

## The Dragon

As I crept past the underbelly of the sleeping beast I could feel my heart pounding through my scale armor. My hand clutched the handle of my sword, now half-way unsheathed from its scabbard. Sweat dripped from my forehead as I grappled with the stress of the situation. With one flick of its massive tail I could be dispatched like a pesky fly, thrown to a cold slumber from which few have ever risen. Thankfully, the potion I had slipped into the monster's last meal, which had consisted of a few hapless deer, seemed to be still working. The deer had been no match for the powerful drug-soaked apples I had fed them, but I wasn't so sure the effect would last on this dragon. I could feel the heat emanating from its own thick scales now, as if there were a veritable fire burning within. I would have to find a soft, unprotected section and thrust cleanly to its heart, as there would be no second chances. I drew my sword and prepared for the death blow, but then to my dismay I saw its huge ugly head turning toward me, and then with the utmost menace a large eyelid snapped open. This wasn't the largest beast I had ever fought, but the pure rage and hatred burning in its yellow eyes left no doubt in my mind that it was the meanest.

And now, my easy victory vanished, the dragon drew itself up to its full height and lunged at me.

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It was a fine morning. A few cumulus clouds drifted lazily across the clear blue sky. A bird tweeted merrily in a nearby aspen grove. A soft breeze rustled pleasantly through the open fields of Timothy-hay intermingled with buttercups. A few deer grazed peacefully near a burbling brook, their steady munching and frolicking punctuated only by the occasional wary glance about them. They had even managed to happen upon some succulent red apples, strewn around in the shade of a sturdy willow tree nestled into the banks of the brook.

Now, you know as well as I that apples do not grow on anything but apple trees, but deer don't know that and so these apples were quickly consumed, a delightful treat. Moments later, the deer fell into tidy heaps, dead to the world. If you looked closely, you would have noticed a shoe fallen off right by the base of the willow tree, just upwind of where the deer had been grazing. It belonged to a valiant and very alert man concealed among the foliage. Aside from the shoe that had slipped off while climbing, his plan so far was working splendidly.

Two miles above this same field flew a monster so hideous and loathsome that it was said children and old wives could be stricken lifeless merely by catching a glimpse of its wicked eyes. But perhaps that's just a silly fable.

Nevertheless, this monster, a dragon in fact, thought himself quite handsome, and despised anything that thought otherwise. He spent his days drifting lazily from one thermal to the next, gloating in his magnificence. On very rainy days he would sulk in his cave high on the mountain and fry to a crisp any small rodents who tried to shelter there, with a quick sneeze of fire from one nostril. But when it was nice like it was today he would soar like an eagle, and in the evenings terrorize any of the small villages around his mountains if the fancy suited him.

Then, something caught his evil eyes. He saw the same few deer we've already noted, and thinking to himself that they were merely napping, swooped in for the kill. And as an eagle can pluck a fish from the water, this dragon gobbled the deer up without even touching the ground. If a dragon had lips, he would have been smacking them. As it was, he was quite happy at his good fortune. Though he could easily be well fed like this every day, he was very lazy and preferred to let his prey present itself as an offering to his greatness. Of course this never happened, and so he was usually hungry and irritable. But now he was fat with cargo already digesting slowly, and was becoming very drowsy. He alighted on the crag outside his cave and stumbled inside for a nap.

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As the dragon lunged for the poor soldier he only had time to react as he had been trained. His left arm raised itself along with shield and so he braced himself as a palm tree against a hurricane. But as the dragon reared up in its rage, he banged his head against an outcropping rock formation lodged twenty feet up in the ceiling of the cavern. The force of the impact not only startled the dragon, but dislodged the rock, which came crashing to the floor. This gave our hero enough time to locate and take cover in a tight nook against the speedy wrath of the great dragon, his shield closing him in. Flames shot from the dragon's mouth and nostrils, dark smoke filled the cavern. The earth shook as wicked claws mauled at a once shiny but now blackened shield, recessed just out of reach. The man behind the shield thought it was the end, that this is how he would die. If he didn't die immediately from the heat, he would surely perish from the heat or be crushed! The whole mountain now seemed to be shaking apart, and a deafening roar echoed miles down into the valley.

The dragon had chosen the cave for the dull constant heat it found there, unaware that lurking beneath lay a force more powerful than man or beast alike. This volcano had lain dormant for hundreds of years, but the falling rock had caused enough of a fissure to unleash hell. From deep within the earth boiling lava exploded upwards, scorching to a crisp the reptilian monster like a hair held over a candle's flame. The mountain top collapsed inwards from the heat and pressure, and hot lava sloshed slowly down the rocky slopes, consuming everything in its path.