

The dragoness inhaled deeply through her nose to steel herself. She could see them coming: four humans, worse for wear from their travels, yet armed and dangerous. Especially the one with the shotgun. And she knew why they came: the woman clutched in the foot on her right foreleg, who had also spotted the approaching humans and was trying to pull herself free once again.

"Frank!" the woman called out, reaching out with one arm, "Save me!"

"Marianne!" the man with the shotgun called back, raising his gun. "You monster, put her down!" His face was streaked with dirt and his blonde hair a mess, his clothes torn in several places.

The dragoness rose up on her hind legs, holding her captive in front of her chest. She towered over the humans, easily three times their height, and the black scales covering her body had little to fear from the gun. The red-orange membranes of her large wings were another matter, and she folded them behind herself protectively. Yes, she had to show them she was in charge here. She let out a long breath that made her throat rumble threateningly.

"Careful, Frank, you'll hit her!" one of the shotgun-wielder's companions warned him.

"Put her down, you beast!" Frank yelled once more, "I won't stop until I have her back!"

"Frank, help!" the woman called again.

A snort from the dragoness. "You wish to challenge me for her?" she asked rhetorically, turning up her muzzle at Frank and his group. "Very well! I challenge you to duel me at the chessboard, for I was once the regional champion-"

"Cut, cut, CUT!" a harsh voice yelled from nearby. Immediately the atmosphere of the recording studio changed: the actor playing Frank buried his face in his palm, and Marianne's actress sighed, the remaining actors shaking their heads in dismay.

The director, a gray-haired and thickly bearded man with a megaphone, came running over to the green-screen area, directly marching towards Leslie's enormous body. "WHAT was that? Did you even read the script?" he snapped angrily.

"I did, I did!" Leslie replied, her ear-fins folding back in shame from being chastened, her wings lowering to her sides as if to try and cover herself up. She looked down at the director, lowering her head a little so that the overhead lights weren't shining into her yellow and green eyes. "But it seemed so... needlessly violent! I'm not an evil dragon, I thought perhaps we could resolve this in a more peaceful manner..."

"Do you even understand what we're doing here?" the director shouted, gesturing around the studio area at the cameras and stagehands. "We're shooting a movie! You're playing a character! Tharaxas the dragon is a monster who has gone on a rampage and kidnapped the hero's love interest!"

"But why? Dragons don't feel the need to-"

"It's a MOVIE!" the director cut her off. "It's FICTION! You have to get into character! PRETEND you're a fierce dragon for just five whole minutes!"

"But I-"

"Or do you want me to replace you with another dragon?"

Leslie shook her head emphatically, but the motion detached one of the motion capture markers stuck to her and sent the little white ball skittering across the floor. "No, no! I... I can do it!" she insisted, her tail swaying pensively, sending stagehands running or brushing aside those too slow to get away in time.

"Then read the lines you were GIVEN!" the director shouted at her. "Let's take this again from the top!"

"Uh, sorry, mister director, but we have to fix the mocap markers," a nearby tech sitting at a computer piped up.

Furious, the director spun on his heel to face the tech. "Then FIX IT! Do I have to do everything around here?" With a frustrated sigh he collapsed

back into his chair and the stagehands got back to work. "Never work with animals, they told me. I should have known it extended to dragons too, even if it's cheaper than CGI..."

Leaving him to his grumbling, Leslie lowered her head and body down, both to allow the marker to be reattached, and from the shame she felt. The actress in her hand had one elbow resting on her other arm, in turn propping up her head as she stared off into the distance with a bored expression.

"Hey, miss dragon lady?" a voice called out to her from nearby. She turned her head, and the stagehand who had been about to put the marker back on her nearly fell over. The one speaking to her was another actor, in a blue policeman's uniform with a big tear on one sleeve, a fake cigarette in his mouth. He had his arms folded and resting on the prop pitchfork that was his weapon, the tines pointed downwards so he could lean on the handle.

"Yes?" she asked, spotting the stagehand out of the corner of her eye making another attempt to put the marker back on her scales.

"This your first time acting?" he asked her. What was this name? Clive, wasn't it? No, that was the character's name. The actor was... Barrett something. She'd only been told his first name. He was giving her a more impassive look than the others, who seemed bored or disappointed.

"Yes it is," Leslie admitted. It was a little distracting having the stagehand climbing partway up her face, and she did her best to ignore him and keep her head still. "It was a, um... relatively new career change. I wanted to work at the daycare center but people aren't really... comfortable turning their children over to a Child of the Egg, and..."

The actor interrupted her. "So why go into acting then? Money? Fame? Something else?"

"No, no," Leslie asserted, about to shake her head before stopping herself, lest she displace another motion capture marker, or hurt the stagehand holding onto her. "I... well, my friend saw an ad, and showed me, and I thought... why not?" Leslie answered, then gave a little hum in thought, which came out as more of a rumble from her draconic throat. "I wanted

to make people happy at the daycare before Zero Day happened, and I thought that acting would be similar, right?"

Clive – no, Clive's actor, Barrett – gave her a nod. "It can be. People go to the movies to have a good time, after all."

"Right!" she agreed. "But... there are so many misunderstandings about Children of the Egg, I don't want to make things worse..."

"Lady, if you don't take the role, someone else will," he told her gently but firmly. "But more importantly, nobody's mind is really going to be changed by watching a movie. Someone who already didn't like dragons might like 'em less afterwards, but nobody who liked 'em is going to suddenly hate you because they saw a movie with a scary dragon in it."

"I... suppose," Leslie conceded. The stagehand finally clambered down from her, and the tech began checking that everything was working at the computer.

"Look at us," Barrett said, gesturing to his fellow actors. "We're a bunch of walking stereotypes. I'm playing a cop whose first scene in the movie is waiting at a speed trap eating donuts. In the end the hero slays the dragon and saves the girl; it's just the whole knight-rescues-princess thing, but modernized. It's not original, but people will enjoy watching it. And that's what you wanted, right?"

"Right..."

Straightening up and picking up the pitchfork as the crew prepared for another take, he went on, "And think of it this way. If you do good and the movie takes off, you'll get interviews. And you can tell 'em there all about how misunderstood dragons are."

"But... what if the movie doesn't do well...?"

He gave a wry chuckle. "Then it won't matter, will it?"

He did have a point, she had to admit. She took a breath and glanced over her shoulder to make sure nobody would be hit by her tail as she backed up to her starting position. "Okay... yes. Yes, I can do this," Leslie murmured to psych herself up. "I can do this!"

"I sure hope so, darling," the actress in her right hand said, "This isn't exactly comfortable."

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Leslie stomped forward, her body crouched low, doing her best to growl menacingly, keeping her eyes on the camera ahead of her and resisting the urge to look at the others.

"I can hear it! It's coming!" Frank's actor said in a raised whisper, he and the other actors pressed up against the back wall of the green screen. It would probably be the corner of a building or something after some liberal editing.

Strong. Fierce. Intimidating. She had to be all of these things and more. Leslie tried to focus on that, taking another heavy step forward, letting her tail swing behind her. She couldn't help but be reminded of the way her cat looked when it was stalking something, and tried to put the thought out of her mind; having to give the cat up after her transformation had been difficult...

"We've gotta run or it's gonna find us," one of the other actors murmured. Even despite the distance she was at, Leslie could still hear the quiet delivery easily. At least it made it easier to know when her cue was.

Ferocious! A beast! She wasn't actually either of those things, but she had to pretend to be! She took another step, then turned her head to look directly towards the actors. Rearing up, she drew a breath and...

"RRRAAAAAARRRRRRR!"

"Cut! Cut! CUUUUUUT!" the director yelled, and Leslie blinked in confusion, looking over to him as he got up from his chair again.

"Wh-what? What did I do wrong?" she asked, raising her shoulders a bit.

"You call that a roar? That was like a child impersonating a dragon!"

"But the script said-"

"You're not supposed to actually SAY 'Rraarrrr'!" the director snapped.

"Can't you roar like a real dragon?"

"I... I AM a real dragon!" Leslie insisted, somewhat bewildered by the assertion that she somehow wasn't real.

"Then roar like one!"

"I... I don't know how!"

"Um, mister director," the tech at the computer cut in before the director could blow his top, "Maybe we could just... edit it in? Have her just... go through the motions, and then we splice in a roar afterwards from the sound bank?"

The director's rage subsided, albeit slowly, and he took a deep breath.

"Good idea, kid. Make it happen. Let's do another take! Back to your positions! And Leslie, just pretend to roar! You can manage that, right?"

"Yes, of course...!"

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"Okay, one more time, people, come on!" the director shouted, and Leslie was glad it wasn't her fault this time; Frank – or rather, Frank's actor Conrad – had forgotten a line. Some other mishaps had made this the fifth take or so, including more loose motion capture markers, a stagehand losing his grip on a boom mic, and Leslie's tail knocking over a camera. At least she hadn't broken it, but the take had been ruined all the same.

It was the big showdown, where the dragon was supposed to be defeated instead of merely fleeing with the captive Marianne. Taking her position, Leslie kept her focus and waited for the call of "And... action!" to begin the latest take.

This time went much more smoothly, as she was getting used to the 'roaring without roaring' thing she had to do; she felt silly each time she merely opened her maw wide without making a sound, but if they thought they could make it work, then she would do it. It was a complicated scene but was fortunately broken up into lots of little shots, and messing up one of them only meant retaking that one small part.

Lunging forward, Leslie took a big overhead swipe with her front left leg, claws slicing through the air – a good foot or so away from 'Clive', but the

camera angle would make it look like she had hit him directly. He gave his best agonized cry as he let himself fall onto his back, and Frank stepped forward with the shotgun, aiming it at her chest.

"You'll pay for that, monster!" he shouted, and pulled the trigger. It was a prop, of course – but the blank rounds it was loaded with still produced a bright muzzle flash and a very loud bang, loud enough that it made Leslie's internal ears ring. She reared back in genuine pain, eyes shut tight, and let out a deep and guttural roar in reflex, staggering back a step and nearly falling over to the side. Instead she managed to collapse back onto all fours, and after a few moments' delay heard the director shouting again.

"And... cut! Great shot, people!" he called out, getting up from his chair. "Leslie, that was amazing!"

She opened one eye and looked over at him, her ear-fins fanning out a bit. "What? It was?" she asked, the pain in her ears gradually receding.

"Yes!" he told her, looking incredibly pleased for once. "The way you recoiled was perfect! And that roar – I knew you could do it! We need more of that! Hey Marco, can we get her to record some roars and splice them in instead of using stock ones?"

"Uh... sure thing, mister director," The tech replied. "I don't think she'll fit in the audio booth though."

"Figure out a way to make it work! Build another booth or have her stick her head through soundproofing curtains or something!" he instructed, then turned back to Leslie. "I knew you had talent, you've just got to let it shine!"

She didn't have it in her to tell him her reaction was genuine. "So... that take was good, then?" she asked hesitantly.

"Good? GOOD? It was award material! Stunning! Dynamic!" he replied, and she breathed a sigh of relief; it meant she wouldn't have to go through that a second time. "Let's get set up for the next shot, people! I don't pay you to stand around scratching your asses! Move it!"

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"Cut!" the director called, standing up once more. "Okay, good work, that's a wrap for today."

Leslie shifted from sitting on her haunches to lying down as stagehands came over to reclaim the motion capture markers stuck to her body. "Do you need me again tomorrow?" she asked the director.

"Yes, we still have some scenes that need you, and we need to record some roars once the audio gear is set up," he replied, putting down the megaphone. She knew the plan was for them to record all the scenes she was needed for first, then to let her go while they did all the parts that only needed the human actors. "I expect you here at nine sharp!"

"Okay!" she agreed, and he wandered off to bark out more orders to the stagehands.

She saw Barrett approaching, his shirt and arm still stained with fake blood. "Feeling better?" he asked her, "Think you're getting the hang of it?"

She nodded, accidentally knocking away the hand of someone reaching for a marker. "Yes. I think so, anyway. I don't know if the director does..."

"If he didn't like it, he would have ordered a re-take," he told her pointedly. "I think you're doing fine."

"I still worry... what will people think of me for taking on a role like this? So many people hate us already. What if I make it worse?"

"That's because they don't know you. They don't understand you're still a person like they are." Gesturing to her with his fake-bloodied arm, he continued, "I watched you cower from a man in his sixties a fraction of your size. I know you're no beast or monster. Nobody here thinks you are. Anyone who talks to you will know you're not. Besides, it's not really going to be you. They'll be doing computer magic to make a different dragon be the one on the screen."

His reassurances helped her, and she relaxed, sitting back on her haunches once the stagehands reclaimed all the motion capture markers. "Thank you," she told him.

"Don't mention it," he replied. With a grin he added, "I hope you succeed. Then I'll be famous too for starring alongside you! So do your best, will you?"

"I will!" she told him enthusiastically, her tail sweeping back and forth and prompting curses from the director when he was nearly struck by it.