

A NEW GENERATION
by JERRY OLTION

Illustration by Vincent Di Fate

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Beings who rely primarily on intelligence tend to disdain “mere instinct” as an inferior substitute. But is it really?

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She was the first to hatch from the egg. The moment she broke free of its leathery skin, instinct sent her scuttling up the sandy slope into the bushes overhanging the beach, where she waited, alert for danger in the suddenly larger world.

The rhythmic swishing sound that she had heard all her life was much louder now. It came from the edge of the ripply blue vastness that lapped at the other side of the wide strip of sand she had just crossed. Understanding rushed into her mind as she examined each concept. Waves. Ocean. Beach. Instinct told her the ocean would come closer before it receded, rising much higher than where she now stood. She would have to climb all the way up the cliffs behind her before the day was out, clear into the bright blue sky with its puffy clouds and the long streak of almost-cloud that stretched downward toward the silver oddity that rested on the beach only a few tree lengths away.

Something was strange about the silver thing. Her mind held ready-made knowledge of everything else she saw and smelled—the rocks and the cliffs and the clouds and the birds and the bushes and the ocean and even the multitude of creatures *in* the ocean, but it held nothing for the silver thing. The mystery object was round on top like an egg, and it had a hole in the side like the one she had made in her own egg, but it wasn't an egg. It glistened like a life-giving puddle in the dry interior of the continent, but it wasn't a puddle. She had no instinctive knowledge of it at all.

She should probably run. The silver thing was big enough to be dangerous. Besides, the tide was coming in. She needed to get to higher ground or become just another link in the food chain.

It would be a long climb, and her belly already hurt. She knew what

that meant. The orange berries on the bushes' outer branches drew her up onto her hind legs, balancing on her long tail so she could reach out with one taloned paw and snag them by their pulpy skins. The berries burst in her mouth and the juice ran sticky and sweet down her throat, but it wasn't enough. A whole bush full wasn't enough. Nor was another one. Now she understood the urge to be first out of the egg; there weren't enough berries for her and her siblings.

There would never be enough. She looked back at the leathery oblong, partially buried in sand. None of the others had emerged yet, but the skin was rippling as they squirmed about inside, attempting to burst free of their individual compartments like their oldest sister had done. The waves were drawing closer, but wouldn't wash over the egg in time.

She had one chance for a life without constant battle against her own kind. She cast a wary glance at the silvery thing, but it hadn't moved. Working up her courage, she raced back down the beach to the egg, put her head and one shoulder against it, and shoved hard. It rocked backward a bit. She shoved harder, lifting it over the lip of the hole it rested in, and scuffled sand beneath it so it couldn't fall back down while she backed up for a better grip.

A long, toothy snout burst through the egg's side and snapped at her forepaw. She snapped back, biting off a chunk of its upper lip, and when it jerked away, she used the momentum to rock the egg completely out of its sand cradle.

Another push sent it rolling toward the water. She watched a wave come in and just touch it, then she rushed forward and shoved it after the receding surf. The holes she and her wounded sibling had made flopped against the sand and slowed the egg's progress, but she kept pushing with all her might and sent it around another revolution, then another and another.

The returning water lapped at her feet, and instinct sent her scrambling back just in time to avoid the snapping mouths of the water's inhabitants. The egg jerked from side to side under their onslaught, then ripped open and spilled all eleven of her siblings into the surf. Their frantic thrashing churned the water into a froth, and two of them managed to kick free of the melee long enough to swim a couple of body lengths toward shore, but that was as far as they got. One disappeared so quickly it never had a chance to scream; the other went slower, in thirds.

The wave receded. She was alone. All the berries were hers, and all

the crawling, hopping, and flying creatures she could catch were hers, too. She turned to begin the climb.

“Hey, there’s one,” said a voice from down the beach.

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She didn’t understand the words themselves, but the situation was clear enough. She scrambled for cover, smashing through bush after bush to make an obvious path, then abruptly changed course and slipped silently beneath the branches toward the tumbled rock slope at the bottom of the cliff.

She had caught just a glimpse of her discoverer: a tall, gangly creature that walked on two legs, maybe three times as tall as her. It didn’t look toothy or heavily armored or particularly fast, which meant it was probably poisonous.

How could she not know? She knew about the bushes with the orange berries, and she knew about the tide, and she even knew about the forest that awaited her atop the cliffs, but she didn’t know anything at all about the creature that stalked her. Was it fierce, or was it food? She didn’t know that most basic of things about it.

She poked her head up through the scratchy branches of her hiding place until her topmost eye could see over the bushes. The mystery creature had followed her trail to the point where she’d stopped making one, and was waving a shiny forepaw back and forth through the air. “It’s in here somewhere,” it said.

“Watch out,” said a fainter, thinner voice from the side of its head. “If it’s anything like what’s in the water, it could take your arm off in one bite.”

“I’m wearing my p-suit,” the mouth voice said.

“It could still hurt a lot.”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s two feet long.”

Language. Two speakers were exchanging thoughts. Instinct told her that much. It didn’t tell her what they were saying, but she guessed one was being cautious and waiting out of danger while the other one explored.

It bothered her that she had to guess. It bothered her that she didn’t

know how the second speaker could project its voice directly into the first speaker's ear. Instinct should have covered this, as it covered everything else.

"I'm getting a heat signature," the explorer said. It waved its shiny forepaw toward her, then past, then brought it back to point straight at her. "Right there."

Discovered so easily? She must have wiggled the bush. She ducked down and moved silently toward the ocean again. The creature would expect her to climb the cliff, as her kind always did when they hatched. But when she rose up again to look, it was still pointing its outstretched arm directly at her.

"It's quick," it said. "I'm probably going to have to stun it."

"If you can hit it," said the other voice.

"Watch me." The creature lowered its shiny paw to its waist, left the shiny part in a pouch there, and lifted a different shiny thing—a weapon, by the sense of confidence that emanated from the creature when it grasped it.

The weapon looked like nothing instinct had prepared her for, either. This was too strange. She turned to flee, but her legs had hardly begun to move when they lost their strength. Her tail twitched for balance, tearing the bush beside her out of the ground, but then she lost control of it, too, and fell to the sand.

"Got it in one," said the creature happily.

It tromped up to her on its long legs and in one smooth motion grabbed her tail and lifted her off the ground, her head lolling from her numb body. She tried to snap at its knees, but she could barely open her mouth.

Instinct offered no script to follow now, either. If any of her ancestors had been caught in this fashion, they hadn't survived to breed and pass their knowledge on.

So she would be eaten. Not immediately, though. The creature was taking her back to its silver egg. Apparently this was the mother, rather than a hatchling, and it meant to feed its young. It must be like the small leaf-eaters in the forest above, whose species survived by out-breeding

their predators.

But this creature was a predator itself. That would be a dangerous combination. Ancestral memory reminded her how that had turned out when her own species tried it. This creature's kind would have to be winnowed ruthlessly or the rest of her world would suffer for generations until evolution restored the balance.

She had to escape. Escape and climb the cliff and cross through the forest to the highlands where the adults lived, long before breeding time made it safe. She would have to negotiate a truce, probably between many of her kind, and lead them back here to kill this new creature before it spread too far to be stopped.

But first she had to regain control of her body. She twitched her tail and stretched her legs out as far as she could, trying to break through the weakness the creature's weapon had induced in her, but her muscles moved so slowly she wouldn't have been able to walk, much less run, even if she managed to break the creature's grasp.

They reached the opening in the egg. She expected to die in the next instant, but instead of throwing her in for the babies, the creature reached inside and withdrew a bag, which it dropped her into and drew closed at the top.

Her world became sound and motion. She felt herself dropped on a hard surface inside the egg, heard the creature climb in after her and settle into place, heard the sudden stillness as it sealed the egg somehow from inside, then heard its voice and its companion's attenuated reply.

"I'm heading back to the ship."

"Docking bay's open."

Suddenly, impossibly, her weight tripled. She had landed with one foreleg beneath her neck; the pressure of her windpipe against the bone slowly cut off her air, no matter how hard she struggled to breathe. She heard the rush of air whooshing past the egg, but she could gasp none of it for herself. Her body automatically began shutting down the blood flow to her least-needed organs, preserving her brain for last, but eventually there wasn't enough air left to sustain consciousness.

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She awoke in a nest made of silvery rods spaced too close for her to pass between. Ancestral memory flooded into her: cages were for holding things meant to be eaten later. Sometimes the caged animals could be coaxed to breed first, and then you wouldn't have to hunt anymore. But you still had to feed the animals, which was ultimately more work than simply feeding yourself. Her species had given up cages long ago.

She tried to stand, and succeeded, though her legs still felt as if the bones had been removed. There was a bowl of water in one corner of the cage. A threat? But when she looked into it, she could see all the way to the bottom, and there was nothing waiting to attack her. She slipped her tongue into it, gingerly at first, then more eagerly when the water's soothing trickle eased the dryness in her throat.

When she finished the water, she examined the door to the cage and discovered that it was held shut with a simple latch, which she easily lifted with a curved foreclaw. Maybe it wasn't a cage after all.

Or maybe the creature didn't think she was smart enough to understand the latch. For the first time since it had overpowered her with its shiny weapon, she felt a glimmer of hope. It might have captured her, but it didn't know any more about her than she knew about it.

Her cage sat atop a flat slab along one wall of an unusually regular cavern. Other cages stood next to hers, and as she looked at the creatures inside them she recognized a bnat, a grith, two sniks, and a nona. They were all looking at her; the bnath and the sniks hungrily, the grith and nona in fear.

At the other end of the slab from the cages were clusters of tools. She recognized hardly any of them, but one triggered a memory. If a spark-stone were flaked just so, and bound to a shaft so smoothly that neither the seam nor the binding could be seen, and if the whole thing were coated with the silvery substance her captors seemed to love so well, then it would look like the edged weapon that lay on a soft and impossibly white skin before her.

She picked it up, gauging its heft. It was not balanced well for throwing, but the sharp edge ran a quarter of its length. A knife rather than a spear, which meant close-in fighting, but it would have to do.

She tested it on the nona. The blade sank into its neck with surprising ease. When it finished thrashing, she opened its cage and ate it while the other captives watched hungrily. She considered eating one of the sniks as

well, but she might need to conserve her food supply until she could make her escape.

She examined the cavern for a good spot to wait in ambush. She was too small to overpower the creature that had captured her; she would have to take it by surprise. Instinct couldn't tell her exactly where its vulnerable sites were, but the neck was usually a good bet on most animals, which meant she needed to climb something it would walk past.

The cavern was filled with such somethings. It was practically stuffed with unintelligible things, enough of them to make her doubt her development. How could there be so many things her mind didn't recognize? Had no ancestors of hers ever survived an encounter with these creatures? If even one had lived to breed, she would know of it. Their memories would be hers, passed along in the ever-growing chain of knowledge that made her who she was.

Despair weighed her down like the force inside the bag. This was hopeless. But the alternative was to wait in her cage until her captor grew hungry. If she was to die, she might as well die trying to escape.

She surveyed the cavern for choke points the creature would have to pass on its way to her cage, and suddenly realized that the entire cavern was another cage. It had only one opening, sealed at the moment by a flat slab of the same stuff everything else was made of.

That would be the best spot, then. Wait for it to enter, kill it, and make her escape while the entrance was still open. Her legs felt usable again, if not back to full strength, so she dropped to the ground, landing on three legs so as not to damage her knife, and moved silently across the smooth, cold surface to the tall assembly of niches and slabs that stood next to the entrance. In a real cavern, this would be a food cache, but she could recognize nothing edible among the hard-edged mysteries wedged into the niches.

She climbed awkwardly up the outer edges of the slabs until she reached the top. This would be just about the height of the creature's head. Perfect. She shoved two transparent somethings aside to make space for herself, but she misjudged her returning strength and they toppled over the edge, shattering loudly on the ground. If the creature heard that, it would know she was awake.

She held the knife out, ready to swing it at the first thing to enter, and she didn't have to wait long. She heard footsteps, then the creature's voice.

It paused at the entrance, then the slab that blocked the opening slid aside and the creature stepped inside.

She was already lunging with the knife when she realized her mistake. This was the wrong creature. This one was shorter than the other one. The knife merely slid through the golden hair atop its head, slicing a wide swath of it loose, and the lack of resistance sent her tumbling off her perch.

She grabbed at the short creature's head and managed to grip some of its remaining hair in her forepaw, and she swung there like a climber on a vine in a windstorm while the creature shrieked "Get it off, get it off!" and flailed with its arms and backed out of the cavern.

The other creature was just outside, already reaching for its numbing weapon. There was no way she could kill this one in time to attack the other before it weakened her again. Instinct chose her next action: she wrapped her hindlegs around the smaller creature's neck, stuck the tip of the knife against a soft spot at the base of its skull, and snarled the short, blunt word that meant "Stop!" to every creature in the world.

These two both froze. Then the big one said, "Holy shit, it's intelligent."

"I don't care what it is, get it off me!" said the other. It was the voice that had been speaking into the big one's ear before.

"It's got a scalpel. Don't do anything sudden. You too, little guy. Relax. We're not going to hurt you."

It was speaking to her, that much was obvious, but its words were garbled. Both of these creatures spoke a language that wasn't in her ancestral memory. But that was impossible. Surely, sometime during the evolution of their language, someone would have learned it and escaped. Even if the language evolved further afterward, *some* of the words would be understandable.

Its intent was clear enough. It meant to keep her from killing its mate until they could overpower her. She couldn't give them time enough to make a plan. She tightened her grip on the smaller one's neck and said, "Take me out of here," jerking her head sideways to emphasize her words in case these new creatures couldn't understand her, either.

"We're sorry," the big one said. "We really didn't know." Its voice sounded conciliatory, but she barked "Stop!" again and it shut up. It could

be conspiring with the other one in their private language.

“Move,” she said, jerking her head sideways again. She would have pointed, but she couldn’t lower the knife, and she didn’t want to risk letting go with her other paw, either. They had to know what she wanted anyway; what else could a former captive with a knife want?

The big one backed away, and the small one moved after it, carrying her on its shoulders. They moved down a narrow passage, turned left at a fork, and started climbing a set of regularly spaced ledges. As they climbed, she realized that she was getting lighter. It felt as if she were slowly being immersed in water until she floated, but there was no water, and none of the hungry creatures that lived there.

She dug into the smaller creature’s loose skin with her claws and held the knife against its neck. At the top of the ledges, her weight was entirely gone, and the creatures floated into another cavern where finally a familiar sight greeted her. It was only recently familiar, but the silver egg resting in the center of the cavern was a relief after so many unknowns.

The big creature pointed at the egg. “You’ve got to get back in there if we’re going to take you home.”

Perhaps to illustrate what it meant, it climbed inside and pushed itself downward until it sat in a close-fitting niche surrounded with blinking lights and various protrusions. It patted the artificial ground beside it, a clear invitation for her to join it.

Should she do it? *Could* she do it? There was no room for the second creature inside the egg. She would have to let it go if she were to climb inside with the big one. She gauged the distance between them and prepared to leap, but in her momentary distraction she had forgotten that the creature she held hostage was not tied. While her attention was on the other one, it simply reached up and snatched the knife from her paw.

She leaped before the little one could use the knife. The big one yelped and grabbed for its numbing weapon, but she bit its forepaw, crunching down until she felt bones break, and snatched up the weapon when it spun away from the creature’s grasp.

She had seen how the weapon worked. Grab it here, put a claw here, and squeeze. She aimed it at the lower half of the big creature and tried it, and was gratified to see its legs slacken.

She clutched the big creature's shoulder and held the end of the weapon to the side of its head. "Take me home," she said, but the creature was yowling and paying more attention to its broken forepaw than to her.

The smaller one advanced with the knife, but she growled "Stop!" at it and it paused, its eyes shifting to her and then back to the other creature.

The big creature bent forward to cradle its wounded paw against its belly. A normal enough response to injury, but it could easily have another weapon tucked away, too. She slapped its paw with her tail, and when it flailed outward in pain, she shot the paw with the numbing weapon.

"There," she said. "Now it doesn't hurt."

The big creature looked at its paw, then at her, then at its paw again. It let out a long breath and said, "This guy's scary fast, mentally as well as physically. We really don't want a bunch of them pissed off at us."

"You can't fly like that!" the smaller one said.

"It's all right," the big one replied. "The landing site's programmed in. I'll drop it off and be right back. Get the docbox ready for surgery."

She let them have their parting words, whatever they meant. It didn't matter now. She held the big creature's weapon. If either of them tried anything, she would weaken them both with it and eat one of them while the other watched.

They seemed to understand the situation. The small one lowered the knife and floated back. The big one said, "Okay, little buddy, don't panic when the door closes," and it reached slowly forward with its good paw to touch one of the raised bumps on the shelf before it.

The egg sealed itself with a piece of shell that slid down from above. The interior grew darker, but light still streamed in through the clear part of the egg in front of the creature.

"Are you out of the docking bay?" it said, and the smaller one's voice said in its ear, "Clear. Be careful."

It touched more of the bumps before it, and the wall of the cavern slid aside just beyond the egg. Outside was an arc of brilliant white cloud, swirled like foam in an eddy, with a sharp line dividing it from blackest black above.

The egg lurched, then slid out of the cavern into the darkness. It tipped until more cloud was visible, cloud and sky and ocean and ground all mixed together.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” the creature said. “That’s your world.”

She let it talk, even though she couldn’t understand its words, or the sight beyond the egg. She kept her eyes on its paws, watching what it did with the bumps and the blinking lights before it.

“Get ready for thrust,” it said, and when it pushed one of the bumps, she felt her weight return. She teetered on the creature’s shoulder, but wrapped an arm around its neck and held on.

The clouds and sky and ground grew nearer, and then the egg started to shudder. She heard the sound of wind rushing past, and not long after that the clouds and sky began to separate from the ground and the ocean, and she realized that she had been above them all, and was now descending through the sky to the ground. She had no knowledge of any creature that could fly that high.

She watched this one’s every move. Every time he pushed that bump, the egg veered left. The bump beside it made the egg veer right. Other bumps controlled up and down and forward and back. She committed them all to memory.

The ground came up toward them, and she saw that they were dropping toward a bay, probably the bay where she had hatched. After all this, the creature was going to lay the egg on the sand again, and make her climb the cliffs herself.

“There,” she said, and this time she did risk pointing with the paw that didn’t hold the weapon. “Go there.”

“Yes, that’s your home,” the creature said in its unintelligible language.

“Go there,” she said again, pointing.

If it understood her, it gave no sign of it. The egg fell onward, past the cliffs, slowing until it came to rest with a soft thump on the narrow strip of sand between ocean and cliff face. But the tide had risen. A wave came in and swirled around the base of the egg.

“No!” she shouted. “Go up! Up!”

“It’s all right,” the creature said. “You’re home.” It pushed another bump and the door slid upward. “Go for it, little guy,” it said.

She slid off its shoulders, but not toward the door. She pushed herself as far away from it as she could, and put the creature between herself and the opening.

“It’s all right,” the creature said again. “I’m sorry I—”

It had just time enough to register surprise when the scaly green tentacle reached in through the door and wrapped around its neck, but the tentacle yanked it out through the door so quickly that it never even had a chance to scream.

She didn’t wait for another tentacle. She leaped for the bump that controlled the door and banged her paw on it, then pushed hard on the one that made the egg go up.

The egg went up. The same mysterious force that had crushed the air out of her last time tried to do it again, but she hit the *down* bump and it eased off. She looked out the clear side of the egg as the cliff face slid past. When she was well above it, she pushed one of the bumps that made the egg go sideways.

She had intended to set it down at the top of the cliff, but as she drifted over the forest, she looked beyond the treetops to the mountains where the adults lived. She could bring it down there just as well as here and save herself the walk, and the egg would put her in a much better bargaining position when she got there. With it, she could enlist the adults’ aid in hunting down and killing the rest of these new creatures before *they* became the dominant species in her world.

Her world. She remembered the view from above, seeing the whole thing at once. That could explain why she had no foreknowledge of the new creatures. If they actually lived beyond the sky, maybe they had never come here before.

No matter. If they ever did again, she—or her progeny—would know just what to do.

