

DRAGON

One night a bearded old man in a raggedy long coat knocked over his Elven wine as he sat in the corner of Adam's Apple Ale House. A barmaid of twenty went to help him. She was the loveliest girl in the land, with golden hair, dawn-fresh skin, and exotic, almost unearthly eyes.

"Again, Tobin?" she said with a sad smile as she wiped up. "Let me help you to your room."

Tobin leaned on her as they climbed the stairs. "I hear you refused the Duke's son today, Aurin."

She shrugged under his weight. "He has knocked-knees and speaks with a lisp."

"He would have showered you with gold and jewels. You'd never need work again."

Her eyes shone as she narrowed them. "I intend to have all that, without the lisp," she said.

He sat on a narrow cot in a tiny room and she helped him off with his coat. "Beware hubris," he told her. "Pride and arrogance made me the broken old man you see today. I was once a great wizard —"

Aurin pshawed, "You, a great wizard?"

His eyes unfocused, his face grew sad. "I had wealth, power, and... love. I lost it all from hubris."

"Love? Now that's a story I want to hear," said Aurin, reaching for the satchel Tobin wore across his chest beneath his coat.

He twitched away. "Another time, my dear. Leave me be."

Next morning Aurin set breakfast in front of Tobin and sat down across from him. Her eyes twinkled. "Tell me about this love of yours," she said.

Tobin sighed, and hesitated. Aurin frowned. "Come now, I've cooked, cleaned, and taken care of you for a year. The least you owe me is your story."

He nodded. "Ages ago, I was head of the wizard's guild in Hanover. I was powerful then, and haughty. I fell in love with a woman nearly as beautiful as you, but my hubris pushed her away, into the arms of my rival — another wizard, as powerful as I." He shook his head. "Jealousy makes a man do terrible things. I destroyed him and his castle, not knowing my love was with him. I killed her."

Aurin shook her head. "How could you have killed such a powerful wizard?"

Tobin hung his head. "I couldn't, he was too well protected. But I had the power and skill to create an Orb of Dragonkind, and with it I controlled a dragon. I sent the dragon to destroy him in his tower." He shuddered.

Aurin gasped. "What happened to the orb?"

Tobin's hand went to his satchel.

Aurin's eyes widened. "It's a bag of holding, isn't it? Another dimension. That's why I couldn't sense the orb." Her face fell. "Oh Tobin, I'd hoped that I was wrong, that it wasn't you."

Aurin's form began to shift and slide, growing in size, filling the room. Her soft skin hardened into golden scales. Leathery wings sprouted from her shoulders. Her torso elongated. Still she grew.

Tobin cowered under the table as the ceiling and walls exploded into dust and debris. The golden dragon towering over him gave a shake and a catlike stretch.

"Why didn't you destroy the orb and release her after she did your bidding?" demanded the dragon.

"How could I?" said Tobin, trembling. "She would have come after me and killed me."

"So you left her trapped by your spell amid the wizard's moldering castle grounds to scrounge for food and perhaps starve!"

Tobin struggled to his knees. "I did. What else could I do? I've spent my life hiding, moving from town to town in case she ever got free."

"Oh, I know," said the dragon. "Your spell kept her in, but it didn't keep other dragons out. Nor did it prevent her from laying eggs." The giant claws closed around the old man's torso. "Come Tobin," said Aurin. "It's time to go see my mother."