

FIRE DRAKE

"Dragons aren't real" he kept saying. Damn the bookworm bastard to all the hells he's never heard of! My shoulder and forearm scream with awful pain from the blazes that came out of the monster's maw. But at least I can rest easy it's not a bloody dragon! I hear the same sound it made as it drew in the breath before the blast – this rumbling wheezing, so deep and raspy you can sense the sound crawling on your skin. My eyes dart around the cave for safety and I spot another large boulder nearby, diving for the cover it provides just as my previous hiding place is bathed in flames.

"Dragons, the four-legged winged reptiles of legend that breathe fire and possess magical powers are entirely made up" the pretentious wise fool who travelled with us told me. "Some less educated folks might mistake a wyvern for a dragon, but the wyvern's wings are more like those of a bat and you can rest easy that it does not breathe anything but foul odor. And it most definitely doesn't possess an intelligence beyond that of a hungry animal – a cunning beast, but a beast, nevertheless". Yep, that dumb birk got killed first in the ambush, and serves him right for the endless yammering on, thinking everyone else dumber than he is.

I hear the scraping of claws on stone and I peek out from my hiding place – the awful thing is rushing at me! Oh, my scholar friend would be so satisfied with being right this time too! This one doesn't have wings – just a scaled body size of a horse, iron-melting fire breath and more fury than words can describe. Lucky me it's not a dragon or I'd be in real trouble!

It moves its lithe red body way faster than I'd expect, bouncing off the boulders as it's speeding towards me, maw open for a deadly bite, its nasty teeth almost glowing red to match the scales. I barely manage to get my makeshift spear up in defense as it bites on the shaft, already damaged by its fire. The struggle is short but futile – I'm no weakling, but I'm no match for the monster.

It bites through the weakened shaft and roars in triumph – the sound echoes around the cavern. Too early, you, ugly piece of work – I manage to grab the part of the spear with the sharpened tip and plunge it into the beast's neck – the blood that spills out is scalding hot, as it singes my hand, but I smile anyways as it writhes in agony for a moment – I've clearly hurt it.

The wood of the shaft is damaged beyond all use and I free up the spear tip to use as a knife. The monster settles and stares me down with its glowing eyes. Now you say what you want but I see something more than just hunger or anger there – it's like malice, like this thing actually hates me, beyond just being its prey. The rumbling sound from its belly sounds again and I barely have a second to tumble away, jumping into a moss-covered crevasse in the cavern floor. I feel the heat above me as it burns the top of my hair, I land on a slippery bed of moss, and fall, losing my footing. Falling, I smack my arm against the stone on the bottom, but the wetness of the moss is strangely soothing against my burned skin. I back away slowly as the giant lizard appears over the ridge, staring me down. It leaps down, landing with a heavy sound, the wet moss steaming under its clawed feet because of the immense heat coming from the beast. Orange boiling liquid drips from the wound on its neck, landing on the moss with a sickening hiss.

I hate this bloody lizard. I hate these bloody caves and I hated that bloody pompous fool who brought us down here. Clenching my teeth, I grab my knife as tightly as I can and prepare to get scalded by the monster's heat one more time. Now or never. Whether this damned thing is a real dragon or not, I'm going down swinging and if I die in this cursed place – I'm counting on taking it with me.