

## Drakes, Assassins and Measures of Success

by Mia Sundby

Baelin yawned for what might have been the fortieth time in the past two hours. From the other side of the small shop, half-hidden in the shadows, Cierna grumbled in her sleep, foul-smelling smoke spiralling from her scaled nostrils. Baelin took a moment to wonder what the point of having a guard drake was if all she did was sleep --and deliver borderline poisonous gas, particularly after eating rats, which was often. (Baelin did not feed her the rats for this reason, though she was at least glad that none of the critters were getting into her stock. Giant rats weren't uncommon, even in Stredspire, and they were big, feral bastards.)

Cradling her head in her hands, Baelin frowned down at her accounting records. None of it made any sense. The city had recently overturned its old taxing system for some new-fangled one which conveniently allowed the senate to do whatever the hell they wanted, and the noble merchants to line their pockets with the excess profit. As if they weren't already getting enough.

Not to mention that trade had become more difficult in recent years --the tunnels between Stredspire and other underground cities were growing more and more treacherous. Grimlocks attacking folk on the road, Kuo-Toa spotted on the outskirts of settlements, muttering to themselves and clutching the symbol of whatever god they'd created most recently. Baelin had heard rumours of Kuo-Toa kidnapping folk on the edges of towns. Even the Troglodytes were dragging themselves out of their dark, cavernous lagoons --and they were never organised enough to actually formulate attacks. Or at least, they hadn't been.

Baelin's troubled thoughts were interrupted by another yawn.

"Forty-one," she informed Cierna. The small, stocky, wingless dragon cracked open one eye, huffed, and went back to sleep.

Baelin couldn't help but agree with the sentiment; she'd been up all night working on a new form of size-altering mushroom. If she could just get the damn spell to work, the idea was that the mushroom could shrink to the size of a fingernail, be thrown into a rations bag along with hundreds of others, and then once it came time to eating it, be enlarged back to its regular size for the greatest amount of nutrition.

It wasn't revolutionary, by any means, but Baelin had never aimed to be revolutionary. Just helpful. And she hoped that the Magpies would consider it a help.

The Magpies were always looking for ways to pack lighter for their hunting trips beyond the borders of the underground city of Stredspire, and they paid well for new equipment. The outside world was a lethal one, and you did not want to be killed by a giant spider because you were carrying too much cheese. If nothing else, it was embarrassing.

She knew she was close. Perhaps she wasn't a well-respected mage, perhaps she wasn't even that successful --though she had once been enough of a threat for a fellow mage to send an assassin to take her out. Which had been flattering in its own way. As with so many things, Baelin thought, success really just depends on your point of view. But no matter what other mages thought of her, she always got results from her work. Eventually.

The bell above her shop door dinged, and Baelin flinched in surprise. Scrambling out from under her piles of paperwork --and a fern on the shelf above her desk, which seemed to be trying to pet her--, she hurried out onto the shop floor.

"Hello, can I--" She stopped, staring. "Who the hell let you back into the city?"