

HERE BE DRAGONS

A short story by S. J. A. Turney



'It said it on the damn map: "Here be dragons"!'

'It says that on *every* bloody map. Every map you look at has a big blank space where nobody has ever bothered to go and look closely at it, and the map-makers fill the space either with a compass or a picture of a sea serpent, or "Here be dragons" in spiky lettering.'

'But in all fairness, we're in that big blank space, under the 'b', and what have we found?'

'My point, Khotoch, is that just because a map says "here be dragons" is no reason to actually expect bloody *dragons*!'

The pair ducked once again as a sulphurous blast of toxic liquid flame seared the ancient column beside which they cowered and charred the surface of the upturned marble altar behind which they lurked.

'Well you're our "*leader*",' Khotoch snapped, managing to infuse the word with every ounce of contempt he could raise. 'You're the one who decided on our course and brought us here. You should have paid closer attention to the map, shouldn't you?'

'I *did* pay close attention, Khotoch. I simply disregarded the note as fiction. What's the point in being bold, heroic adventurers if we cannot strike out into unknown lands and make our mark?'

'We're going to make our mark alright. Seven charred shapes in the form of 'bold adventurers'. And at least one of them is going to be an outline of someone mightily pissed off!'

'If you're so bothered, then go!'

'Really? You think I should just stroll out of here and leave you to it?'

Another burst of sickly-green liquid fire raked the room, and Khotoch adjusted his precious 'wizards hat' and raised a meaningful eyebrow at his leader as he pinched out the small flame burning on the pointed tip.

Gmiri the Black, scourge of Netherhaven, master of the seven blades, eater of the unholy stew - and hater of dragons - glared at the group's mage angrily. Khotoch was quite

the most cantankerous and argumentative, miserable and awkward bugger that Gmiri had ever had the misfortune to meet. Sadly, he was also Gmiri's brother-in-law and family politics bound them together tighter than the slave collars of Dharmak.

Not for the first time in the past week of adventuring, Gmiri wondered if the group's success rate might actually rise a little if he slipped his dagger between two wizardly ribs. Alena would never forgive him. But a sister's loathing for a lifetime was starting to look pretty good when weighed against another five minutes of Khotoch's complaining.

'Some sort of magical shield?'

'Used them,' snapped Khotoch. 'Had three different forms memorised. You might have noticed the bloody great white explosion of light when the dragon broke through the first. Poor old Khab never stood a chance, he was so close.' Khotoch issued one of his extremely rare – and usually in bad taste – smiles. 'Funniest thing I've seen in years, though. I always thought it was a myth that a man could evaporate and all that remained be his empty boots. When the light died down and all that was left of the barbarian oaf was his boots I almost wet myself. *Would* have done, had I not had to run so damn fast!'

Gmiri gave his companion a hard stare. 'The boots weren't empty. They still had his feet in them.'

'Still bloody funny.'

'Oh you're a barrel of laughs, you are. What about some sort of missile?'

'All done. Fired off everything I memorised and all I managed to do was attract the bloody thing's attention.'

'You've got *nothing* left?'

'Fireballs. And Flame blasts. And Ignites. A few other minor burning spells. About as much use in this situation as a paper helmet in a swimming pool.'

Gmiri rounded on the wizard with narrowed eyes. 'Hang on... you're saying that you expected dragons because the map said so, and yet, despite the clear and concise knowledge that dragons breathe fire and are generally flame-retardant, all you memorised from your book before we came in was a dozen fire-based spells?'

'Fire spells are easy,' grunted Khotoch.

'And oh so damn helpful against a dragon. Thank you again, you pointless, pointy-hatted tosspot. I swear my sister must have a cabbage for a brain, marrying you!'

'Oh insults now, is it?' Khotoch snapped, straightening as he bridled.

Another blast of green, sticky fire swathed their side of the room and took the top four inches off his expensive silk pointy hat. The wizard dropped behind the altar once more, his face ashen grey as droplets of flame-melted hat fell onto his equally-prized robe and began to singe it.

'So you're out of magic? You've always been basically useless, but now you've actually become *less* than useless.'

Khotoch glared at him for a long moment and twitched his fingers angrily, muttering something arcane under his breath.

'What was that?' hissed Gmiri.

'Crabs. Hope you like them.'

'You really are an asshole, Khotoch.'

'Where are the others?' the wizard said suddenly, the latest in a long line of interpersonal arguments having distracted the pair from the task at hand.

Gmiri raised his head a few inches so that his eyes rose just above the altar's side beneath the brim of his skull-embossed helmet. The scene was one of adventurers' nightmares.

The great black dragon stomped in a circle at the centre of the huge hall, its cart-sized feet cracking marble tiles with every step, its foot-long razor talons gouging deep lines in the ground. Its wings remained tight to its body, even this enormous room not affording enough space for the beast to spread them. Its forepaws continually grasped and raked the air in its fury as its spine-topped head swung this way and that issuing blast after blast of deadly liquid fire.

The hall itself was charred black, lit only by the strange, inexplicable crystals at the domed apex that glowed with a bright, unearthly light. It had been a temple at the centre of an ancient religious complex, and the furnishings were impressive and – for the most part – burned to a crisp. The circle of columns that created an ambulatory about the edge were soot-stained and many were cracked from the dragon's many attempts to get at the heroes that fluttered around the room like mayflies around a buffalo.

Only the columns that formed the bars of an apparently accidental prison kept the beast from simply tearing the adventurers to pieces, so long as they stayed back safely. But still the monster's breath could reach into every crevice of the room, as two of the seven-man adventuring team had discovered to their disadvantage.

In the alcove off to the west the figure of Acariyan, the warrior priest of Pelegath was comically preserved as a clean shape, stencilled in soot on the wall. And what had once been Atikari the Ranger was now spread in a thick, maroon-coloured paste across the altar at the far side, mirroring the one behind which the wizard and the fighter lurked. Along with the severed feet and blackened boots of Khab the barbarian standing in the room's centre, that left only four of the seven adventurers to deal with the beast, and the dragon did not appear to be tiring.

Stelisto the thief was somewhere at the far side of the room, behind the pile of charred pews that was becoming less of a viable defensive position with every fresh burst of flame, and his brother - Kaiaka the grey knight - was almost certainly in the same place, though Gmiri hadn't seen him since they'd abandoned their attempts to attack the beast and settled on hiding and hoping the thing tired and gave up.

'Can we make it to the exit?' Khotoch asked.

Gmiri peered past the dragon at the wide double doors through which they had entered, eying the temple with the hungry gaze of treasure-hunters and blissfully unaware of the great black beast that had hung above them like an immense bat among the crystals. By the time the creature had begun to move and make its presence felt, the party had been in the room, searching the altars for secret compartments and cut off from their escape route.

The vestibule beyond that door ran for a straight twenty feet and was wide and spacious. While the dragon was trapped here in the circle of columns – Gmiri had given up trying to work out how it had got there, but presumed it was something to do with the temple's original inhabitants – and it could not physically reach the exit, there was little point in the four men trying to make their way around the circular outer wall and run for it. One breath of that liquid flame into the vestibule and everything in it would be cooked. There would not be time to make it to the corner at the far end.

'No. Same as before. We kill the beast or it kills us. Unless it simply gives up, there's no other option.'

'Shit.'

'On that, at least, we agree.'

'What's Kaiaka the pointless knight doing?'

'What do you think he's doing? He's hiding from the dragon.'

'And that thieving little runt?'

'Guess.'

'Probably picking his brother's pocket, I'd say.'

Gmiri watched as the dragon momentarily turned its back to spray dripping green fire across the other side of the room in its indiscriminate fury. As the beast spun toward the exit, the figure of Stelisto the thief popped up above the smoking pews.

'Gmiri!'

'What?'

'I think I've found a way out.'

Hope coursed through Gmiri and he caught a glimpse of the same in the wizard's eye. 'Really?' he replied.

'I think there's a trapdoor here,' Stelisto shouted, 'but I don't have the strength to lift the flag.'

'What about Kaiaka?'

'He's badly hurt. Don't think he's got long left. Certainly can't lift anything. Acariyan could have helped him, but I can't. Best we can do is look to ourselves and see if we can get three of us out alive.'

Gmiri glanced at Khotoch, struggling to balance the sense the thief made against the moral urge to try and help the injured knight.

Khotoch sneered. 'If the thieving little shit has stopped stealing the gold teeth from his brother long enough to consider leaving, it's a good bet he's made the right choice.' The wizard's expression clearly stated *his* opinion. *The selfish bastard*, Gmiri thought. Still, it helped him make up his mind.

He ducked again as a swathe of deadly flame raked the top of the upturned altar. As soon as the blast stopped, he counted to three to be sure it was over and then raised his head to look across the lip. Stelisto was still visible over the charred seats as the dragon circled towards him. While Khotoch's venomous opinions of the others was hardly to be trusted, Gmiri was forced to accept the fact that Stelisto was not the sort of man to put his friend's lives above a fat purse, but for all the potential wealth an ancient temple might contain, the thief was clearly desperate to escape as fast as possible.

'Stay there. As soon as the dragon finishes his next attack, we'll run round to you.'

Stelisto nodded and then disappeared behind the pile of carbonised furniture as the dragon switched its attention to him.

'Alright. As soon as the thing finishes, we go,' Gmiri whispered to Khotoch. 'It takes at least the count of six for the beast to get its next breath.' The wizard nodded, hitching up his robe and grasping the embroidered hem in his fingers so as not to trip on it as he ran.

The pair waited for a moment and, hearing the crackle, wheeze and silence as the deadly exhalation ended, broke into a sprint, around the southern end of the hall, past the alcove with its outline of their former companion.

The dragon was spinning towards them, its eyes glassy and menacing as it hauled in another deep breath, preparing to torch a few interlopers. Gmiri had a momentary panic as he calculated in a heartbeat their speed, the distance to move, and the likely time they had before the dragon could bring his breath to bear on them. It was touch-and-go.

The warrior fixed his sights on the pile of charred pews that was their goal and would be their salvation: the location of the thief's secret trapdoor that would allow them to escape their predicament, and then forced an extra turn of speed.

His heart lurched as his eyes picked out something that his brain simply couldn't explain or believe. As he peered at the pile of blackened wood behind which Stelisto awaited their help, he suddenly saw the thief break cover, running *the other way*. What was the madman doing?

He almost stopped in surprise but the knowledge that the dragon was still turning and heaving in air spurred him on faster. Now, though, as his gaze left their destination and followed the thief, he realised in dismay what he was seeing. The thief was making for the exit vestibule! The little rat had tricked them into running into the open as a distraction. Now,

as they ran from their previous protective position to a less strong one, Stelisto was using the time with the dragon's back turned to get to the exit and flee down the hallway! The bastard!

Gmiri snarled as he watched the grinning thief, a full sack of something heavy – and doubtless priceless – over his shoulder, duck into the vestibule, afforded all the time he needed to escape while the dragon had its sights on the other two.

'You *bastard!*' Gmiri bellowed after the disappearing form of the thief, just as he and the wizard took a flying leap to the dubious safety of the pew-pile. He felt the searing heat of the dragon's fire as his boots and calves were momentarily engulfed before he rolled into the lee of the pile. Before he came up into a crouch, he beat out the flames on his legs with his armoured leather gloves, hissing with pain and anguish as the liquid fire spread from surface to surface, proving troublesome to extinguish. Finally, he managed to put out the burning and sighed. He would have a few new interesting scars after this particular adventure. If he lived long enough to show anyone, anyway.

'Well this is just pissing wonderful. This is excellent. Stupendous!' Khotoch the wizard glared at his brother-in-law and mimed throttling the life from him. 'Now, thanks to your stunning leadership, earth-shaking cartographic skills and your somewhat blurred hiring policies, we're down from three to two, trapped behind something that's not far from becoming a pile of ash, armpit-deep in the shit, and the only thing that would make this whole nightmare remotely worthwhile – the temple's legendary treasure – just walked safely out of this place over that treacherous knobhead's shoulder. How do you intend to top this? What have you scheduled for me next? Perhaps a little hair pulling? Or will you spray me with acid while you saw off my nose?'

Another burst of flame raked the pile of collapsing chairs, back and forth, strafing with fury. Somehow it seemed to be going on far longer than any previous barrage, and with a previously unmatched intensity.

'Sounds like the thing's getting more pissed off by the minute,' Gmiri huffed.

The wizard nodded. 'Seems to be having a fit of some sort. Your plans stink, you know that, Gmiri!'

'Will you just shut up complaining for one minute and let me think.'

'Oh joy. You're thinking again. Can't wait to see what you come up with.'

'Shut up.'

Ignoring the next tirade of drivel from the wizard, Gmiri shuffled across from their position. Near the far edge of the pile and close to the immobile shape of Kaiaka the half-dead knight, one of the wide, marble floor slabs had been levered up and moved out of position. Had Stelisto *really* found a trap door? Surely not. Why would he have run for the exit if he had?

Scrambling across, Gmiri peered into the hole revealed by the displaced tile and frowned. Far from the flight of stairs for which he'd hoped, or a sloping tunnel with the welcome airy draft of freedom, all that had been concealed by the flag was a square hole

some two feet in each dimension. It had been a purposeful container, as was evidenced by the regularity of its form and the fact that it appeared to have been hewn from rock and then lined with some soft material.

'What is it?' Khotoch grunted as he shuffled across to join his companion.

'No idea. Whatever it was, Stelisto took it.'

'Shitbag,' the wizard blurted with feeling.

'Indeed. Must have been something precious.'

'And delicate,' the wizard added. 'It was carefully padded.'

Gmiri reached out for the slab that had covered it, half an inch thick and polished with centuries of wear. Frowning, he slid it back towards him, the padded underside gliding across the matching tiles with slick, silent grace. 'It certainly was. Even from above.'

His frown deepened. 'There's something written on the marble.'

Khotoch pushed him roughly aside. 'Let me have a look.'

'I can't decipher it,' Gmiri announced, sliding the slab across to his companion as a fresh burst of fire smothered the furniture pile with an astounding intensity.

'Of course not. You can swing a sword like a trained ape, but you have about as much command of the written word as a seasick slug with chronic myopia.'

'I can read.'

'How many languages?'

'One,' admitted Gmiri irritably.

'Barely. And I have a full command of nine languages and can order drinks and pay for sex in eleven more.'

'I shall tell my sister you said that.'

'You do and I shall break your fingers. I can do it without touching you, you know? Even through walls.'

'Oh so you're effective against people, just useless against dragons.'

Flashing him another irritated glance, Khotoch turned the marble tile round and, ignoring the endless wash of liquid fire above them, ran his finger down the words.

'Well?'

'Give me a minute. It's old Gargandian. A dead language.'

'Well you're nearly a dead wizard, so it should come natural. What does it say?'

'It's a repository for the blessed ovum.'

'The what?'

'Ovum.'

The wizard went suddenly still, his face paling. 'Err.... An egg.'

'An egg?'

'Yes.'

'A *dragon* egg?'

'I would guess so. This is a dragon temple. The Gargandians worshipped them.'

'Well I would say that explains the big bugger's increasing unhappiness. Stelisto just walked out with its baby.'

'Of course he did. It's the score of a lifetime for a thief. Dragons are a dying species,' Khotoch breathed.

'Not dying fast enough for my liking.'

'There's so few of them left their eggs are prized by wizards, priests, loonies and other collectors. He could almost name his price. He could buy a small Dukedom with the proceeds from a dragon egg of this age and pedigree.'

Gmiri slapped his head. "'Here be dragons",' he said with a sigh. 'Not *dragon*. Dragons. The map was a lot more accurate than even you thought!'

'I don't like the idea of that tricky little shit living in luxury after leaving us in the shit,' grumbled Khotoch.

'No – me neither. But worse: / don't like the idea of someone hatching that bloody thing back in the city!'

The two men shared a look as the pile of furniture slumped a little further under a fresh fiery barrage. Both were suddenly plagued with a vision of the same beast free in the sky above Trademeet. It didn't bear thinking about. If that thing got free...

Gmiri frowned suddenly. Mentally he replayed the image, focussing on it and trying to spot what it was that had almost piqued his attention. Again and again he replayed it, trying to block out the constant bickering and chuntering of his brother-in-law and the regular furious blasts of dragon-fire above them.

There!

In his mental image, the freed dragon over Trademeet was busy bathing the city in flames, passing across the river, leaving the burning carcasses of trade ships, turning the warehouses to pyres, incinerating the people, and then passing over the temple of the martial healing God Pelegath, having to rise slightly to pass its glorious golden dome.

Helpfully, his imagination superimposed upon that picture the image of this very dragon temple at the centre of the complex as he'd seen it when they first entered the valley. A similar five-armed star with a dome at its centre.

The dome above them.

Gmiri's eyes rose to the glowing crystals at the apex. Somehow, since they had entered the temple complex through one of the outlying structures, they had been turned around and up and down slopes and stairs and had become so hopelessly buried in the place that he'd assumed they were far beneath the ground now. But no. The temple at the centre had had a glorious dome to match that of Pelegath in Trademeet. Despite all the stairs and slopes, they were again at ground level, beneath that very dome.

He grinned.

'Time you stopped being useless and argumentative. Time you did something to make your journey worthwhile.'

Khotoch narrowed his eyes suspiciously. 'I told you I've nothing left but fire and this thing will be fire-resistant!'

'Will the roof?'

'What?'

'Will the *roof* be fire resistant?'

'Well I'm not sure, but...'

'Could you blow a hole in the dome?'

'How big?'

'Big enough to fit a dragon through?'

Khotoch's eyes widened. 'Well I could. I could cast a sequenced multiplier and combine maybe half a dozen smaller flames with a fireball. But it might cave the building in on us.'

'Better than that thing melting me.'

'And are you sure you want to release that thing?'

Gmiri's grin widened. 'I do. Shit happens... and right now I think I would like it to happen to Stelisto. Something tells me that if this beast is freed from the columns our thieving friend's life will become very exciting. And very short.'

For the second time in the last five minutes, Khotoch smiled, and this time it was even more malicious. 'Give me the map.'

With a confused frown, Gmiri fished the map from his belt pouch, unfolded it and passed it to the wizard. Khotoch's tongue poked from the side of his mouth as he studied it,

fished a small self-inking quill from his 'wizarding pouch', and scored half a dozen lines through the words that so offended him on the map.

'Stelisto lives in a village in the Quoril valley, yes?'

'Yes. At the head, near the lake.'

With his malicious grin still in place, Khotoch moved across the map until he found the Quoril valley and scribbled above it: 'HERE be dragons'.

'Now tuck it away and duck down into the chairs. This might be a big bang.'

* * *

Stelisto FitzPoynter grinned like a lunatic. The reassuring bouncing weight in the backpack on his shoulders was worth a lifetime of fortune seeking. He would outdo everyone he knew with his wealth. It was a shame he'd had to sacrifice Gmiri, but those were the breaks in the adventuring profession. And sealing the doom of that miserable old wizard had just been the icing on the cake.

First port of call: home, in the Quoril valley. There he would hide the egg somewhere secure before he began to set up meetings with potential buyers. Then he would set about the business of making himself the richest man in the valley.

Laughing with wild abandon, he reached the place they'd entered the complex. It had taken them over an hour to find the temple at the centre, but he'd spotted a number of tell-tale shortcuts as they'd moved through the tunnels and had filed them away in his memory for just this very occasion. An hour to reach the place, less than five minutes to leave.

Swiftly, he leapt up to the back of the horse and settled in the saddle, kicking his heels and pushing the beast into life.

Laughing the laugh of the victor, he burst from the doorway of the ancillary building just as the main temple exploded. With a frown, he slowed the horse again and watched as the domed roof boiled up into the sky in an orange ball of roiling fire.

And from that boiling mushroom of heat, a huge black shape coalesced, flapping its angry wings as its furious snout swung this way and that, as if sniffing something out.

Shit happens.

And as Stelisto kicked his horse into a desperate run it happened to him, uncontrollably.