lay claim to such an accomplishment, and I have been studying for centuries. But that is irrelevant. Tomorrow you must take your leave of my caves and go in search of your own fortune."