

Matias F. Travieso-Diaz  
4110 Faith Ct.  
Alexandria, VA 22311  
(703) 472-6463  
[mtravies@gmail.com](mailto:mtravies@gmail.com)

2560 words

## **The Dragon's Bite**

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*The hunger of a dragon is slow to wake, but hard to sate.*  
— Ursula K. Le Guin

As the rays of the sun pounded on the surface of the dry lake, an egg cracked open, sending leathery shards flying in all directions.

The wyrmling shook himself free of egg remnants and slid onto the hardened muck. He was small, less than three feet from muzzle to tail, and had trouble keeping his eyes open in the blazing afternoon light. His instincts told him that something was wrong. He should have awakened immersed in cool, dark waters replete with swimming food. He was hungry, but nothing edible seemed to lie within the thrust of his tongue. He began to slither towards the shore.

A couple of times along the way he attempted to fly. His wings, however, were still pinned to his flanks and hardly stirred when he made a gesture with his shoulders to unfurl them. He let out an exasperated howl, a ragged cry for help. Where was his mother?

He reached the shore of what once had been a deep body of water. Except for desiccated shrubs covered with dust, there were no signs that life had ever

existed in this corner of the world. Yet, he smelled a living being of some kind a little distance away. He moved clumsily at first, digging his clawed feet into the pebbles that covered the ground. As the scent of prey became more pronounced, the wyrmling picked up speed and in a few seconds reached the top of a rise from which he could see the prairie below. A skinny four-legged animal, slightly larger than him, was grazing at a clump of yellowed grass.

The wyrmling's next actions were automatic. He ran towards the animal, inhaling big gulps of air, contorted, and emitted a very thin ray of incandescent gas towards his victim. The animal had already detected peril and started to run away, but the flame caught up to it in a moment and singed its legs, forcing it to the ground. The wyrmling kept spitting fire at the prone animal, and when the two were next to each other, the predator jumped onto his partly carbonized victim, held it between his forelegs, and started taking huge chunks of flesh with his two rows of sharp teeth.

It was all over in a matter of seconds. The wyrmling consumed every bit of his victim down to the fragile bones. He let out a satisfied grunt and lowered himself to the ground to digest his meal and take his first nap since birth.

\*\*\*

His exploration of the barren land continued when he arose. There was nothing to see for a good distance but, far away to the west, he came upon a clump of timbered structures arranged in a semicircle around a hole in the ground from which rose the remembered smell of water. Thirst more than curiosity drew the wyrmling towards the hole. He was nearly there when he felt motion around him, as creatures that stood on two legs began emerging from the wooden structures. Cries resonated and the air filled with projectiles aimed at him. One of those hit the wyrmling on the back of the head. It did not quite penetrate the hard scales that covered his body, but the projectile exploded on his hide, burning it and causing

him to scamper for cover, fleeing to safety among the loud noises emitted by his attackers.

He marked the bipeds as enemies and vowed to come after them as soon as he could.

\*\*\*

Over the next several moons, the wyrmling managed to survive in the barren land. He preyed on birds by downing them off the air with blasts of fire, swallowed crawling creatures that failed to escape his pursuit, ate carrion left behind by other predators. His keen sense of smell allowed him to find oases and pools that held muddy waters, but both the meager food and the foul waters left him unsatisfied. He felt he had to get more and better sustenance if he was going to grow to his full potential. These needs went largely unmet, but he grew rapidly nonetheless.

In one of his forays, he came across a lone biped accompanied by half a dozen four-legged animals like the one that had served as his first meal. He made a quick calculation: he could down several of the four-legged animals or go after the biped. Resentment dictated his choice, and he charged at the biped and carbonized him with an angry blast. Turning to the four-legged creatures, he managed to roast a couple before the others dispersed.

He turned his attention to the fallen biped. The victim's body was mostly charred but several morsels of intact anatomy remained. The wyrmling bit into those, reveling in anticipation of sweet meat and revenge.

He found the biped's meager flesh disappointing. It was stringy, dry, and almost flavorless. It was also marred by a lingering undertaste of unnatural substances that revolted him. Whatever these bipeds were, their bodies were deeply polluted and unfit for consumption. He would kill them if the occasion presented itself, but would not partake of their flesh again.

\*\*\*

Half a cycle around the sun after his hatching, the wyrmling – now a dragonet – had grown into a twenty foot of terror capable of swooping out of the sky like a bolt of lightning onto an unsuspecting prey. There were few wild animals left in the empty lands he called home, but he lorded over all of them and had developed a particular predilection for the four-legged beasts tended to by the bipeds. He played a game of hit and run in which he would come close enough to the biped's habitations to taunt them and steal one or two of the animals they kept, and then fly away out of reach of their projectiles. Through repeated contacts, he had learned some of the bipeds' language, who called themselves "humans" and referred to the dragonet as "L'ong." To the humans, L'ong was a deadly threat, to be destroyed if possible but warded against by all possible means.

As he grew to adult size, L'ong developed into a daunting figure. He had a powerful, spiky tail, enormous wings whose span extended twice the length of his red body, a skin reinforced by armored scales containing tiny bones that functioned as a natural chain-mail, razor sharp serrated teeth that measured a couple of inches in length, and a long, forked tongue that he used to detect, smell, and taste those objects that came within its reach. He had loosely articulated jaws that now allowed him to swallow, in a single bite, animals almost the size of humans.

He loathed the midday heat that was always present in this blasted land, so he only hunted at dawn and near sunset, and sometimes at night. His silhouette, appearing like a sudden dark blot in the sky, sent humans into a panic, forcing them to seek refuge in the underground shelters they had to construct once L'ong started to visit their village.

\*\*\*

Despite their precautions, humans never remained unscathed whenever L'ong paid them a call. The terror the dragon inspired and the bloody toll he exacted forced the inhabitants of the villages to think of ways of setting traps to

capture him before he wiped out their entire population. A resident of one of the settlements came up with a plan: "Let's start paying L'ong a tribute. We'll sacrifice animals to him so he will leave the rest of us alone." The plan was not well received at first, until its proponent clarified: "At some point, the sacrificial animal could be poisoned."

Initially the plan was carried without a glitch. L'ong feasted on a pig chosen for its relative plumpness compared to other emaciated domestic animals. He did not return for a week or so, but when he did the humans were ready. They placed in the middle of the village common a calf that had been fed a blend of poisonous herbs and could barely stand. L'ong descended in front of the offering, examined him with his sensitive tongue, issued a harsh cry of disgust, and directed a wall of flame at the calf and the three nearest huts, turning all to cinders.

The humans were discouraged by this setback, but came up with another plan. "We won't feed him poison, but our sacrificial offerings will be the sickest among our cattle. Perhaps he will eat them and fall sick himself."

The modified plan was put into effect shortly thereafter. The next offering was a goat that was near death from affliction with black quarter disease. The goat was breathing with difficulty and exhibiting swelling of the hip, back and shoulder due to the internal accumulation of gas. L'ong landed next to the animal, examined it carefully with his tongue, and took a huge bite of the goat's back. He did not swallow the morsel, however. He spat the flesh and flew away after burning to the ground half a dozen huts.

When it was clear that the dragon was gone for the evening, the village's inhabitants advanced gingerly to the place where the goat lay, writhing in pain. Then they made a startling discovery: the goat was bleeding profusely from the dragon's bite, but the body swelling was disappearing and the animal appeared to breathe more normally, though in fits and starts from the pain.

They picked the goat up and took it back to its pen, keeping it isolated from other animals. Three days later, a scar was forming at the site of the dragon's bite and the animal was back on its feet, bleating as if all was well.

"It's a miracle," said some humans. Others of a more scientific bent hypothesized: "There may be something in L'ong's saliva that cured whatever was causing the disease. We need to investigate this further."

Further modifications were made to the human's plan for dealing with L'ong. The site of the sacrifices was moved to an altar built on a hillock some distance from the village, to try to avoid further dwelling incinerations, and the offerings were made in the evening. Once a week, animals were presented for sacrifice suffering from a variety of cattle diseases: foot and mouth, rinderpest, even a suspected early attack of anthrax. L'ong devoured some of the offerings, flew away with disdain at others, took a bite or two of other victims before going away. In all cases, an animal that was left alive after being bitten by the dragon managed to recover.

"What are we going to do now?" asked a human. "It seems that L'ong's bite will cure some diseases, but we don't know if it will work on all, plus he is still eating our animals and destroying our homes."

A heavy silence followed, broken at last by an old man: "Something is gnawing at my innards, and I feel more exhausted each day. I I don't think I have much left to live. I'll offer myself as a sacrifice to the dragon."

\*\*\*

They tried hard to dissuade him from his suicidal plan, but at the end they allowed the old man to place himself on the sacrificial altar each night, awaiting L'ong's arrival. On the fourth night the dragon swooped down from the sky, approached the hillock, glanced at the sprawled offering, and veered away. As he parted, L'ong issued three guttural words: "No eat humans."

“Wait!” replied the old man, getting up from the altar. “I don’t want you to eat me, just to take a bite!”

L’ong stopped in mid-flight and returned to the ground. “Why?” he asked suspiciously.

“I’m very sick” replied the old man, “and something in your bite may cure me, as it did some of our animals. Please give it a try.”

L’ong moved next to the old man. “I do this only once.” The dragon bit sharply below the old man’s shoulder, almost severing an arm. The man screamed and fainted.

A week later, an old man with a heavy bandage on his shoulder led a discussion of the leaders of his village on how to deal with L’ong. “I declare, other than the wound on my shoulder, I feel as good as I did when I was a youngster.” His wife nodded her head, a knowing smile on her lips.

“We are all glad about your recovery, but we can’t beg this monster to come bite every sick person in this town. After all, most of us have some form of death working its way inside us.”

“Why not?” replied the old man. “The worst that can happen is that he will bite us and the disease will kill us all the same. We have nothing really to lose except for a painful bite by those teeth. I say we find a way to persuade L’ong to work with us on this.”

\*\*\*

One evening later in the week, there were two victims lying on the altar: a young, emaciated woman who hardly moved at all and a lamb that fought energetically to free itself from the ropes that kept it tied to the altar’s supports.

“What this?” questioned L’ong as he hovered above the scene.

The old man L’ong had bitten in their previous encounter joined the couple at the altar and replied: “Your bite cured me, and we want you to do the same for

many of our kin who suffer from disease. In exchange, we'll give you a healthy animal to enjoy for each human you help.”

L'ong lacked the ability to formulate a verbal reply to this offer, but substituted action for words. He approached the young woman and bit her on the neck gently. He then cleansed his mouth by spitting into the ground and yanked the lamb from its bindings, swallowed it whole in a single motion, and took off, a patch of deeper darkness against the night sky.

\*\*\*

A strange form of commerce then developed between dragon and humans. L'ong's bite cured many, but not all, the humans who presented themselves for treatment. There was no explanation why some “patients” failed to respond to the dragon's ministrations, but their demise was accepted as a limitation in an imperfect medical practice. After all, sometimes not even the potent kiss of a dragon can push death away.

The village started to prosper as its inhabitants regained good health and energy, though the livestock losses were grievous.

Everything seemed fine until one evening in the early spring of the following year. L'ong appeared late, yanked a lamb off the altar, ate it in a single gulp, and prepared to leave, ignoring the trembling man that had been waiting for L'ong's bite.

“Are you leaving without treating me?” asked the man querulously.

L'ong's final words were lost as he rose to the skies: “Need to find mate.”

He was never seen again in that village or any other human settlement in the entire area. His story has become another legend among the folks who scratch a living in the inhospitable prairie. “Not even dragons like to live here” is often the melancholy conclusion of L'ong's tale.



But others retort, forgetting L'ong's depredations: "But it was good while it lasted." For mankind is always capable of finding a bit of good even in the most dreadful events.

END