

***Dragon's Blood by Jane Yolen***

The shock of the night air, cool in comparison with the moist heat of the barn, made Jakkin shiver. The hatchling gave an answering shiver against his chest.

“There, there, little one. There, there, beauty,” he said, and slipped the trembling hatchling inside his shirt. Its soft little nails caught in his skin but tickled rather than hurt, and he could feel its heart beating rapidly. He decided to keep it wrapped up until they reached the oasis.

Crossing a stone weir, one of many catch basins for the Narrakka waters, Jakkin listened again for sounds. Then he scrambled up the embankment and headed out across the sands.

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He traveled partly by instinct, partly by star reckoning, and cursed the light of Akkhan, which was in its brightest phase. He had to get away from the nursery's line of sight before Akka, the second moon, filled the sky as well, for then it would be as light as day, at least for a little while.

There was another way to get to the oasis. It meant going down the road almost a kilometer and then striking out across the sand. But it took longer. He did not have the time.

The dragon was quiet—sleeping, he would guess—and he stroked it lightly with one finger as he kept it cradled against his chest. Then suddenly he stopped. This was not the end—but the beginning. He had the dragon that he had prayed for, longed for, worked for, but now the hard part began.

He wondered briefly how there could have been such a mistake in the count, ten hatchlings instead of the nine listed. Perhaps they hadn't added in the one with the broken wing. If so, they would know at once that one was gone. Or perhaps this one, so obviously a newborn, with its eggskin still a bright creamy color and wrinkles even on its wrinkles, perhaps this had been a last-minute egg laid by Heart O'Mine in her own compartment instead of in the eggroom. A single. He had never heard of any such thing happening before. But then, he did not know *everything* about dragons. He laughed at himself softly. Everything? Why, he realized, he scarcely knew *anything*.