

**BLOCK /
HATCHED
RED**





When he was first hatched, his parents had no reason to suspect that he wasn't a perfectly ordinary – though, for them, precious and special – tiny dragon.

As the thick white shell of his egg fell apart and revealed him curled inside, gazing up at them with blinking eyes and breathing out just the faintest trickle of infant smoke, his mag and dag bent their long necks and nuzzled him, the way dragons do, and licked him with their forked tongues. He was smooth and hairless, soft, cool and cuddly as a dragon hatchling should be.

His colour?

A sort of beige, which is the colour most hatchling dragons are before they become brown or green or black. If there was the faintest tinge of pinkness to his skin, they put it down to reflected firelight. What else?

Before long he was able to stand on his strong little

hind legs and jump about their cave with the help of his tail, not yet full-length, with the point on the end of it still quite soft. He sometimes curled it into his mouth to chew when he was dropping off to sleep.

His front paws began to sprout claws, and his forehead two knobbly horns. For his parents, these were exciting stages of their son's growth, and they blew thick white smoke at each other to celebrate. Dragon smoke, of course, is quite free of any nasty stuff due to the filter in their throats. The filter doesn't work as well on black smoke, but this family didn't blow any of *that* kind.

The development of the young dragon's wings, which had been all scrunched up like fine crumpled leather when he was first hatched, was even more exciting. It meant he was beginning to grow from a hatchling into a mumbo, as young dragons are called.

Shortly after, he spoke his first *words*.

There was still a certain sense of wonderment among dragons when their young ones began to use words that, for untold lights and darks, dragons had not had. While all dragons tried not to think about the terrible time before the Great Ridding, they had a dragonlore back-think of an age when uprights ruled, and only

they among the living things of the world had the ability to communicate in *language*.

Now dragons could talk.

How this had come to pass, none of them were certain, but it had something to do with a cataclysmic event many, many dragon hatchings and life-overs ago – one that had changed dragons’ think-spaces and throats and made it possible for them to speak. This event was referred to as the Ear Breaker, from which the world had emerged as a much emptier place, but one in which dragons could come into their own.

Other events that had contributed were seldom spoken of, except in occasional heads-togethers among the wiser dragons, who thought it important that they should not be completely forgotten. Talked-down stories suggested that something called the Big Heat had also played a part. Dragons *loved* heat.

Even young dragons knew there had been something called *fighting* before the Great Ridding. That was long left behind, of course, because there were no enemies to fight any more. Although Dragons now prided themselves on being peace-loving, they knew that hadn’t always been the case. They had once been fierce and powerful. Otherwise

how could there have been the Great Ridding?

Oddly enough, they still liked to keep the names that suggested the Old Time and the old ways, which is how it came about that these proud dragon parents decided to call their son Ferocity. They thought it sounded very good with their family name, which was Bychaheadoff.

It wasn’t until Ferocity was growing scales and fins on his back that his parents noticed his colour was – how best to put it? – *unusual*. They’d been wondering whether he was to be green, like Perilous, his mag; or black, like Rampant, his dag. But then the beige darkened and became...

“A sort of falling-leaf tint?” suggested his mag.

“Brown, then,” said his dag. “Unexpected, but quite acceptable.”

But then the brown seemed to drain away altogether, leaving only the red, which grew redder and redder until...

“It’s obvious,” whispered his mag, one dark after fire-out, peering down at her mumbo in a worried but loving way as he slept.

“No question at all,” agreed his dag. “He isn’t any of the usual dragon colours.”

“What is he, then?” asked his mag, who thought she had the word for it on the tip of her tongue but didn’t like to say it.

There was a stretch of silence between them.

“I know what he is,” muttered a gruff voice behind them.

Rampant and Perilous whipped round to see a familiar shape emerge from the darkest part of their cave.

“Dag!” spluttered Rampant, pretending not to have got a terrible fright. “I didn’t see you there.”

Rampant’s dag, a large, snaggle-toothed old dragon with a limp from an ancient flying injury, hobbled over to them. He peered down through heavy lids at his oddly hued grandmumbo.

“I’ll tell you what he is. He’s *red*.”

“*Red?*” croaked Rampant. “But ... that’s *impossible*. There’s never been a red dragon. Red dragons don’t exist.”

His old dag gave him a funny look and grunted, “Now one does. Yours.”

Ferocity’s parents talked



it over that dark, when Granddag had hobbled back into the shadows to a crevice in the rear of their cave, which he shared with his pair.

“Do you think there’s anything actually *wrong* with being red?” asked Perilous hesitantly.

“Why would there be?” replied Rampant. “Red makes him ... er...”

“Different?” put in Perilous.

“Well, yes. But *every* dragon’s different in his or her way. Being red – that makes him more ... more...”

“Interesting.”

“Right! That’s exactly what it makes him.”

“And *special*,” added Perilous, peering down at Ferocity, who looked adorable with his tail-point in his mouth.

“Oh, yes. Very, very special. If our mumbo’s red, my dear, then red’s what he’s supposed to be.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Perhaps there are others,” said Perilous suddenly. “Red dragons, I mean – somewhere out there in the world.”

“Yes, I expect so – lots of them,” agreed Rampant. “But we never go anywhere so I guess we’ll never know.”

Perilous dropped her head and rested it on her pair's haunch. He covered her tenderly with his wing.

"You're so wise, my mild, decent love," she growled softly. Growls were fierce once – used to frighten uprights, mostly – but now they were only affectionate.

"Ferocity's a wonderful, strapping mumbo," said Rampant, "and for my part I'm proud he's different."

They crouched there quietly together. Perilous felt a wave of contentment wash over her until, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a trace of brown smoke drifting from Rampant's nostrils. Her head jerked up with sudden concern.

"What's the matter?"

"What? Nothing – why d'you ask?" He hastily sniffed the smoke back up his nose.

"You never blow smoke like that. Not unless something's wrong."

Rampant's think-space was filling with not-true-thinks, but his pair knew him too well, and deep down he was bursting to tell her anyway.

"Our coal supplies are running low," he said in a sort of spluttering cough. "I found out. It's all the Council can talk about."

In a corner of cave, Ferocity's eyes snapped open. He didn't understand much language yet but there was an unfamiliar tone to his dag's voice. A tone he didn't like. Could it be – what was the word – *fear*?



By the time Ferocity was due to start dragon school, his parents had very nearly forgotten he was different. So it's easy to imagine their surprise when, on the light before he was due to start school, Head-dragon Heinous called them in for a quick heads-together in the big, shabby, crumbling-at-the-corners school built-thing, with the big hole in its flat top where a very tall dragon teacher had, in a moment of untypical annoyance, thrust his horns. Of course, when such not-decents damaged an old built-thing, there was no way to repair it, and most such shelters eventually crumbled away.

"It has come to my attention," Heinous began, "that your son is – how can I put it? – *red*."

"*Is he?*" replied Rampant, as if he'd never really noticed. "Well, now that you mention it, he is rather a fine shade of red, don't you think?"

"He has a wonderful think-space!" added Ferocity's mag.

Head-dragon Heinous looked at her sternly. “He would have, wouldn’t he? All mumbos are bright.”

“I think what my pair is trying to say,” put in Rampant quickly, “is that we’re sure Ferocity will be a credit to the school.”

“Let’s hope so, shall we?” replied Heinous. “But I was wondering whether ... I mean, we prefer all our mumbo pupils to look ... well, like ... like *regular* mumbos, if you take my smoke-drift?”

The Bychaheadoffs shared a bemused look.

“Regular?” echoed Perilous.

“Yes. Very regular.” Heinous lowered his voice slightly and leaned forward. “Your son will, I fear, stand out in the playground. If he were perhaps a rugged black like you, Rampant, or ... or a delightful green like you, Perilous... What I’m trying to say is—”

“Yes, what exactly *are* you trying to say?” asked Rampant evenly.

Heinous took a deep breath. “Couldn’t you arrange for him to *perhaps* roll in some mud—”

“*Mud?*” repeated Perilous sharply.

“Certainly – or take a dip in a pond of green slime—”

“*Slime?*” spluttered Rampant.

“Yes, or ... or...” Heinous spotted the dark trickle of smoke now seeping from the Bychaheadoffs’ nostrils and added, “Nothing that would harm him, of course!”

Ferocity’s parents rose to their full height.

“We are *not*,” said Rampant, “going to roll our son in mud or dip him in any dirty stinking pond slime.”

“Or anything else for that matter!” snorted Perilous.

“There is *nothing* wrong with his colour,” Rampant continued. “As a matter of fact, we’re very fond of it. Red is ... is... What is it, Perilous?”

“Different,” answered his pair.

“In a good way,” said Rampant firmly. “Now, Head-dragon, if you have a problem with it, we’ll simply home-cave Ferocity instead.” He coughed. “Good dragon-light to you.”



When Ferocity’s mag dropped him off on the first light of school, the other mumbos tried not to stare at him, which would have been undragonly rude. Rudeness was the opposite of politeness, and politeness was one of the first Rules of Dragonkind.

“Put the *kind* into Dragonkind!” was something mumbos recited every single day at school. They meant it, too.

By the end of the second lesson, everyone had almost forgotten Ferocity’s unusual colour. Teasing just wasn’t done. One she-mumbo, Merciless, sidled up to him between lessons and asked politely *why* he was red.

“Why? How should I know? I was hatched like it.”

“It’s nice,” Merciless said. “Can I nuzzle you now?”

There was something about the way she asked the question that sent a slightly uncomfortable tingle down Ferocity’s back-fins.

“If you want,” he replied a little anxiously.

And she did. Behind his ear. Which was surprisingly nice – and a bit tickly. Then she said, “Can I call you Red?”

Ferocity looked at her. He realized he quite liked the idea of a nickname.

“If you want.”

And just like Ferocity when he spread his wings, the name took off in no time. It wasn’t long before the whole class was calling him Red.

And that was the name the other mumbos called him from that light onward.



Red did well at school, just as his parents had expected – just as everyone had expected, because, as the head-dragon had said, “All mumbos are bright.” And indeed, it was a well-known fact: all dragons were now clever. Red stood out only by seeming to be a bit *too* clever.

But that didn’t stand in the way of him making friends. He may have been different, but the other mumbos liked him even more for his very special think-space than for his very special colour. It was what went on in there that made him say all sorts of things that set him apart. Like when he suggested, “Let’s play Dragons and Uprights.”

Dragons and *Uprights*? The other mumbos fell into stunned silence.

“What’s wrong with that?” asked Red.

Basher, a bright green mumbo with a particularly

large head and noticeably sharp teeth, turned to him. “Uprights,” he said, snarling, “are our worst enemies, driven out a long, long time ago when the fighting ended. We don’t play games about *them!*”

“And anyway,” added Fiery, a small black she-mumbo with knobbly horns, “they’re gone from the mainland, which means the whole world.” She gave a hoity grunt and added, “Don’t you know *anything?*”

“Yeah!” scoffed Basher. “So why bother even thinking about stupid uprights?”

“I think about a lot of things,” mumbled Red.

Thinks? They weren’t that useful, his teacher would say. “Because the more thinks you have, the more confused you get. *Think* less. *Do* more.”

The lessons the mumbos learned were limited to the things dragons needed to know. Or, more specifically, the things their teachers *thought* they needed to know. Which wasn’t that much. Flying skills, for example, were important – like how to glide or soar or do a tail-over-horns, crash-land and, in the advanced classes, do straight-up take-offs. All very challenging when you’re as bottom-heavy as dragons.

“If we were like sky-flappers,” said Red to his

granddag one dark over supper, “it would be much easier to fly.”

“If we were anything like sky-flappers,” replied his granddag, sucking on a juicy ground-flapper bone by the fire, “we’d be the ones being eaten.”

Granddag always said funny things like that.

Mumbos also learned Cave Law and Rules of Dragonkind, like talking-not-quarrelling, resisting strong *feelings* – ugh! – and displaying excellent dragon manners in school. Everything to do with how dragons should treat each other came together under one subject heading. “Say it again – louder this time,” Berserk, a she-dragon-teacher, would roar.

“DECENCY!” the class would roar back. They enjoyed roaring, mostly because they weren’t allowed to do it very much.



By the time Red and his classmates were fully scaled and their back-fins about half grown, their class teacher, Berserk, announced it was time to talk about the Facts of Smoke.

“At present, you blow white smoke when you’re happy—”

Basher, always the first to demonstrate, blew a big puff of white smoke.

“Very good, Basher. Anyway, as you may unfortunately have realized, there’ll be times in your full-grown lives when you’ll *feel* things. Feelings are things we dragons don’t really have good words for.”

An excited murmur rose in the class. Fiery was first to raise her tail-point.

“Like what sort of things?” she asked, knowing several of them but enjoying watching her rather uptight teacher attempt to explain.

Berserk cleared her throat. “Things like anger, hate and ... um ... *envy*.” The young teacher could hardly bring herself to say the last one. A shocked silence fell over the class. “These words,” Berserk continued, her voice now lowered to a whisper, “are called swearing and are strictly forbidden.”

Everyone knew about *swearing*. A mumbo could be kept in school for a whole free light if he or she said a swear word out loud. It was Red who raised his tail-point next.

“Yes, Red?”

“I just had a think—”

“Uh-oh,” grunted Basher.

“If we *feel* things, we should definitely have good words for them because, well, feelings are very important things for a dragon to have.”

The rest of the class turned and stared at Red. If dragons could have fallen about in fits of giggles they would have done.

The teacher cleared her throat again. “I’m not sure, Red, that I follow you,” she said, even though, deep down, she probably did.



Red opened his mouth to answer but was suddenly aware of all the other mumbos staring at him.

“Nothing,” he said awkwardly.

The teacher gave a little sigh of relief. “We don’t have proper words for many of these ugly, indecent feelings,” she said, “because we hardly ever have them. And when we *do* have them, something bad happens.”

“Like what?” asked Basher, forgetting to raise his tail-point.

“Our smoke, our beautiful white dragon smoke, turns black. And,” the teacher continued solemnly, “we try never to blow any of—”

Red interrupted. “My granddag said it was black smoke that covered the blue-top and ruined the whole world. He said uprights made black smoke and black smoke brought life-over.”

“How does your granddag know that?” asked Basher.

“*Every* dragon should know it,” explained Berserk. “Dragon smoke – the *white* kind – is for showing how different we are from those terrible *creatures* we banished in” – her eyes darted from one mumbo to the next – “in what?”

“THE GREAT RIDDING!” the whole class shouted.

“Correct. Our smoke is harmless – unless it’s black. We must try never to blow that kind in case the badness in it gets out – the same way it did in the Old Time when uprights ruined the world with it—”

Red interrupted again. “My granddag said that ages ago, when the world was going bad, dragons gave uprights a chance to make griffilin—”

“Oooh! Red said the impossible word!” cried Merciless.

The other mumbos just looked puzzled.

“What’s *griffilin*?” one of them asked.

“Don’t waste your think-spaces on it. It can’t happen. That’s why we don’t say it,” warned Berserk.

“Why can’t it?” asked Red.

The teacher gave him a stern look. “Because it would need uprights to listen. And listening’s not what uprights do.”



Fire was a topic that often came up in lessons, and was very important to dragons.

“Eat up your twigs and branches before meals,” their teacher often stressed. “Without them, you won’t have fire in your chests. And without *that*, well,

I won't even go into that because it's much too..." She cleared her throat. "Anyway. Very soon you'll be able to chew and swallow coal."

The whole class shivered with excited anticipation.

"This will put fire in your chests," the teacher went on, "and one light you'll feel the urge all dragons feel, and you'll open your jaws and a stream of beautiful fire will flow from you. Then, and only then, will you stop being mumbos and become—"

"Full-grown dragons!" shouted Basher, thumping on the floor with his strong hind paws. "FULL-GROWN! FULL-GROWN! FULL-GROWN!"

The other mumbos, stirred by their classmate's words, joined in, chanting and thumping on the floor until the sound rang through the built-thing like thunder.



Later that light, Red – ever curious – caught up with his teacher in the school playground and asked, "Where does the coal we eat come from?"

The teacher gave him a very curious look. "I thought your dag was head coaler. I'm surprised he hasn't told you that."

"Coal stacks?" Red guessed. Berserk nodded. "Does it grow there?"

There was an uncomfortable silence. The teacher shifted slightly on her haunches. "It's there because" – she gave a little cough – "because it's ... er ... always been there." She began to edge away, but Red followed.

"But if all full-grown eat it, won't it eventually get used up?"

A faint trickle of darkish smoke drifted from the teacher's nostrils. "You ask too many questions, Ferocity. Try not to. It's unhealthy."

Red felt a stab of shame. "Sorry, I was just trying—"

"Try less. Listen more. Now repeat after me," said his teacher, staring at him earnestly. "*We eat coal to fuel our fires. Coal makes us whole and much better flyers.*"

Red repeated her words. But his think-space was alight with even more nagging, unanswered questions.



The mumbos only took one term of Geography (mostly because they never went very far), and it was mainly about the Endless Water. They were warned *never* to fly over it – even though they'd probably never see it – because dragons can't swim. Known fact.

The Geography teacher, Gruesome, made them recite a reminder:

“Over the valleys and hills you can fly, but not over water; that way—”

“LIFE-OVER!” the class all shouted.

Once every few lights, they practised blowing smoke signals, which is how dragons communicate across distances, even short ones. And they learned tail-signalling, a skill left over from Before Speak. Tail-signalling was a sort of forgotten language and most of the mumbos found it pointless – this was a joke because of their *tail-points*. But Red liked it. His dag had forgotten it completely from his school-lights, so Red and his friends could use it to talk in secret.

“You lot are really getting on my tail-point!” Rampant would complain whenever Red had his friends round to cave and they sent messages to one another in this way. “I can’t understand a smoking word you’re signalling. And that’s rude.”

No one liked being called rude, so they quickly stopped. Until the next time. One dark, Red saw his dag blow a trace of black – no, no, not black but *greyish* – smoke. He’d never once seen him do that, not even the time he went hunting horn-trotters and

bashed his head on a branch mid-chase. So that was the end of tail-signalling, at least in cave. One thing was certain: no one wanted to see what happened when Rampant’s grey smoke turned black.

Red’s favourite subject was Dragonstory, also called the Trail of Smoke. It was passed down from full-grown to mumbos and went right back to when dragons weren’t at all as they are today.

“There have been so many advances in Dragonkind within the think-hold of our oldest dragons that it’s no wonder we have changed and become far better in every way,” another of his teachers, Bellicose, explained.

And like all good pupils, Red and the rest of his class believed everything they were told.



Red loved school, but he always seemed to have more questions than his friends. When he sensed he wasn't going to get all the answers from his teachers, he would save them for when his mag and dag next went out, and his granddag and grandmag stayed in to mumbo-sit. They loved telling him about Dragonstory.

"For most of the Trail of Smoke," his grandmag said one dark, "we had mortal enemies."

"What does *mortal* mean?" asked Red, crunching a fur-hopper bone.

There was a slight pause.

"Well, go on," urged his granddag. "Tell him."

"It means deadly and cruel—"

"And violent!" added his granddag, and, despite himself, uttered a little growl.

"Granddag!" protested Red, shocked. "You said the *vi* word!"

His granddag muttered something.

"Pardon?" said Red.

His granddag, ignoring the pain in his old wobbly haunches, rose to his full height, spilling shadows against the cave walls that made him look twice the size. Now his words were very loud and very clear.

"I said: VIOLENCE WORKS!" He cleared his throat and lowered his voice. "These words you hear at school – the ones they *say* are indecent – describe what dragons once *were* and could still *be*."

"*Still?*" Red just about managed to say it.

"YES! STILL!" His granddag gave a little rasping cough. "*Deadly* and *cruel* and *violent* should never have been left behind. They're words that we should always keep in our think-spaces."

"But why, Granddag? We don't need any of those awful things now!"

"In case," the old dragon hissed.

"In case what?"

"They ever come back."

Red shivered down his back-fins, he didn't know why.

Granddag bent his neck so that his snout was very close to Red's; close enough so the mumbo got a whiff of his granddag's acrid smoke-breath.

“If it’s *cruel* to protect your family,” the old dragon continued, “if it’s *violent* to stand up for your kind; if *goodness* and *decency* come under threat; if every bit of your body goes tight with the agony of watching your own beautiful world disappear, then tell me – is it not right to use the old ways?”

Red opened his mouth to answer. But couldn’t. There was another long silence, eventually broken by his grandmag suddenly nudging her pair and saying in a croaky voice, “Enough! That’s enough now!”



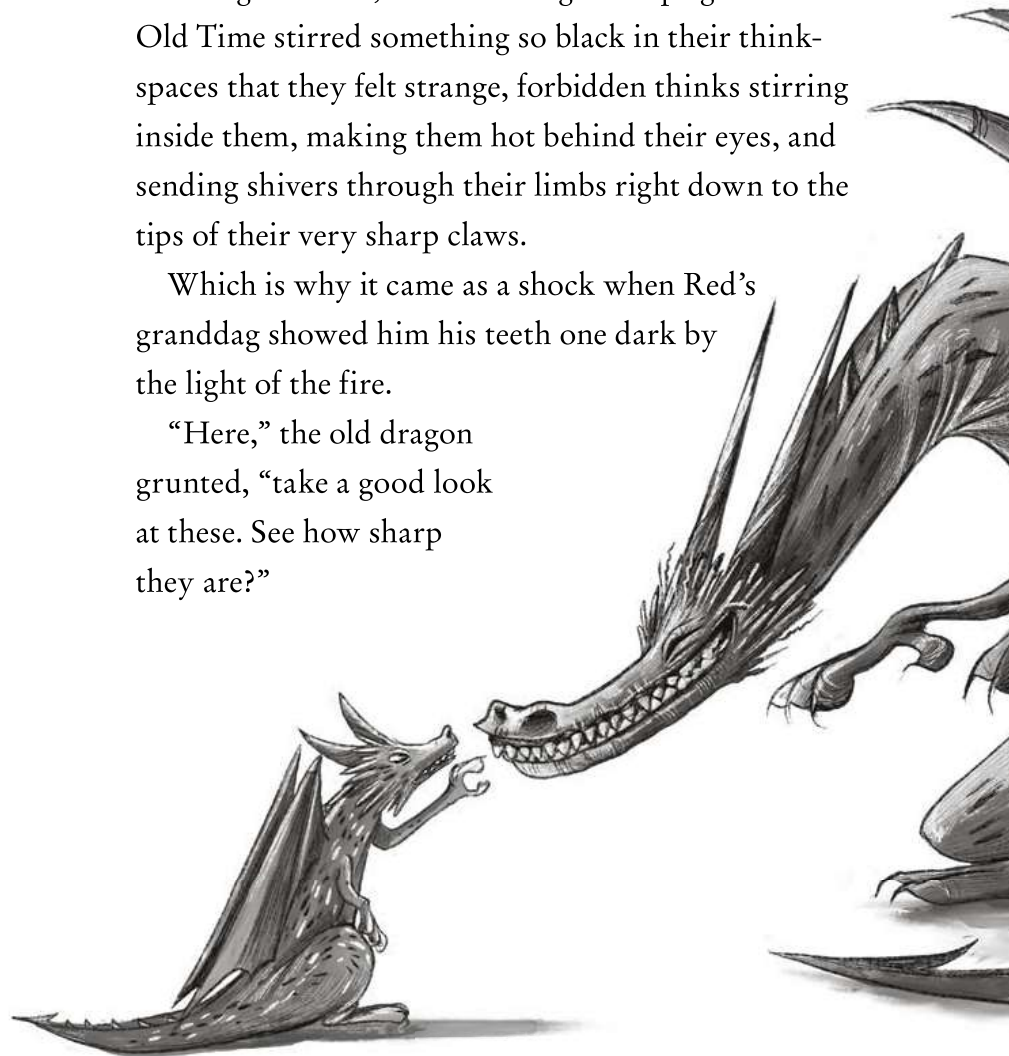
One thing was clear to Red, and that was that the mere mention of that Old Time made his grandparents – all full-grown, in fact – very uncomfortable. This period of Dragonstory was very unpleasant and only taught to half-grown who were so nearly full-grown that they could breathe fire. But thanks to his granddag, Red found out about uprights earlier than most. “Those REPULSIVE clawless, fireless, wingless creatures!” he called them, who, despite being scaleless and puny, had once ruled the world, as dragons did today.

They were all gone now, most dragons believed. Thanks to the Great Ridding.

Neither Red’s grandparents nor his parents – indeed, not even any teacher – could explain exactly how this had happened, because dragons now prided themselves on being civilized, and the thought of uprights and the Old Time stirred something so black in their think-spaces that they felt strange, forbidden thoughts stirring inside them, making them hot behind their eyes, and sending shivers through their limbs right down to the tips of their very sharp claws.

Which is why it came as a shock when Red’s granddag showed him his teeth one dark by the light of the fire.

“Here,” the old dragon grunted, “take a good look at these. See how sharp they are?”



Red peered at them. Sure, they were a little worn down, but the mumbo still marvelled at their immense size and sharpness.

“You don’t think dragons need these crunchers *just* for eating – even the few who are still meat-feeders?”

“Are they for crunching pieces of coal?” Red asked innocently.

The old dragon growled and shook his head. “Course not. We used them to drive out those stinking uprights.”

“Drive them out, Granddag?”

There was a pause.

“Yes, son, yes. WE RIP-BURN-KILLED ’EM!”

There was an unfamiliar sound in the old dragon’s voice – could it be *pleasure*?

Red gasped. *Rip-burn-kill* was the worst – the very worst – swearing he’d ever heard. And it left him talkless.

His granddag sensed the mumbo’s shock. “We had to get rid of them somehow,” he insisted. “Or what? As sure as fire burns bright, they’d have got rid of us. They nearly did!”

Red cleared his throat. There was something hot and bad and bitter-tasting in there, like rotten meat.

Still, he mustered a question. “What about the ones we didn’t” – Red gulped – “do *that* to?”

“The unlucky ones who survived, you mean?” His granddag gave a chortling snort. “They fled as fast as their puny little legs could carry them.”

“You sound like you’ve seen one, Granddag!”

“Who, me? Don’t be ridiculous!” the old dragon snarled. “This was all long, *long* before my time! Just as well, because I’m certain eating one would’ve made all my teeth fall out!”

Nothing he’d heard so far shocked Red quite like this.

“EAT them? You mean dragons *ate* uprights?”

His granddag gave a grunt. “Well, it’s all just stories – ages old. Who can really know for sure? No one, that’s who...” With that he turned and hobbled off. “All I know is I’m no green-feeder, not me,” he muttered as he vanished into the shadows, “but I don’t suppose I could’ve stomached eating the likes of *them*.”

Red called after him. “Where did they go, Granddag? The uprights, I mean. The ones who got away?”

His granddag’s gnarled old face reappeared suddenly, eyes gleaming in the firelight.

“Go?” A faint trail of black smoke spurted from his nostrils. Then he said quite simply, “Wherever they went, they’d better FLAMING WELL STAY THERE!”

A little later, when Red asked his grandmag the same question, she fluttered her old wrinkled wings, ducked her head, and insisted there never really were any uprights. But Red knew that couldn’t be right – it *couldn’t* be – because dragons can’t make things up. Their think-spaces just aren’t made that way.



Later, when his dag came back to cave and stuck his head in to say good dragon-dark, Red put the same question to him. After huffing a little – to hold his smoke back, Red presumed – Rampant told him of the rumours that the upright survivors of the terrible pre-Ridding battles, if indeed there *were* any, were thought to be scattered on small live-places called *land-lumps* somewhere out in the Endless Water.

“That’s a very, very long way away, where they can’t harm anyone or anything,” he assured his mumbo.

“How’d they get there, Dag?” asked Red sleepily.

“You mean *if* they got there.”

“Yes.”

“Nobody knows.” Rampant leaned down and nuzzled his son’s ear. “Now go to sleep, and don’t waste your think-space on uprights. They’re nothing but dust and shadows.”

Reassured, Red gave a contented sigh, closed his eyes, and slipped away, deep into the vastness of his think-space.



Next time the subject of uprights came up at school, Red’s class teacher backed up Rampant’s words. She had no reason not to.

“We don’t have to worry about marauding uprights any more, forever hunting us and taking over our live-spaces and then ruining them. If uprights did *anything* good, it was to show us, by their awful example, how *not* to live.” Berserk looked severely at the class. “We dragons are very practical and concentrate on our needs and on just being polite and sensible. In a word...?”

“DECENT!” the mumbos replied. And then, as if on cue, they recited, “*We never quarrel or argue, it’s true – kindness and decency’s what dragons do.*”

The teacher nodded. “When disagreements or problems arise, what do we do?” She scanned the mumbos hopefully until one, at the back of the class, raised her tail-point.

“Yes, Militant?”

“We solve them by talking-not-quarrelling.”

“Talking-not-quarrelling. That’s right. We crouch around a fire, and we have a – anyone...?”

This time the class answered in chorus, tail-signalling to emphasize the words: “HEADS-TOGETHER!”

“That’s correct. We have a heads-together till we agree on what to do next. Who knows what we call that?”

“DRAGONSENSE!”

“It’s polite to raise your tail-point *before* you answer, Ferocity. But yes. We never really need to quarrel. There’s plenty of live-space, lots of fruit and other green-feed, and small prey for the few of us who, regrettably” – her eyes darted to Basher – “are still meat-feeders. So we’re not short of food.”

Red’s tail-point shot up. “So what *are* we short of?”

“Why d’you ask that, Ferocity?”

“Well, the way you said *food* sounded as if we were short of *something*.”

Their teacher gave an irritable little cough. “Let’s move on, please...”

Talk of food reminded Red of a subject that sometimes caused not quarrels but discussions in cave. His dag had recently given up meat-feeding, calling it *uncivilized* because it involved life-ending.

“Nasty business,” Rampant had said. “I like to think of Dragonkind as having moved beyond that. I hope when you’re older, son, you’ll follow my example.” He’d thrown a meaningful glance at his pair. She, on the other paw, was an extremely skilled hunter who refused to deny her son the “fire-stoking pleasures” of a meat diet.

“You want to be a green-feeder, go right ahead, dear,” she’d said. “Me? I end what I eat.”

Ferocity hadn’t known which parent to side with. What he did know was that he absolutely loved the taste of ground-flapper.

Suddenly his teacher’s voice snapped him out of his back-thinks.

“Another example of talking-not-quarrelling,” she said solemnly, “is deciding how to share out the coal for our chest-fires – yes, all right, Merciless, no need to show us your smoke rings.”

Red needed to listen very carefully to coal-talk. His dag, as head coaler, crouched on the Council and had to attend heads-togethers. Red had overheard his parents talking about this recently after fire-out. He wondered with a sharp realization if coal was the answer the teacher had avoided giving before – could *that* be what they were short of?

“One last thing,” the teacher added. “Listen very carefully, because this may very well be the difference between life and life-over for us dragons.” The class fell silent. “You must – *must* – keep your chest-fires lit at all times. No exceptions. Does anyone here know why?”

Silence.

“Because if your chest-fire goes out, you stop being” – she lowered her voice to a whisper – “a *full-dragon*.”

There was a gasp, followed by excited murmurs. Berserk raised her tail-point for silence.

“Not being a full-dragon means you can’t breathe fire, and if you can’t do that, you can’t fly!”

Another uneasy murmur from the class.

“We have a signal for that, mumbos.” And she showed them by curving her tail to point to her chest.

She cleared her throat uneasily. “*That* is the most terrible signal you can *ever* make. I only hope that none of you ever have to.” Then she uncurved her tail and said pleasantly, “Good dragon-light, everyone.”



CHAPTER 4

For more lights and darks than he could remember, Red had been waiting for one thing, and he wasn't alone. From a very young age, every mumbo learned that the Special Place was by far the most important thing in the whole of their live-space. Roughneck, teacher of Dragonstory, had waited patiently for the moment when the Council would give their permission for the school to visit it.

That light had finally come.

The Special Place was a built-thing on the edge of Red's live-space that had somehow not fallen down. He and his mag sometimes passed it when they went to visit his dag at work, but then the doors were always hard shut.

They weren't shut now.

This light, the doors were open wide and there were special guides to show them where to go. The mumbos

broke into pairs to squeeze through the entrance – a straight-sided opening quite unlike a cave mouth.

This built-thing was the strangest, most solemn Red had ever been in.

He stood with the rest of his class, shuffling a little but otherwise still and silent, staring all around him. From the ground to the roof, stretching from side to side, were flat bits of wood, and arranged along these were a lot of similar objects, large and small, thick and thin. The inside was hollow and straight shaped, and everything in it was grey with dust and sticky-spinners' homes.

Red's dag always said uprights had lived not sensibly in caves but un-sensibly in built-things. No one knew why. *Caves* were what you lived in. Most upright things dragons saw no use for. Those were just scattered about, or in the way, and probably dangerous considering the state that the world had been left in. So, many wars and colds ago, dragons had dug huge pits – their big, heavy, well-clawed forepaws were perfectly adapted for digging – pushed in as much of this useless rubble and trappings as they could, and buried them. Since then, nature had reclaimed these ugly areas, which became play-lands or hunt-lands for Dragonkind.

But the Special Place was one upright thing they didn't bury.

Roughkneck lifted one of these objects off its wood-strip with his teeth and laid it carefully on the ground for all to see.

"This, mumbos, is a Block of Knowledge. We know very little about it. Except" – his eyes fell on the class – "that it was *caused* by uprights."

The class came alive with whispers, and a few gasps.

"Of course, we don't have any idea what uprights *looked* like. What we do know is that they caused things, some of which are still part of dragons' lives. Built-things, like the one we're standing in, and, of course, our own beloved school."

There had been occasions when Red had looked at his school and thought how often full-growns talked about how stupid uprights had been compared with dragons. But there was something that always puzzled him: no dragon he knew could have *caused* the built-things that uprights had left. Now he thought the same think about this one.

The teacher continued. "Those horrific creatures, *before* they ruined everything and before they were banished, caused all sorts of things – but these things

right here, our wisest dragons believe, may well be the most important of all." He paused. "Right. You may sniff it, but absolutely NO touching or licking."

The class jumped closer and took turns sniffing.

"Phew!" spluttered Basher, reeling back. "Doesn't smell like anything I've ever smelled before!"

"Ugh! Smells disgusting!" snorted Fiery.

Red took a sniff. "Lovely," he said with quiet reverence.

The others eyed him strangely.

"You say the weirdest things," whispered Militant.



“Don’t judge a block by its smell, mumbos,” said the teacher, and raised his tail-point for silence. “Now. Have any of you ever wondered why it is that for so many warm and colds, we ran away from uprights, even though they were puny, pathetic, little—” He stopped himself abruptly, and gave a sharp cough. “So much smaller and weaker than us?”

The mumbos fell silent.

“It was because they had the Power of the Hand.”

The mumbos exchanged bemused glances. Only Red had the nerve to ask, “What is the *baaaand*?”

The teacher gave a little grunt. “If you want to know *that* you’d better ask an upright. And since there aren’t any left, we’ll just have to hope that one of our wiser dragons will eventually find the answer. Any more questions? Right, everybody out.”

The mumbos turned and filed solemnly out of the hollow space. Every one of them felt something very special had just happened, but none of them knew quite what.

Back at cave that dark, Red was struggling to sleep. After the excitement of the visit, pictures of the Special Place filled his think-space. Especially the mysterious Blocks of Knowledge. What could they be? They had

smelled almost good enough to eat.

Now he could hear voices. Not in his head, but close by.

He opened his eyes and saw his mag and dag huddled once again by the embers of the fire in a heads-together. They were talking in agitated whispers. He could hardly hear anything, but he caught the familiar word *coal*. And an unfamiliar one: *mission*.

**BLOCK II
THE
MISSION**





At first lesson the next light, Red was called to the front of the class to talk about anything that interested him. Of course, there was only one thing on his think-space: the mission. His dag had made it clear he shouldn't talk about it. But he couldn't hold it in.

He stood for a long moment staring anxiously out. He could see Berserk, his teacher, looking at him impatiently. He suddenly blurted out, "My family are leaving cave!"

There was uproar. Even Berserk looked concerned. She shuffled nervously.

"I beg your pardon?" she said. "What exactly do you mean – *leaving cave?*"

Basher, bashing the floor with one foot, shouted, "No one's ever left cave, Red!"

Fiery shook her head and huffed. "*We don't get detached. We stay where we're hatched!*" she recited.

Even Militant, usually a calm little mumbo, jumped up and said, "Your family must have lost their flaming think-spaces!"

It wasn't long before the whole class had left their crouch-places to crowd round him with anxious puffs of smoke. Finally Berserk raised her tail-point for silence.

"All right, all right," she said firmly. "Everyone, calm down; that's enough fuss... Let's hear what Ferocity has to say. CROUCH DOWN!"

The mumbos returned reluctantly to their places.

"Well, the thing is ... er ... the thing is..."

"Yes? What *is* the thing, Ferocity?" asked Berserk curiously.

"The thing is, we – I mean, my family and I – are going on a mission."

"What's a *mission?*" a voice from the back of the class asked.

Red didn't answer. How could he? He didn't have the faintest think what a mission actually was. He'd just heard his dag say they were going on one. And now he heard himself repeating the word vaguely. "*Mission...*"

The word was so unusual, not even his teacher appeared to know what it meant. More reason for Red to be proud that his dag knew it. Rampant learned

a lot of funny words from his job with the Council. Suddenly a think came to Red. *Dragons may all be clever now. But some, like my dag, must be cleverer than others.*

Red cleared his throat. “The Council knows—”

“Did I hear you say the Council?” interrupted Berserk.

“Yes. They told my dag about the mission. And that it was secret.”

There was a hush.

“Secret?” echoed his teacher in an accusatory way. “But everyone knows that dragons don’t do secrets.”

The class erupted into agitated tail-signalling and smoke-blowing and foot-thumping until Berserk stopped them.

“A mission may not be usual,” she said, “but if the Council says it’s important – secret or otherwise – then THAT is what it must surely be.”

Tails dropped, loud voices faded to whispers, and the class shuffled off to their next lesson.

One thing was certain. If there’d been any doubt in any of his classmates’ think-spaces that Red was a bit different before, there wasn’t any now. It didn’t help when Berserk, who’d tried hard not to show her

true feelings in class, was heard afterwards, mumbling under her smoke-breath, “Dragons leaving cave on a *mission* – and a *secret* one at that! Outrageous!”

Of course, no one had anything against Red himself. But it was ... *different*. And different made your fins stand on end.



When Red got home from school, he asked his mag, “Why do we have to leave cave? Dragons don’t do that, do they?”

His mag didn’t say anything for a while. She just laid some sky-flappers on the floor in front of him. The smell was comforting, especially on a light as embarrassing and awkward as this one had been. He snatched one and swallowed it down in a single gulp.

Dragons have a sort of halfway-down extra stomach, where food gets cooked as it passes their chest-fires. Red let out a burned-sky-flapper-smelling burp that echoed round the cave. Suddenly he felt bad about not being able to resist meat, and admired his dag for being beyond it.

As for the coal, until recently he’d just eaten charred wood fragments. Coal wasn’t as tasty as proper food,

and much harder to crunch up and swallow. His mag pointed sternly with her tail at their coal pile, and Red gave a gusty sigh.

“Don’t waste it on me,” he mumbled. “I’ve tried and tried. I’ll never be able to breathe fire, so what’s the tail-point—”

“NEVER?” His dag’s booming voice made Red turn just in time to see his bulk appear in the mouth of cave clutching a couple of bushes in his claws. “You want to be a full-dragon? Or are you going to stay a smoke-blowing mumbo the rest of your life?”

“Rampant, please!” hissed Perilous. “Ferocity’s just not quite ready yet.” And she gave her mumbo a reassuring little nuzzle.

Rampant jumped into cave and threw the bushes on the floor. He stared at his son. “Tell me something. Can the others in your class breathe fire yet?”

“I don’t know,” Red said uncomfortably. “Maybe.”

“Don’t worry your think-space about it,” his mag soothed. “When it happens, it happens. You blow smoke as long as you like, dear.”

“Nonsense! A mumbo must learn,” snorted Rampant, and he came and stood over Red, looking stern, the reflection of flames from the fire dancing

over his long snout and pricked ears, and flashing off his shoulder scales.

“Now,” he ordered. “Show me your smoke.”

“Pardon?”

“Show me your smoke, son!”

Ferocity looked up. Breathing fire was a critical stage in growing up, every mumbo knew that. Not having reached it yet was already weighing heavily on him. But disappointing his dag? That weighed heavier.

Red took a deep breath and felt his chest-fire glow.

“That’s right, son. Can you feel it deep in your chest?” Red nodded. “Good. Now – blow it out.”

Red obeyed, but all that emerged from his jaws was plain, flameless white smoke.

