

### The Son of the Dragon Merchant

The right side of Tolem's chin was still bleeding from where the Grimhook had gone for his cheek. He figured that the gash would scar and be an angry red mark for a few days, but it was better than losing an eye. The Grimhook had jumped for his face, but had fallen short. The tiny, black and violet dragon was yanked away in Tolem's large hand and shoved back in its wicker cage before it could do much damage. Grimacing, Tolem decided it was enough training for today.

Tolem washed his cheek in a basin of water, wiping the blood off with a clean cloth. It was a difficult job, Tolem knew that. When he started working for his father, it came with angry dragons and a lifetime of taming the brutes for when he inherited the dragon roost. His arms were covered with claw marks, bites and a number of burns that stretched up to his shoulders. Yet, for the price he got on each hatchling, it was worth the wounds. Small dragons were good pets, the more beautiful the better. The bigger ones in Tolem's kennels were regarded as valuable guards of property. Business was steady, no matter how slow it was.

The bell at the front desk rang and Tolem dropped the cloth to the counter. Walking through the back of the shop, Tolem peered in the cages. He got a nasty look from a Crimson Razorback. These dragons had outgrown their wings a long time ago, now used more as frills for intimidating opponents. The deep red scales bristled angrily as the frill rose, though an iron muzzle keeping the Razorback's mouth closed. It would make a great treasure guard, but it was especially vicious to Tolem. Despite the time he'd spent with the beast, the dragon was unforgiving when it was subjected to Tolem's training.

Pulling back a curtain, Tolem wiped his hands on his leather smock and tried to make himself presentable. A young man was waiting at the counter, his hands folded behind his back as he examined a framed collection of dragon scales on the wall. He perked up when Tolem appeared and approached him.

“Are you the dragon merchant?” The young man asked. “I was expecting you to be older.”

“My father owns the business,” Tolem said, “but I have taken over the shop while he’s been ill, I’m afraid.”

“My apologies.” The young man bowed his head. “I could come later, if—“

“I’ve been training dragons with my father since I was a child.” Tolem cut him off. “The most difficult part has been the business on the front end. Picking up or ordering?”

“First time in. I’m Asrin Valent, Devros Valent’s son. He’s looking for something to help watch the shop.”

“Devros Valent? The Mage Supplier? That’s a tall order. Did he have any specifics in mind?”

“He said that the dragon merchant would have a good suggestion in mind. I could come back when you’re father—“

“I think, between the two of us, we can manage something.” Tolem took a large book from under the counter. It was a dusty catalogue filled with different types of dragons with his father’s handwritten observations and warnings.

“Well, you seem like a bright fellow.” Asrin said. “We can probably come up with something to suit our needs.”

“Let’s try our luck,” Tolem said, leaning over the counter so Asrin could also look at the book. “Let’s see...probably want to stray away from anything too small. Grimhooks and the like

tend to not be best for treasure guarding. Most of what we sell tends to fit best around the arm of a lady in waiting or perched on the shoulder of some noble or other.”

“I think we’re looking for something a little more fierce.” Asrin said, turning the book so he could read the catalogue’s notes. “I think he’d like something that could be trained easily.”

“How big a room?” Tolem asked.

“It’s a basement room, but it’s hard to put an exact measure on it. Mage Cellars—“

“Change sizes? Right. I remember dropping a Crag Keeper in a Mage Cellar once. It went on for further than I could see, but the store front was smaller than this shop.”

“Do you have another Crag Keeper on hand?”

“Those are a little harder to find, I’m afraid. We had an egg dealer about three years ago, but the mother found him before he could restock. Needless to say, he stays away from that particular roost and is still looking for a new one.”

“I think we were looking for something with a bit of muscle on it...” Asrin said, flipping a few pages. “Something powerful... a deterrent as much as a guard dragon. What about one of these? An Ironhide sounds fierce.”

“Ironhides are good for protecting people, but not treasure. They need to have an emotional attachment with what they’re protecting. Normally, they’re joined with children as guard dragons. In the wild they’re big softies; they’ll hoard birds or rabbits before wasting their time on jewels. Convincing an Ironhide to keep watch over a room of books or artifacts will be a challenge even I don’t think I can handle.”

“Hmmm, what about one of these?” Asrin pressed a finger to the page. “A Rel—Relian?”

“A Relyn Guardian?” Tolem asked. “That shouldn’t be in there.”

“Why not?” Asrin asked. “Are they rare?”

“Not especially rare,” Tolem admitted. “But they aren’t known for being easy to train...or find for that matter. Each is born with the ability to lay a single egg and they guard it furiously. I know a number of trappers who go their whole lives without seeing an egg. The parents can be vicious if provoked...or annoyed.”

“Why are they called Guardians then?”

“Thousands of years ago, they were revered for their loyalty to kings. It was a magical bond, forged from mutual respect and all the stronger for it. Legend says they would circle a kingdom for decades without sleep or rest to protect the borders. They could eclipse the sun with their shadow and burn armies of invaders in a cone of fire big enough to engulf a mountain.”

“It sounds perfect!”

“Sorry,” Tolem laughed, closing the book. “They aren’t really in the market. The eggs are impossible to get ahold of. Live capture is an option, but—”

“It sounds like they're difficult to track down, but not illegal to tame and sell.”

“No, they’re not illegal, but—“

“Is it money?” Asrin said. “We’ll pay any price! My father wants to collect some artifacts of extreme value and we can’t have anything but the best.”

“As I said—“

“Ten thousand gold crowns?” Asrin asked. “Fifty thousand?”

Tolem rubbed his chin, cringing at the scratch on his cheek. It reminded him how dangerous the job really was. Dragon hunters died trying to catch smaller dragons and the tiny Grimhook in the back had tried to take his eye out just this morning. Getting an egg would be impossible, but

finding and rearing a youngling was doable. Foolish, but doable. He'd need a team to do it, but convincing a trapper to go after a Relyn Guardain would be—

“*Well,*” Tolem thought, “*Laslin might try it, she's mad enough to do anything for the thrill of it.*” Emmell would probably come, if the money was good enough. That meant Rint would also be joining the ranks, if Emmell was there. Rint was a good tracker and Emmell was strong as an ox. He had relied on those three in the past for live captures, but the biggest thing they'd caught would barely come up to Tolem's chest at the shoulder.

Risks were stacked high, but the benefits were also enticing. His father wasn't getting any healthier and the money would help. They could open a second roost and build the shop up. Not to mention, the prestige of taming a Relyn Guardian would be enough to put them on the map. That meant more money and more clients...above and beyond simple guard dragons or house pets. Tolem could actually open his own roost one day.

“Seventy five thousand gold crowns?” Tolem asked, guessing at the cost it would take to keep his friends employed.

“Done!” Asrin smiled. “I'm relieved! My father will be very pleased.”

“It'll take some time, I'm afraid.” Tolem said. “I have a trapper friend who might be up to the challenge, but I'll need to convince her. And I'll need you to fill out some contracts...purely for legal reasons.”

“Of course.” Asrin rubbed his hands together, eagerly. Tolem had only seen that look on a hoarding dragon. If it were possible, it looked more dangerous on a human.