

Mike Resnick and Nicholas A. DiChario

BIRDIE

I SLEEP. EVENTUALLY THE heavy oak doors of the wine cellar screech open, their iron hinges sprinkling detritus upon my earthen floor.

The slow creak-creak-creak of wary footsteps descend the rotted wooden staircase that has not borne the weight of Man since-- hmmm, let me think about this--

Robert Darwin? God only knows how many years ago that was, and BOOM! The wine cellar doors collapse again, leaving in their wake a young human boy, standing at the bottom of the cellar steps, trembling in the soft glow of a single flickering candle.

"Is there a dragon down here?" says the lad.

"Anything's possible," I answer.

The child gasps, and I see his white face turn a shade or two paler, and when he finally lets out his breath, out goes the candle. I seem to recall Robert, when he was a lad, making the same blunder-- but when Robert blew out his candle he scrambled up the steps and pounded on the wine cellar doors, begging to be freed, screaming like a banshee that the dragon was about to devour him alive. But this one just stands up straight, straining his weak human eyes, eyes that were not made for seeing clearly through the darkness.

"What year is it, lad?"

"The year is 1817," he says. "I thought Father was fibbing. I mean about you. Of course, I can't see you-- so you could be fibbing, too. This could all be part of my punishment. Are you a man pretending to be a dragon?"

"Why in the world would I want to do that?" "Maybe Father is paying you."

"I am not so easily bribed." I flare a nostril, and reveal just enough of my flame to illuminate the corner of the wine cellar where I lie resting.

The youngster edges closer.

"Well, my boy," I said smugly, "do I pass the test? Man or beast?"

"You do look different. Is that green fur?"

"Land scales, actually."

"And that big head with the long nose --"

"Snout."

"And those long floppy --"

"Wings."

"I think your ears are bigger than my whole head," he says, his voice filled with more curiosity than awe. "Do you have four legs or two?"

"Two hind legs. Two front forearms. Fourteen digits in all." I wiggle my fingers and toes.

"Those are awfully small arms," he says. "And awfully big legs. And just look at the size of your toenails!"

"Talons."

"And there's that fire in your nose, too. I don't know of any man who can light a room with his nose."

"Snout." I haul myself up to get a better look at the boy. He doesn't back off, even though I'm as tall as two men and as round as ten. He's a skinny cub, but handsome for his race, nothing at all like the other Darwins I've seen. Erasmus was ugly as sin, and Robert was a fat pig of a child, an awkward, weary specimen with nerves like glass trinkets. The Darwins, historically, have been an absolutely hideous-looking elan. "If it makes you feel any better to believe I'm a man, then I'm a man."

The boy frowns. "You smell different, too. Like . . . like . . ."

"Wine?" I suggest.

"How many years have you been down here?"

"That's a good question." I pause. "Let me think. I was sleeping under a tree, and when I woke up this wine cellar was all around me. I don't remember much before that."

"You mean we built Mount Darwin right on top of your?"

This seems to upset the lad, although for the life of me I can't understand why.

I lie down and get comfortable again, resting my chin on the floor.

The boy strides right up to me, sticks his candle in my snout, and lights the wick. He reaches out and touches my land scales. "They don't feel anything at all like fur or fish scales. They feel like . . . I don't know. . . "

"Peat moss."

"You can put your fire out now if you like. It must be painful for you to have it burning inside your nose like that." He stares at me. "Do you get headaches? Father gets them badly sometimes. Where do you come from? Do you have any family?"

"My fire is not painful; I don't get headaches; and I don't come from anywhere, nor do I have any family."

"Everybody comes from somewhere."

"Is that so?" I retort. "Says who?"

The lad sits down cross-legged on the hard-packed din and holds the candle out in front of him, inspecting me. I shut down my nostril, and a small cloud of smoke wafts in the air between us. A pensive look crosses the cub's face, too serious- a look for a young human boy -- at least from what I can remember of them. I've come across a few in my lifetime. They always look a little stupid and very frightened in my presence, never pensive. In any event, I am intrigued, as much by the boy as by the fact that I seem to be carrying on a conversation with him.

"What are you doing down here in my wine cellar?" I ask him.

"Father is punishing me for making too much noise in the house. He's always punishing me for something. I think he doesn't like me much. He says I'll never amount to anything. He says I lack ex-pe-di-en-cy, whatever that means. Just now he told me I've pushed him to the limits of his endurance so he's locking me in the dungeon until after dinner."

"The dungeon?" I repeat. "Is that what he calls it?" The boy nods. "What's your name, lad?"

"Charles. Charles Darwin."

"Your father wouldn't happen to be Robert Darwin, would he?"

"Do you know Father?" he asks.

"I've met a few members of your lineage. Apparently it is a Darwin tradition to punish their cubs by banishing them to the wine cellar--excuse me, the dungeon -- where the sight of me is supposed to terrify them."

"I don't find you scary at all."

"Come to think of it, I don't find you scary either," I say.

The boy nods, apparently satisfied with the arrangement.

"Expediency," I say. "A concentrated effort in pursuing a particular goal or self-interest with efficiency and haste."

"I think you might be a very big bird. Do you come from a family of birds?"

"Do you know how to fly? Are you lonely down here all by yourself?"

"I prefer solitude."

"Or maybe you are a fish, because of your scales."

"Land scales. I'd rather be a bird, anyway. I don't know how to swim, but I do know how to fly." I try to flex my wings, but it has been such a long time since I've used them that they flap just once, awkwardly and stiffly, so I give it up.

"I promise you, when I get out of here, I'll figure out where you come from," he says with exaggerated pride, tucking his thumbs under his suspenders.

"What if I don't want to know where I come from?"

"Everybody wants to know where he's from."

"I wouldn't bet my last shilling on that."

The boy puffs out his candle, and curls up on the wine cellar floor. "Do you mind if I take a nap, Birdie?"

Birdie?

In a matter of minutes he is sleeping peacefully. I smile. I do not ever remember smiling with any of the other Darwin stock. This one is different.

Charles Darwin.

"This is an incredible opportunity, Birdie! I must go, I simply must!" Charles is talking about the expedition, of course, as outlined in his letter from the botanist, John Stevens Henslow. Charles, only twenty-two years of age, has been recommended by Henslow to a Captain FitzRoy, R.N., commander of Her Majesty's Ship the Beagle, preparing for a journey to survey the coasts of Patagonia, Tierra del Fuego, Brazil, Chile, Peru, and several islands in the Pacific, to record chronometrical measurements around the globe. The short of it is, FitzRoy needs a nature-lover who can keep meticulous records.

"A trip around the world! And listen to this. Henslow recommended me as 'The best qualified person he knows likely to undertake such a situation.'"

"Not exactly a rave review," I say dryly. "You could well substitute 'madman' for 'person'."

He ignores my sarcasm. "There's more, Birdie. Henslow says Captain FitzRoy is 'A public-spirited and zealous officer of delightful manners, and greatly beloved by all his other officers!'"

"And were you the first chosen to undertake this situation, Charles?"

"Well, no," he admits.

"Others turned it down?"

"Well, yes. Henslow himself turned it down, but he didn't want to leave his wife, and Leonard Jenyns is a top-notch naturalist, but he is a clergyman first and foremost and he doesn't want to leave his parish in the lurch."

"Might I remind you that you are a clergyman, also."

"I am not," he replies heatedly. "Well, not yet, anyway. And you're not going to talk me out of this expedition, Birdie. I've already discussed it with Father, and I've sent my letter of acceptance to the captain. This is the perfect opportunity for me to document new species." He paused and stares at me. "Don't you see what this means, Birdie? At last I might be able to pinpoint your origins!"

"Ah-ha! You're doing this for me, aren't you, Charles?"

Silence. Of course I am correct. Ever since the first moment he saw me he has been driven to discover who and what and why I am.

He became interested in natural history, in minerals and sea shells and fossils, in pigeons, in marine life, always searching for clues to my origins. The Greek and Latin that Dr. Butler tried to teach him at Shrewsbury Grammar School made no impression upon him whatsoever.

When Charles turned sixteen, his father gave up on the boy ever gaining a classical education, and decided to send him to Edinburgh to study medicine. Alas, the sight of blood disgusted him, and he hated inflicting pain as much as most men hate bearing it, so he began to cultivate new and more interesting hobbies -- zoology, geology, botany -- and without the support or encouragement of his family or his masters at school, Charles continued to pursue my past, even though I constantly tried to dissuade him.

"Give it up, Charles. Get on with your life," I would lecture him. "I was here a long time before you were born, and I'll be here a long time after you are gone. I don't need to know where I came from. I will survive."

"I'll find you somewhere, Birdie. You'll see. I'll find you."

After Charles' failure at Edinburgh, old Robert Darwin began to think that the clergy might be the only respectable career left to his son-- a fate, as far as I was concerned, that did not frighten Charles nearly enough. So, in 1828, off to Christ's College, Cambridge, he went, just in time for the Lenten term.

Mathematics, theology, languages -- how frustrated poor Charles became at this sacred institution of higher learning! The administration had absolutely no use for his true love, the natural sciences, and excluded them from the curriculum. He wrote me from Cambridge about how his father, on one of his visits to the college, had berated him: "Father said I care for nothing but ratcatching, and that I will forever be a disgrace to myself and my family."

But Charles kept on.

It was at Christ's College that Charles met Henslow, and the opportunity for

this boat ride came about.

As I look at the lad now, young and strong and healthy, full of red-faced determination, I see that his curiosity is stronger than any of the opposing forces in his life, and in a way I am almost jealous of his sense of urgency and wonder and purpose. What would it be like to possess such feelings?

"As I mentioned," Charles says, sitting cross-legged on the wine cellar floor, reminding me of the little Darwin who could so easily make me smile, "I have already sent my letter of acceptance to Captain FitzRoy, on one condition."

"One condition?"

"Yes. That I might be allowed to bring my faithful dog along with me, for comfort and companionship. It is a two-year expedition, after all." "You don't own a dog." "You noticed." He grins.

So in the end, I agree to the expedition for Charles as much as Charles agrees to it for me.

IT IS A bright, December morning, in the year 1831. Charles and I stand on a hill in Devenport, overlooking the dockyard where the beleaguered Beagle sits half-sunk, looking more like a shipwreck than a ship. I appear in the guise of a clog: there is no limit to what dragons can do when they set their minds to it.

"She may appear to be in dire straits," says Charles, "but Henslow has assured me she's seaworthy."

"Ah, yes," I say. "Your dear friend Henslow, who so graciously turned down this commission so he could offer it to you."

"The Beagle has been five years at sea, so she's a bit battered, but she's been rebuilt from the inside out."

"How reassuring," I mutter.

"She used to be a three-masted, twenty-five-ton brig, carrying up to ten guns," he says as we walk through the shipyard and up to the Beagle, where some of the crew are busy loading supplies by winch and crane. Their sharp voices cut through the crisp morning air.

As we walk up the gangway he whispers to me, "Remember, don't talk to me in front of FitzRoy or the crew. You're supposed to be a dog."

"Aarf!" I say, and he shoots me a behave-yourself glare.

I entertain hopes that this FitzRoy might just be bright enough to deny me passage -- the sea is no place for dead weight, after all -- but when we board the regal Beagle, FitzRoy, dressed in a spectacularly clean English Naval uniform, rushes up to us, salutes us both, and shakes Charles's hand.

"FitzRoy, Captain FitzRoy!" he exclaims, scooping a monocle out of his breast pocket and slapping it over his left eye. "And you must be the young Darwin chap I've been expecting. And this must be your dog. What's his name?"

"Birdie," says Charles.

"Birdie, yes, of course, Birdie!" FitzRoy reaches down and scratches my snout. I snarl.

"What strange green coloration you have, and what a unique short-hair fur, the likes of which I have never before felt on any animal!" He adjusts his monocle, which makes his eye appear larger, while simultaneously making him squint. He smiles at me, then turns to Charles. "You'll have to keep him in the aft holds, below sea level."

"I understand," says Charles, without asking my opinion.

"One last thing before you board, Darwin. I'm a clean ship. That means no rum or whiskey or spirits of any kind, including wine. Do I make myself clear?"

Charles is taken aback for a moment, then he nods. "Ah, yes, that smell. That's just Birdie. I gave him a wine bath before we arrived in Devenport. When I was at Edinburgh studying medicine, our professors discussed this new theory that alcohol might actually be used to sterilize --"

"Ah, say no more!" FitzRoy raises his hand. "We don't want the beast in heat. Progressive thinking, Darwin. We're going to get along just fine, you and I."

So I'm led by two members of FitzRoy's crew into the bowels of the ship, where I'm shoved into this dark room, and the hatch is slammed shut and padlocked over

my head, at which point I gratefully assume my true shape. I can hear the tired old wood of the hull creaking against the waves. The hold smells of seaweed and mold.

I can only hope that this trip makes Charles happy, that he finds the treasure for which he has so earnestly been searching all these years. My origins. He's a good lad, after all, but he suffers from the same incurable ailment as all the others of his race: Restlessness.

I curl up in the corner, and sleep.

"It's about time you woke up," says Charles.

I yawn, stretch my arms and legs and wings. It's so hot and stuffy in the aft hold I can barely breathe, but the heat has made my wings more flexible, and for the first time in centuries I am aware of their strength.

"Is it morning already?" I ask.

"It's July already," he replies with a touch of disapproval in his voice. "We're in Maldonado, in case you're in the least bit interested." He stares at me and frowns. "I never knew you to be such a sound sleeper."

"I was hoping I would sleep through the entire expedition. If it weren't for this infernal tropical weather, I might have been able to do it."

"Honestly, Birdie, I don't even know why I bothered bringing you

"Nor do I. All I've done is trade one dungeon for another."

I notice Charles is almost as pale as the first time we met, and he's sitting on the floor in a rather hunched position, as if ill. He rubs at the dark circles under his eyes.

"What's wrong, Charles?"

"Would you like something to eat?" he says without lifting his head.

"The seamen have been netting shark for two weeks."

"No, thank you."

"Don't you ever get hungry? I don't believe I've ever seen you eat. To tell the truth, that bothers me. Are you a carnivore? Are you going to suddenly burst

into a feeding frenzy and consume the crew?"

I search my memory. "I seem to remember eating once, a long time ago. Something makes me say a spinach salad, somewhere in France. Now why don't you tell me what's really bothering you?"

"Would you really like to know ?" he says, raising his voice, glaring at me through glossy, red-streaked eyes. He pushes himself up off the floor. "I've been seasick since the first day we set sail. FitzRoy is an ass -- that's right, an ass! He's a Creationist for God's sake, Birdie! He thinks God snapped His fingers and created all living things in their past, present, and future forms, just like that!"

Charles tries to snap his fingers but he's shaking so badly he can't quite pull it off. In this day and age, ardent Creationists aren't scarce enough, as far as Charles is concerned, and those who believe in Progressionism are just as bad. Progressionists would explain fossil discoveries and archaeological finds as proof of nothing more than successive intermittent catastrophes, with God destroying and replenishing the globe with new species after each cataclysm, Noah's flood being the last of them. ("The existence of all species can be explained using the sound principles of science," Charles once told me. This from a graduate of Christ's College, Cambridge. Amen.)

"And that crew!" Charles raves on. "You'd think a bunch of seamen who have sailed to almost every known port in the world would have something a little more stimulating to discuss than food, ale, and naked women!"

Charles begins to sob. I reach out and take him under my wing. "There, there, Charles, everything will be fine. The longer they're at sea, the less interested they'll be in talking about food and ale."

"Try to stay awake, will you, Birdie?" he snuffles. "Just so I have someone intelligent to talk to."

I get him to relax a bit, and then I get him talking which is something he seems to need desperately.

He tells me about the lofty mountains of Porta Praya, and their groves of cocoa-nut trees and tracts of lava plains and herds of goats. He tells me of the octopus that sprayed him with a jet-stream of water on the rocky shore of St. Jago. He tells me of the stark-white rocks of St. Paul, the vast Brazilian forests, the reddish-brown sea of the Abrolhos Islets. He tells me of the vampire bats in Engenhodo and how they bite the horses there, and how the large black-and-ruby spiders of St. Fe Bajada feast upon prey ten times their own size.

All of this between bouts of tears, while I rock him gently in the crook of my wing.

And then, exhausted, in the middle of a sentence about a sparkling apricot-and-flamingo-colored sunset in Rio de Janeiro, he falls fast asleep. I feel his fragile body shivering beside me like that of a tiny butterfly. The heat is stifling. The H.M.S. Beagle rolls helplessly in the waves, like a wine barrel, and I think: Oh, how I miss the sweet smell of wine! I smell nothing here but salty sea water and fish, fish, fish, like a Venetian summer (although how I remember a Venetian summer I do not know). Charles is feverish. Why did I ever allow him to go through with this?

In the days that follow, Charles's spirits brighten under my care and attention. He is excited about leaving the ship and traveling by land from Bahia Bianca to Buenos Aires. He is reluctant to leave me behind, but I assure him that I will be fine.

When he finally meets up with the Beagle again, he seems more energetic. He has collected hoards of specimens, some to dissect, some to stuff, and others merely to observe. He seems his old self again --enthusiastic, inquisitive, determined, even expedient. He has returned with a gift for me, a bright, jade-crimson-turquoise-colored blanket, woven by a half-naked woman of some South American Indian tribe. It's big enough to fit around me like a shawl. Much to my surprise, I adore it.

I notice he has returned with something else as well. His skin is covered with red bumps, some of them swollen, some of them scabbed, and he cannot stop himself from scratching. "We were attacked by large, black bugs as we crossed the Pampas."

"What kind of bugs?"

"Benchuca, I believe."

"What can we do for the itch?" I ask.

"Nothing. Nothing can be done. The bumps will disappear soon. You can stop mothering me now." And then he smiles and winks.

"Welcome back," I say.

So the days turn into weeks, months, and so on and so forth . . . the Falkland Islands, the Strait of Magellan, Chile, Peru, and the Galapagos Archipelago fall behind us. Once in a while, late at night, Charles sneaks me on deck where I watch the waves roll beneath the ship, look up at the bright moon and the vast canvas of stars, and feel the salty spray of the sea upon my face.

Charles's gloominess returns only when he finds it necessary, every so often, to inform me that he has still found no clues to my origins. On such occasions he hangs his head low and speaks into his chin and cannot look me in the eye.

This infuriates me. Why can he not let go of this childhood obsession with the origin of my species? But I keep my anger to myself. Charles needs my support.

He has dealt with more defeatism and opposition in a quarter-century of his life than I've seen in eight or nine centuries of mine.

I am a dragon, I remind myself, and Charles is only a man.

When we set sail for Van Diemen's Land, Australia, the crew begins to talk about something more than food and ale, more even than naked women, and I don't like what I'm hearing. Apparently the aborigines there were run off by the white settlers only a few months ago, and since that time raids and burnings and robberies and murders have become commonplace, the aborigines striking back with small ambushes whenever and wherever possible.

When we drop anchor, I tell Charles, "I don't want you going ashore. The natives are restless."

"Nonsense, Birdie. The town is secure and most of the natives have been deported to another island. We'll be docked for ten days and I'll need to make some excursions inland to examine the unique geological structures of the area."

"You've got more than enough --"

"Birdie, this expedition is nearly at its end and I've still found no clues to your origins! There are some highly fossiliferous strata in Van Diemen's Land, and I must take every opportunity to -- "

"My origins! My origins!" I feel the heat rise into my snout. I rear back on my haunches, and my nostrils begin to flare. "Why can't you just give it up!" I can't remember the last time I've been angry enough to smolder like this.

Charles takes a step back. For the first time in all the years we have known each other, he is afraid of me. Why do I worry so about Charles? I am a dragon. What do I care for the ephemeral pursuits of Man? And yet I do care about Charles.

The heat of the moment passes. I plop down on the floor, let my nostrils fizzle out, and pull my Indian blanket up around my neck and shoulders. "I'm sorry," I say.

Charles exhales slowly, trying to pretend he was not frightened, though we both know he was. "It's been a long voyage for us all," he says. "I think everyone is tired, including you. Just remember to keep your voice down. We don't want FitzRoy catching on to us this late in the game."

"FitzRoy couldn't catch a mountain if Mohammed dropped it on him."

"Have you ever met Mohammed?" he asks.

"Possibly," I answer.

Charles climbs out of the aft hold, leaving me to stew for ten days.

Only it's not ten days when the trouble begins. I hear the explosions of black-powder rifles. My ears perk up. Men are shouting. I smell smoke.

"Charles?" I climb the steps of the aft hold. The hatch is padlocked shut. I feel the anger rise within me. My belly churns like a furnace and I feel my throat burn with red heat. It has been so long since I've erupted, it almost frightens me. My body trembles. My throat tastes like coal. My saliva drips like hot tar. I am appalled at the digestive system I must house in order to manage such an internal inferno.

I rear back and belch, blowing a fire hole through the hatch. There is nothing left to do but burst onto the upper deck. It is a pitch-black night. The Beagle has been abandoned.

All hands are on shore. It seems that the aborigines have attacked the town.
Charles!

I leap overboard, splash into the sea. The water drowns my fire, and I sink like a stone. I suddenly remember that I can't swim. But I know how to fly, so I start flapping my wings. Higher, higher, higher I rise --and finally I break the surface.

Into the great mysterious night I fly! It has been so long. Centuries! Up over the Beagle, over the sea that ripples the gold-orange of the burning town below me, up over the town itself, I fly.

The aborigines are withdrawing. They've killed. They've taken prisoners. The townsfolk fire their balls aimlessly into the dark. But I am a dragon and my eyes can see everything. I can see the dancing spears of the natives, their hurried retreat, their wounded victims and struggling prisoners . . . and Charles! Charles has been taken at spear point, his hands bound behind him, driven like an animal by a dozen aborigines into the black forest. If they reach the thick of the woodlands, I'll never find him, I'll never see him again.

The fire screams within me!

I dive!

"Chaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarles-!"

My fire rakes through the aborigines, setting the field of their retreat aflame.

They scream. Charles screams. I make my pass and my wings caress the air and I circle back, a trail of fiery phlegm cutting through the black night, and I dive again. One native, two natives catch fire and roll in the grass. The others run for their lives. Charles has fallen. Smoke billows. I circle and dive and circle, giving the natives a damned good look at me. I shall live in their nightmares for the next ten generations! But I must save Charles before the fire or the smoke take him. So I dive once more, and like a hawk snaring its prey I pluck Charles out of the grass with my talons and take to the air again.

He looks up at me with stark terror in his eyes, and his lips form the question: Birdie?

I glide low to the ground, as silent as the wind. I drop Charles in a safe field near town, and head back to the ship, without so much as a word to the poor boy.

There is nothing to say. Charles has finally seen me for what I truly am, a dragon. It will take him time to adjust.

When I land on deck, I scorch a few more areas of the bulwarks to mask my escape and make it look like the aborigines tried but failed to bum the vessel, and then I climb down through the ruined hatch, back into the aft hold, and curl up on the floor with my blanket.

In the morning, after order has been restored, rumors pass among the crew of a flying creature all ablaze, a beast the size of a country-cottage, storming through the nighttime sky and wrecking havoc among the aborigines. But it was dark, and there was so much confusion and so many fires that most of the seamen do not believe the tales, or if they do, they aren't willing to admit the truth.

Charles is uninjured, but it is three days before he comes to the aft hold to tell me so.

"I never should have gone ashore, Birdie."

"Wisdom is hard-learned," I tell him.

But at least Charles has come to me. I believe this is a gesture of acceptance.

Man, I have come to learn, is a creature of metaphor.

The two-year expedition runs five years in all. When we return, I retire to the Darwin dungeon. It is my home, after all. I curl up with my Indian blanket, and sleep.

Charles visits me often in that first year, and together we compile his Journal of Research into the Geology and Natural History of the Various Countries Visited by H.M.S. Beagle under the Command of Captain FitzRoy, R.N. It's Charles's bright idea to include FitzRoy's name in the title, a point on which he refuses to compromise in spite of my objections. Otherwise, I edit the manuscript for him, suggesting some stylistic enhancements, all of which he agrees to, including striking all references to his faithful Birdie, a point on which I refuse to compromise because I insist upon protecting his scientific integrity.

After the publication of the Journal, he is lionized by London's intellectual society, his career as a scientist catapults, and I know I'll never have to worry about Charles settling in as a country clergyman in some obscure backwoods parish.

Still he visits me often, to tell me of an exciting speaking engagement, or of a treasured new colleague, or of an admiring letter from some American naturalist, and one day when he comes, he tells me of his cousin, Emma Wedgwood, to whom he has proposed marriage.

Even after he is married and moves to Upper Cower Street in London, he thinks to visit me occasionally. He comes to tell me about his children, and how he will be among the first generation of Darwins not to punish his cubs by banishing them to the dungeon on Mount Darwin.

One day when he comes, he is so ill he can barely lift the wine cellar doors and make his way down the steps. He is weak and nauseous and suffering from heart palpitations. He does not stay long.

It is many months before I see him again, and when I finally do, he tells me his symptoms have worsened, and I can see he has lost weight and appears deathly

pale.

"I am not likely to improve, Birdie. I am suffering from the attack of the Benchuca, the great black bug of South America. Do you remember the day I returned to the ship riddled with bites, after my hike through the Pampas?"

I remember, but I say nothing.

"The disease carried by the Benchuca is fatal," he says. "It can also be long and painful. I had hoped that after having gone so long with no symptoms, I might not have been infected, but it was not to be."

Charles carries with him a stack of notebooks and papers he can barely hold in his arms. He spreads them out on the floor and stares at me. "I have been working on a theory," he says. "Will you help me?"

AMONG THE volcanic outcrops known as the Galapagos Islands, off the coast of South America, each island claims its own distinct population of birds and animals. Although there were obviously common ancestors, the fauna of each island developed separately, despite only a modest oceanic separation.

When Charles traveled across the islands, he noticed that the finches have become so distinct from one island to the next that they can no longer interbreed.

Charles has read Lamarck's hypothesis, dating back to the eighteenth century, that all living matter has an inherent drive toward increased complexity. This intrigues him, as does Buffon's theory, which suggests that environmental conditions as well as the struggle for survival might lead to the extinction of some species, and the succession of others.

"We also must consider Lyell's belief in uniform geological change," says Charles. "As geological alterations occur, this must bring about changes in the natural habitat of all living things."

We assemble the evidence, piece by piece, until it all finally makes sense.

Global changes. Genetic mutations. The struggle of all species for survival.

Natural selection.

Evolution. It is not my origin that Charles has discovered during the voyage of the Beagle, it is his own.

And yet just when the theory of Man's evolution becomes so absurdly obvious that neither of us can ignore it, ignore it is exactly what we do. We push aside our papers and relax to the smell of wine and cedar and moist earth, and spend most of our time together talking about death.

"I am looking forward to my death, Birdie," Charles says. "Death is the last great challenge of Man."

"You have always been too curious for your own good," I tell him.

Charles slides a Chilean cigar out of his pocket. I flare my nostril for him. He sticks the cigar in my snout and puffs hard on the butt, then succumbs to a coughing fit.

"Charles, I want you to know that I am very sorry."

"Sorry about what?"

"In many ways I am responsible for your malady. If not for me, you never would have gone on the expedition, and you never would have been attacked by the Benchuca."

"No, no, don't you see, Birdie? You have given me my life, not my death. If I had not met you, I never would have been driven to explore, I never would have lived through such exciting adventures. Death is merely a consequence. That is the way of Man, Birdie. We pay for our lives with our deaths."

I nod, but I do not understand. How can I?

"Because of you," I say, "I was able to share in that adventure." I am surprised to discover that this matters to me.

"You know, I could have died at the hands of those aborigines. I have never properly thanked you for saving my life, Birdie."

"Think nothing of it."

"I'm sure it is a point of less concern to someone who has lived centuries, probably eons." Charles coughs. He does not possess the lung strength to keep

the cigar lit, so he stubs it out in the dirt. "Man needs to believe in his life after death. Man must have his gods."

Ah, yes. Charles is afraid of the changes his insights might bring about among his species. He is afraid of how his race might suffer without the comfort of the Book of Genesis. He does not see what I see. He does not have the perspective of centuries.

"Charles," I say. "What does your theory tell you about Man?"

He looks at me blankly.

"Adaptation, Charles," I explain gently. "If Man needs new gods and new beliefs, I promise you that he will devise them. It is not only the body that evolves, but also the spirit."

"But does Man want new gods?" he asks dubiously.

"I cannot say," I answer. "If he does not, rest assured that he will create new reasons to believe in the old ones."

"I am very tired, Birdie," he says. And this is the last thing he will ever say to me.

Charles is supposed to visit me today, but when or if he arrives, I will not be here. I have decided that I cannot watch him die.

So I am alone in the wine cellar when I scribble Charles Darwin's name across the cover page, and affix a title to our manuscript: Upon the Origin of Species By Means of Natural Selection, or Preservation of Favoured Races and the Struggle for Life.

I don my Indian blanket and tuck the manuscript under my wing and climb the stairs of the wine cellar. I push open the doors and step out into the bright morning sun.

I think I shall take the train to London -- or perhaps I shall fly -- to Albemarle Street, and in my human guise, much as I hate corsets and bustles, I will personally deliver the manuscript to the publishing company of John Murray. I was impressed by the job they did with the 1845 edition of the Journal, quite

a money-maker from what I understand, and I am certain they will be eager to print Darwin's newest work. In any event, I must do what Charles cannot. I must offer Man the truth. It is essential, I think, for the continued development of his species.

Then I shall find another place on this Earth to live. Mount Darwin will never be the same without Charles. The future Darwins, like those before him, seem a dull lot. I am a dragon: I can fly, I can set a field aflame with my breath, I can see things clearly in a way that men, even so gifted a man as Charles, cannot, and I have needs of my own.

The boy has overcome his initial surprise at seeing me, and now sits down on the floor, cross-legged, a few feet away.

"Why have your parents locked you down here?" I ask. He stares at me uncomprehendingly, and I switch to German.

"No one locked me here," he answers. "I often come here to think."

"And what do you think about?" I ask.

He shrugs. "It is difficult to express," he says. "They are very big thoughts," he adds seriously.

A warm glow suffuses me. "Sometimes I think very big thoughts myself." I pause.

"I think we are going to become friends."

"I would like that."

"What is your name, boy?" I ask.

"Albert," he says.

"Albert," I repeat. "That is a very nice name. And I am Birdie."

I wrap my Indian blanket around me. I am content.