

They discovered the first one in the cupboard. It was no rare thing to expel several imps from the kitchen each morn; the castle staff dealt with the small, light-fingered creatures without even changing expression. Nevertheless, every imp managed to relieve the kitchen of at least one silver spoon or other trinket; with imps, it couldn't be helped. All an honest traveler could do was keep both hands on his purse and an eye out for imps, not to mention all the other thieves and rogues. They were far more common than imps, and quite as likely to cut a traveler's throat as his purse strings.

"They say you're the best there is," the lord-mayor of the city Kyrgon said to the lean, silent figure sitting across from him in the castle kitchens. The hunter was younger than he had expected, with tousled black hair and bright grey eyes. His angular features suggested some elven blood somewhere in his heritage.

"Depends on who's doing the telling," the weather-worn hunter replied. "The lord-mayor should not believe everything he hears."

"I have an opportunity for you to make a large amount of money." The rather heavily built noble tossed a bulging purse of gold coins onto the table.

Flashing a white grin as he watched the cook escorting a pack of imps from the pantry, the hunter asked, "Was it imps?" He resisted the urge to laugh as a blue skinned imp lifted the lord-mayor's purse as it passed by, hurried along by a swat from the cook's broom.

"I have no idea what you mean." The shakiness in his voice told the hunter that he had struck home.

"You were about to beg me to recover Kyrgon's tribute to the dragon-lord, a tribute which seemingly vanished two days ago under the very noses of its guards."

"Does nothing remain secret in this city?" the lord-mayor muttered under his breath.

*Not when your chamberlain is a sot who would sell his firstborn for a pint of malt beer.* The hunter kept the thought to himself. Aloud, he said, "I'll recover your tribute." With that, he rose to his full height, almost a foot taller than the lord mayor, and strode into the velvet black night. Summoning his wolf like dog with a whistle, he tramped down into a back alley. Maybe he could catch one of those imps before it disappeared into the secret passageways and tunnels that such subterranean creatures called home.

"No," the green skinned imp shrieked. "I not tell you!"

Tatharen tightened his grip on the scruff of the imp's neck, holding the diminutive creature almost four feet off the ground. Kicking and squealing like a suckling pig, its oversize wings beating furiously, the imp shifted into its own tongue, and Tatharen guessed that the things it was screeching were far from complimentary. "Unfortunate," the hunter growled. With a whistle, he summoned his dog and said, "Wolf, take this pitiful creature and tear him apart."

"No!" The imp gibbered. "I tell. Not let wolf-dog eat, not kill." It kicked again. "Put Ricitky down, then I talk."

Though he didn't release the imp, Tatharen lowered it until its feet almost touched the ground. The imp was about two feet high, and its hair stuck straight up, adding almost three inches to the imp's height. Like all other imps, its triangular eyebrows and wire like hair were a brilliant orange, and it was clothed in a simple pair of trousers and a bright tunic, its belt hung with numerous pouches.

"Much shiny stuff," the imp said, nodding rapidly. "I take you there, you let me go."

“Agreed,” Tatharen said, letting go of the imp’s leathery hide. As soon as it was free, the creature started to run down an alley, only to find itself pinned by the hunter’s dog. “Don’t try to run again,” Tatharen commanded. “Or I might let Wolf eat you after all.”

“Not run,” the imp agreed. “No want eaten. Show you hiding place.”

“Tatharenmor Sereagil, is that you?”

“Just Tatharen now,” the hunter replied, nodding.

“I admit I did not recognize you at first,” the tall, blond elf seated himself across from the hunter, glancing inquisitively at the imp beside Tatharen. “You haven’t changed at all since I saw you last.” Leaning forward, he added, “I am curious to know why you sent for me.”

“Imps stole the city’s tribute to Ghrazha.”

“That was an unwise move, even for them. Surely they knew that such an act would only provoke the dragon’s anger.”

“Well,” Tatharen stated. “The lord-mayor seems to think Ghrazha’s patience is fast running out. He charged me with recovering the treasure, and I need your help, Sylnar.” At the elf’s assent, Tatharen stood, looking at the imp, “Come, Ricitky. Now you prove your merit.”

Ricitky led them to a well-hidden trapdoor in a dark alley behind the inn and descended into a low, dark tunnel, Wolf right behind him. Tatharen and Sylnar followed, nearly having to crawl through the imp tunnel. Not a sound stirred in the gloom, save for the faint tramp of Ricitky’s bare feet on the stone floor, and Wolf’s husky, panting breath. Both the elf and the hunter crept along in absolute silence, invisible in the close blackness like two shadows.

Before long, the tunnel began sloping steeply downward, tons of rock above weighing heavily on them like a tangible creature, malevolent and ravenous. While the tunnel became high enough for Tatharen to walk upright, the walls drew in until Wolf’s fur brushed the sides. In the enclosed space, the hunter felt an eerie sense of uneasiness; he kept one hand on the hilt of his sword.

“How far is it?” he whispered, not wanting to disturb the silence.

“Far, very far,” Ricitky sounded unusually loud in the echoing tunnel. Obviously, he was not disturbed by the endless darkness and felt no reservations about breaking the stillness. “Long way, must walk many days. Hope you brought food, because we’re going to get hungry.” A wide, almost devious smile spread across his face. “Maybe we eat wolf-dog.”

“Nobody’s eating the dog.” Tatharen growled, sounding almost like a wolf himself. Immediately, Ricitky let an appropriately chastened expression take the place of his former grin. “I have enough provisions for all of us.”

While Ricitky moved on again, his shoulders slumping, Sylnar moved up and whispered to Tatharen, “What will we do if we cannot find the treasure?”

“I have no idea. I certainly know I do not want to be anywhere near Kyrgon if Ghrazha doesn’t receive his treasure.”

“Who would want to encounter a furious adult dragon?” Sylnar asked. “Except,” he added sarcastically, “An imp who wanted to know what one looked like.”

If Ricitky had heard the slur he made no sign of it; he was trotting down the tunnel as fast as his short legs could carry him. Tirelessly, he led them through twisting passages, down long, crude stairways, and through so many crossroads that even Sylnar lost all sense of direction.

At a particularly wide place in the tunnel, the imp stopped, sniffing the air. "Wait here," he said, creeping forward. Wolf didn't listen, and darted ahead with a careless air. A moment later he let out a yelp of terror and pain. Both Tatharen and Sylnar rushed onward, only to find a huge snake coiled around the dog, preparing to swallow its prey. Ricitky was the first one to react. Picking up a large stone, he hurled it at the monster, hitting it squarely on the forehead. The huge creature was dazed only for a moment, and then it turned its attention toward the imp, snaking onward in an attempt to ensnare Ricitky. Rushing forward, the imp drew a small knife and threw it into one of the snake's sightless eyes, instantly killing it.

While Tatharen and Sylnar loosened the deadly coils that held the dog prisoner, Ricitky scolded the dog. "No run ahead again, wolf-dog, or you get eaten. Maybe I not gonna save you next time."

"How far is it now?" Tatharen asked as they rested in an offside chamber before continuing onward.

"Not far," Ricitky responded excitedly. "We follow tunnel until reach door, then we reach earth-lizard. It has treasure."

"What is the earth-lizard like, Ricitky?" Tatharen had a feeling that he already knew.

"Bigger than a house," the imp grinned. "It uses green breath to make tunnel and treasure place bigger. It eats imps and elf-people."

"Acid breath," Sylnar muttered darkly. "This is just great. First imps that won't shut up, and now a black wyrm."

Tatharen resisted the urge to shudder. Like Sylnar, he had fought wyrms – dragon like creatures with the same characteristics as dragons, but without wings – but those were the small, green wyrms of the forest of Carthindal, not the huge black ones that lived underground. Among all the creatures near Kyrگون, save Ghrazha himself, wyrms were the most feared. At the moment, however, his thoughts were more focused on a simple truth he should have realized long before. "Ricitky," he asked somberly. "How did the wyrm get the treasure?"

"Imps find in city. We bring to earth-lizard so it doesn't eat us." The imp's voice was actually serious for once. "It still eats us, though."

"You might as well get some rest, both of you," Tatharen said. "I'll keep watch tonight." Sitting cross-legged against a wall of the chamber, he drew a long, slender pipe from his pouch, filled it with tobacco, and lit it. He had to think, to plan. This would be harder than he had thought.

When Sylnar roused himself, Tatharen was gone, along with Wolf. He had left behind most of the supplies, as well as a message scrawled on the rock wall. The elf read it twice, shaking his head at the audacity of the hunter's plan. *Tatharen*, he thought. *If you pull this one off, people will be talking of it for the next century.* Gently, he woke Ricitky and said, "Lead the way back to the surface as speedily as you can. We can't take longer than a day."

The imp grinned, "Then we ride grub-back." Sylnar didn't even want to ask.

Nearly four days later, Tatharen stood at the entrance to an immense cavern, gathering his courage. There could be no mistake; this was the wyrm's treasure hall. Its ceiling was so lofty that even his keen eyes could just barely see a small, round window at its apex. Yes, there was

treasure aplenty here, far more than Ghrazha's tribute, piled here and there with no regard for order. Upon the greatest pile lay an immense ebony wyrm, asleep, smoke drifting from its nostrils. The walls of the chamber were scored with acid burns.

The wyrm shifted, and Tatharen could see that it was curled about a nest of eggs, three of them black, the other a striking crimson. His guess had been correct.

From above came the sound of breaking stone; great chunks of rock began falling from the ceiling, smashing into the piles of gold like enormous hailstones.

Larger far than the black wyrm, redder than a sunset, Ghrazha the dragon-lord swooped into the chamber, a jet of fire issuing from his mouth. Letting out a defiant roar at the smaller creature, he set upon it with tooth and claw.

Seeing his chance, Tatharen sprinted up the piles of gold to the nest, snatching up the red egg only an instant before the wyrm fell onto the nest, crushing the other three eggs. He ducked to avoid a blow from the dragon's thrashing tail, and then dashed behind a towering stalagmite just as the wyrm spewed forth a cloud of acid that ate away at the rock and scorched Tatharen's boot-heels.

Letting out a roar of pain as nearly all of the acid struck his flank; Ghrazha rose to the roof of the chamber with two great wing beats. Then, locking his wings against his sides, he shot downward like a spear. His outstretched talons slammed into the wyrm's shoulders, digging into the scaled flesh. The wyrm thrashed about wildly, struggling to escape from the dragon's clutches. With a final bellow, Ghrazha sunk his wickedly serrated teeth into the wyrm's neck, cracking bones and tearing flesh.

Flinging the corpse aside, the dragon rose to his full height, roaring out, "I know you're here, little hunter!"

"I am, lord Ghrazha," Tatharen stepped into view, the egg hidden in his satchel.

"It was your elf friend that directed me here?" The booming voice didn't seem angry, but intrigued.

"Yes, dragon lord, it was." Drawing the egg from his pouch, he held it out toward Ghrazha. "I believe this is yours.

Glancing at the nest, where the smashed remains of the three wyrm eggs lay, Ghrazha turned to face the hunter, and there were actually tears in his eyes. "Thank you," his rumbling voice echoed and re-echoed in the vast chamber. "I am greatly within your debt. What do you wish as a reward? Ask for anything, even up to a tenth of my treasure hoard, and it shall be yours."

"I've been meaning to ask you," Sylnar remarked as they sat over a meal of venison at the inn a week later. "How did you know the wyrm had Ghrazha's egg?"

Tatharen grinned back at him. "The mayor's chamberlain told me that Ghrazha had hidden the egg with the tribute, fearing someone would try to steal it. I assumed that if the wyrm had the treasure, it would also have the egg."

"What I don't understand is that Ghrazha offered you whatever you wanted, and, even though you could have taken a dragon's weight in gold, you chose a wyrm hatchling."

“I don’t know,” Tatharen stroked the head of the brick-red wyrm that lay at his feet with Wolf. “He might come in handy some day. By the way, thanks for convincing Ghrazha to come after the egg. It must not have been easy to get him to believe you.”

Sylnar laughed, “It wasn’t, but you really should be thanking the imp. He was the one who got me to the dragon’s lair.”

Ricityk didn’t say anything; he was busy devouring Sylnar’s haunch of venison.

Sylnar reached for his plate, glaring at the imp. “Do we actually have to take this creature with us when we set out for Carthindal tomorrow?”

Tatharen chuckled, “Sylnar, if I’ve learned anything on this quest, it’s that friends are worth far more than any amount of gold, even a dragon’s ransom.”

“Besides,” he added. “I do not think Wolf would let me leave without Ricityk. I believe they’ve grown attached to each other.”

“Have not!” Ricityk protested. Nobody believed him.