

# The Desolator

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There was but one settlement on the sun-baked Plains of Gorp: the hamlet of Yendour. Nestled in a bend of the river Otirian, the rag-tag collection of buildings was a magnet for adventurers from the icy wastes of the North and the sandy wastes of the South. It would have attracted parties from the watery wastes of the East and the mountainous wastes of the West, but they were populated by humongous sea snakes and murderous rock trolls respectively, and nobody was stupid enough to live there.

It was near midnight, and Skewkeep the Well-Hung glittered in the night sky, his prominent sword a beacon to countless wanderers in the wild and savage wastes. But there were few wanderers abroad, for Yendour was besieged by a dragon.

No ordinary dragon, the Desolator was a scrawny, bad-tempered beast. It had a nasty habit of stealing animals and eating them in the air above the town, occasionally showering the inhabitants with body parts. In Yendour it could literally rain cats and dogs, although you were more likely to get a down paw.

The scaly beast soon tired of raining half-eaten pets on the populace, and had taken to swooping on the inhabitants instead. It had nabbed half a dozen villagers from the main street in less than a week, and although there were plenty more available it was the principle of the thing which rankled.

Cries for help had been answered, and parties of adventurers had been pouring into the town for days. Like adventurers the world over, the mob had congregated in the local tavern, for there is nothing like a rousing piss-up to steady the nerves, especially when you're likely to die in a dragon's jaws in the cold, grey dawn. As a result, yellow light and blue language poured in equal measure from the doors of Kurt's Trinkplatz. Inside, the tavern was packed

with assorted races: dwarves, elves, humans, even the odd halfling. There were some *very* odd halflings, but after a whispered conference they decided to try their luck at the Belaying Pin, a secluded establishment further along the road.

Kurt, the beefy landlord, worked the counter with an easy manner - chatting to his clients about the weather, enquiring as to the health of their families, and in return being told to piss off or to drown himself in troll bile. Undeterred, he persisted, all the while serving beer and taking money.

A movement caught his eye - at the far end of the bar a halfling perched on a stool was waving madly. Kurt moonwalked his bulk across the uneven floor with the sort of ease only minutes of practice can bring. Halfway there he caught his heel on the edge of a flagstone and landed on his backside with a meaty thud. He bounced up, laughing to the crowd. The crowd hadn't noticed.

Up close, the halfling looked surly. It was struggling to keep its balance in the crush, and was almost knocked from its perch by a careless elbow even as Kurt approached. The halfling's short, burly frame was clad in weathered combat fatigues, and its nut-brown face was creased with a frown. There was an unpleasant light in the creature's piercing blue eyes, contrary to almost everything Kurt had heard about the race. Still, he leant across the counter and beamed his best ale-selling smile.

'Good eve, my cheery little fellow. How might I serve? A glass of cold milk perhaps?'

A bunch of drunken wizards began a rousing drinking song at that very moment, drowning out the creature's curt reply.

'Eh?' yelled Kurt, leaning closer.

Before he could react a small, hairy hand darted out and grabbed his ear in a surprisingly strong grip. The point of a well-honed dagger appeared at the tip of his nose. 'Hello, my name is Runt,'

said the halfling, 'I'd like two beers and a bloody mary.'

'Wh-what's a bloody mary?' asked Kurt.

'No idea,' said the halfling. 'But if you're not quick I'll help you find one of the ingredients.' He waved the dagger to emphasise the point.

'Coming right up, fine sir,' said Kurt. He grabbed a well-worn book, moistened his thumb and began to turn the pages. 'Haven't seen you round these parts before,' he shouted, ever the optimist. 'Been here long?'

'Too f—' cheers from the wizards '—g long,' said the halfling. 'Now get a move on before my companions come over and kill you,' he added, jerking a tiny thumb towards a table in the corner.

Kurt peered through the haze and saw two humans seated in the shadows – a lean, rangy cleric in a faded brown habit with the hood drawn up over his head, and a huge bronzed fellow with dented armour and an impressive mane of blond hair. 'Brothers in arms?' asked Kurt.

'Shut up and make the drinks,' yelled the Halfling, leaping from the stool and vanishing from sight. He reappeared a moment or two later, forcing his way through the crowd with judicious use of his elbows.

The cleric looked up as the halfling emerged from the group of groaning, doubled-up drinkers. 'You took your time. Don't they serve minors?'

'Do I look like a dwarf?'

'I meant... Oh, forget it. Sit down, you're making people nervous.' The cleric, who used the rather pretentious name of Father Mephistopheles, withdrew a well-worn book from his pocket and began turning the pages.

'Expecting trouble, Father M?' asked Runt, clambering onto his

chair.

‘There’s a dragon terrorising the town, Runt. Of course I’m expecting trouble.’

‘Dragon?’ said the third member of the party, suddenly alert. The table creaked as the fighter leant forwards on his thick arms. ‘Who said dragon?’

‘Relax Hurm, we were just—’

The man-mountain leapt to his feet, blond hair waving and muscles writhing like copulating snakes. ‘I am HURM!’ he yelled, drawing his two-handed sword and waving it around his head like a helicopter blade. In the sudden silence, the swish of razor-sharp steel sounded like escaping steam.

‘Sit down, beefcake,’ hissed Father M. ‘Sit, or I’ll turn your hair into rat tails.’

The flashing sword slowed, then stopped, and there was a round of drunken cheering as the fighter regained his chair.

‘Bloody amateurs,’ said the cleric. ‘Look, we came here with a plan, and by Skewkeep’s left testicle we’re going to stick to it.’

Runt glanced round at a curious slithering sound and saw Kurt moonwalking towards them with a tray of drinks. The glasses were half empty thanks to his stumbling progress, and the tray brimmed with frothy reddish liquid. As he leant forward to set the glasses on the table, the trayful of liquid shot down the back of Runt’s neck.

‘Shit!’ yelled the Halfling, bobbing up and down, scrunching his shoulders and generally trying to rid himself of the cold, clammy liquid running down his back. He grabbed for Glimmer, but before the renowned blade could put in an appearance Kurt was halfway to the bar.

‘I’ll kill the bastard,’ seethed Runt, finally drawing his sword. He set off in pursuit, only to be brought up short by a thin, bony hand

on his shoulder.

‘Are you mad?’ Father M leant close. ‘Now sit down and shut up or I’ll put you over my knee and give you a hiding.’

‘Oh yeah?’ There was a flash of silver, and suddenly Glimmer was pointing at the cleric’s throat. ‘I’m getting fed up with your superiority complex, book basher.’

Father M’s eyes widened. ‘A midget with attitude. Great, just great.’ He snapped his fingers and the blade fell off the sword, leaving Runt brandishing a very ornate handle. ‘Anything else you want me to neuter while I’m at it?’

Runt picked up the blade, his eyes bright with tears. ‘Glimmer! Oh, Glimmer! Long and tedious will be the songs composed in thy honour!’ He raised the broken pieces and closed his eyes. ‘I shall not rest until--’

‘Yadda yadda yadda,’ said the cleric. ‘You only just bought it from that squinty little shit down Terrace road.’

‘It’s still a magic sword.’

‘No, it was a magic sword. Now it’s a magic artifact.’

‘What’s the difference?’

‘Try killing an orc with an artifact.’

‘What plan?’ asked Hurm suddenly.

‘Eh?’ Father M. stared at the fighter. ‘Oh, that. You don’t think we’re just going to wave swords at the nasty lizard, do you?’

Hurm looked surprised. Clearly he’d been thinking exactly that.

‘Give me strength,’ sighed the cleric. ‘Hurm, this thing is a monster. It’s ...’

Hurm leapt to his feet. ‘I am HURM! I will defeat the mighty—’ Suddenly he clutched his throat, fighting for breath. He turned his bulging eyes on Father M, who was motioning him to sit down. He did so, involuntarily.

‘Once more, and I’ll take your head off,’ said Father Micily.

‘Yeah, Hurm, pretty dumb,’ chimed in the halfling. ‘If we draw attention to ourselves they’ll have me on the table reciting epic poetry before you can add two prime --’ He got no further, for a hand grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and hoiked him out of his chair. A very large man wearing a bearskin rug peered at him with bloodshot eyes. ‘At it, short-arshe,’ he yelled, blasting Runt with stale, beery breath. ‘Shing someshing, or I’ll shave your feet!’ His bear-skinned companions howled with laughter.

‘If you don’t put me down, my friends here...’ Runt gestured to his companions. Hurm was grawing his thumbnail, while the cleric was carving runes into the back of a gold ring... ‘My friends here!’ shouted Runt.

‘Shuddup and enternai, etnerta, entretin, . . . sing a bloody shong for us,’ said the bearskin rug, plonking Runt down on a table. Hemmed in from all sides by eager listeners, he had no choice but to sing. He cleared his throat, raised his voice and began.

‘This is the tale of a dragon, Oh!  
As big as a house and as hot as the sun  
Skin like bark and legs like trunks  
It’s the DESOLATOR! Run, run, run!

‘For this is the tale of a dragon, Oh! (‘Oh!’ yelled several dozen lusty voices.)

As mean as a rat and as old as a rock  
Ears like a bat and teeth made of flint  
It’s the DESOLATOR, after your flock!

‘For this is the tale of a dragon, Oh! (‘OH!!’ howled the crowd)  
And when he arrives, you’re fresh out of luck  
He’ll snap up your maidens, virgins or whores  
It’s the DESOLATOR, and he don’t give a f--.’

Suddenly, a piercing scream cut through the smoky haze. ‘It’s the Dragon!’ yelled a frantic voice outside. A young woman charged into the tavern, her eyes wild. ‘It’s as big as a house...’

‘And as hot as the sun!’ yelled every creature in the tavern, as one.

The woman stopped, confused. ‘It’s the Desolator, he’s here, he’s come!’

‘And now it’s time to run, run, run!’ shouted the crowd, enjoying themselves immensely.

The woman put her hands on her hips. ‘And you call yourselves adventurers,’ she said, tossing her head. ‘I’ll have more luck down the Belaying Pin.’ And with that she turned and left.

Then, with a roar like a speeding steam train, a huge black shadow swept past. There was a faint scream, then silence.

‘Oh, crap,’ said a voice. ‘It really was the Desolator.’

There was a swish of collectively drawn weaponry, and a dozen mugs clattered to the floor. Then the bulk of the tavern’s patrons dived for the door with much elbowing, eye-gouging and head-butting, every single one of them eager to claim the mighty dragon’s head.

Father M. sipped delicately from his glass as he watched Hurm throwing himself repeatedly into the crowd, scattering human, elf and dwarf alike with his huge arms. He watched Hurm go down, clutching his groin, and winced as a slender, female elf in a crimson



battle-dress trod carefully on the back of the warrior's head on her way out.

Through the grimy windows Father M. watched the crowd assemble in the main street, saw the pointing fingers and swords as the adventurers searched the night sky for their fearsome foe.

'Shouldn't we join them?' asked Runt, who had slipped out of the crush and returned to his seat.

'That's not in the plan,' said the cleric.

There was another screaming roar, and the black shadow sped past belching fire. The crowd held for a second, then split like startled cockroaches, scurrying hither and yon and bumping into each other as they ran for cover. Several reappeared in the Tavern, grabbed their mugs and began drinking busily. Others slinked off and were never seen again.

'That was a rout,' remarked Runt.

'Right,' said Father M. 'No cohesion. No teamwork.'

'No balls,' added the halfling. He glanced round at the stragglers. The nearest was one of the bearskins, although his smoking skin now lacked hair. 'Did you get it?' called Runt.

There was another roar outside, and the shadow flashed past, illuminating the street with jets of bright, probing flame.

'Er, not yet,' said the bearskin. 'We're just planning our campaign.'

His companions nodded sagely. 'Campaign. Thassit.'

'Have you met a dragon before?' asked Father M. politely.

'Can't say as we have,' replied bearskin. 'We heard all about 'em, though. Somehow I thought they was ... smaller. I didn't realise they was really that big.'

'And I didn't know they was that hot,' added one of his companions, a thickset, greying man who was nursing a burnt hand.

‘Big as a house, hot as the sun,’ quoted Runt.

The greying man turned on him, an aggrieved look on his face. ‘Yeah, but that shit’s for the tourists. We allus talk stuff up in songs – tits, dicks, battles, they’re always larger ‘n’ life when the minstrels get to ‘em.’

‘You mean you shouldn’t rely on the media if you want facts?’ asked Father M.

‘Man, you got that straight.’

More adventurers trooped in, most of them smoking gently and all of them careful to keep their eyes on the floor. Hurm came last, his blond mane untouched and his armour shiny except for a black, elf-shaped outline burnt across his breast-plate.

‘What happened?’ asked Runt.

‘The elf gave her life to save me,’ said Hurm, shaking his head.

‘Voluntarily?’

Hurm buffed his armour. ‘The dragon swooped, and her body absorbed the punishment in my stead.’

‘Yes, but did she throw herself in front of you, or was she struggling to escape?’

‘Enough questions. I will not have her valour sullied by a tavern dweller,’ said Hurm loftily. ‘In any case, she should have known better than sally forth in a red shirt.’ He reached reached for his mug, then sprung to his feet. ‘WHO’S been drinking MY ale?’ he thundered.

‘Eh?’

‘It’s empty,’ yelled Hurm, casting a suspicious glance at the bearskins.

‘What you looking at?’ demanded the grey-haired one, reaching for his axe. After facing the dragon, a three-to-one fight with a mortal sounded like good odds.

‘You cowa—’ Hurm got no further. His throat closed, and he was forced into his seat by an unseen, overwhelming force.

‘The plan,’ said Father M. coldly. ‘Now, the first part is going to be rather more difficult, given Runt’s unfortunate choice of entertainment.’

‘It’s the only song I know,’ sniffed the Halfling. ‘My old grandma...’

‘...was a lush who could chop logs with her bare hands,’ finished Father M. ‘I met her, remember? In fact, I wish I’d brought her along in your stead. She might have sung something more... uplifting. Still, the damage is done.’

‘You keep on about the plan, the plan. What plan?’

‘OK, I’ll lay it out for you. Before we can get rid of the dragon, we must discover what the dragon wants.’

‘It wants to kill everyone and burn the town,’ said Runt.

‘No, I think that’s just a ruse. We must discover the true reason for the seige.’

Runt shrugged. ‘It’s a dragon. They just do that sort of thing.’

‘But this one’s been dormant for decades. Why attack now?’

‘Perhaps it got bored?’

‘It is in the nature of dragons to attack Man,’ said Hurm.

‘And elves,’ said Runt.

‘All creatures equally,’ said Hurm. ‘None are safe from these vile creatures.’

‘Unless you’re hiding behind an elf,’ said Runt.

Hurm glared at him. ‘What do you know of the wily beasts, tavern-dweller?’

‘More than you, you—’

Father M gestured, and both Runt and Hurm were silent. ‘As I

was saying, I cannot see why this dragon has suddenly developed a blood lust. I think we need to find that out, so that we might delve deeper into the problem.'

'Enough words,' said Hurm, slapped his sword hilt. 'Give me cold steel and I will face any creature.'

'As long as there's an Elf in the firing line,' muttered Runt.

'SHUT UP!' yelled the cleric. 'Now listen, for I have a tale which needs telling.'

Runt hid a yawn. 'Shummary?'

The cleric ignored him. 'Far and wide I roamed, from the sandy wastes of the South to the icy wastes of the North. I battled trolls, wild dogs, giants and orcs until at last I found the Tomb of Sethor. The air was still. The birds were silent.'

'The tale was endless,' muttered Runt.

'But my struggles were not in vain, for I bear upon my person the very means with which we will defeat this dragon.' Father M reached into his robes and pulled out a massive, studded collar. It was about four inches wide, two feet across and made of faded red leather. From the tarnished buckle hung a cowbell the size of a beer mug.

'What's that?' asked Runt, although deep down he had a pretty good idea.

'This is a Collar of Taming,' said the cleric. 'Place it around the neck of the most savage beast on the planet and it will become your willing slave.'

'Riiiiight,' said Runt. The tavern shook as the Desolator swooped down the main street, searing buildings and townsfolk with jets of flame fifty feet long. 'Have you thought this through? I mean, who's going to fit the thing?'

The cleric pursed his lips. 'I shall be ensuring the smooth

operation of the plan. Hurm will be standing by with his weapon, ready to leap to your defence.'

'Oh, no,' said Runt firmly. 'No way.'

'It's traditional. Halflings are dragon-tamers by their very nature.'

'Just because one of us got away with it doesn't mean another will be so lucky.'

Father M gestured with his left hand. 'Runt, you will place the collar on the dragon.'

'The hell I will.'

'You WILL place the collar on the dragon.'

'Forget it. I'm a halfling, not a halfwit.'

'You will place the COLLAR on the DRAGON,' said the cleric, with another flourish.

Runt sighed. 'Ok, I'll put the collar on the dragon. But when this spell wears off I'm going to—'

'Capital!' exclaimed Father M. 'Come, let us prepare.'

\* \* \*

Runt stood in the center of the main street, darting nervous glances at the heavy sky. A tangy mix of charred wood and dragon breath hung in the air, and the lightest of breezes had little effect on the smoky pall which hung over the town.

The halfling had a stick in his hand, and tied to the end of the stick was a scrap of off-white fabric. Runt would liked to have torn the rag from the undershirts of a willing maiden. Unfortunately it was a dishcloth, since none of the maidens would let him anywhere near them, emergency or not.

Runt heard a rustle of leathery wings, and waved the flag like

crazy. He didn't know whether dragons respected the flag of truce, and he had a feeling that if it worked now it would never work again. But it was the only thing between now and the hereafter for the unwilling negotiator, so he shook like he'd never shaken before.

A shadow passed overhead, then vanished. Runt swallowed. The shadow wheeled around at the far end of the main street, just out of the light. Then it approached at speed. The Desolator flashed overhead, all scales and teeth and sharp claws and leathery wings, and Runt dropped the stick and ran. At least, that's what his brain told him to do. Somehow the stick was glued to his hand, as permanent as a scar. His feet were rooted to the ground, the air around them misted with iridescent blue-green. He shot a venomous look at the tavern doorway, where Father M was peering at his spell book.

'Got any protection from fire spells, too?' yelled Runt.

'Be brave, little one. The Desolator returns.'

Runt ducked as the dragon whistled past, then watched in awe as the huge creature turned in its own length then dropped to the muddy street on all fours. The ground shook with the impact, and Runt shook with it.

Then the dragon emerged from the shadows at the far end of the main street. It began to move towards him, one step at a time, and as it got closer Runt took in more and more scary details. The head was a huge diamond shape, with a narrow muzzle and laid-back ears. One side was chiselled, flat planes with fine scales around an inky-black eyeball the size of Runt's head. The other was a mass of ancient scar tissue, a clenched knuckle of skin surrounding an opaque, milky eye.

The dragon's head twisted and turned as it scanned both sides of the street with its good eye. Runt clutched the collar behind his back, his hand slick on the leather as he waited his chance. He

almost dropped it as the Desolator tilted its head back and belched fire into the air with a bellowing roar.

Then the dragon thrust its face forward until its smoking nostrils were a short arm's length from Runt. Which was very close, because Runt had very short arms.

'What issss it?' hissed the Dragon.

'Wh-wh-what?' stuttered Runt.

The dragon tried again, its hard lips and narrow tongue striving to form the words. 'What issss it you are sssshaking at me?'

Runt lowered the flag. 'Th-th-this?' he stammered, his slack lips and furry tongue also giving him problems in the speech department. 'It's a-a...' he thought for a split second. 'It's a flag.'

The dragon's eyes narrowed, the milky one almost completely hidden by folds of ravaged skin. 'I can sssee it'sss a flag, but why are you sssshaking it?'

'I wanted to talk to you.'

'I have better thingsss to do than talk to halfwitsss,' said the dragon sternly.

Runt frowned. 'I'm a halfling, not a halfwit.'

The dragon sat back on its haunches. 'You're ssstanding in the open, waving ssticks at a marauding dragon. That makesss you a halfwit.'

Runt silently agreed. 'Why are you attacking the town?'

'It'sss part of being a dragon. They don't call me the Desssolator jusst because I sssteal sssheep.'

Out of the corner of his eye, Runt saw the cleric motioning him towards the dragon. He gestured right back. 'Er, you know there's something you could do to make yourself really, really scary?'

The Desolator looked at him like he was mad. 'I'm not scarry already?' he growled. 'Didn't I sizzzle enough people yet?'

'Y-yes, but you could improve your visual, er, scariness.'

'I could, could I? And you are an expert on this scaring business?' The dragon belched. 'That one thought I was scary enough.'

'Yes, but it's just terror-munch, terror-munch. No long-term effects.'

'You think I should employ mental tactics?'

'Precisely. And I've got just the thing to help, right here behind my back.'

The Desolator craned its neck, but Runt backed away. 'No peeking,' he said.

'You try my patience,' hissed the dragon. But he kept trying to look. 'Why do you do this?'

'I'm a halfling – teasing dragons is in my nature.'

'No, I mean why do you offer me this? You could make things worse for the town.'

Runt cast his eyes down. 'I was hoping you'd spare me, if I gave you something valuable.'

'A deal?' the dragon began to shake. 'I could snap you up and I'd have your precious gift for free.'

'No, you wouldn't.' Runt held up the collar, and the silver studs glistened in reflected light. 'You couldn't do it up.'

'Ahhh, clever,' said the dragon. It peered closely at the Collar of Taming, and Runt heard it sniffing. 'Who wore this? No, don't tell me... it's coming to me... Definitely from the Wyvern branch, possibly a Great Newt, or...'

'Just think how fearsome you'd look!' exclaimed Runt, tilting the massive collar so the dragon could see the fine stitchwork. 'Hand crafted, this was.'

'Hmmm, I don't see the harm,' mused the Desolator. 'You're



barely a snack in any case.'

'If you bend your neck down, I can fit it without climbing on your wonderful scales.'

The dragon shot him a glance. 'You can take the soft soap too far, halfwit.' But he bent his neck and laid his massive head on the ground. 'Fasten it, then, and I will spare you.'

Runt gulped, then walked past the milky eye and the scarred face until he was alongside the thin, scrawny neck. He closed his eyes, counted to three, then threw the collar over the dragon.

The reaction was immediate – the Desolator reared up, snarling, with Runt barely clinging to the ends of the collar. Then the dragon flapped its massive wings, and Runt found himself dangling from its neck, his eyes fastened on the rapidly-receding ground.

'Tricksster!' screamed the Dragon. 'It's a magic collar!' One of the short, stubby forelegs swished past Runt's stomach, and the dragon's head turned this way and that as he tried to see the Halfling with his good eye.

Runt ignored the leg and looked up. His only chance was to fasten the collar, and he mentally berated the stickler who'd created the damn thing. Near enough apparently wasn't good enough.

His hands were slick with sweat, heat and wind tore at him, the dragon's rough claws kept slashing at him, and he was dangling hundreds of feet above the ground. But somehow he got the pointed end of the collar through the buckle, and with a feeling of savage joy he pulled the thing tight and shot home the catch.

The claw stopped slashing. The dragon stopped twisting and turning. The fiery breaths ceased.

'Desolator?' called Runt.

'Yes, halfling?' said the dragon kindly.

'Let's go take a look at your treasure hoard, shall we?'

\* \* \*

The dragon landed on the side of a craggy mountain, and Runt unhooked his aching fingers from the collar and stood up on shaky legs. He shivered – the air was cold, and the hillside was strewn with the bleached bones of many unfortunate meals.

‘Follow me,’ said the Desolator, leading the way between two large rocks. It was dark beyond, but the dragon breathed twin flames through its nostrils, lighting the way admirably. Runt staggered after it, his heart thumping. Just a few short steps and he’d be set for life.

As they turned the corner, Runt stopped. Laid out before him was a gleaming lake of treasure – drifts of gold coins, sprinkled with gems the size of his fist. Wooden chests overflowing with pearls, necklaces, diamonds. There were magic weapons, fine armour, musical instruments and some really nifty antique clocks.

‘Mine,’ yelled Runt. He ran forward and dived into the treasure, then began throwing handfuls of coins into the air. ‘All mine!’ He grabbed gems and kissed them, grabbed weapons and sighted along their gleaming blades, dropped jewelled crowns over his head until he could barely peep over the top of them.

He turned to gloat at the Desolator, then felt his blood turn to ice. Alongside the scarred dragon was another, her scales sleek, polished green and her wide eyes a deep, dark jade. Worst of all, she had no collar.

‘Runt, meet my daughter,’ said the Desolator calmly. ‘Daughter, meet lunch.’

‘Holy cow,’ breathed Runt, as priceless treasures slipped from his incontinent fingers. ‘If I take the collar off, will you let me go?’

‘No,’ said the dragon. Her voice was soft and musical, but her eyes were hard. She glanced at her father. ‘You look like you need to lie down.’

‘I need to lie down,’ said the dragon. ‘I’ve got a ssplitting headache.’ The Desolator ambled into the piles of treasure, curled up and immediately began to snore.

The green dragon gazed at the Desolator fondly for a moment, then turned her attention back to Runt. After regarding him for a moment or two, she began moving towards him purposefully. Slowly.

He closed his eyes, bracing himself for either a fiery breath or a quick snap of the teeth. Instead, he felt himself embraced warmly, and when his eyes blinked open he found himself staring into the beautiful face of a female halfling. ‘I can’t thank you enough,’ she said. ‘He won’t take his pills, gets himself all worked up then charges up and down attacking things. That collar is perfect.’

‘Huh?’ said Runt, lost in the halfling’s jade, green eyes. ‘Hey, you’re the dragon!’

She smiled. ‘I thought you’d die of fright if I hugged you in my natural form.’

‘But...’

The halfling put her head on his shoulder. ‘You saved my father’s life,’ she said. ‘It was only a matter of time before some two-bit wannabe hero—’ she stopped, pulled away. ‘Someone’s coming.’

Runt heard the clink of steel on rock, followed by a muttered curse. ‘Hurm!’ he cried.

There was a hissing sound. ‘I am Hurm!’ boomed a voice, echoing around the cave like a fairground caller’s cry.

‘Shut up, you moron,’ hissed a second voice. ‘The little twit might not have fixed the collar properly.’

‘Friends of yours?’ asked the dragon. ‘Would you look away while I change?’ Runt did so, although he risked a peek over his shoulder. He saw the curvaceous halfling morphing into the dragon – strong, green and very large.

‘Hurm’s got a sword,’ whispered Runt. ‘He’s the big one. The other one’s fast with the spell book. Don’t hurt them too much.’

The dragon regarded him for a moment before nodding. Then she backed past the tunnel entrance and crouched low.

Father M’s voice rang out suddenly, close by. ‘Runt, trusted companion, how fares it with you?’

‘I put the collar on the dragon,’ said Runt.

‘Firmly, I trust?’

‘Oh, yes. He’s quite docile, no trouble from that angle.’

‘Splendid,’ said Father M., stepping out of the tunnel. His eyes widened at the sight of the treasure. ‘Skewkeep’s foreskin, that’s a goodly haul.’

Hurm emerged behind him, clutching his trusty sword. His mouth dropped as he saw the sleeping dragon curled up on the piles of gold. Then, before anyone could stop him he charged forward towards the slumbering beast. ‘Long will be the tales of my valour,’ he said, skidding to a halt in the coins and raising his sword.

‘That’s not a good idea,’ said Runt.

‘None shall stay my hand,’ declared Hurm, raising the sword higher and getting a good grip.

‘Hurm, put the sword down. Slowly.’

‘I am HURM!’ yelled the fighter, driving the point of the sword towards the Desolator’s head. There was a hissing roar, and a jet of flame boiled across the cave from the hidden, crouching dragon. It blasted the blade into molten droplets, but the force of Hurm’s

thrust was such that the hilt slammed into the heavily armoured scales.

The Desolator's snoring ceased, and he opened his good eye. 'D'you mind?' he asked languidly, before shutting his eye and resuming his slumber.

Hurm stood up, his face white.

'Now you're for it,' said Runt. 'And there's not an elf in sight.'

The green dragon came forward, squashing scattered gold coins under her feet. Her eyes were sharp, her ears flat against her skull.

Hurm fell to his knees. 'Oh great one, spare me. I beg of you.'

'Long will be the tales of your cowardice,' muttered Runt. 'It's ok, she's on my side. Hop up before you get gold rash.'

Hurm struggled to his feet, brushing away Father M's hand. 'From this day, I fight no more.'

'More?' snorted Runt.

'Gentlemen,' said the dragon suddenly, making the three companions jump. 'My father will trouble the town of Yendour no more, and the three of you will therefore return as heroes.'

Hurm's downcast expression changed to one of hope.

'However, I will not have foolhardy idiots making their way here, tempted by treasure and rumours of a slumbering, docile dragon.'

Runt gulped.

'So I will give each of you a gift and a warning. The gift is as much treasure as you can carry.' The companions looked at each other in astonishment and glee.

'Wh-what about the warning?' asked Runt.

'Come here,' said the dragon.

The companions stepped forwards, against their will. When they were lined up in a row, the dragon breathed soft, lilac flames into

their faces.

‘Ow,’ said Runt, rubbing his forehead.

‘You will never return to this cave, nor reveal its location to others.’

‘Never,’ said the three companions as one.

‘Now take your treasure and go.’

Father M and Hurm dived for the hoard and began stuffing gems and coins into every pouch and pocket on their persons. For several minutes the cave echoed to hoarse breathing, clinking metal and the clack of gems.

‘And you, Runt?’ asked the dragon. ‘Do you not share their lust for riches?’

‘It’s just treasure,’ said Runt, with a sidelong glance at the dragon. ‘You know, you make a great halfling.’

The dragon’s eyes twinkled. ‘But I cast a spell on you, forbidding you from ever returning to this cave.’

They were interrupted by Father M and Hurm, who staggered up draped with necklaces and bulging with coin. ‘We’ll be off then, ma’am,’ said Father M. He tried to raise his hand to his forehead, but the weight of a chainmail vest slung over his arm prevented much more than the tiniest of movements. ‘Coming, Runt?’

Runt crossed his arms. ‘I can’t say that I am.’

‘Ok, see you around,’ said the cleric. He turned and staggered up the passage with Hurm close on his heels. Runt watched them go, wondering whether they’d get as far as the village of Yendour before they were beaten and robbed.

He turned at a rustling sound, and saw the dragon changing back into halfling form. ‘Do you think we’re compatible?’ he asked, eyeing her curves with arousing interest.

‘I don’t know,’ said the dragon, with a smile that lit up her deep,

jade eyes. 'But we can have some fun finding out.'