

WINDHAMMER PRIZE
FOR SHORT GAMEBOOK FICTION

The Draconic Challenges

AN ENTRY IN THE 2015 WINDHAMMER PRIZE FOR
SHORT GAMEBOOK FICTION

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Character Sheet:

Name: Ari Enara

Your Stats	Base Stats	Bonuses	Deductions	Combined Total
Health	7			
Reputation				
Speed				
Agility				
Endurance/Strength				

Your Dragon's Name:

Dragon's Colour:

Dragon's Stats	Base Stats	Bonuses	Deductions	Combined Total
Health	7			
Speed				
Agility				
Endurance/Strength				

Inventory	

**Note: If the health level of yourself or your dragon decreases to between 1-3 points, a "minus 1 deduction" is applied to Speed, Agility and Endurance/Strength due to weakness for both yourself AND your dragon due to the link you share.*

If the health level drops to zero, this denotes a critical injury and the penalty will be increased to a "minus 2 deduction" for Speed, Agility and Endurance/Strength. The health level cannot fall below zero.

A BEGINNING

The wind whips your long brown hair as you hide behind a rocky outcrop, observing the graceful creature circling on the thermals over the valley. With a tilt of her long sinuous neck and a flap of wide membranous wings, the dragon changes course. Scales glint in the afternoon sun as the massive creature glides effortlessly away spined tail flicking in the air currents.

Sighing you crawl out from your hiding spot, covered in dirt and brambles. Although beautiful, dragons are also deadly. A wild one such as this would consider you easy prey....and then there's also her nest to consider. Golden dragons are renowned for being aggressively protective of their young.

Once again you question the sanity...or perhaps that should be insanity....that has lead you to this point. Standing alone on this forsaken mountainside, defenceless against the very creatures you hunt. For a hunter you are. You seek to claim for yourself a dragon egg.

You think back to your family and wonder if they miss you. Born Ari Enara, you were the second child of a middle class merchant family living in the bustling town of Foresbeth. Your upbringing could not have been any more normal or typical. You played in the dirt with the other children and were scolded when you arrived home with torn and dirty clothes. Like a good child, you helped your parents sell their wares and even had a tutor hired to teach you what you would need to follow in their footsteps: reading, writing and arrhythmic.

Perhaps you could lay the blame at your tutor's feet for your current predicament. Instead of sticking to the basics of how to read ledgers and write inventory lists, he would produce finely crafted leather bound books from his satchel, reading tales of faraway fantastical places, full of colour, adventure....and of course dragons.

The latter tales were always your favourite. The brave men and women who first sought to domesticate the fire-breathing beasts, only to find something much more. Once imprinted, dragons bonded to a single human for life, a strong telepathic connection that only death could break. Over the years dragons and their riders had served in many capacities, from war heroes to intrepid explorers. In this current day and age however, the most highly regarded riders competed in the Draconic Challenges.

On the surface these challenges seem innocuous enough, a race between competitors to see who could cross the finish line first. In reality they were anything but. A stylised warfare where no holds are barred and injury....sometimes even death are not uncommon. Yes it is a race to the finish line in it's simplest form, but only if you could make it through the course in one piece. Winners were glorified; fame and fortune awaited them. And the losers? Well, although less glamorous, there was always work to be had, so long as you survived.

Despite the dangers, you found yourself wishing you could see these marvels for yourself, playing at being a dragon rider and searching the skies. Your parents and older siblings despaired at your foolishness. There are no dragons in the cold southern climes. Dragons are fire incarnate. They reside only where the sun beats down mercilessly, warming their blood and allowing their flight.

Besides which, outside of the old “dragonrider clan” bloodlines, only the very wealthy could afford a dragon egg. No one of your modest means could ever hope to gather the gold required for such an extravagance

Still your dreams persisted....and grew into an obsession.

At 17 years of age, you were old enough to make your own decisions. Much to the disapproval of your relatives, you gathered your savings, small though they were, and set off to become a dragon rider.

Which brings us to where you are today. Alone on the edge of a precipice with little more than the clothes on your back and a few gold pieces, searching for the lair of a dragon where you might steal an egg. Rarely done because it is almost suicidally risky, it's your only option if you wish to proceed.

How To Play The Game:

As you've no doubt gathered, this is your chance to control the adventure and outcome. To play you will need a copy of the character sheet provided at the start of this book, a pencil to record with and a single six sided dice or equivalent random number generating website.

Throughout this game you will be asked to make decisions which will affect what happens on your journey. Sometimes you will be asked to make a "skill check" to see whether you have been able to complete a task successfully. This will involve rolling the dice as directed and adding the result to the selected stat.

For example: If your agility rating needs to be 7 or more to pass and you have an agility rating of 2 plus a dice roll of 6:

Agility Skill Check = 2 (Agility stat) + 6 (Dice roll amount) = 8 (Passed)

The skill check will ask you to check "Your skills" or "Your dragon's skills."

Your base stats will be determined by dice rolls as detailed below. Your dragon's base stats are always determined by their colouring type.

Health:

An important stat for obvious reasons. A poor health may stat to degrade your performance in all areas of life.

A Health score of between 1-3 points for **either** yourself or your dragon, denotes a weakened state, and will earn a -1 deduction for Strength, Agility and Speed, making tasks that much harder to achieve. This penalty will occur for both you **and** your dragon regardless of who has been injured, due to the psychic link between the two of you. (For example if **your** health were to fall to 1 point, **BOTH** you **and** your dragon will have -1 deductions for strength, agility and speed, even if your dragon is still very healthy).

A fall to zero for either yourself or your dragon is disastrous, indicating critical injury and will earn a -2 deduction for Strength, Agility and Speed.

Health deductions are additive. For example if your health falls to 2 (a minus 1 deduction) and your dragon's health is zero (a minus 2 deduction). **Both** of you will have a total deduction of 3 for Agility, Strength and Speed so it pays to try and stay healthy if possible.

Both you and your dragon start with a health score of 7.

Reputation:

The better known you are, the more likely you are to receive the adoration of your peers and perhaps more importantly: funding and gifts to keep yourself and your dragon afloat in this

world. This can potentially work against you at times though, as the more famous you are, the more attention your opponents are likely to dedicate to pulling you down.

Being a newcomer and not known in this arena, your reputation score starts at zero. Please record this on the character sheet.

Speed:

How quickly you or your dragon can move. Important especially for top speed in races and avoiding potential threats.

Please roll one 6 sided dice to determine your speed and record it in the character sheet.

Agility:

How manoeuvrable you are. This can effect anything from how quickly you and your dragon can turn, avoid attacks, or how silently you are able to move when required.

Please roll one 6 sided dice to determine your agility and record it in the character sheet.

Endurance/Strength:

Speed and agility isn't everything in the races. The most lucrative races are run over longer distances, resulting in dragons with a lower endurance stat to be more likely to flag and fall behind. Strength is also important for determining the amount of damage done in attacks and how strong the two of you generally are.

Please roll one 6 sided dice to determine your Endurance and record it in the character sheet.

A Note on the Dragon Species and subtypes:

Dragons are a large aggressive reptilian species native to the warmer climates. Cold will slow a dragon's ability to act significantly. Well armed with a mouthful of teeth, long claws and a barbed tail, they are protected by an armouring of scales.

Dragons appear to possess a kind of basic racial memory, enabling them to, amongst other things, understand and communicate simple ideas telepathically soon after hatching with no instruction.

There are three subtypes in the dragon species, easily identifiable by their scale colouring: Gold, Green and Blue. Gender is not colour specific.

Greens: The smallest and most agile of the dragon types, they are highly manoeuvrable, reasonably fast but lack strength and endurance.

Blues: A good all rounder, without any particular areas they either excel or are deficient in, they are reasonably fast, agile and have an average endurance. Moderate in size, they are generally larger than greens, but smaller than golds.

Golds: The rarest of the subtypes and also considered the most valuable. Gold dragons always draw the crowds due to their large size and metallic colouring. They are very strong, with good

endurance and are able to reach reasonable speeds. Their downfall is lack of agility compared to their smaller brethren.

Dragon genetics are complicated and even the experts cannot be completely sure what the ratio of colours will be in any given nest. What is known, is having a gold parent dramatically increases the incidence of gold hatchlings, however all colours are possible from any combination of parents and there have been occasional reports of gold hatchlings being born to blue and green dragons. It is impossible to predict the colour or gender of a dragon from the shell alone.

Although each dragon type has their natural strengths and weaknesses, training can be used to improve a dragon's ability to preform better than their natural inclinations.

Your Journey Awaits.....

1

You wake early and roll out from under your blankets. Your breath mists in the cold morning air as you prepare a small fire to cook breakfast. Butterflies flutter uncomfortably in your stomach. Today is the day of truth. You are going to try and collect yourself an egg.

From your time spent observing, you've narrowed your choice down to two lairs that you are fairly certain currently contain clutches of eggs.

The first belongs to a green and blue pair of dragons. Their lair is by far the easiest to access, relying more on camouflage than location for protection. Ironically that same camouflage should allow you to sneak in close to the cave unseen, waiting until the right moment to dart in and out with your prize if all goes to plan. Unfortunately since the pair are not metallic dragons, your chances of obtaining a gold from their clutch are dismally small.

The second lair belongs to a pair of large golden dragons. Their lair is situated in an exposed rock face, meaning you'd have to creep along a narrow rocky ledge to access the cave. There is no cover if the parents return early and you're still out on the ledge. Additionally it's a very long way down should you should lose your footing, the chances of survival would be very small even before the dragons arrived to deal with your presence. Even though a metallic dragon would be more likely to hatch from one of these eggs, it's by no means certain.

You know the safer, more guaranteed option is to take the first lair, however the allure of getting a golden dragon of your own is strong. How much risk are you willing to take?

Choose to raid the safer blue and green nest: Turn to 16.

Decide to risk the exposed golden nest: Turn to 37

2

You sprint for your life down the winding passageway towards what you hope is an exit out of the underground. Hearing a sharp click you risk a glance over your shoulder to see a massive black

spider the size of a Rottweiler scrambling towards you. Having taken your eyes off the tunnel floor, your foot catches the edge of an exposed rock and you fall hard.

The giant spider needs no further invitation. It lunges towards you, fangs tipped with gleaming drops of venom. Desperately you reach for your knife, retrieving it just in time to slash wildly at the oncoming arachnid. With a series of harsh clicks, the creature lurches to the side, missing your blade.

Crouching, the monster springs at you one again with lightening speed. Throwing yourself out of the way, you miss being pinned to the ground under the spider, but not before one of its spine tipped feet opens up a long laceration in your leg. As scramble painfully to your feet, you can feel blood running down your calf to pool wetly in your boot.

Your Health Decreases by 1.

The spider jitters agitatedly back and forth just out of reach of your knife, waiting for an opening. You worry it can sense you are bleeding and is biding its time until you weaken sufficiently for it to close in on you more safely. With a deep breath you make a decision, lining up the arachnid you throw your knife with all the force you can muster. With relief you watch as the sharp blade flies true, piercing the creature's thorax. With a high pitched squeal, the spider retreats into the darkness. Not knowing if it will return since you likely only injured the monster, you take the opportunity to continue your limping progress out of the cave.

Turn to page 59.

3

You consider the darkened tunnel dubiously. You've never been one for exploring the underground considering it far too easy to become turned around and lost, or victim to one of the dark, dangerous creatures that tend to haunt the shadowy depths. You decide to stay where you are.

It's a long, unpleasant wait. Smoke filters into the cave through the vine netting at the entrance, making your throat hurt and eyes water. Outside you hear the constant roars and screams of the irate dragons as they tear up the countryside in search of their missing egg. Finally, long after dark as fallen, the noise dies away and silence falls. Twitching nervously you decide it's too quiet. Where there should be rustling of leaves and chirping of insects, there's only the soft cracking of burning wood.

Carefully you part a small hole in the concealing vines and look out into the darkness. Absolute devastation meets your eyes. Where there was ones a dense forest, only charred broken pieces of wood remain, burnt and smashed by the two large wyrms. Smoke hangs thickly over the mountainside as the red hot coals continue to simmer in the night air. Seeing no sign of the reptiles, you decide it's as good a time as any to try and make your escape.

The burning landscape makes picking your way off the mountain long and difficult. The sky is

alight with the first rays of dawn, by the time you clear the charred landscape. Even though you're exhausted from the stress and walking, you don't dare stop and make camp. The more miles you can put between yourself and the angry parents, the better you will feel.

As you trek back towards civilisation, you can't keep the spring out of your step despite the weariness that comes from long days spent hiking through wild terrain. The dragon pair seems to have finally given up on the search and you no longer have to spend your days looking anxiously upwards for signs of their arrival.

Heading along an overgrown game trail, you stumble losing your balance for a moment. You must be more weary than you thought. *Just a little further.* You tell yourself. *Then I can rest.*

Setting off again you find yourself once again rocked off balance. *It's the egg!* You realise. *It's moving!*

Quickly lowering the heavy backpack to the ground, you open the strings to reveal the egg rocking back and forth, a spiderweb of cracks spreading along the surface. You freeze for a moment, not expecting the egg to hatch this early while you are still out in the wilderness. Nothing for it, you settle down to wait impatiently for the creature to break free.

Finally you see a claw poke through the shell breaking the casing away.

Please roll the dice once.

If the dice shows 1, turn to 45.

If the dice shows 2 or 3, Turn to 12.

If the dice shows 4, 5 or 6, Turn to 22.

4

Hands shaking and almost blind with panic, you retrieve your first aid bag and tip the contents onto the floor. There's nothing specific for an insect toxin, however you find a vial of feverweed which should help reduce the high temperatures wracking her body. Uncorking the vial you pour a small amount onto her tongue which has turned an ugly shade of purple.

Frantically you run from the building into the night air, screaming for help. The racket quickly brings Raxus charging out from the darkness. You don't have Kale's proficiency in communicating with dragons other than your own, but the big blue must have understood enough, as he immediately turns and gives a trumpeting roar.

Woken from sleep, Kale comes stumbling half dressed out of a nearby building and runs down the road towards your position. Seeing your stricken expression he wastes no time. "Take me to her."

You sprint to the lair with Kale and Raxus in tow, back to the side of your dragon. The feverweed seems to have had a positive effect as she seems to register your presence now.

Dragon's Health Has Increased by 2

"I don't feel well." she pines. *"Make it stop hurting!"* She starts to shiver again.

Kale crouches down by her side and starts checking her vital signs. "What happened?"

"I think it might have been an insect sting. We were walking back and there was this large beetle in the tree..."

"Was it black with bright blue and yellow spots on its wings? Shiny, short legs, about so large?" Kale holds his hands about half a foot across. You nod miserably.

He looks confused. "I know what that is, they're toxic but not to this extent. A single sting shouldn't cause her to be this ill. Are you sure there's nothing else?"

Your mind races, trying to think clearly is difficult while your soul mate lies dying on the ground beside you. Then a thought strikes you. "Would it be any different if she ingested it? When it stung her, she attacked it. She may have swallowed some of it in the process."

He gives a curt nod. "Yes that would definitely be more of a problem, she's probably ingested the entire venom sac."

"Pen? Paper?" You race to get the supplies he needs from your room as he turns to the waiting Raxus who is pacing agitatedly outside. Placing his hand on the giant dragon's head he communicates silently. You hand him the supplies and he scribbles a few notes and rolls it up into a tube and hands it to the blue dragon who takes it delicately in his claws. With a rush of air, the drake launches into the night.

You twitch agitatedly "You have to do something!"

"Calm down." Kale pushes you back into a chair. "I've sent Raxus to the town for medical supplies, he shouldn't be long. There's a particular combination of herbs we'll need to treat this, get it wrong and it'll make things a whole lot worse."

He looks at the scattered bottles on the floor of the room. "Did you give her something? I need to know if you did."

Tears start leaking from your eyes. "I'm sorry! I thought I was doing the right thing. I only gave her some feverweed, she just looked so sick and...." You break off unable to continue.

Kale pats you on the shoulder. "No it's ok, that was quick thinking on your part. Feverweed is only going to help here, you've done the right thing."

You continue to sniffle wordlessly, unable to trust your voice. As promised Raxus returns shortly with a pouch tied around his neck. It's a long night but shortly before dawn, Saryanth seems to turn the corner for the better and falls into a deep, healing sleep.

It takes her a few weeks to get her strength back, but due to your quick thinking and fast actions, she makes a full recovery.

Dragon's Health Increases By 1.

Turn to page 38.

5

The leg that follows is BLUE! You feel a momentary stab of disappointment, even though you knew a golden egg was unlikely from this clutch. The egg shakes violently a few more times, shell fragments splintering off to lie broken on the forest floor. The tiny dragon climbs clumsily from her prison, tripping on her heavy wet wings. She looks up at you with shining sapphire eyes and everything changes.

All of a sudden it feels as if a missing piece of your soul is in place. The dragon that looks up at you is the most beautiful, precious thing you have ever seen. Any regrets about her not being golden evaporate without a trace. This must be the mind-bond. You think hazily, but nothing you'd ever read, could ever do what you're feeling right now justice. You reach out to brush the glistening scales, they're rubbery under your touch, not yet hardened. The young wyrm looks up at you with large eyes and croons pityingly. You feel it like a punch to the stomach. She's hungry.

Your dragon has an Endurance/Strength of 5, Agility of 5 and Speed of 5. Please record these on your character sheet.

Turn to page 40.

6

Without thinking you scream wordlessly at the giant arachnid. Leaping forward, you wave the torch in front of you, the motion causing the fire to flare brightly. With a shrill sound, the spider cringes, blinded by the sudden light and falling back against your advance. With another yell, you swipe again at the creature, bringing the flaming bundle down onto the monster's head to the unpleasant smell of singed fur.

Distressed at not finding easy prey, the spider quickly retreats once more into the darkness, leaving you to back slowly out of the lair.

Turn to page 59.

7

You talk to Kale for some time, explaining how you consider speed to be the most important area

you have worked on with Saryanth.

“Elaborate some more.” Kale prompts. “Take me through a particular session.”

Thinking back, you remember the last speed focused training session with Saryanth.

You toss a brightly coloured ball high into the air. Saryanth, launches after it, catching it in her claws before returning it to you.

“This is getting way to easy.” you tell her. She replies with a wave of smugness.

You spot a small grey lizard like creature flitting through the air on multiple wings towards her tail.

“Watch it!” you warn.

Spinning she snaps at the small, vampiric animal, jaws closing just shy of its head. The lizard darts away in alarm, flying back into the cover of the trees at high speed.

Scanning the clearing carefully, you see several others, skulking in the branches. You sigh, there must be a flock of Lemichs in the area. More of an annoyance than anything else, their usual tactic is to approach unseen, draining a blood meal before retreating. They remind you of giant mosquitoes and their bites sting for hours. It gives you an idea.

“Saryanth, how would you like to chase something?” Her eyes light up in anticipation, hunting is what she does best.

Your dragon sets herself up as bait, pretending to sleep in the middle of the clearing. Before long, you spot one of the shadowy creatures creeping through the grass towards her. She waits until it’s about to bite and leaps into action. The startled animal leaps away, sprinting back towards the trees with your dragon in close pursuit. The Lemich makes it to the trees and disappears into the dense undergrowth where Saryanth cannot easily follow.

You expected annoyance at its escape from your dragon, but she seems pleased. “That was fun, can we do it again?”

You wave her back to the clearing with a shrug. Although fast, Lemich are not overly bright and it takes a fair bit to scare them off. Before long, another decides to try its luck with the “sleeping” dragon. Although she once again fails to capture the creature, you notice with every attempt she’s getting quicker at anticipating the Lemich’s moves. Just when you think she’ll probably catch one on the next go, the Lemich unfortunately seem to have finally worked out they’re being lured into a trap and make no further advances that afternoon. On the plus side, since they’ve decided to stay clear it means neither of you end up with any bites that night.

Dragon's Speed Increases By 1.

Turn to page 34.

8

Firth's offer is tempting, particularly since your recent near death experience on the mountainside, but becoming a dragon rider has been your dream since since you were little. You can't give up on it quite yet.

"Thank you for your offer Firth, it's a kind one. As much as I'd like to join you, I want another chance at those dragon eggs more I'm afraid."

Firth raises bushy eyebrows and frowns. "It's sad to see one so young throw their life away on a fools errand like this, but it's your decision. So be it, it's your funeral not mine." Without another word he stomps away through the tavern doors and disappears.

You signal the innkeeper again. "Do you have a room I could rent?"

Conserving your funds, you finally decide to take the loft above the stable. Although a bit scratchy, the hay is warm and the smell of horses below comforting. Sari even allows you to boil water to set up a makeshift bath in one of the water troughs to clean the grime away. Seeing the angry tears on your back, she sighs and reappears with a bottle of salve that carries a strong herbal smell.

You spend a week recovering in the town, but know you can't linger too long. If the nests hatch, it'll be another year before you can try again. Ribs bandaged with linen, you thank the innkeeper for her hospitality and walk once more into the wilds.

Your Health Increases by 1.

Setting up camp at your familiar haunt, you check your options. This time around you dismiss the golden lair out of hand. As if it wasn't difficult enough to access the first time, since your recent incursion, the parent dragons seem to be hyper-vigilant and agitated, rarely leaving the nest for long.

The nest belonging to the green and blue dragons however, thankfully appears to have been unaffected by the drama on the hillside, the routine of the dragons remaining largely the same. You decide this is your best hope of successfully acquiring an egg.

Turn to page 16.

9

You look over the harness you've painstakingly put together, reflecting you could have saved yourself a lot of trouble if you had have known you would just be offered one. Although you regret the wasted hard work, you remember all the times you've wistfully eyed the professionally made dragon riding gear with it's polished leather and elaborate metallic inlays.

You make a decision. "Are you sure? I mean you've already given me so much and I couldn't

possibly pay for it at the moment..."

"Nonsense." he cuts you off firmly. "It's one of Raxus' from when he was much younger. He'd never fit into it again in a million years, he's far too large now. It's just sitting in a chest gathering dust, I'd be happy for someone to get some use out of it. I'll bring it to training tomorrow, with a bit of a clean it should come up fine."

You've gained a professionally made dragon harness. (Bonus +1 Reputation).

He stands. "Anyway I think that's enough for today. How about you take Saryanth for a scrub down in the lake since it's such a pleasant day. Meet me outside the main building with your dragon tomorrow morning and we'll get started on something practical."

Turn to page 39.

10

You stealthily sneak up to the edge of the clearing, then dart into the cave while the blue dragon is glancing up at the sky towards his mate hunting in the distance.

The cave floor is sandy and warm, looking around you quickly discover the source. Eight large, mottled, yellow-green eggs sit surrounded by a ring of rocks which radiate heat. From their blackened appearance, the parents have obviously been using their fiery breath to warm them. Careful not to touch the scalding rocks, you step into the circle. Which one to take? They all look the same. Oddly one of the eggs draws your attention. With no time to lose, you pick up the heavy object and carefully pack it into your back pack. Peeking out from the cave entrance you see the blue dragon still on his ledge, tail flicking idly with the scraping sound of spines over rock.

Time to go.

As quickly as you can, you make your way back into the cover of the forest and relative safety. You don't stop moving until you're some distance from the cave. Even still, you can hear the anguished growls of the parents later in the day as they discover the loss of one of their young. You'll have to be on guard.

Turn to 24.

11

You clutch the smooth surface of the rock wall as you creep slowly along the narrow ledge. Pieces of loose rock and shale litter the uneven walkway making progress difficult. Spurred on by the knowledge that the dragon pair could return at any time, you move as fast as you can towards the cavern entrance.

Without warning, the fragile ledge gives way beneath your feet. Lunging for the lip of the cave,

your fingers scabble for a grip, rock coming away in your fingers. With no purchase, you plummet towards the valley floor.

It looks like your journey ends here.

The End

12

The leg that follows is GREEN! You feel a momentary stab of disappointment, after all you went through, you'd hoped for a metallic dragon even though you were aware it was never a certainty. The egg shakes violently a few more times, shell fragments splintering off to lie broken on the forest floor. The tiny dragon climbs clumsily from her prison, tripping on her heavy wet wings. She looks up at you with shining emerald eyes and everything changes.

All of a sudden it feels as if a missing piece of your soul is in place. The dragon that looks up at you is the most beautiful, precious thing you have ever seen. Any regrets about her not being golden evaporate without a trace. This must be the mind-bond. You think hazily, but nothing you'd ever read, could ever do what you're feeling right now justice. You reach out to brush the glistening scales, they're rubbery under your touch, not yet hardened. The young wyrm looks up at you with large eyes and croons pityingly. You feel it like a punch to the stomach. She's hungry.

Your dragon has an Endurance/Strength of 2, Agility of 7 and Speed of 6. Please record these on your character sheet.

Turn to page 40.

13

The dark shape moves swiftly towards you, diving at speed to pass just over your head. The force of the wind from the giant wings knocks you to the ground. Saryanth crouches over you protectively, hissing at the newcomer as the dark blue dragon circles around, heading back toward you. You suppose it is probably Raxus, Kale's dragon. What he would gain by inviting you here then attacking the two of you though, you cannot imagine. You hope it's some kind of misunderstanding.

You send waves of reassurance and calm to Saryanth who is visibly shaking and glancing wildly around, expecting an attack. "It's ok Sary, stay calm, I don't think he's here to hurt us."

The larger dragon lands heavily between you and any escape from the gate you entered through. Saryanth responds by arching her neck growling. Keeping a hand on her scaled shoulder, you try to reassure her. When the newcomer does not attack, she relaxes slightly but the atmosphere is still very tense.

“Raxus what are you doing?!” You hear the voice of Kale Cyra ringing loudly as he exits a nearby building and runs towards the scene. The heavyset blue dragon, tucks his neck in submissively as he backs away.

Turn to page 46.

14

The lair is far harder to reach than you had ever anticipated. With every step, you fear you will fall into the ravine....and it's only a matter of time before the pair return to their nest. You should have already left the area by now. You remember the blue and green nest lower in the valley. Although less likely to give you a prized golden egg, it is looking like the more sensible choice by far at this point.

Carefully you shuffle back along the slippery path, wincing at every loose piece of shale that breaks off under your feet to tumble out of sight the the rocks below. Finally with a heartfelt sigh of relief, you make it back to the solid hillside and hurry quickly through the shattered, burnt rocks and into the concealment of the forest below.

You haven't made it far into the trees before you hear the familiar heavy wing beats of the dragons returning. You sag against a nearby tree. That was far too close. You hope you have better luck at the second nesting site. Making sure you put a large amount of distance between yourself and the Gold's lair, you set up camp for the night.

The following morning you awake to a clear blue sky. Already you're in a more positive frame of mind and keen to get moving.

Turn to page 16.

15

Retrieving your torch from the tunnel floor, you blow on the coals gently, coaxing the fire back to life. Pulling your knife from its sheath on your belt, you hold it out in front of you and enter the darkened tunnel to the right.

Making your way carefully through the narrow winding path, your attention is caught by something that reflects the firelight caught on a sharp piece of rock. Retrieving the item, you realise it is a broken necklace, the pendant appears to be inscribed with some kind of protective rune. You pocket the golden pendant and continue down the tunnel.

You have found a pendant spelled with a protective rune. Add +1 to your (and your dragon's) strength/endurance while you have it in your possession.

The tunnel widens out rapidly into a cavern large enough that your small torch can only throw

shadows fitfully around you. The scrabbling sound echoes loudly around the rocks as something skitters unseen in the darkness.

Hearing a sharp scraping sound from behind, you spin to face a large spider, bristling with black fur. Approaching the size of a large dog, the arachnid advances quickly towards you, red and yellow markings denoting the deadly toxicity of its venom.

If you scream and wave your torch at the creature, Turn to page 6.

If you threaten it with your knife, turn to page 19.

16

Getting a dragon at all is the most important thing. An egg is no use to you if you end up crispy fried by an angry parent. Besides which, you've always considered yourself lucky, so who knows?

You creep silently towards your chosen target. You've watched the lair often enough over the last few weeks to know their routine. While the green heads off to hunt, the larger blue will leave the cave to bask on a nearby ledge, warming himself in the morning light. Although out of the cave itself and sluggish from the cold, he is still close by and alert to any potential danger to his offspring. It's going to take a fair degree of skill on your part to slip into the cave soundlessly and unseen, gather up your prize, then exit and retreat far enough away before the dragons discover their loss.

The lithe green dragon stalks quietly out of the darkened lair. Stretching her wings, she gives one last rumbling growl to her mate before winging stiffly into the sky. On schedule, the blue appears to take up his vigil on the ledge. You'll have to be fast, there's no telling how long you'll have before the green dragon returns to her nest.

Agility Skill Check. Roll one dice and add the amount to your agility score.

If the total is 7 or more: You enter the cave unseen. Turn to 10.

If the total is below 7: You stumble at the cave entrance causing a few small rocks to roll away with a clatter. Turn to 20.

17

The reflective speck is getting larger as you watch, you can already make out the shape of wings as the dragon flaps swiftly towards your position. With a sinking heart you doubt you can outrun the incoming wyrm.

Frantically you scramble over the broken rocky hillside, searching for a place to hide. Although the boulders were fine for a spying locations on your reconnaissance trips, they're not going to conceal you from an angry dragon raining fire down from above. You continue searching.

You think you can hear the high pitched screeches and whistles as the two creatures approach, their voices carried on the wind. They're not far now. You start to panic.

Hurrying over the far side of the hill top, you see something that makes your heart leap with joy, the dark shadow of a hole beneath one of the rocks. It's not big and you sincerely hope it is not occupied, but it's the best you're going to find. Flattening against the ground you squirm into the entrance, emerging into a small cave only a few meters across. It's blessedly empty.

Outside you hear the heavy "Whump-Whump" of wings beating overhead, followed by enraged shrieks as the loss of one of their eggs becomes apparent. Thankfully you sink back into the cold, protective rocks as you listen to the golden dragons raging overhead. Whiffs of sulphur and smoke drift into the small cave from time to time, however you remain safe within its confines. It's long after dark before the turmoil above ceases and you feel confident enough to leave the safety of the cave.

Tentatively you poke your head out from the confines of your small stony refuge. Although dragons usually hunt by day to take advantage of their keen eyesight, the pair may be worked up enough to continue their search in the darkness. Whether the dragons have returned to the lair for the night or were hunting you further afield you're uncertain, either way you can find no sign of them close by.

Crawling all the way out into the open, you brush the majority of the dirt from your clothes and shoulder the backpack containing your precious cargo. The mountain is shrouded in smoky haze which becomes thicker as you pick your way carefully down the rocky landscape trying to stay as quiet as possible. The sight that greets you as you approach the area where the forest should have been is pure devastation. The wyrms have not been idle while you hid, entire sections of bushland smoulder redly in the darkness, charred and blackened. Nothing within this area would have had a hope of survival. Your throat feels dry, you were nearly going to run to this very area for refuge.

The burning landscape makes picking your way off the mountain long and difficult. It takes you the better part of the night before you are clear of the charred landscape. Even though you're exhausted from the stress and long hours of travelling, you don't dare stop and make camp. The more miles you can put between yourself and the angry parents, the better you will feel.

Trekking back towards civilisation, you can't keep the spring out of your step despite the weariness that comes from long days spent hiking through wild terrain. The dragon pair seems to have finally given up on the search and you no longer have to spend your days looking anxiously upwards for signs of their arrival.

Walking along an overgrown game trail, you stumble losing your balance for a moment. You must be wearier than you thought. *Just a little further.* You tell yourself. *Then I can rest.*

Setting off again, you find yourself once again rocked off balance. *It's the egg!* You realise. *It's moving!*

Quickly lowering the heavy backpack to the ground, you open the strings to reveal the egg rocking

back and forth, a spiderweb of cracks spreading along the surface. You freeze for a moment, not expecting the egg to hatch this early while you are still out in the wilderness. Nothing for it, you settle down to wait impatiently for the creature to break free.

Finally you see a claw poke through the shell breaking the casing away.

Please roll the dice once.

If the dice shows 1. Turn to 45.

If the dice shows 2 or 3 Turn to 12.

If the dice shows 4, 5 or 6. Turn to 22.

18

You talk to Kale for some time, explaining how you consider strength and endurance to be one of the most important areas you've been working with Saryanth on improving.

"Can you elaborate?" Kale prompts. "Take me through a particular session."

Thinking back, you remember the last strength training session with Saryanth.

Shielding your eyes from the bright sunlight, you spot Sary lazily on a rock warming herself in the sun. "Come on lazybones, time for some work."

She grumbles half heartedly but trots over none the less. You have placed a few rocks around the clearing. Pointing to one of moderate size, "I want you to pick up the rock and fly it over to the old tree over there and back again."

Saryanth groans. "Not this one again, it makes my wings sore."

"I know it's hard work, but it'll all pay off in the end." You reply.

"Says you," she grumps. "You're not the one flying those stones around."

"Come on." you cajole, "Do this, and you can pick the next game."

She snorts derisively but picks up the rock and launches into the air. You watch appreciatively as she wings over to the tree, flipping around agilely and speeding back to your clearing. She's definitely improving you reflect. Your dragon starts to flag slightly just before reaching the clearing, landing a bit more heavily than usual, but still making it all the way back.

"Well done!" You wrap your arms around her neck, as she opens her jaw in a draconic smile.

After catching her breath, the dragon reminds you that you said she could choose the next activity. "So I did, very well, what would you like to do now?"

She give you a mischievous look. Swinging around in a circle, she catches the fallen rock with her tail,

launching it into the air where it shatters against a rocky outcrop. "Bowling practice!"

You sigh, sometimes she's too clever of her own good. It could take you days to find a selection of rocks to replace the ones she's about to destroy, which means a break from the carrying tasks. You watch as she attacks the rocks with more gusto than is really required, but at least she's having fun and building muscles while she's at it.

Dragon's Strength/Endurance Increases By 1.

Turn to page 34.

19

Waving your knife threateningly, you attempt to drive the spider off. Unfortunately its short blade means having to get in much closer than you would like to those fangs.

You dart in with the knife, only to have the agile spider jump away into the shadows. Listening for the tell tail tapping of its legs on the rocks, you're ready when it next leaps towards you. Jumping sideways, the edge of your knife scrapes the length of its hard carapace, making the creature more wary but otherwise unharmed.

Speed Skill Check. Roll one dice and add the amount to your speed stat.

If your total is 4 or less, turn to page 23.

If your total is 5 or more, turn to page 65.

20

You wince as the some loose rocks give way under your foot, the echoes loud in the silence. Quickly you flatten yourself into the shadows, freezing in place. Your heart threatens to stop as you hear the "Thwump...Thwump" of wings and a heavy thump as the wyrm lands by the cave entrance. You hold your breath as the deep blue reptile scans the clearing for movement. He spins a circle, thrashing his tail menacingly. Apparently satisfied that his charges are still safe and sound in the cave, with any potential threats scared off, he takes to the air once more, disappearing from your sight.

Your shoulders sag with relief. Against all odds it seems as if you weren't seen in your hiding place. Even so, it's several minutes before you can bring yourself to move again. Only the thought of what will happen if you're still within the cave when the female wyrm returns from her hunting spurs you back into action.

You look wistfully at the mottled green and yellow eggs at the back of the cavern. Despite the danger, they're what you came here for. After today, you may never have the nerve to try again. Hesitating, you decide to grab an egg then get out of here.

The eggs are large and heavy, surrounded by a ring of blackened rocks which radiate heat. With a queasy feeling you're reminded of the dragon's fiery breath and what they'll do to you if you're found here. Although they all look the same, one egg draws your attention more than the others. You quickly heft it into your back pack and hurry from the cave.

At the entrance you look out towards the blue dragon's perch. To your dismay, he's disappeared. Now you have no idea where he is! There's nothing for it, you can't linger here. You make a run for it.

Too late you hear a loud hiss from above. The dragon was not as clueless as you thought he was and had moved to a closer perch on a ledge above the cave entrance out of sight. Spinning, you take in the enraged animal as he dips his neck towards you, an orange glow forming at the back of his throat. There's no way you could take on an adult dragon with no weaponry and live to tell the tale.

You Run.

Sprinting towards the relative safety of the forest you feel heat wash over you. Jumping to the side, you're not quite fast enough, screaming in pain as the side of your leg is scalded by dragon fire. By all rights, he should have killed you by now....then the thought occurs to you. *He knows you've got one of his eggs. He'll not risk damaging it.*

Your Health decreases by 1.

Every step is torture as you continue to run, the dragon screaming in frustration after you. In the distance you hear his mate answer. *This is not good.*

Weaving through the trees, you try to loose your pursuers circling above which are breathing goutts of fire at anything that moves within the forest. *So close! You have your dragon egg safely strapped to your back, however it seems as if you'll never get a chance to hatch it. You'll never outrun two angry dragons.*

Suddenly the ground gives way beneath you and you slide awkwardly into a cavern. Battered and bruised you take stock of your injuries. The worst are the burns to your left leg which are blistering angrily. however you're well aware you got off lightly. Overhead you can still hear the angry screams of the distraught dragons, however here underground you should be safe from their fire. You decide your best recourse is to wait until nightfall to make your escape.

Turn to 24.

The shattered mountain top is likely to provide few refuges. You hesitate for a few seconds weighing the options, then decide to run.

Skidding over the loose rocks, you clamber as quickly as you can down the hillside towards the shelter of the forest. You notice that many of the scorched rocks contain the charred bony remains of various creatures, mostly unrecognisable from the shattered remains.

Above, you hear a shrill cry. You're too slow, the drake as spotted you.

Not daring to look around you continue to flee, hearing the heavy wing beats sounding ever louder as the beast gains on you. You hear an odd crackling sound and instinctively dive behind a mossy rock. Intense heat washes around you as the dragon envelops the area with a wall of yellow-white fire. You squeeze your eyes closed against the unexpected brilliance momentarily blinded.

Bright spots clearing, you scramble to your feet and continue to run towards the trees looming up ahead. Although not safe once in the forest, you will be a good deal closer to being that way once you have some measure of shelter. Out in the open, you're easy prey.

A rattlesnake like hiss sounds from above and you duck as sharp grey claws rake the air above your head. With a roar of frustration, the dragon lashes out with his tail as he sweeps past sending you tumbling down the hill with a scream of pain.

Your Health Decreases by 1.

Fortunately for you, your luck has held and the glancing blow has thrown you into some scrubby bushes at the edge of the forest. Above you can see the glinting shape of the dragon circling around to finish you off. You need to get out of here.

Your twisted ankle pains you as you jump to your feet but you barely notice as the adrenaline courses through your system. Racing into the dense foliage you push your way deeper into the camouflaging leaves, hopefully safe at last.

You hear a second screech coming from ahead. The dragon's mate has joined him in the hunt. Hunkering down, staying completely still, you hope they'll continue to move away, down the mountain in their search.

You hear a roar and a bright flash of light, then the smell of wood burning. Forcing yourself to stay still, you continue to stay hidden. The flash of light comes again, closer this time with the crackle of burning trees.

The dragons may not be able to see you, but they're going to flush you out of your hiding spot by burning the woodland down around you. There's no choice, you're going to have to move or stay and be burnt to death. You wince at another roar of fire up ahead. Your escape options are

becoming progressively more limited.

Creeping as quietly as you can, you make your way on an angle across the mountain, hoping to get clear of the ignited tracts of forest.

To your despair, as you push aside some branches, you come up against a solid wall of granite. Climbing would put you in full view of the dragons to be easily be picked off the rock face. Travelling up the hill would only bring you back to the open mountaintop and the wyrm's lair. *Down the hill it is.* You think to yourself.

The smoke is becoming thicker, choking your lungs and making it hard to see. You despair at the folly that made you think you could ever steal an egg from a dragon, there is good reason why it is so rarely done. Eyes watering, you suddenly fall sideways as your arm slips through a curtain of vines into a hidden cave.

You can't believe your luck, there may yet be a way out of this. Outside the dragons continue to rage, ear splitting shrieks and roars echoing across the rocks. You fear they may not calm down for some time and the mountainside could stay afire for days. Moving to the back of your shelter, you realise the cave extends back into a tunnel. The air here is not stale, in fact you can feel a slight breeze against your face. It may be worth investigating.

If you would like to investigate the tunnel, turn to page 54.

If you would prefer to wait in the cave and try to escape once it is dark, turn to page 3.

22

The leg that follows is GOLD! You blink a few times in disbelief. Somehow, against all the odds, the egg you selected has a metallic dragon inside. The egg shakes violently a few more times, shell fragments splintering off to lie broken on the forest floor. The tiny dragon climbs clumsily from her prison, tripping on her heavy wet wings. She looks up at you with shining eyes, the colour of newly minted coins and everything changes.

All of a sudden it feels as if a missing piece of your soul is in place. The dragon that looks up at you is the most beautiful, precious thing you have ever seen. Any regrets about her not being golden evaporate without a trace. *This must be the mind-bond.* You think hazily, but nothing you'd ever read, could ever do what you're feeling right now justice. You reach out to brush the glistening scales, they're rubbery under your touch, not yet hardened. The young wyrm looks up at you with large eyes and croons pittingly. You feel it like a punch to the stomach. *She's hungry.*

Your dragon has an Endurance/Strength of 7, Agility of 4 and Speed of 5. Additionally gold dragons give you a reputation bonus of +1. Please record these on your character sheet.

Turn to page 40.

Springing forward once again, you lung for one of its many legs hoping to disable it, only to have the creature dart under your guard and bite into your hand. The heavy leather gloves stop the fangs from sinking deeply into your flesh, however you feel a prick as the tips of the fangs pierce your skin. As the toxin does its work, your right hand goes numb and useless.

Your Health Decreases By 1.

Desperately you slam the burning torch in your left hand into the spider, trying to knock it away from your arm. The torch hits with the fizzling of burning hair. With a high pitched squeal, the spider leaps away, scuttling away into the darkness.

Quickly you retreat the way you came, waving the torch wildly around you in case there the arachnid has any second thoughts about letting you leave. To your relief, the feeling seems to be returning to your right arm, although it leaves throbbing pain in its place.

Turn to page 59.

Trekking back towards civilisation, you can't keep the spring out of your step despite the weariness that comes from long days spent hiking through wild terrain. The dragon pair seems to have finally given up on the search, and you no longer have to spend your days looking anxiously upwards for signs of their arrival.

You stumble loosing your balance for a moment. You must be more weary than you thought. *Just a little further* you tell yourself. *Then I can rest.*

Setting off again, you find yourself once again rocked off balance. *It's the egg!* You realise. *It's moving!*

Quickly lowering the heavy backpack to the ground, you open the strings to reveal the egg rocking from back and forth, a spiderweb of cracks spreading along the surface. You freeze for a moment, not expecting the egg to hatch this early while you are still out in the wilderness. Nothing for it, you settle down to wait impatiently for the creature to break free.

Finally you see a claw poke through the shell breaking the casing away.

Please roll the dice once.

If the dice shows 1, 2 or 3. Turn to 5.

If the dice shows 4 or 5 Turn to 35.

If the dice shows 6. Turn to 22.

25

You shake as you step out onto the narrow ledge. Fine sand and loose shale litter the path in places causing the footing to be slippery and treacherous. Your palms start to sweat, making your ability to grip the smooth rock wall even more difficult. You find your progress agonisingly slow, maybe this was not a good idea after all.

If you turn back and decide to try the easier green and blue nest instead, turn to page 14.

If you keep going, turn to page 58.

26

The viscous wyrm snakes out his neck, trying to clamp knife like teeth into her retreating tail. With a fearful trill, Saryanth swings her tail out of reach, however not fast enough to prevent Morth's fangs from grazing along the side, removing scales and skin but preventing a solid hold.

With rapid pumps of her wings, your dragon accelerates away, leaving Morth and his rider to roar in frustration at their escaping prey.

Dragon's Health Decreases by 2.

Turn to page 66.

27

In the confusion of dragon bodies, you're taken by surprise when another dragon slams into Saryanth's shoulder hard. Rory gives you a sadistic grin as he swings Morth around for another attack. The blue dragon's maw opens wide as he snakes his head towards Saryanth's unprotected neck.

Agility Skill Check. Roll one dice and add the amount to your dragon's agility stat.

If your total is 7 or less, turn to page 42.

If your total is 8 or more, turn to page 31.

28

The cheering crowds seem to allow your dragon to dip into a reserve not even you had realised she had. With powerful wing beats she strains to bring herself level with the the golden dragon Zalara. Her rider gives you a wide eyed look as she encourages her own dragon on. Neck and neck the two dragons streak towards the finish line to the thunderous applause and yelling of the crowd.

Saryanth is giving it her all but you feel her flight becoming more uneven, her body tilting drunkenly as she tries to stay in the air. Zalara starts to pull away as Saryanth struggles to keep up. The finish line flashes by, beaten by a mere half a dragon length.

The last of her energy spent, your dragon drops heavily to the ground, landing awkwardly, head dipped to the ground as she heaves for breath.

Kale presses through the throng of people crowding the winning dragons.

"I can't believe you two did it!" His eyes are bright as he runs over to give Saryanth a rough hug around her neck. "On your first run as well! I knew you two were something special right from the start!"

"But we didn't win." Your shoulders slump dejectedly. *You were so, so close but still lost!*

"Are you kidding? Snap out of it!" he growls at you. "On your first race, the two of you came in second. Do you have any idea how hard it is for an inexperienced pair to place at all? You need sponsors to stay in this game. People with money who will fund your races for the pleasure of being able to call you "their" racers. After an unknown pair comes along and trumps almost the entire field, do you really think you will have any lack of offers?"

You pause and *really* look around at the crowd. Although many are crowded around Dhar and Zalara, at least as many are trying to get a good look at the second place getters. You catch pieces of excited conversation about the new pair on the circuit.

"Come on." Kale gives you a smile, helping you down off your dragon's back. You take Saryanth's head in your hands.

We did good! You voice silently.

She snorts with a thin wisp of smoke. *We will do even better next time.* It's nice to see her high opinion of herself remains undamaged.

With a small laugh you pat her neck tenderly. "Come on, they're waiting for us. Let's go claim our prize!" To the deafening cheering of the crowd you head towards the podium. You remember back to your childhood when this was all dreams pieced together from tales in old books. Perhaps one day someone will write your story too. The tale of you and your dragon-kin Saryanth.

The End

Saryanth's agility has definitely shown marked improvement over the last few months. The way she spins in the air is enough to make you dizzy just watching. For not the first time you reflect on what it would be like to be up there with her. High above, Saryanth tilts over into a spinning dive, pulling up at the last moment to brush the tree tops with the tip of her tail. Hopefully you can stay on!

Your Dragon's Agility Increases by 1.

Turn to page 50.

30

"Go ahead, use your strength against it, attack now." you urge the dragon silently.

You don't have to tell her twice. With a roar, she releases all her pent up anger into an open jawed lunge towards the gryphon. Her opponent skips lithely to the side, raking sharp claws along Saryanth's ribs. Screaming in pain and frustration, she spins towards the tawny animal, releasing a small gout of fire. Too quick for her, the gryphon has already moved, snapping at the sensitive membranes of her wing.

Saryanth's Health reduces by 1.

Although fierce, it's obvious with her lack of experience, Saryanth is going to become progressively more injured as the fight progresses. Her opponent is skilled enough to know that if he continues to strike and move, he'll eventually wear her down.

"Saryanth, break off, return to me!" you call out to her. The dragon ignores you, reaching down to snap at the tail of the gryphon, only to get claws raked across her nose.

"Saryanth! Break off NOW!" She shakes her head in frustration, trying to get rid of your influence. The gryphon takes advantage of her distraction to snatch up the fallen bird and flee into the sky. The dragon gives a roar of anger and prepares to launch into the sky in pursuit.

"No! To me NOW!" With a howl of frustration, the young dragon lowers front feet back onto the ground and stalks back to your side.

"Why!?! Why did you interfere? That kill was mine!" The force of the drake's anger is making your head pound.

"Calm down Sary, I did it for your own good. He was hurting you." You try to soothe the irate dragon.

The dragon continues to rage unabated. *"You think I'm weak? That I can't take care of a gryphon half my size? How can I prove myself if you won't let me fight?!"*

"I'm sorry, you're right. I'm sure you could have beaten off that creature. I just feared for you, that's all. I'll tell you what, I'll come with you and help you hunt something else." Your offer slightly mollifies her, although she is still obviously upset.

Your visitor was right about one thing, you'd only just curtailed her attack on the gryphon. If she dug her heels in and resisted even a tad more, you may not have been able to stop her at all.

Saryanth's comments made you realise something else as well. If you are ever to compete in the races successfully, sooner or later you'll have to let her fight with all the risks that entails.

Turn to page 36.

31

As Morth snakes his head towards your dragon, you yell a desperate warning to Saryanth. You only just have time to tighten your grip on her neck spines when she suddenly furls her wings, plunging into a spinning dive below the main press of dragons.

Morth roars in frustration as his teeth click shut on air, changing his tactic to charge towards nearby green dragon instead. You hear a shrill scream of pain as the smaller dragon leaves the race, flying unevenly back towards the ground.

You gulp. That was very nearly you and Saryanth. Your dragon however does not share your views. *I'm far to quick for that slow coach!* Flapping her wings strongly she approaches the main pack of dragons once more. Ducking and diving, she winds through the racers coming out ahead. With a trill of triumph she accelerates away from the crowd.

Turn to page 66.

32

The start of the race is a confusion of dragon bodies as each competitor tries to find their own space and get clear of the crowd. You see the muscled form of Morth crash sideways into a smaller golden dragon which squeals in pain as his rider desperately tries to guide him out of the way of the viscous dragon's snapping teeth. Diving away from the press, the attacked pair leaves the race. Morth snarls menacingly causing nearby dragons to shy away and opening up a wider area around the brutish dragon.

Rory give you a sadistic smile as he sees you staring in horror at the brutal treatment of his opponents and nudges the heavy blue dragon your way. You need to get out of here now.

Morth wings your way, casually lashing out with teeth and tail at any other dragons and riders within reach as he passes.

"Sary let's get out of here!" you yell against the noise of trumpeting dragons and cheering crowds.

You don't need to tell her twice, flapping her wings she picks up speed as fast as she can, hindered by the other racers dipping and swooping around her. You glance back to see Morth gaining. "Sary watch out!"

Speed Skill Check. Roll one dice and add the amount to your dragon's speed stat.

If your total is 8 or less, turn to page 26.

If your total is 9 or more, turn to page 49.

33

Carefully you walk out onto the narrow ledge. Although precarious, you find your balance more than adequate and shuffle lightly across the narrow bridge. As your confidence improves, you risk moving faster, keen to get to your prize before the adult dragons return.

With a crack you feel the ledge give way under your right foot. Clutching the slippery rocks and trying to rebalance yourself, you look down to see pieces of rock spinning away through empty space to shatter on the ground far below.

Shaking you freeze for a moment, realising how close that came to being you smashed on those rocks rather than a just a few pieces of granite. Reaching across the newly formed gap, you progress at a more sedate pace until you step gratefully into the cave.

Out of the bright sunlight, it takes your eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness. Towards the back of the cavern you notice five eggs positioned in a circle near the back wall. The very walls seem to give off a radiant heat and are covered with a thick layer of soot. You realise the dragons must be using their own fiery breath to heat the cave walls and keep the eggs warmly incubated.

Like all dragon eggs, the smooth oval shapes are patterned in shades of green and yellow. Although there is nothing physically to differentiate them, one egg seems to draw your attention inexorably towards it.

Removing your back pack, you carefully pack the large egg inside and make your way back out to the entrance.

The way back to the mountainside is harder than the trip in, as the heavy egg strapped to your back threatens to overbalance you and pull you over the edge at every step. At long last you scramble hastily off the ledge. The whole exercise has taken longer than you were anticipating and you look fearfully into the horizon for any sign of returning dragons.

You catch the glint of gold in the sky. The dragon is still quite some distance away and has likely not seen you yet, however he's getting closer by the second. Do you run and try to put as much distance as possible between you and the cave? Or search for somewhere more local to hide?

If you search for a hiding place: Turn to page 17.

If you run: Turn to page 21.

Kale nods as you finish your recount of the day's activities. "That's good work, using your head to train with what you had available out in the wilds there. I can see it has definitely made a difference. We may try to make her training a little more rounded from here on in, although we can definitely focus on some specific areas."

He pauses thinking. "Ok, let talk a little more about the Draconic Challenges. How many have you seen?"

You blush slightly and mumble a response. His eyes widen. "You've never been to one? Ever? And you still managed to bring up a dragon having never seen one before? Ok, well let's talk about what you do know then."

You continue to talk about what you'd learnt from your tutor, talking to well travelled customers and your own reading on the subject. "Well that's certainly a start." Kale continues, "Lets go over some of the finer points."

"As you already know, the Draconic Challenges were originally set up as training for wartime, trialling each dragon's skills to determine who were the most capable and where pairs needed to improve. Later, they were continued as an outlet for the competitive, aggressive instinct that is strong in the dragon species, an activity for them that can with luck and training, hopefully be restrained to be non-lethal in nature. These contests have continued to evolve into the challenges we see run today, largely unchanged from their original intent." Kale pauses for a moment.

"Although they are encouraged to be "non-lethal," that does not mean that they are not highly dangerous. Most of the scars Raxus carries are from those events. Some competitors are not good at restraining their dragon's "enthusiasm" to win, and the more malicious may even encourage that behaviour. If you train under me, I expect no unnecessary violence. I need to make that clear. I'm not having bad behaviour associated with my training grounds." He waits until you nod.

"Ok, so the courses are run against other dragons in your approximate skill level. Having never placed in a contest, you'll start in the lower grades. That's a good thing, it'll let you find your feet. There will be obstacles to navigate and of course other dragons to avoid and race to the finish line. I'm going to get you started on some general training so we can see where you're at, then select areas to specialise in down the track. First thing's first, do you have a riding harness for Saryanth? I know she's too small yet to ride, but it never hurts to start training with it on so she can adjust to it." Kale looks at you expectantly.

You nod slowly and walk back to your room to collect the harness you've put together. Professionally made dragon harnesses are terribly expensive! Far too costly for someone of your means to afford and you've been scraping together every spare coin as it is, trying to get the funds together for a challenge entry fee when the time comes. Instead, your harness is a patchwork of leather off cuts and pieces of old horse harnesses and riding gear you've managed to gather cheaply over the last few months, all carefully stitched together by your hand. Although it looks a bit ratty, you're pretty sure it will do the job.

Kale frowns when he sees the unevenly made harness spread out on the table before him. "Hmm, made that yourself?" You nod in response.

"I appreciate what you've done given what you had to work with, but this won't look very professional at all. I'll tell you what, I've got an old harness I'm no longer using that you can have if you want." Your benefactor gives you a slight smile, knowing his comments about your workmanship might be taken the wrong way. You consider for a minute, even an old harness is worth a tidy sum of money. Do you really want to be further indebted to this man you've only just met?

If you accept his offer of the harness, turn to page 9.

If you decline to use Kale's harness, preferring to use your own, turn to page 61.

35

The leg that follows is GREEN! You feel a momentary stab of disappointment, even though you knew a golden egg as unlikely from this clutch. The egg shakes violently a few more times, shell fragments splintering off to lie broken on the forest floor. The tiny dragon climbs clumsily from her prison, tripping on her heavy wet wings. She looks up at you with shining emerald eyes and everything changes.

All of a sudden it feels as if a missing piece of your soul is in place. The dragon that looks up at you is the most beautiful, precious thing you have ever seen. Any regrets about her not being golden evaporate without a trace. *This must be the mind-bond.* You think hazily, but nothing you'd ever read, could ever do what you're feeling right now justice. You reach out to brush the glistening scales, they're rubbery under your touch, not yet hardened. The young wyrm looks up at you with large eyes and croons piteously. You feel it like a punch to the stomach. *She's hungry.*

Your dragon has an Endurance/Strength of 2, Agility of 7 and Speed of 6. Please record these on your character sheet.

Turn to page 40.

36

Fortunately your hunting expedition was a successful one and Saryanth's mood improves markedly once she has a full belly. You decide you should broach the subject of the mysterious visitor from earlier today.

"Saryanth, I need to talk to you about someone who came to visit me earlier." She lifts her head sleepily, ready for a nap after her meal. "Do you want to race Sary?"

Her thoughts are a bit fuzzy from the tiredness creeping in. *"I want what you want Ari-Kin. You know that."*

"I know," you persist. "But if you didn't know what I wanted. Would you still want to race?"

She shifts sleepily. *"You're being very strange today...but yes. I think I would like that. I want to be the best, the fastest, the strongest. I want to show the world how good I know I am."*

Your dragon's confidence makes you chuckle. Nothing like false modesty in the dragon world. "Well that person I met today, he said he can help us do that. He is coming to meet you tomorrow. Can you tell me what you think of him?"

Your dragon sends you a wave of sleepy affirmation. "Ok Sary, go to sleep." She rumbles appreciatively and closes her eyes.

The following day you await the arrival of your mysterious visitor.

"Stop pacing, you're making me dizzy." Saryanth tells you with a hint of amusement.

Finally your potential benefactor steps quietly out from the trees. Dressed in brown leather which blends in well with the surrounding forest, you hadn't seen him approach. Saryanth stays seated but lifts her head to regard him closely.

"Quite a beauty you've got there." He strolls over to your dragon, offering his hand for her to inspect. You start to voice a warning, but trail off as you realise Saryanth has no intention of being hostile towards the newcomer.

He traces a fresh scratch along her wing. "What happened here?"

"We had a bit of an...ah...incident with a gryphon yesterday." you reply, waiting for another reprimand.

"Hmm....could use dressing. You don't want those to get infected. Even the shallow ones can go bad." he says gently inspecting the wound. "Have you thought more on my offer?"

"Saryanth?" You ask silently.

She gives her head a shake, rattling the spines on her neck. *"I'm not sure what you were so worried about. I like him."*

He gives a low chuckle, smile creasing lines on his face. "Well, that's a start anyway."

You blink a few times speechless. "You can hear her too?"

"Of course!" He gives another laugh. "Her speech is surprisingly clear for one her age. I'm impressed."

"But how.....?" Then it dawns on you. "You're a dragon rider, aren't you?"

"Of course I am. How else did you think I was going to have any hope of teaching you anything?" he replies smugly. "So I've got your dragon's approval. Do I have yours?"

"Not so fast, I need to know a bit more. You're being so cryptic." you protest.

"Part of the charm." he quips with a smile. "Ah ok, enough with the teasing, ask."

"For starters, who are you?" you ask your initial question again.

"I run a dragon training facility. I used to race myself. Not so much any more, we've earned our retirement." the stranger says.

You're a bit annoyed that he's still avoiding the question. "That's *what* you are. I asked *who* you are."

"Ok, ok." he says making an appeasing gesture with his hands. "Calm down. If it's really important, my name is Kale Cyra."

Your eyes widen in recognition. "*The* Kale Cyra."

"Yes, yes. Winner of umpteenth million titles and prizes in the racing area. That one. You can see why I don't lead in with my name can't you?" he says with a grimace.

"Oh, sorry. Didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I just didn't recognise you that's all..." you trail off. "Ah sorry for another question, but why would someone like you want to have anything to do with someone like me?"

His answer is light. "Well lets just say, I've got the time free to train you at the moment; got the room available at my facility and well... I guess I've got a soft spot for hard luck cases."

You look at him quizzically, wondering if you're being insulted. "Hard luck cases?"

"*His dragon is a wildling like me.*" Saryanth supplies.

You've seen images of his large, midnight blue dragon Raxus. Given the nickname "Cosmos" for the unusual silver speckled pattern along his topline. You'd had no idea he was originally from the wild as well.

"Is there a catch?" It's still all sounding a little too good to be true. "I don't have much money, I'm going to have trouble getting the entry fee together, much less funding for training."

"There's no catch....exactly." he replies. "You'll be training at my facilities, so my rules are the go. If you don't like them, you're always free to leave though. And it's not entirely altruistic on my part

I'll admit. I've been watching the two of you and you definitely have potential. While you train with me, you'll race under my training stable's name which is good advertising for me, provided you go well as I think you will. I'm not going to charge you for the stay, however I get fifteen percent of any winnings you earn while training with me, which will go towards paying for your and Saryanth's upkeep. It's a good deal kid if I do say so myself, I recommend you take it. For your sake....and hers."

You send out another silent query to your dragon. *"What do you think.?"*

"I think he can help me to fight better. I trust him. Don't you?" Saryanth seems quite taken with Kale.

You think it over. There really is no choice. You need help and Kale Cyra can provide it. "Ok, we're in."

You hold out your hand. He takes it in a firm grip cementing the agreement. "Great. I'll leave you to pack up your things. Do you know where I live?"

You nod, everyone knows where he resides.

"Good, I'll see you both soon."

The guard at the front gate lets the two of you pass without a word. The estate is huge, large buildings with doors big enough to allow access to dragons are scattered around the premises. You spot an inviting, sandy shored lake over to the far side of the property, while a mock race course winds its way around the grounds.

Saryanth is looking twitchy. "Are you ok?" You ask, placing a hand on her shoulder. She simply brushes you off with a grunt. You probe a bit further with your thoughts and realise she's nervous. *She's never met one of her own kind before.* Not even you are sure what to say to that one. Instead you give her a reassuring pat on the shoulder and continue to walk.

Without warning, a shadow eclipses the sun above, as the large shape of a dragon dives from the sky towards you.

If you decide it's a trap and react, turn to page 62.

If you wait, hoping it's a misunderstanding while trying to convince Saryanth to stay calm, turn to page 13.

You procrastinate for a while, mulling the decision over. Although you know the camouflaged nest would be the safer choice, you feel it's worth the risk to try for the metallic dragon's lair for a better chance of a gold hatchling.

Making your way up the mountainside, you approach the lair with caution. Hiding behind some broken rocks you watch the entrance with interest. Unlike the blue and green dragons down in the valley, the golden pair do not seem to hold to a strict routine. When they do leave to hunt however, you've noticed they often leave together, trusting the inaccessible nature of the nest to protect their young. Hunting in tandem, they usually take down prey rapidly and therefore are rarely gone for long. Your best chance is to wait for an opportunity and be as quick as possible when it arises. The sun is high in the sky before you finally see the glistening form of the female perch at the entrance of the cavern, surveying the land. Apparently satisfied, she takes to the air with powerful beats of her wings.

You hold your breath, will the second dragon appear? In what seems like an eternity, but in reality is only a few minutes, a second metallic dragon pauses at the entrance to the lair before taking to the air also, winging after his mate with a shrill cry.

It's now or never.

Quickly leaving your hiding place, you walk towards the edge of the cliff face. Looking down makes your head reel dizzily as you take in the shear drop onto jagged rocks and trees below. Making an effort to keep your eyes on the path, you start to edge along the precarious walkway.

Agility Skill Check. Roll one dice and add the amount to your agility score.

If the total is 4 or less: You find the footing slippery and much harder to navigate than anticipated. Turn to page 11.

If the total is 5 to 8. You find the path difficult to cross. Progress is slow. Turn to page 25.

If the total is 9 or more: You enter the cave undetected. Turn to page 33.

38

You find Kale a strict instructor, training not only Saryanth but also yourself. Day by day, you find the two of you get fitter and stronger. With everything from drilling through obstacle courses, to mock aerial battles with Raxus, the variety keeps your dragon interested and motivated. You notice in particular, she has shown marked improvement in the area of:

Her speed, turn to page 43.

Her agility, turn to page 29.

Her endurance and strength, turn to page 64.

39

You admire your dragon as she pulls herself out of the blue waters of the lake. You've spent the last hour scouring her scales with the fine sand along the shore until they glint brightly in the afternoon sun. She sweeps her tail along the bank, bringing up a wall of water and drenching you to the skin.

"Hey!" you yell annoyed. "I was almost dry before you did that!"

All you get in response is an open mouthed grin. You can't help yourself and smile along with her, it's hard to stay cross when your dragon is involved. "Ok you, lets head back before you can try that again!"

Walking along the wide dirt path, Saryanth, pauses and reaches her head into the trees, studying something closely. Squinting, you make out some kind of large, brightly patterned insect in the branches.

"Pretty." Saryanth comments, eyes gleaming.

"Yes very," you agree. "Bright colours often mean they're dangerous though, so lets keep going."

Saryanth ignores you puffing breaths of air through her nose at the strange insect. It flares its wings out with a rattle in a threat display.

"Saryanth." you call her again, a little concerned "Leave it alone and come with me now."

Your dragon continues to ignore you, fascinated by the shiny creature. "Saryanth! I'm not kidding, lets go now!"

"I'm watching something." she voices crossly. "It's so small, stop babying me...OUCH!"

She rears back with an audible screech to match her telepathic one, as the bug springs forward and stings her squarely on the nose. She reacts by snapping up the creature and crunching it into little chitinous pieces in her jaws, before sinking to the ground to paw at her injured muzzle.

You run to her side. "Are you ok?!"

You feel a tremor of the pain in her nose, but it's fading fast. She nods sulkily.

Now that you know she's ok, you growl at her. "I told you to come away, I'm only trying to do things for your own good. You need to start listening to me!"

She grumbles something unintelligible and you sigh wearily. "Ok, drama over. Lets get back home."

That night though, you realise that Saryanth is far from ok. You're awoken by her pitiful groans from the next chamber. Jolting awake, you run once again to her side.

"Saryanth?" You get no response. "Saryanth wake up!" You shake her shoulder, but she only groans painfully. Her eyes are open but seem unfocused and her skin hot to the touch. She starts to shiver violently.

Dragon's Health Decreases by 3.

Your heart is beating hard in your chest. Your dragon is seriously unwell. You think back to the incident on the path earlier today. It's likely she's been affected by a toxin from the insect, although since you've never seen anything like this before you're uncertain. You're terrified that you could lose her, what would you do? Even the thought of it makes you freeze inside. You have some basic first aid supplies in your bag but you're not sure if they'll be enough and any delay in getting appropriate help could prove fatal. As panic sets in, you realise you have no idea where Kale lives on the premises if you want to enlist his help.

*If you try to find something to give Saryanth from your first aid supplies first, turn to page 4.
If you decide to leave immediately and look for Kale to help you, turn to page 51.*

40

The force of the emotion causes you to reel. Unprepared for the wyrm's early arrival, you still manage to come up with some beef jerky after a quick rummage through your pockets. The young dragon pounces on it clumsily, gulping it down with a satisfied croak.

The morsels gone, she turns to regard you again, head tilted questioningly to one side.

"I'm sorry little one, that's all I've got for now. I'll make sure I get us some more food soon." Although newborn, you get the feeling on some level she still understands.

"Saryanth." You hear the voice echoing through your mind. "What?"

The dragon is still regarding you steadily "Saryanth."

"Wait, is that your name?" You get a wash of emotion to the positive in response.

"But....How could you know your name?" You feel something like a mental shrug. You'll get no more answers today.

With a belly full of meat and the effort of digging her way out of the shell, Saryanth's eyes droop sleepily. Fortunately she's still small enough that you can carry her across your shoulders. Picking her up, she winds her way around you neck and drifts into a deep sleep. You feel her tiredness echo on your own psyche, it's going to take practice keeping her thoughts separate from yours. It's almost as if the two of you have merged at a deep level.

Whatever it is, you've never felt so complete before. With a smile you continue your journey.

The months roll by and you find Saryanth is growing amazingly fast. As a hatchling she could nestle comfortably on your shoulders, now she's easily approaching the size of a small horse. You've kept to the wilds as much as possible, trying to stay clear of anyone who may want to hurt

her until she's large enough to take care of any threats herself.

Although you haven't tried riding her yet as a result of her still relatively small size, you've started her off with some light training which has included helping catch her own meals. Thankfully she turns out to be an efficient hunter, without that you would never have been able to keep her fed.

Words make it hard to describe the relationship you have with your dragon, after only a few months, you find it hard to remember what it was like not to have her constant presence in the back of your mind. Living without her seems unbearable.

As if sensing your thoughts, the small dragon trots over, bright eyes regarding you closely with concern. You give her a gentle scratch over an eye ridge. "Nothing's wrong Sary, just mulling over things again."

"You think too much for your own good." The dragon's "voice" sounds in your mind scoldingly. She sighs, blowing a small puff of smoke. *"I'm hungry, can I go?"*

"Of course. Don't stray too far." you reply. The dragon sends you a wave of exasperation in response. She seems to be getting progressively more wilful and resentful of restrictions as time goes on. You hope it's all part of the process of growing up. Turning she wings up into the sky in a sparkle of reflective scales.

"You really shouldn't let her talk to you like that." You jump at the unexpected voice, spinning to see a man leaning casually against a tree on the edge of the clearing. His brown hair is streaked with grey, but he carries himself as one much younger, walking with a springing youthful step.

"Who are you?" You ask the approaching stranger defensively. "Why have you been spying on us?"

He ignores your question, continuing his lecture. "She'll grow much larger and stronger than you, probably is already at that point even now. If you let her think she can boss you around and challenge your decisions, you'll never have any control. Dragons are fire incarnate, with tempers to match. Have you seen what happens when a rider loses control of their dragon?"

You tense. *How dare he lecture you on what you should and shouldn't do with your dragon. As if he could even begin to understand!* You turn on him. "I'm going to ask you once more. Who are you?"

Seemingly unconcerned with incurring your potential wrath and therefore that of your dragon, he continues lightly. "Who I am is not as important as why I'm here. You're asking the wrong questions."

Anger at his attitude is boiling under the surface of your skin. "You're angry, I can see that." The man continues. "Ask yourself why. Are you really that angry about me being here offering you advice, or perhaps could that anger be coming from somewhere else?"

You pause, stopped in your tracks. Although annoyed at the stranger's sudden appearance, why

were you so angry? A second ago you'd been so furious, you'd been about to call Saryanth down to deal with him, potentially even kill him. Why?

The stranger's voice interrupts your internal dialogue "What's your dragon doing right now?"

"Why she's....." That killer instinct..."She's hunting." Oh no, could it be? Is she having that much influence on me?

You freeze stricken. Although you had been aware of the bonding of your minds....perhaps even your souls...you'd never stopped to consider just what that might mean for you.

The stranger is still standing a respectful distance from you, not willing to approach too closely but his tone is warm. "You've got a wild one. The ones born to human- bonded pairs can be headstrong enough, but her? Her kind has never known what it's like to work with a human. She'll fight you for dominance every step of the way, make no mistake. But if it's handled right.... you'll both be better for it. I should know...."

You shake your head to clear it. "Who ARE you?!"

"As I said, a potential friend, or at least an ally. I can help you....if you want it. Think it over, talk about it with your dragon. I'll be back on the 'morrow. I wanted to talk to you first, without your dragon. From your initial reaction it looks like it was just as well, doesn't it?" You blush at his words, reminded of your loss of control.

"Until tomorrow then." You watch him leave, completely at a loss as to who it is you were dealing with.

Fidgeting impatiently, you wait for Saryanth to return from her hunting expedition. Your recent loss of control almost had disastrous consequences. It's plain you could do with some help, but could you trust him? A stranger who arrives out of nowhere and wont even give you his name?

Suddenly you're hit by a wave of emotions. Everything becomes tinted red. Saryanth is enraged. She's not far, you can feel the pull of her mind close by. Breaking into a run, you sprint through the trees towards your dragon.

Breaking through the foliage into a clearing you take in the scene before you. Two combatants square each other off. Saryanth is closest to you, spined tail thrashing menacingly as she emits a low growl. On the other side of the clearing, a small, tawny coloured gryphon paces back and forth. The carcass of a large bird lies fallen on the ground between the two. From your dragon's thoughts you realise after knocking the bird from the sky, the gryphon had swooped in to steal the kill. Saryanth was having none of it. She prepares to run down the smaller beast.

Quickly you take stock of the situation. Although smaller, the gryphon still has formidable weaponry in the form of wickedly sharp claws and a long hooked beak. From the feline grace with which it moves, it is also likely to be more agile both in the air and on the ground. It could do her significant damage. What are you going to tell Saryanth to do?

*If you tell your dragon to fight aggressively and to go ahead and run down the gryphon, turn to page 30.
If you try to convince Saryanth to break off the fight and return with you, leaving the kill behind, turn to page 60.*

41

A man clears his throat to get your attention. Distracted as you were by the race countdown, you hadn't noticed his approach. Dressed in fine clothes of colourful silk, his moustache is elegantly curled at the tips, with a top hat completing the picture. Unused to associating with the aristocracy, you fumble for the right words. "Good morning sir....Ah.....How can I help you?"

He gives you a broad grin. "By racing well my young man! The odds are not in your favour but I know something of dragons and to me, I think you look like a winner. I've put 50 gold coins on you against that know it all Quany Shepard."

He pauses to glance sourly at a similarly attired grey haired man, speaking earnestly with a golden dragon's rider further down the field.

"I have something for you. A token of my faith in your upcoming success." He produces an ornate pin in the shape of a miniature dragon which he fastens to your leather harness.

"This will help protect you from harm." he says with another broad smile. "Good luck! Remember I'm counting on you!" He waves, then turns and heads off into the press of people without a backwards look.

Examining the amulet, you recognise the protective symbols engraved into the surface. While Saryanth wears it, this will help increase her vitality.

You Have Gained A "Protective Dragon Amulet" (Bonus +1 Health for your dragon).

You're feeling rather more confident about the upcoming race when a sneering voice intrudes on your thoughts.

Turn to page 67.

42

You yell out a warning to Saryanth who attempts to dodge out of harms way, but in the press of dragons her movement is hindered enough to allow Morth to bite down on her neck hard. Your dragon screams with pain, a noise that's echoed by an emotional jolt that stuns you with its intensity.

Dragon's Health decreases by 3.

Saryanth thrashes desperately, trying to squirm free of the larger dragon's hold. Finally she

manages to bring her tail around in a solid swing, causing the attacking wyrm to back off. You notice blood is running freely down her glittering scales.

“You're injured.” you cry, over the sound of the wind.

Just a flesh wound I'll be ok. Your dragon replies shaken, but with an underlying determination.

With powerful beats of her wings, she accelerates away from the main pack of dragons, leaving a frustrated Morth behind. You glance around to see the hulking dragon knock a small green from the air in irritation as he wings after you. He is no match for Saryanth's speed however and she rapidly increases the distance between you and your attacker.

Turn to page 66.

43

Saryanth's speed has shown a marked improvement over the last few months. You reflect she would easily catch the fleet little Lemich lizards that used to bother you when living in the wilderness. You watch her playing in the sky with Raxus, climbing and diving. The older blue dragon no longer seems to be going easy on her, she's giving him a run for his money as they race back and forth across the sky.

Your Dragon's Speed Increases by 1.

Turn to page 50.

44

With a roar, Saryanth impacts the large chunk of stone, hitting it squarely with her forelegs and deflecting it away towards the canyon wall where it smashes into pieces with a satisfying crunch. As you fly on, you see the green you had been chasing was not to lucky. You recognise Faya on the ground with Firath, looking concerned over a wing blackened with bruises that droops alarmingly. You're thankful when you finally leave the dangers of the claustrophobic canyons behind.

Turn to page 63.

45

The leg that follows is BLUE! You feel a momentary stab of disappointment, after all you went though you'd hoped for a metallic dragon even though you were aware it was never a certainty from any nest. The egg shakes violently a few more times, shell fragments splintering off to lie broken on the forest floor. The tiny dragon climbs clumsily from her prison, tripping on her heavy wet wings. She looks up at you with shining sapphire eyes and everything changes.

All of a sudden it feels as if a missing piece of your soul is in place. The dragon that looks up at you is the most beautiful, precious thing you have ever seen. Any regrets about her not being golden evaporate without a trace. *This must be the mind-bond.* You think hazily, but nothing you'd ever read, could ever do what you're feeling right now justice. You reach out to brush the glistening scales, they're rubbery under your touch, not yet hardened. The young wyrm looks up at you with large eyes and croons pityingly. You feel it like a punch to the stomach. *She's hungry.*

Your dragon has an Endurance/Strength of 5, Agility of 5 and Speed of 5. Please record these on your character sheet.

Turn to page 40.

46

Kale races past and directly addresses the blue dragon angrily. "You should be ashamed of yourself. Look what almost happened due to your theatrics! I told you we had nervous newcomers and to wait for me, but no! You had to be here first!" The dragon rumbles apologetically, visibly sinking away from the chastisement.

With an audible sigh, Kale turns to face you. "I am sorry about that. As much as I couldn't live without him, sometimes he likes to show off. I apologise if he scared you or Saryanth."

The danger over, your dragon has drawn herself up to her full height. "*I was **not** scared.*" She voices acidly.

You try to diffuse the situation. "Maybe not but *I* was. You were brave to stay with me." Your dragon snorts loudly as if that was obvious.

Kale lets out a breath. "As you may have worked out, this fellow who is way too full of himself sometimes, is Raxus."

The midnight blue dragon walks slowly forward. As he approaches, you can now make out the silvery highlights speckled along his body. The heavy, scarred dragon reaches slowly forward with his muzzle towards Saryanth who stoically holds her ground.

Kale gestures for you to follow him into the large stone building he had exited from on your arrival. "I was making sure everything was ready for your arrival when you came. If there's anything else you need, just let me know."

You look around in wonder, it's perfect. The building has been built to mimic the inside of a cave, with a large sleeping area for your dragon and an attached room for yourself. Fine sand lines the floors and a small spring for drinking water trickles softly near the back wall. You nod wordlessly.

"Good, I'll let the two of you settle in, don't worry I'll keep Raxus clear for today. If you're hungry from your journey, I've had some food left for you on the table there. He gestures to a some metal

covered trays on a stone bench built into the wall. You thank him and settle in to your new home.

Training was to start the next day.

“So,” Kale asks sitting you down at a table. “What methods have you been using to train Saryanth so far?”

If you've been concentrating on strength and endurance, turn to page 18.

If you've been trying to increase Saryanth's speed, turn to page 7.

If you've been working on your dragon's agility, turn to page 55.

47

You feel your dragon's muscles strain as she puts on a final burst of speed. Flying across the meadow, you approach the finish line with its crowds of cheering people. With every wing beat, you get closer and closer to the gold dragon ahead. Her rider turns realising you're there and you recognise Dhar Lamai, the final rider Kale told you to watch out for. Zalara pumps her wings frantically but she's obviously tiring and dips slowly downwards, closer to the ground with each flap.

“Come on Saryanth, you can do it!” you yell encouragement to your dragon. Her breath comes in laboured gasps as she tries to do as you wish. Level with Zalara's tail, the other dragon makes no effort to strike out at you, also concentrating on putting every ounce of strength she has into making it to the end of the course.

Turn to page 48.

48

The cheering crowds seem to allow your dragon to dip into a reserve not even you had realised she had. With one last effort she streaks past the final labouring dragon to fly across the line just ahead of your rival. The last of her energy spent, she drops heavily to the ground, landing awkwardly, head dipped to the ground as she heaves for breath.

Kale presses through the throng of people crowding for a look at the winning pair.

“I can't believe you two did it!” His eyes are bright as he runs over to give Saryanth a rough hug around her neck. “On your first run as well! I knew you two were something special right from the start!”

He helps you down off your dragon's back as you ignore the crowds and take her head in your hands.

We did it! You voice silently to your dragon. Weary as you are, the reality has not quite set in.

As if it could be any other way. Saryanth replies, still full of herself as usual despite her tiredness. You take that as a good sign.

With a small laugh you pat her neck tenderly. "Come on, they're waiting for us. Let's go claim our prize!" To the deafening cheering of crowds you head towards the podium. You remember back to your childhood when this was all dreams pieced together from tales in old books. Perhaps one day someone will write your story too. The tale of you and your dragon-kin Saryanth.

The End

49

The viscous wyrm snakes out his neck, trying to clamp knife sharp teeth into her retreating tail. With a fearful trill, Saryanth swings her tail out of reach and turns hard to the right, the ground spinning dizzily as she flips over out of reach. With a roar of frustration, Morth chases after you as Saryanth regains her balance, flapping unevenly. Now free of the main press of dragons, she pumps her wings rapidly, accelerating away from the slower dragon. You hear Rory yelling at his dragon to keep up, but against Saryanth's rapid flight, they quickly fall behind.

Turn to page 66.

50

Sitting on a rock, you turn your face to the sky, wistfully watching the dragons as they play.

"There's nothing quite like it. Flying I mean." You jump at Kale's quiet voice, lost in the moment, you hadn't heard him approach. He seats himself beside you, watching the pair play with a smile.

"What's it like?" you ask him.

"You'll find out soon enough, I think you're both ready." You snap your attention directly onto Kale.

"Really? You're serious?" You can't keep the excitement out of your voice. You feel as if you've been waiting your whole life for this, but Kale had always counselled patience.

"Definitely." He nods to your dragon circling a thermal. "She's far larger and stronger than when you arrived. And you? You've grown too. Not just your strength, but up here as well." He points to his head. "She's a wild one, your little Saryanth, but I think the two of you have developed enough of a bond for this to work."

Leaping up you give the surprised man a hug. Laughing he pushes you off. "Go on, call your dragon down and let's see what the pair of you can do."

With a lightness to your step, you run to your home retrieving the flight harness and reach your mind up into the sky. *"Hey Sary! Get down here."*

Winging her way down, she swoops in fast, back winging for a flashy landing which unfortunately also covers you in a cloud of dust. As you cough harshly, clearing the dirt from your throat, she sends a wave of apology.

"Never mind that. We get to go up for a flight today!" She lets out a happy whistle, bringing her head in close for an eye ridge scratch. Your wayward dragon has been trying to convince you to go on illicit flights with her for ages. Although tempted you'd stuck with Kale's advice.

She fidgets while you adjust the buckles on the harness. *"Do I really have to wear that?"* She complains. *"It itches. You know I'd never let you fall, you don't need the buckled thing."* Your dragon regards the leather harness darkly.

"I know you wouldn't." you soothe. *"But you're so shiny and slippery I might not be able to hold on. I can't fly like you!"*

Saryanth gives a snort in answer, but stills her twitching to let you finish fitting the equipment into place. The dragon lowers a wing, allowing you to climb up over her shoulders and settle your legs into the leather straps. You've done this before. Everything seems clearer from here. You can feel the wyrm's powerful muscles moving as she walks around the clearing, almost as if they were your own.

Kale walks into the yard, wordlessly coming over to check you've done all the straps up securely. *"Alright you two, take it nice and easy, just a few gentle laps of the grounds for the first time, ok?"*

"Ready Sary?" you ask her wordlessly. The dragon tenses her powerful muscles and launches into the sky. Wings beating in a powerful rhythm, the ground falls rapidly away. Hanging onto her spined neck for dear life you yell above the sound of the wind. *"Take it easy Sary, I'm just getting used to thisss....whowww....."*

With a silent chuckle, the dragon spins upside down, then proceeds into a loop. *"Saryanth!"* you yell at her, eyes squeezed shut against the vertigo. You feel the flight level out and your stomach stops its flip-flopping as her wing beats steady into a more even rhythm.

"I didn't bring you up here so you could be blind." She's laughing at you. *"Open your eyes!"*

Carefully you open one, then the other, taking in the fields laid out like a patchwork quilt beneath you. You can see Kale still down in the courtyard below, as tiny as an insect. The new perspective, takes your fear away as you look around in wonder.

Saryanth hums happily, enjoying the feeling of the wind running over her wings. You can feel every movement as she makes it. She's so strong, you feel like you could take on anything from up here. *"See I said you'd be ok."* the dragon tells you smugly.

With a flick of her wings, she changes direction, curving back the way you'd come. On the ground you can see the tiny figure of Kale, waving his arms, signalling you back down. Spiralling down far more quietly than the rocket like take off, Saryanth lands gently back where you started.

Laughing you slide off her back, giving her a hug around her neck. "It was incredible!" you exclaim.

Kale gives you a crooked smile. "Well not exactly the "quiet and easy" first flight I asked for, but I see you've made it back in one piece. Welcome to the dragon riders club."

The day dawns bright and cold as you dress rapidly and go out to attend to your dragon. Today is the day of your first ever challenge. Long, hard months of training under Kale's watchful eye have lead up to this moment when he's agreed you're ready for your first trial.

Kale is already waiting when you exit the building with Saryanth, dressed in far finer clothes than you're used to seeing him in, all polished leather and silver needlework. Raxus is similarly attired, looking particularly imposing as he stands head held high, eager to leave.

The event is a relatively local one, held in the nearest city only a short flight by dragon-back. As a novice level participant, your event will be one of the first. Even so, time seems to tick as if in slow motion, making each hour that passes into an eternity.

Leaving the dragons at the "stable" area, you follow Kale through the press of people to confirm your arrival at the event. Glad for the guide, you wind in and out of brightly coloured tents, the sound of voices loud and almost indecipherable in the air, as various stall holders hawk their wares. A large golden dragon swoops low overhead to the appreciative gasps of the crowd.

"Show off." Kale mutters, probably the only person not awed by the metallic dragon's passage. He takes your arm and continues to push his way through the throng.

Having collected your registration papers. Kale leads you over to the large sign, detailing the entrants for each event. He scratches his chin thoughtfully. "You know this is actually not a bad draw for you. I know most of the dragons in your race and to be honest, if you fly today the way you have been in practice, there's really only three dragons I think will be of any serious threat to you."

He reaches out with his finger and points to the first name. "Morth. Male Blue Dragon. Rider: Rory Simalton. Nasty combination those two. Morth has a viscous streak a mile long and Rory's really no better. They've gotten very good at "accidentally" taking other competitors out of the race one way or another. It's how they usually end up placing. Try not to let him get too close to you, Morth's not particularly fast or agile, but he's more than strong enough to cause Saryanth damage and quite devious to boot."

He traces his finger down the lists landing on another name. "Firath. Female Green Dragon. Rider: Faya Charan. This is an interesting one. I've seen Firath race many times. Agile. Very quick as well over short distances. One of the fastest sprinters I've ever seen, but not so good over the longer runs. Usually Faya tries to keep her to races shorter than this one. I'm not sure what her plan is here."

The final name his finger points to is a female Golden Dragon. "Zalara. Rider: Dhar Lamai." He frowns slightly. "I'll admit I don't know much about this pair, they're quite new to the scene. My understanding is she's a pretty good all-rounder and a definite challenger for first place. Zalara is well trained, but lacks that spirited, competitive spark of a true champion. Still, I'd keep a good eye on her whereabouts during the race."

You nod committing each name to memory, then return to Saryanth to prepare for the race.

You wait atop your dragon at the starting line. People and dragons mill around in organised chaos as the starting time approaches.

If your reputation is ONE or more, a stranger approaches you. Turn to page 41.

If your reputation is ZERO, turn to page 67.

51

Hands shaking and almost blind with panic, you run from the building into the night air, screaming for help. The racket brings Raxus charging out from the darkness. You don't have Kale's proficiency in communicating with dragons other than your own, but the blue dragon must have understood enough of your speech as he turns his head and gives an ear splitting roar.

Woken from sleep, Kale comes stumbling, half dressed out of a building further down the road and runs towards your position. Seeing your stricken expression he wastes no time. "Take me to her."

You sprint to the lair with Kale and Raxus in tow, back to the side of your dragon. Over the short time you were away, your dragon seems to have deteriorated markedly. Her eyes are over-bright and glazed with fever and her tongue has turned an ugly shade of purple. She mutters barely coherent words in your mind, obviously delirious.

Kale crouches down by her side and starts checking her vital signs. His look of deep concern shows you your worries were justified. "What happened?"

"I think it might have been an insect sting. We were walking back from the lake and there was this large beetle in the tree..."

"Was it black with bright blue and yellow spots on it's wing? Shiny, short legs, about so large?"

Kale holds his hands about half a foot across. You nod miserably.

He looks confused. "I know what that is, they're toxic but not to this extent. A single sting shouldn't cause her to be this ill. Are you sure there's nothing else?"

Your mind races, trying to think clearly is difficult while your soul mate lies dying on the ground beside you. A thought strikes you. "Would it be any different if she ingested it? When it stung her, she attacked it. She may have swallowed some of it in the process."

He gives a curt nod. "Yes that would definitely be more of a problem, she's probably ingested the entire sac of venom."

"Pen? Paper?" You race to get the supplies he needs from your room as he turns to the waiting Raxus who is pacing agitatedly outside. Placing his hand on the giant dragon's head he communicates silently. You hand him the items and he quickly scribbles down a few notes, rolls it up into a tube and hands it to the blue dragon who takes it delicately in his claws. With a rush of air, the drake launches into the night.

You twitch agitatedly "You have to do something!"

"Calm down." Kale pushes you back into a chair. "I've sent Raxus to the town for medical supplies, he shouldn't be long. There's a particular combination of herbs we'll need to treat this, get it wrong and it'll make things a whole lot worse."

"Did you give her something?" He regards you sternly. "I need to know if you did, it could be important." You shake your head helplessly, not trusting your voice to words.

Kale pats you on the shoulder. "It'll be ok, you'll see."

Despite his reassurances, you can see the uncertainty in his eyes though that gives lie to his words. You start to snifle as you watch your dragon shaking painfully, unable to help.

As promised Raxus returns shortly with a pouch tied around his neck. It's a long night but shortly before dawn, Saryanth seems to turn the corner for the better and falls into a deep, healing sleep.

Dragon's Health Increases By 1.

The recovery is a hard one and it takes a number of weeks for Saryanth to regain her strength. Your quick thinking saved her life, however the illness has taken its toll on on your dragon and she remains a little more fragile than she was before.

Turn to page 38.

With a roar, Saryanth impacts the large chunk of stone, hitting it squarely with her forelegs, trying to deflect it from her path. The rock is heavier than you'd hoped, throwing your dragon off balance and causing her wing tip to graze along the wall of the canyon painfully before she can right herself.

Dragon's Health Decreases By 2.

A few more rocks are thrown into your path, but this time you're ready for them, ducking and weaving around the dangerous pieces of stone without further incident. As you fly on, you see the green you had been chasing was not to lucky. You recognise Faya on the ground with Firath, looking concerned over a wing blackened with bruises that droops alarmingly. You're thankful when you finally leave the dangers of the claustrophobic canyons behind.

Turn to page 63.

You mull his offer over. As much as you hate to admit it, your near death experience on the mountain has shaken your resolve. As much as you knew in theory you could die, actually experiencing that potential has left you a little more leery of the concept.

You look your potential employer up and down. You've always considered yourself a good judge of character and although a little rough around the edges, you feel that Firth is likely being on the level with you and will do what he promises.

You weigh up your options. On one hand you could go back to the wilds and try to get another egg....if they haven't already hatched and if your little escapade hasn't upset them enough that you can get within three miles of the place. And then there's that little matter of getting out alive....

You can see a slight smile tugging at the edges of the grizzled warrior's mouth, he already knows which way you'll choose. The merchant in you decides to not make it too easy.

"Pay?" You ask him. He's trying to hide a smile, you're playing this right.

"One twentieth of the party's hire and food included while we're on a job." He tells you confidently.

"One tenth." you counter. "Gotta have some way to save up for more dragon adventures."

"Remember I'm training you." he replies with mock sternness. "I'll make it one fifteenth and you should be glad of it." he adds gruffly.

"Ok, one fifteenth." you reply. "But you throw in a decent weapon, to get me started on that training you've promised."

“Done!” He holds out a calloused hand for you to shake. “You’re quite the negotiator aren’t you? Glad to have you along.” He claps you on the shoulder warmly, making you wince as his hand contacts the many bruises blackening your body.

He considers the crumbs of your meal. “Well if you’re finished here, I’ll take you along to meet the rest of the crew.”

Getting up you follow him stiffly out the door. While not a dragon rider, you’re sure to have many fine adventures in your new profession, far more than if you had stayed at home. And in the future? Who knows, you may get another chance to go dragon hunting. For now though you’re happy to follow Firth to start your new life.

The End.

54

The tunnel runs away on a slight angle down into the mountain. Although you can smell clean air, the tunnel itself is pitch black, a point of exit may be some distance from your current position.

Careful not to let any movement show from the outside. You break off the driest areas of the vines covering the cavern entrance and bundle them together into a rudimentary torch. Removing a flint from your backpack, you set about trying to spark it alight. It takes a while, but eventually you get your makeshift torch to stay alight. Not as tinder dry as you would like, your light source glows redly, giving off more smoke than light, still it’s better than nothing.

Carefully picking your way into the mountain, the sounds of the dragon’s rage become blessedly muffled. You console yourself with the fact that they could not follow you in into the claustrophobic confines of the tunnel even if they wanted to. You try to stay to the largest passageways, always using your nose to follow the slight breeze like a compass to lead you out safely.

Creeping along, you hear something moving in the darkness. Quickly you extinguish the torch against the floor before it can give you away. With the torch out, you realise the tunnel to your left seems slightly brighter, as if lit somewhere not too far up ahead. The tunnel branching to your right is pitch black and also the source of the echoing noises.

You pause. Should you investigate the noise? You have only a small knife and little training in fighting, so an encounter could be risky. You think the path to your left leads to a way out, however who knows how far ahead that is, or if it even leads to the outside. You’re unsure if the presence in the dark already knows you’re here. If it does, you could be inviting a sneak attack from behind if you leave it alone, which could be worse than confronting it head on.

If you take the tunnel to the right and investigate the noise, turn to page 15.

If you decide to try and leave the cave as quickly as possible, proceeding directly into the left tunnel, turn to page 57.

You talk to Kale for some time, explaining how you consider agility to be the most important area you have been working with Saryanth on.

“Can you elaborate.” Kale prompts. “Take me through a particular session.”

Thinking back, you remember the last agility training session with Saryanth.

“Up and at ‘em Sary, time for training! It’ll be fun!” you prod your sleeping dragon awake.

She half opens an eyelid to regard you suspiciously. “What are we doing? I think I’d rather sleep, the sun is beautiful and warm.”

“I know, but we’ve got to put in the work sometime. Come on!” You give her another playful prod.

“Ok, ok.” Saryanth stretches lazily in response to your cajoling and rises, flapping her wings a few times before settling them tightly against her back. “What now?”

While she was sleeping, you had set up an obstacle course. Rocks to dodge around, branches to duck under or leap over and a series of vines tied between trees to test her skills at dodging through tight places while flying. Her eyes light up at the sight of the course.

This will be fun!” she tells you eagerly.

You spend the next few hours running through the course. Although she still knocks many of the branches she’s meant to duck under, you notice her flying skills are definitely improving, only rarely brushing the vines as she darts through the trees. She seems to be keen to keep going, but you notice she is starting to tire. Better to end on a positive note.

“Well done Sary!” She arches her neck proudly. “You’re so much quicker and more accurate than I’ve ever seen before.”

Dragon's Agility Increases by 1.

Turn to page 34.

Sprinting along the uneven tunnel floor is difficult and many times you grasp at the smooth walls of the cave to prevent yourself from falling. You're under no illusions. If you fall, whatever is chasing you will certainly catch you.

Although you feel clumsy in the dark, you pick up enough speed that you hear the eerie tapping sounds gradually receding. Finally there is a high pitched scream of frustrated rage and the

skittering goes silent. You sincerely hope what ever was perusing you has given up, but decide to take no chances continuing your run towards the light.

Turn to page 59.

57

You hesitate undecided. An odd tapping sound interspersed with occasional clicking sounds, comes from the darkened tunnel to the right. The movements seem random and as far as you can tell, they're not headed your way. Treading as carefully as you can, you leave the tunnel junction and head towards what you hope is the outside world and relative safety.

Moving quietly in the unlit tunnel is difficult and you trip over an exposed rock in the darkness, dropping the torch to the ground where it bounces noisily across the rocks on the floor of the cavern. As the echoes fade away, they're replaced by another sound. The rapid tapping of multiple legs. Blind in the blackness of the cave, you're at such a disadvantage that staying to fight is not an option.

You run.

As you flee, you abandon any semblance of silence as you stumble and slip over the uneven tunnel floor. The light grows steadily brighter, allowing you to see the shadowy forms of your surroundings in the dim light, however you can see nothing of your pursuer. The increasing volume of the skittering sounds seem to indicate it is gaining on you. Putting on one last burst of speed, run as hard as you can away from the terror in the dark.

Speed Skill Check. Roll one dice and add the amount to your speed stat.

If your total is 8 or less, turn to page 2.

If your total is 9 or more, turn to page 56.

58

You look longingly at the safety of the mountainside. Ahead the fragile pathway stretches away towards the cave entrance. Closing your eyes, you take a few deep breaths to steady your nerves. *You can do this.*

Step after careful step, you edge closer to your goal, keeping your eyes on the cave and careful not to watch the loose pieces of rock spinning away into the emptiness below. You're starting to feel more confident about the whole mission when you hear something terrifying....The ear splitting screech of an angry dragon. Thinking quickly you realise continuing any further will only trap you in the cavern, so you reverse course and try to hurry back towards the solid ground of the mountain side.

Thwump.....Thwump....

You can hear the wing beats now as the angry drake closes in on you. You need to move faster.

Crack!

You hear the fragile ledge give way beneath your feet as your fingers scrabble desperately for a handhold on the smooth rocky surface. Managing to grip the remains of the ledge you were standing on, your legs swing helplessly, unable to climb back to safety.

Something crashes into you, knocking the air from your lungs. As claws rake your back, you think you feel ribs break. Each breath now comes in agonising gasps as you cling desperately to the decaying ledge.

The golden dragon wheels around for another pass, hissing angrily as he whips a muscular tail around to smash you off your precarious perch on the mountainside. The force of the blow knocks you free as you feel yourself spinning, hurtling towards the adjacent cliff face and deadly drop into the valley. Your head slams into a rock and everything goes black.

Blink.....

Ouch! The light hurts your eyes causing you squeeze them shut again. In fact everything hurts. Every breath creates a stabbing pain in your right side and every bone and muscle feels like it's been bashed against rocks repeatedly. Given where you've ended up, that's most probably exactly what happened in actual fact. You remember nothing after hitting your head and in retrospect, that was probably a mercy. At least the pain means you're alive...probably.

Your Health Decreases by 4.

You try opening your eyes again against the bright afternoon light. More successfully this time. Taking in your location, you realise just how lucky you really are. Although you've tumbled a fair way down the rock face, it's clear by the broken branches above, that a number of stunted trees and bushes have caught and slowed your fall before depositing you on a small ledge. Looking down your head spins with vertigo. A fall to the bottom of the mountain would have killed you for sure.

Your back burns like fire from the scratches. Gingerly feeling along the gouges, you hiss as they contact something cold and hard embedded in your skin. Pulling it away, you see the reflective surface of a golden scale. You stare dazedly at it for a while, before pocketing the item and spinning back into unconsciousness once more.

You awaken sometime later to the chirp of insects in the cool night air. The burning pain in your back has been replaced by stiffness and a constant throbbing pain. "Well no point waiting here."

With a supreme effort, you get to your feet and painfully climb the short distance back onto the main slope. Injured as you are, it takes a number of days to hobble back to civilisation.

The first town you find is thankfully large enough to have an aging, if clean tavern. The innkeeper does a double take as you sit down at the bar. Taking in your dishevelled, dirty appearance in the reflection of a nearby metal tankard you can see why.

You quickly remove a coin and slap it on the polished wooden bench to show you can pay. "Please good lady....a tankard of ale and a meal would be very appreciated."

The blue aproned, stocky woman looks you up and down for a moment, then shrugs as if having seen it all before and bustles off to get your meal.

Setting the toasted bread and strips of venison set down on the table, you waste no time tucking into the food ravenously. The innkeeper lingers nearby, drying some mugs with a stained cloth. Seeing you're too busy eating to talk, she finally speaks, curiosity getting the better of her. "So, you look like you've been to hell and back. What happened?"

"Dragon." You mumble between swallows of ale.

She blinks a few times. "Did you say *Dragon*?"

You nod, grabbing a piece of buttered bread and shoving pieces into your mouth. She narrows her eyes suspiciously at you, obviously considering if you are having her on. Remembering the scale in your pocket, you retrieve it and place it on the counter where it shines brightly in the lamp light.

"They're not known for attacking people out this way." she addresses you, looking concerned. "This could be a the start of a definite problem, I'll have to let the rest of the town know so they can prepare."

You shake your head gulping down the food in your mouth. "No, they won't come here. I tried to steal an egg."

"You?!" She looks you up and down incredulously. "All by yourself? Well you've got courage I'll admit that...Although maybe not the brains." That last part was said softly and obviously not meant for her patrons to hear, but still you caught it. Curiosity satisfied, she moves off to wipe down the tables at the far end of the room.

You jump as a tall, grizzled looking man taps you on the shoulder. Clean shaven, it highlights a puckered scar that runs along the length of his jaw. He regards you with steady brown eyes. "Couldn't help but hear. You took on a dragon boy?"

Although dressed casually, you notice a sword hanging from his hip. You proceed with caution.

"Well yes sir, there's no law against it. I've done nothing wrong."

He grins and then laughs loudly. "Well I'll second old Sari here," he nods towards the innkeeper. "You really are brave...or stupid." He looks deep into your eyes. "No, I don't think it's stupid. Just

driven. What's your profession son?"

You stammer something about working in a merchant's business.

"Hmm...I can see why you'd want to get out of that." he says with a frown. "It also means you're likely to have little experience with a blade though doesn't it?" You shake your head truthfully.

Your companion drums his fingers on the wooden table thoughtfully, coming to a decision. "You lack experience but I like what I've seen so far. My name's Firth, I run a company providing guards for travellers and merchants. If you're willing, I'll take you on, train you on the job. If nothing else in the meantime, I'm sure you can put your education skills to good use, lending our company something of a more polished edge when dealing with the upper class folk if you know what I mean." He smiles sincere in his offer.

If you decide join Firth instead of returning to the forest to hunt for another dragon egg, turn to page 53.

If you refuse his offer, insisting you will become a dragon rider, turn to page 8.

59

Escaping down the left hand tunnel, you find it does indeed lead to a way out. Not wanting to spend a moment more than necessary in the darkness, you race out into the sunlight.

You doubt the denizens of the deep will follow you into the light, however looking up you can see the sun is already on it's way towards the horizon. You'll have a few hours at most before night fall to get clear of caverns. To your relief, you appear to have travelled to the opposite side of the mountain and the hunting dragons are nowhere in sight. Getting your bearings, you start walking.

Trekking back towards civilisation, you can't keep the spring out of your step despite the weariness that comes from long days spent hiking through wild terrain. The dragon pair seems to have finally given up on the search, and you no longer have to spend your days looking anxiously upwards for signs of their arrival.

Walking along an overgrown game trail, you stumble loosing your balance. You must be more weary than you thought. *Just a little further*, you tell yourself. *Then I can rest.*

Setting off again, you find yourself once again rocked off balance. *It's the egg!* You realise. *It's moving!*

Quickly lowering the heavy backpack to the ground, you open the strings to reveal the egg rocking from back and forth, a spiderweb of cracks spreading along the surface. You freeze for a moment, not expecting the egg to hatch this early while you are still out in the wilderness. Nothing for it, you settle down to wait impatiently for the creature to break free.

Finally you see a claw poke through the shell breaking the casing away.

Please roll the dice once.

If the dice shows 1. Turn to 45.

If the dice shows 2 or 3 Turn to 12.

If the dice shows 4, 5 or 6. Turn to 22.

60

"Saryanth!" you yell to your dragon. "Come here this instant! Don't you know what that gryphon could do to you?" Your dragon shakes her head, throwing off the command and continues to growl at the other beast.

"Saryanth. It's not worth the fight over. BACK OFF!" The dragon's growl turns whine as you put your will into the command. Howling in frustration, she relents and slowly backs away from the gryphon, returning to your side. The other beast wastes no time, grabbing the fallen bird in its beak, it flaps away with a cry of triumph that makes your dragon shake with rage.

"Why?! Why did you interfere? That kill was mine!" Your dragon's words are accompanied by a surge of rage.

"It wasn't worth it Sary. That gryphon was dangerous, it could have hurt you." you reply calmly.

"So you think I can't take care of myself? That I'm weak? How am I to prove myself to you if you won't let me fight?" The drake's anger is giving way to frustration and pain that you thought to little of her ability.

"I'm sorry, you're right. I'm sure you could have beaten off that creature. I just feared for you, that's all. I'll tell you what, I'll come with you and help you hunt something else." Your offer slightly mollifies her, although she is still obviously upset.

Your visitor was right about one thing, you'd only just curtailed her attack on the gryphon. If she had have resisted even a tad more, you may not have been able to stop her at all. Saryanth's comments made you realise something else as well. If you are ever to compete in the races successfully, sooner or later you'll have to let her fight with all the risks that entails.

Turn to page 36.

61

You look at the patched together harness. Although you'd love something more polished, you feel as if you've accepted enough favours already, you'll earn your own way. Besides which, you've put a lot of work into making the equipment, it'd be a shame if it was never used. Politely you decline Kale's offer.

You're using a home made dragon riding harness. (No stat bonuses).

Kale rolls his broad shoulders in a shrug. "It's up to you. Make sure you've fastened those buckles on well though, it's a long way down if you fall. Anyway, I think that's enough for today. How about you take Saryanth for a scrub down in the lake since it's such a pleasant day. Meet me outside the main building with your dragon tomorrow morning and we'll get started on something practical."

Turn to page 39.

62

The dark shape moves swiftly towards you, diving at speed, causing you to panic. "It's a trap! We need to get out of here!"

With Saryanth bounding alongside, you run back the way you came. A rush of air knocks you to the ground as the dragon swoops low over the two of you. Your dragon couches protectively over you growling at the newcomer. The dark blue dragon circles around, landing heavily between you and your escape. Saryanth gives you a fearful look, not sure what to do. She glances around wildly, her instinct to take to the sky, but unwilling to leave you to the mercies of the larger dragon.

"STOP!" You hear the voice of Kale Cyra ringing loudly as he exits a nearby building and runs towards the scene. The heavysset blue dragon, tucks his neck in obligingly as he backs away. Saryanth is still visibly shaking as she looks frantically around, smoke drifting in small puffs from her nose.

Turn to page 46.

63

The race markers direct you through a tall forest strung with vines to resemble spider webs, Saryanth's flagging energy levels get a momentary lift with the cheers she receives from the audience for nimbly winding through the obstacles without a touch but she's still rapidly tiring.

"Just a little further Sary." you call encouragingly.

Too tired to answer, you simply get an answering snort, accompanied by a thin trail of smoke that is rapidly swept away in the wind.

On the final leg of the race, Saryanth continues to flap wearily towards the finish line. There's a gold dragon ahead but you can tell by its laboured wing flaps that it is also fading. Steadily your dragon is gaining, but without a burst of speed it's not going to be enough.

"Sary? Can you manage one last burst of speed?" The dragon nods wearily.

Speed Skill Check. Roll one dice and add the amount to your dragon's speed stat.

If your total is 9 or less, turn to page 68.

If your total is 10 or more, turn to page 47.

64

Saryanth's strength and endurance has shown a marked improvement over the last couple of months. Where she used to complain about carrying small rocks into the air, she now hauls heavy weights around without any strain. You see her hovering high above, a large chunk of granite clutched in her claws. As Raxus moves to intercept, she tilts over and dives. Narrowly avoiding the larger dragon, she darts to the side and expertly tosses the rock through a ring before happily flapping back up into the sky victorious.

Your Dragon's Strength/Endurance Has Increased by 1.

Turn to page 50.

65

Springing forward, you lunge for one of the spider's many legs hoping to disable it, only to have the creature dart under your guard and jump towards your hand. Spinning the knife over in your grip, you plunge it deeply into the monster's side. With a high pitched squeal, the arachnid leaps away, scuttling into the darkness.

Quickly you retreat the way you came. Although you suspect you have only wounded the arachnid, the cavern stays silent and the expected attack does not come.

Turn to page 59.

66

Saryanth's breathing becomes heavier as she approaches the first obstacle. You place a steadying hand on her neck as you fly towards a series of rings are placed at intervals across the field. With a clear run, Saryanth agilely flies through the sequence. People on the sidelines cheer you on buoying your dragon's confidence with their encouragement.

The course continues through a narrow twisting canyon. With a sharp burst of speed Saryanth overtakes a small sky blue dragon and strains forward trying to reach a green dragon further ahead. You can feel the strain in her wings and the harshness of her breath as she flies onward. Saryanth dips her wing sharply to make a tight turn in the canyon, when out of nowhere a rock is falling into your path.

In the narrow confines on the canyon, there's no room to dodge the rock, Saryanth will need to knock it out of the way.

Strength Skill Check. Roll one dice and add the amount to your dragon's strength stat.

If your total is 8 or less, turn to page 52.

If your total is 9 or more, turn to page 44.

67

"Well look what the cat dragged in." A brutish man riding a scarred hulking dragon lumbers up to you. Despite the snide remarks, you can see him giving the two of you a calculated look as he sizes you up as a potential threat. You guess this must be the Rory that Kale warned you about.

"You'll get eaten alive." He growls as Morth bites at Saryanth's exposed neck, snapping his jaws shut a mere inches from contact to punctuate his rider's assessment. Rory laughs cruelly as they stride away. You've been waiting for this moment your entire life, but suddenly you feel the icy cold of fear settling into the bottom of your stomach.

Saryanth turns a shining eye to face you. *"Don't worry, he'll never catch me!"*

"I know, just watch out for him, ok?" your dragon wordlessly agrees.

Finally all the racers are in place and the ringing of trumpets sounds in the air. A steward walks up to the side of the track holding aloft a large yellow flag. With a smooth motion he swings it in an arc, to touch the ground.

Muscles coiled, Saryanth surges into the air.

If your reputation is +1 or greater, please turn to page 27.

If your reputation is 0, please turn to page 32.

68

You feel your dragon's muscles strain as she puts on a final burst of speed. Flying across the meadow, you approach the finish line with its crowds of cheering people. With every wing beat, you get closer and closer to the gold dragon ahead. Her rider turns realising you're there and you recognise Dhar Lamai, the final rider Kale told you to watch out for. Zalara pumps her wings frantically but she's obviously tiring and dips slowly downwards, closer to the ground with each flap.

"Come on Saryanth, you can do it!" you yell encouragement to your dragon. Her breath comes in laboured gasps as she tries to do as you wish. Level with Zalara's tail, the other dragon makes no effort to strike out at you, also concentrating on putting every ounce of strength she has into making it to the end of the course.

Strength/Endurance Skill Check. Roll one dice and add the amount to your dragon's strength /endurance stat.

If your total is 7 or less, turn to page 28.

If your total is 8 or more, turn to page 48.