

Honorable Mention
A Salvation of Dragons
by Larry Ivkovich

The cloud forest loomed ahead of Ade Minang like a mist-cloaked mirage. The young girl, scratched and bruised, her shorts and sleeveless T-shirt torn, bare feet bloody, staggered and fell to her knees. Gasping, she pulled herself over the remains of the stone quarantine wall that once separated the cloud forest and its mutated denizens from the rest of Orah Island.

She leaned against the bole of a teak tree trying to catch her breath. Her sweat-soaked clothes clung to her thin, brown-skinned body, long dark hair plastered wetly to her skull. Was it only this morning she'd made a desperate escape from the slavers? Surely, here in the island's infamous forbidden zone, she'd be safe from the brutality and evil of what remained of the so-called civilized world. The slavers wouldn't waste time and manpower on a single teenage girl!

Harsh voices sounded back from the way she'd come. Curses, shouted commands.

"Damn you," Ade whispered. She clenched her fists, heart thudding in her chest. "You won't take me back!" She rose on shaky legs and turned toward the jungle interior.

And came face to face with a Komodo dragon.

Ade cried out and stumbled backward. The huge monitor lizard was nearly three times the size of its pre-infection forebears, as tall as Ade and easily over twice that in length.

The Komodo's red eyes stared wide and unblinking. A purple-scaled hide covered smooth, powerful muscles, long tail curling behind. A strange, but not unpleasant, scent emanated from the creature.

Ade's breath caught in her throat. She felt paralyzed, unable to even turn her gaze away from the dragon which, like the others of its kind, had been mutated by the nanite fallout. Goddess only knew what the Komodo *really* was.

The Komodo approached on four muscular legs, wicked-looking claws digging into the dirt. It stopped, its tapered head only a foot away from Ade's. A thick, forked tongue extended from the lizard's mouth. Ade shuddered and closed her eyes as the tongue ran over her face, bare shoulders, arms, legs, and feet.

When she opened her eyes, she was covered in a thin sheen of the dragon's venomous saliva, which quickly dissipated, as if absorbed through her skin. A sudden dizziness enveloped Ade, a feeling not unlike that of the drugs the slavers had forced on her and the other girls. She shook away the sensation, realizing in surprise her wounds no longer hurt. She stared. The Komodo had dropped its head flat to the ground, its front legs bent low as if kneeling.

A whisper of insight flashed through Ade's mind.

It wants me to climb on its back. She forced herself to move and carefully mounted the dragon just behind its head. Ade clutched the sides of its neck, her legs pressing against its flanks.

The Komodo rose, turned, and strode deeper into the cloud forest, moving swiftly despite its bulk. Ade lowered her head, holding tightly to her massive mount. The lush jungle landscape rushed by—eucalyptus, corpse plants, black orchids. Fronds of oil palm brushed against Ade, whipped up in the Komodo's thundering wake. The sounds of insects and birds blurred into a continuous hum.

This can't be happening! she thought. Yet, strangely, she felt safe, as if this was what she was meant to do.

How could that be?

The sun's warmth and light abruptly washed over her as the dragon exited the cloud forest and moved through a bordering grassland. The Komodo headed unerringly toward a monumental, seemingly abandoned, structure. Thick vines shrouded multiple-tiered towers, low-lying ziggurats, and pagoda-like edifices.

An ancient temple complex, Ade thought in wonder. Ade had been educated as a child, had read voraciously before being taken from her family by the slavers. She knew Orah Island's history. But so little information existed on this sector since the secret bio-genetics laboratory had exploded here eighty years ago. The fears of lingering nanite infection and monstrous chimeras had been more effective in keeping people out than the quarantine wall.

Goddess, what does this mean? The Komodo quickly darted up cracked stone steps and entered the Temple through an ornate entrance doorway. A long, dimly lit corridor stretched into the heart of the structure. The Komodo trod a tiled floor through a wide entry arch into an

immense domed chamber, containing multiple daises and statuary. A phosphorescent moss clung to the walls and rounded ceiling, illuminating the chamber in soft blue light.

The Komodo stopped in front of what appeared to be a central stone altar, a mirrored bowl sitting on its flat surface. The dragon allowed Ade to dismount. She looked dazedly around her. Scores of giant cobras and pit vipers lay coiled on the floor; geckos clung insect-like to the walls and statues. All directed their gazes at Ade as if in ... *expectation*.

Two more Komodos emerged from the shadows to join their fellow dragon. Ade marveled anew at the creatures' dark primal beauty, their majestic aspect. The giant lizards extended their tongues to encircle Ade's body.

Ade felt the Komodos' *essence* coursing through her, *empowering* her. They released her and she turned to the bowl on the altar, looking into its reflective surface. Her image looked back, her once-green eyes now angled and red.

Dragon eyes.

Ade knew at that moment what she had to do, as if her whole life had led to this point. Here. Now. The slavers terrorized and exploited the island's populace for their own hideous purposes. Taking and never giving back. Destroying instead of creating.

Ade and her ... *followers* would stop such obscenity from ever happening again.

A distant shout echoed down the corridor. Ade's pursuers had entered the Temple.

She smiled and laid a hand in turn on each of the Komodos' heads. "Come," Ade whispered to the dragons who had chosen her to lead Orah Island out of the darkness. "Let's give our visitors the welcome they deserve."

Author Bio: Larry Ivkovich's speculative fiction has been published in over twenty online and print publications. He's been a finalist in the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future contest and was the 2010 recipient of the CZP/Rannu Fund award for fiction. He is the author of *The Sixth Precept*, *Warriors of the Light*, *Orcus Unchained*, and *Magus Star Rising*.

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