On Transcending Wings

It was said that the strongest steel couldn't withold a dragon. Its fire-bred bars would bend and burst from the strength of such a powerful beast of legend. The dragon himself believed nothing man-made would ever succeed in capturing him, but the proof was surrounding his very existence. The dragon had a golden-scaled body the size of a house and was enclosed inside the largest steel contraption he ever saw. Thick, steel bars cascaded down from a strong ceiling, closing in around him like an oversized birdcage. Chains and bindings held his muscular limbs together while his long snout was tightly tied shut by coils of rope, most likely to prevent the humans from being roasted alive. Struggling against his bonds only worsened the pain, so he quit after the first prolonging hour of captivity.

Against all odds, the impudent humans had brought him down, forcefully drugged him, somehow managed to move him, and encased him before regaining consciousness. Losing to such insolent pests was already upsetting, but being confined to be watched with amusement was more than outrageous. He was placed in the center of the town as a trophy or some accolade to be claimed and displayed for their meager eyes. It was true he'd rather be alive than dead, but at what price? Small humans threw hard rocks and rotten food while the bigger humans jabbed him with long sticks. The throwing of objects he could care less about, but some of the bigger humans had sharpened the ends of their sticks. Those were very painful and sometimes managed to pierce his beautiful, naturally armored body. If there was one thing he was thankful for during this time, it was the fact that the armored humans guarded him and shooed the culprits away before they drew too much blood. Otherwise, the dragon was left miserable.

The dragon's name was Valdrihn, a magnificent being whose gold-colored scales
illuminated even brighter than a golden sun. Valdrihn was a handsome creature of intellect with clever wit and would never admit to having an eccentric ego. He had a sarcastic personality at best, but there was little use he could get out of it now. The humans believed he was a terrifying monster, a stoic animal that would rather burn their families and eat their children or whichever came first, so they took him captive like a common beast. His treatment was—at best—poor and displeasing. Unable to move, he had nothing to do to entertain himself and could only lay there hopelessly to be gawked at by such disrespectful creatures. He was graciously provided a comfy, dirt floor and a lovely view of wooden, human abodes while his triangular head rested upon a soft, grassy pillow.

Worst of all, he had no food. Valdrihn's first day of captivity crawled by. It seemed as if the essence of time was mocking him as well. Once the sun had diminished and was replaced by the luminescent sphere of night, he was abandoned and left utterly alone with a grumbling belly. He lazily rolled onto his spiny back into a more comfortable position with his bound limbs dangling in the air. The chain bindings sturdily held his forearms together, separate from his hind-legs which were bound in the same manner. His wings were tied down by a strong rope that coiled around his body to hold them against his back. So, even if he was able to escape the cage, he would have to hop like an overgrown, scaly rabbit to move anywhere. For now, he would have to rest the idea of escaping and suffer from cramped muscles.

As the dragon's horrible night went on, he began to ponder about the day before he was imprisoned. What had he done to deserve this? Valdrihn couldn't remember and the idea of him forgetting a memory was atrocious. His memory was perfect. He had done nothing in particular... perhaps it was that sheep he ate. As delicious as it was, the dragon didn't believe it would set off an entire town to attack him. Now, Valdrihn was irritated. Never before had he forgotten such a significant event, especially one that would have a group of marauding warriors sent on an expedition after his capture! The dragon had been resting in the temporary cave home he had discovered on his second day in the area when they had come. He had never spent more than a month in one place in the seemingly endless world, not long enough to amplify any infamy. So he thought, anyway. Humans were queer,
possessive creatures and probably just wanted an impressive looking dragon as a trophy. As ludicrous as that sounded, he almost believed it.

Before Valdrihn could finally rest his mind to slumber, he heard small steps approaching him. He twisted his wedge-shaped head around to find a brave, little, human girl looking up at him while holding a stuffed toy. The little thing held it up to him as if offering a gift. Baffled, the dragon snorted and looked bewildered at the little girl who stood before him. She flinched, but still held out the toy. Valdrihn was trying to understand what it wanted as he was sure she knew he couldn't move. Nonetheless, the dragon rolled back onto his belly and shimmied his way to the edge of the cascading, metal bars, holding his snout against the frigid steel. The little thing looked terrified and backed off slightly as if she would run away. She withdrew the toy and clenched it tightly against her chest with a small gasp.

Valdrihn's brilliant, gold-flecked pupils glared into the human's smaller eyes, silently encouraging her to continue. As if understanding, the small human walked closer. She walked directly up to the dragon and held out a tiny hand. Under normal circumstances, Valdrihn would never, ever, ever let a human touch him.

Never.

But he did not pull away nor did he try to frighten the little girl. Instead, he allowed her to pet the pebbly scales between his nostrils. Her touch was soft and gentle like the wind's caressing breeze he already missed. She smiled while looking up at him. Her body was easily dwarfed by the size of his head, but she still had the courage to approach such a massive beast and touch it. The dragon didn't think any human had the guts besides this little girl. Whether she was curious or just plain stupid, Valdrihn had no idea, but she was brave nonetheless.

“My name is Sarah,” she said quietly.

Valdrihn understood what she spoke, more so than what she probably realized. Humans didn't think dragons could speak, let alone the language that they used. Most dragons actually never learned to speak in the human tongue, but Valdrihn had been curious and learned what he could from various sources before meeting an old hermit that he happened to find living inside a cave. In exchange for a longer life, the hermit had agreed to
teach the dragon everything he knew about the human language. As complex as he made it out to be, Valdrihn picked it up rather quickly after mocking it to be such a backwards speech. If his maw wasn't tied shut, he would have most likely surprised the girl, if not scared the spirits out of her.

Sarah obviously didn't expect him to reply because she continued, “Mother and Father said that you were a monster and should be killed. I don't think so now. You may be big and scary, but I think you are kind of nice.”

Valdrihn throat rumbled slightly as he gently laughed.

“You're cute when you purr.” She laughed excitedly and smiled.

Purr? How dare she! Dragons do not purr nor perform anything similar. Purring is for domesticated felines who contain no sort of intelligence and lie around all day, accomplishing absolutely nothing! Valdrihn snorted blatantly and shook his head away, glaring accusingly at Sarah with glowing, golden eyes. Her joyous expression saddened, almost depressingly so. The dragon sighed and returned to his previous position. She was young and innocent; he could hardly blame her for making such a horrid mistake.

Almost immediately, her face lit up again and she began to quickly pet him with more confidence. “I like you, dragon.” Her hand went farther up his smooth snout because she knew she passed the first test of acceptance. She seemed to notice the tightly wrapped rope circumventing his maw. “I'm going to name you... Jeremy!”

Jeremy? What kind of name for a dragon is that?

“You look like a Jeremy.”

… What? How...

The little girl looked frantically around, acting as if she was being watched. “I got to go, Jeremy.” Then, she whispered, “See you tomorrow night!”

Still confused, Valdrihn watched the Sarah as she pranced away into the dark, cobblestone streets with her auburn hair whipping back and forth. Jeremy? Really? He pondered for a few moments and realized she had left the stuffed toy. It closely resembled a bear, one that would be found in the wild, but it was satirized into a cute, children's toy. The dragon clumsily picked it up and held it in his bound paws, thinking about his little visitor.
Feeling drowsy, he curled up into a ball the best he could and decided he'd be better off sleeping instead. The stuffed bear lay comfortably against his chest as he cradled and cuddled it.

Sure enough, the Sarah came back the next night after such a long, tortuous day. Throughout the day, the pests seemed to grow and the harassment became worse. Valdrihn was indignant he when found the stuffed bear to be missing after his mid-day nap. It was as if they hated him. The jeers and the rude poking of sticks was plenty enough to put Valdrihn in a bad mood, as if he wasn't already. A new set of scars lined his golden-scaled side. That time around, the guards had not stopped the brutal stabbing of sharpened sticks and in fact laughed while mocking the bound dragon trapped helplessly behind bars.

And he still had no food.

Now with the starry, night sky set, Valdrihn's mood was lightened and looked forward to meeting the little girl once more. He was disappointed though that he had already lost her special gift to him. She seemed to be the only sane human in this town. When Sarah approached, she carried a basket that looked almost too heavy for her to carry. Once she set it down, she let out a small, exasperated sigh and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand.

“I brought you something!” she said merrily in a hushed voice. She reached into the basket and withdrew a slab of red meat. Valdrihn's golden eyes grew so large they almost fell out of their sockets. His snout pressed greedily against the cage as he felt his mouth beginning to water. Food.

She. Brought. Food.

Then, Sarah looked disappointed and Valdrihn soon realized why. He couldn't open his mouth! Of all the miserable, absurd things he had the joy of experiencing in just two days, this had to have been the worst! Finally, some intelligent little being had brought him something to satiate the ache in his grumbling belly, but he was unable to consume it. While the dragon was in a silent fury, Sarah reached into the basket and grabbed a knife. Once Valdrihn had noticed this, he flattened his face excitedly against the cold bars so the little girl had easier access to cut the rope. She was smarter than he had assumed. It took the girl
about a minute, struggling at slicing through the thick chords of rope. The dull edge of the one-sided blade pressed irritatingly into his scales, but it was worth it once he felt each binding chord release. The dragon yawned, revealing his large, dagger-like teeth as he stretched out his cramped jaw. Sarah giggled and watched him curiously.

She extended her arm and pushed the raw meat through the bars. Valdrihn snatched it with his teeth, frightening Sarah slightly, and placed it on the ground below him. The little girl watched intently as small flames coursed from the dragon's maw and cooked the meat. Valdrihn preferred his meat cooked as it brought out more delicious flavors. He was not opposed to eating it raw, but he wanted to savor the delicate taste that would soon satisfy his hunger. After a minute, he quickly gulped it down and looked for more. On cue, Sarah gave him another and he repeated the process. After two more slabs of meat, she had no more. The entire time, she was silent, waiting for him to finish eating. Once Valdrihn had finished, he elicited a sigh of relief and delight. The meal did not fill him, but it definitely hit the spot.

“"I heard your stomach making noises last night, so I thought you could use food.""

Now was his chance to surprise her. He had to take it, but he also didn't want to frighten her off. So, he said as softly as he could, “"Thank you, Sarah."" His voice was sounded rougher and deeper than any average man, but what he said was clear and understandable.

The look on the little girl's face was priceless. She almost couldn't believe that a dragon just spoke to her! Her jaw dropped as she stood there, mouth agape and hands grabbing at her hair. “"Jeremy, did you just talk!?"” she half-yelled and half-whispered.

The dragon crinkled his face. “"My name is not Jeremy, it is Valdrihn,"” he said with distaste.

After another moment of disbelief, she returned, “"Oh... Vald- Valdr- Valdrn..."”

The dragon sighed. “"You can call me Val."”

“"Okay!"” She then rattled of a stream of questions that he couldn't even keep up with.

“"One at a time!"” he hissed.

Sarah puckered her lips and crossed her arms. “"How old are you?"”

“"Older than you would think."” Truthfully, he had no idea. Humans counted their
years, but dragons did not keep track of time. The only sense of time to them were the changing of seasons and those seemed to flash by within the blink of an eye. He could be hundreds of years old by their count.

“And how old is that?” She would not accept a general answer.

“One hundred and sixty-three.” A guess at most. Valdrihn was still young in dragon years, but that answer seemed to confound her. “What's wrong?”

“You're very old, Val,” she said matter-of-factly.

Valdrihn chuckled. “Alright, what's your next question?”

“Why are you here?”

Another question without a real answer. “Why don't you tell me?”

“I don't know...” She pondered a minute, staring down at her feet before continuing, “Father said you were a monster and deserve worse, but Mother thinks you deserve to rot. They didn't tell why.”

The dragon sighed again. “You humans seem to think that a lot, don't you?”

“Everyone hates you.”

Her blatant honesty was humorous. “I figured as much. Speaking of which, why are you here?”

“Aren't I supposed to ask questions?” she inquired defiantly.

“That is a question and the answer is no, it's my turn.” Valdrihn grinned, baring his sharp, white teeth. “So, why are you here?”

“Hmph.” She huffed and crossed her arms tighter. “I wanted to see if you really were a monster.”

“Am I?”

Sarah looked up at the golden dragon and honestly said, “No, I don't think so.”

“At least you have so-”

“Get away from there!” shouted a heavily armored guard from the side. He rushed up to Sarah with his armor clinking loudly. The little girl gasped and cried out as she was swiftly taken away and placed several tens of yards away from Valdrihn. The man looked as if he was scolding her, judging by the resistant look on her face and the way he waved his arms
around. The dragon watched intently, unsure of what was exactly going on. The guard raised a hand and struck the girl before Valdrihn could even verbally object. Sarah winced and began to cry, holding the spot on her arm where she was struck.

Valdrihn growled fiercely before roaring vociferously into the thin, night air. The armored human turned around, looking as if he had soiled himself, and backed off. Then, he realized he had a weapon and unsheathed it. Even from a distance, the dragon could see that he was shaking uncontrollably. He smirked and roared again and laughed humorously as the man ran away, leaving Sarah behind like a coward. She was laughing too even though she had also been terrified by such a menacing sound. By the second roar, Valdrihn must have awakened the whole town because more men came rushing to the town’s center at different times, weapons drawn and pointed directly at the dragon. Some of them weren’t even wearing armor. One of them took the little girl away and out of sight despite her wailing objections. The group organized around the beast, surrounding him in a large circle. With an order, they encroached upon the dragon. Valdrihn watched them and did not budge. Where could he go, anyway?

“Did you think you could attack that little girl!?” a man shouted.

“How does this feel!?” shouted another that charged at the prison. He carried a long stick with a metallic end that looked painfully sharp.

And it was.

Valdrihn howled and hissed as his hide was pierced by the weapon. Icy metal chilled his fervent flesh as it pressed into him and twisted. Warm blood trickled from the dragon's lesion once it was pulled out, soiling his beautiful, golden scales. He winced with pain and felt another metal-tipped stick puncture the thick muscle in his hind-leg. Valdrihn pulled his leg away, removing it and felt yet another wound form at his forearm. An onslaught of attacks jabbed at him and forced the dragon to curl up into a giant, protective ball. Each affliction demoralized him until he was whimpering like a child. He crawled to the center of the cage, out of reach for anything worse than a pointed stick, and covered his head with his paws. If he retaliated, he would only lose and experience something far worse. After several minutes of sheer torture, the humans stopped and vanished into their comfortable homes as
if nothing had ever happened. Valdrihn lay there whimpering, trying to push agonizing thoughts of humiliation out of his throbbing head. He hoped that Sarah did not see what transpired. Blood coated his body that was beaded with thick, red blotches. His appearance was ruined. If Sarah saw him now... he didn't even want to think of that.

As the night continued mercilessly on, the sun broke the darkened sky across the Eastern horizon. Valdrihn couldn't sleep while his body suffered. Miraculously, he did not bleed out, but his heart felt faint. Through the day, he was not harmed any more nor was he harassed. Most onlookers just walked on as if he didn't even exist. The men he recognized from the night before stared at his marred body. Whether or not they felt remorse, Valdrihn did not know, but he couldn't help but hate and despise them. Near the middle of the day, a well-dressed man approached the dragon as he lay curled up attempting to sleep.

The man called out, “Dragon, I have come to speak with you.”

Valdrihn lifted the tail covering his eyes and stared blankly at the pompous-looking individual. His belly was rounded by the years of food he gorged upon and his clothing was significantly more expensive and different from all of the commoners. Valdrihn presumed he was a leader and remained silent as the man didn't expect a response.

“Your actions led to your brutal punishment. We will not have an overgrown lizard harassing our people and we most definitely will not keep it here any longer if it chooses to attack us.”

The dragon's golden eyes widened. They might set him free! Three days of confinement was torture enough without the violence he suffered. Valdrihn missed feeling the wind beat against his wings, he missed the freedom of flying. He missed freedom. Whatever he had done to deserve this, he would have taken it back instantly. The suffering here was the worst experience he ever had, much worse than a broken wing.

“So we have decided to relinquish you of your pathetic life.” he finished cheerfully and extended out his arms, clearly believing the dragon could not understand him.

Anger burst forth and snapped Valdrihn's calm nature while he raised his long neck threateningly into the shape of an S. “Of all the convoluted and most foolish ideas I've ever heard, that would have to be the worst!” The shocked look on the fat man's face would have
normally sent Valdrihn into fitful laughter, but he was in no mood. They were going to kill him. “By what law or code do you follow? How could any of this have been fair or ideal?” Guards quickly surrounded the man with their weapons raised. Valdrihn stood up, balancing on four legs while he continued, “You’ve not shown me an ounce of mercy or kindness. What you accuse me of is repulsive and drowned by falsehood. You took away my freedom, and even after that, you took away my dignity. What say you!?” The dragon's profound voice boomed across the town, sending women and children into their homes and people walking by to stop dead in their tracks.

“You attacked a small child! Not even a monster would perform such an atrocious deed!”

“Your stupidity has surpassed what I thought was possible! What is stopping me from burning down your town from where I stand? What is stopping me from killing you within the blink of an eye? What is stopping me from regaining my freedom!? It certainly isn't your daft charm! Your insolence will be punished with time!” Valdrihn snarled and bared his sharp, menacing teeth. The fear he issued into the wretched humans was satisfying. He softened his voice and continued, “A monster is what you call me, but a monster I am not nor am I a beast. If a little girl can realize this, then why haven't you?”

“She was foolish to approach you. You're a dangerous animal that deserves to be executed!”

Then, Valdrihn realized what he had done to issue his capture, to be hunted down and imprisoned.

Nothing.

He realized that no matter what he did, no matter what he said, their opinions would not be swayed. Humans were the most stubborn, pig-headed beings he knew and now the proof was evident. “You have taught me a lesson, human, and so has the girl. Your kind bases the unknown or undiscovered on opinions. Only those courageous and intelligent enough are the ones that can see two sides to the same coin. You lack both outstanding qualities.”

“I will not stand here and be insulted by a talking animal! Guards!”
On cue, several loyal men charged Valdrihn and thrust their metal-pointed-sticks at him. Seething rage and adrenaline coursed through the dragon, sending him into a spiraling fury. He reared his torso into the air and swiped all of the spear-tips that were sticking through the steel bars, snapping and breaking every one of them into pieces. The guards were petrified. With all of his strength, Valdrihn pulled apart the metal chains binding his forearms. They broke apart and fell to the ground with clanking metal. Commoners ran away terrified while guards and soldiers ran to protect their home from the trapped, rampaging beast. The dragon could have burned them all where they stand, but he would have never brought himself to do it. Instead, he tightened the chains around his hind-legs and swiped at them with his claws. He burst them apart, chipping his claws in the process. With a claw that was still sharp, he cut the rope tied around his body and freed his wings.

Once he was free of his bindings, Valdrihn heard clinking metal and felt small, sharp objects striking his hardened hide. They were firing the sticks at him now. The sticks were smaller, but packed an awful punch that bruised his muscles and pierced his softer areas. The dragon roared with frustration and slammed against the strong, steel bars that confined him. He used all the strength he had left to destroy what he learned to despise most, but his body soon grew too weak and his aching muscles gave out. All hope was lost and he collapsed harshly onto the ground against the strong, metal bars. He hadn't even made a dent. The onslaught of attacks ceased, but he knew it was too late. The amount of blood he had lost the night before was already too much, even for a dragon. Now, his bloodied, golden hide was fresh with trickling, warm blood. Small sticks stuck out of his body and his breathing labored. Inside of his chest, he felt something cold penetrating near his heart. Valdrihn looked down, seeing that the metal-pointed-stick had struck him definitely, burying itself deep into his chest and past his ribs. Every part of the dragon was in excruciating pain, but yet he could hardly feel it. What life he still had left was diminishing; the abysmal end appeared closer and closer. With a long groan, he gripped a bloody, metal bar with his paw and clenched it tightly. He winced and bared his snarling teeth, breathing quickly in and out, feeling himself desiring to close his eyes and drift off into slumber. His head felt heavy, swimming in drowning thoughts. Memories flooded his vision, passing him by almost faster.
than he could recollect. Valdrihn shut his eyes, reliving his favorite memory before his passing.

He was an even younger dragon then, still under the loving wings of his parents.

*His mother carried him within a secure grasp, soaring high above the wispy clouds. She spoke fondly towards him, giving little Valdrihn words of encouragement. Soon after, she released him. With wings spread wide, Valdrihn glided down from his smiling parents, feeling the wind carry him upon smooth currents. Adrenaline coursed through the youngling's body while his heart burst with prideful delight. As he descended, Valdrihn relinquished the most mature roar he had ever sounded before, crying out his youthful joy to the echoing skies. With a little strain and concentration, Valdrihn flapped his golden wings, rising higher as a warm current assisted him. He rose on transcending wings to the greatest feeling he ever felt.*

Valdrihn's entire body relaxed and his breathing slowed drastically until he couldn't breathe anymore. His body released everything he had left until a feeling of significance remained; what he had until the final days of his life.

Freedom.