

Dragoniade dried his hands and sighed contentedly at the sight of a pile of cleaned dishes. Putting the wet towel down near the washing basin, he listened carefully for any signs of movement from the rest of the house. The night was cool and silent, save for the noises of insects and brief breezes of wind.

The man walked outside to enjoy the breaths of wind. Solidly built with dark hair, Drago's tanned skin did not stand out against the dark sky, but his bright green eyes reflected any light that hit them. Drago possessed a night vision native to his reptile side, and it came in handy when looking for any newcomers or threats.

Strangers would come to the large house, which stood on the top of a small hill, often at night to seek shelter. That night, about fifty guests lodged in Dragoniade's house. The lodging averaged about forty travelers a night, but recently, the numbers had been growing as knowledge of the quality of the shelter spread. The house stood about two stories tall with many rooms and furnishings to make a traveler's stay comfortable. A nearby lake and river made water easily accessible, and Drago acquired food with his "special" talents. He charged nothing except some hard labor, which most of the guests provided gratefully. Not many people knew that Drago had built this house himself, and he drew pride from that. Many traveler's lodges dotted the land, yet his was the highest quality with the lowest price.

Smiling and anticipating the next day's hunt, Drago turned to walk back inside, beginning to unbutton his overshirt.. Suddenly a voice to his right stopped him.

"Hey! Is this place free?" the voice asked. It was obviously a young male speaking. Drago turned, surprised that he had not seen the approaching figure, and could see the young man in the dark. His face and tattered clothes were dirty, and his expression was worn and weak. Drago did not like beggars, but he had sworn to take in anyone who needed a place to stay for a short time.

"Yes, friend, it is. Do you need a place for the night?" Drago asked, his voice calm and kind.

"Yeah, I need me a bed and some food," the stranger said.

"May I know your name?"

"Tanner," the man said brusquely, pushing by Drago and walking into the house.

Drago, surprised and dismayed at the man's rudeness, watched the new visitor walk in and stood for a moment. Then he followed and caught up.

"And I'm Dragoniade, Drago for short, and you are welcome here" he said amiably, trying to act like nothing happened.

Tanner grunted. "Where's the food?" he demanded.

Drago pointed and replied, "In that icebox. We're a bit short, but there is still some good meat left. I'll be replenishing the supply tomorrow."

Saying nothing, Tanner grabbed a leg of venison from the icebox and roughly closed the door, not paying attention to much except his meat. Drago watched as the dirty man ate voraciously and threw the bone on the floor, wiping his mouth with his sleeve..

"So where do I sleep?" Tanner asked curtly.

Wanting to seem kind, Drago motioned for Tanner to follow and walked into a large room with many visitors sleeping in rows on cots. He made a signal for silence and pointed at an empty cot with clean sheets. Preferring to let visitors stay one night without obligation, he'd let Tanner know in the morning what he would have to do to pay for the next night.

The next morning, Drago awoke early. It was time to hunt. He left a list of chores to be completed by the lodgers, and left out the back door.

With incredible speed, he ran across the field, stopping far enough away from the lake to see but not be heard. He could see groups of deer congregating for a morning drink. That was good – the hunt would be excellent.

Drago did not hunt like normal men. He carried no arrows or axes. One thing that made his lodging so successful was his special ability to quickly and easily retrieve large amounts of food.

Kneeling and bowing his head, Drago began a low chant and continued for five minutes or so and felt his body beginning to change. Small changes occurred at first – his toes and fingers began to elongate, the nails hardening. Then his skin began to become drier and harder and separated into a regular pattern of thick scales. Slowly, his spine began to lengthen, forming a tail out of his backside, and the rest of his bones grew to compensate. Drago's hands and feet began to look more and more like those of a large lizard, and his face was extending outward. The musculature of his body thickened as his body grew, and Drago had to support his weight with his arms to keep his body upright. With a tearing noise, two membranous wings burst from his back and unfolded outwards.

Now in his dragon form after the painless transformation, Drago watched as the sun reflected off of his golden scales. He stood about ten feet tall, his body ready for flight. The group of deer could not fathom what was coming.

With a great downstroke of his wings, Drago lifted himself into the air, looking maliciously with his still bright green eyes at his prey, who now began to take notice of him. Too late, Drago thought as descended upon one luckless deer and broke its neck with a great and powerful front claw. He left that one quickly as it fell to the ground and agilely dived at the next deer who was trying to get away. Biting this one, Drago savored the taste of the deer's blood and let it drop to the ground.

He continued quickly, not taking more than a few seconds with each deer so as to catch as many as possible. His heightened senses allowed him to sense every movement and attempt at escape, and he killed until he had slain about ten of the animals. The last deer he chose he picked up in his claws and rose high into the air, savoring the feeling of the writhing prey. Drago rose high into the sky in triumph, always loving being able to fly like this. As he descended, he broke the deer's back and landed. Then, he tore into it with ferocity, eating as much of the meat as possible.

When finished, Drago knew he himself would not have to eat for a few days. He bathed in the lake and changed back into his human form, still exhilarated by the hunt. When he returned to the house, he would have some of the travelers retrieve the deer and clean them for storage.

When he walked into the kitchen, Drago was surprised to be accosted by a still dirty and rude Tanner.

“These folks tell me I have to work to stay!” Tanner exclaimed impetuously.

“Yes, if you want to stay another night,” Drago replied, watching calmly as Tanner's face reddened.

“But you said this place was free!” Tanner yelled.

“It is, and a little hard labor never hurt anyone,” Drago said. “You're free to stay longer, but you must be willing to help out.”

Tanner shook with frustration. “But I need a bed!”

“So pitch in. List of chores is over on the wall,” Drago said, turning and walking up the stairs to his personal quarters. He smiled at various travelers, who were sweeping rooms, cleaning sheets, and doing other chores. He also remembered to stop a few and ask them to take care of the deer by the lake quickly, before other hunters took them. He liked the system he worked so hard to set up, but Tanner's reluctance bothered him. Why did some people have to be so lazy?

That night, about ten more visitors had been added to the already full roster. Drago did not worry, though, for he had stored extra cots and asked some of the travelers to make a few more in case more kept coming in. Drago was walking into the kitchen, and he heard low voices from the room. He walked in nonchalantly and quirked a brow when he saw Tanner standing with a few of the new lodgers.

“Hello everyone,” Drago said.

Tanner had stopped what he was saying, and he and a few of the new visitors looked at Drago as if looking at a fly on the wall. Then Tanner smiled.

“Hey, want some water?” Tanner asked. His voice sounded casual enough, but some flash in his dark eyes made Drago suspicious. Tanner offered his own cup, and Drago noticed that all the men stood drinking water.

“Sure. Thanks,” Drago replied, taking the cup and downing it in one gulp. The other men watched him, as if eagerly anticipating something. Drago returned their stares in confusion, not sure why they watched him like that.

“Get a lot done?” Tanner asked.

Drago nodded. “Yeah, sure did. Vegetables are coming up nicely – it's going to be a good year for beets.” He had not noticed Tanner helping at all with the farming, however. In fact, he realized that he had not seen Tanner all day.

“Good, good,” Tanner said, an acid smile creeping over his face.

Suddenly Drago felt a searing pain in his stomach, and he doubled over from the shock.

“Get him!” Tanner yelled, and the group of men surrounded Drago and drug him outside. They threw him up against the wall, and Tanner punched Drago hard in the midriff.

“We're taking over your place,” Tanner said maliciously as Drago recoiled and bent over, holding his stomach. “Like that poison? Made it up myself just for you.”

Drago looked up at his tormentors, a few of which were cracking their knuckles but waiting for Tanner to make the next move.

“This is ours now,” Tanner said, coming closer and preparing to knee his victim in the crouch. He stopped suddenly, however, noticing something strange about Drago's face. Drago's skin seemed to be drying up and forming little cracks. Tanner stood, transfixed by this change and unable to decide what was going on, when suddenly he felt something sharp go through his leg. Screaming in pain, he looked down to see Drago's foot, now with long claws, stuck through his thigh.

“What th-”

“Guess your 'poison' worked more to my advantage, Tanner,” Drago said, smiling as his face became that of a raptor and his teeth became longer and longer. The other men began backing away, watching in terror as Drago's body elongated and his claws and teeth became more fearsome. Drago tore his claw from Tanner's leg and bent over to bite him in the arm. Tanner screamed again and Drago through him to the ground, leaving him to writhe in pain.

The other men tried to run away, but Drago caught up with them easily. He tore off various appendages of some of the men and herded them all back to where Tanner lay, roaring and spitting at them so they got the message that he was in control now. When they all stood in a group, huddled and scared, Drago turned back into his human form and smiled maliciously.

“Sorry, gentleman, no free lodging today. Now I'll give you one minute to get out of my sight, and if I see you near this house of mine again, I will kill you without pause.”

Drago's eyes flashed, and all of the men, including Tanner, ran off, some carrying others. Watching sadly, Drago made sure the men were far away before turning back to the house. A group of other travelers had gathered outside the house and watched Drago warily, some backing away in fear.

Drago smiled the best he could and said, “Do not worry, my friends. I mean you all no harm. Only those who wish to stay without pay deserve eviction, and those who try to get a free stay with more force ... well, let's just say they should watch out for vicious reptiles.”