

Drops of water echo throughout the damp cave, echoing throughout as Amyra carefully navigates through the many stalactites hanging from the low ceiling. Her heart was thumping against her chestplate, a tense feeling she'd never felt in her years of various campaigns embedding doubt within her. She'd faced many adversaries in her life, spilling the blood of goblins, bandits and kobolds, but never in her life had she thought she'd be facing a dragon. They said no one who had gone to face the dragon had ever come back, but she was going to change that. Almost on cue, a low rumbling growl echoes through the passage to the beast, only signifying a stiff Amyra that she was getting closer to the beast.

"Deep breaths, *deep breaths*," she repeats to herself, shifting to her side slightly with her hand on the hilt of her blade.

Her armour clinks once more, resuming her journey through the tunnel, the warmth of light and the end of the underpass in sight. That only meant one thing, however; the dragon was waiting on the other side. She gets on her belly and crawls for the remainder of the tunnel, trying to be as stealthy as possible to ensure herself the highest possible chance of survival, though in hindsight, it was much more uncomfortable than she'd anticipated. Poking her head out, her eyes lay on the vast hoard of treasures and valuables in front of her, the hallmark of a dragon's den. Her eyes glisten at what was likely worth more than her entire town, all shunned away from the sight of common folk. And at the very centre of the hoard was the beast that guarded it, covered in a sheen of red scales and blanketed by its large blackened wings.

Amyra shudders to herself, but she swallows her fear down quickly, refusing to back down from the task at hand. Reaching into her pack for a roll of rope, she ties an end to a large rock at her side, grunting as she tightens it all she can. Keeping her approach stealthy, she climbs down the rope gently, slowly extending her foot out onto the mounds of gold so that she didn't make any sudden noises that would wake the draconic being. As simple as it looked, navigating through the treasure trove was harder than Amyra had anticipated, be it the constant clinking of her armour touching the coins or the stray large jewel that would almost trip her because of her attention being stolen away by the vastness of the room. Her wandering eyes widen at the sight of something that catches her off guard. An armour like her own was among the various shining items, though it wasn't as pristine or well-maintained like her's, rather it was somewhat rusted and appeared to bear several dents all around. It only reinvigorated the fire in Amyra, adding the avenging of a fellow paladin to her internal list of quests. The snores of the dragon still cause her heart to jump every now and again, but as usual, she pushes it down in her chest, edging closer and closer to the beast.

Miraculously, she makes it within a couple metres of the dragon without waking it, an achievement even she was surprised by. Now all that remained was to slay the beast. Amyra had never killed something this large, let alone on her own. She didn't know where to strike it, though her gut told her to strike at the breast, the most vital area of any living being.

Haphazardly, she yells as she plunges her sword towards the general vicinity of its heart.  
"*Haaaaaaaaaaaa!*"

Much to her dismay, a jolt travels through her arms as her sword stops dead in its tracks at the surface, not even a centimetre penetrating through the guardian of the cave. All she had

done was awaken it. It bellows out in a rage, blowing a puff of fire into the air as it stomps to its feet, knocking aside Amyra with a swing of its tail.

“Ow....” she moans, the cushioning of the piles of gold not helping in the slightest.

She quickly rolls to the side as a looming claw slams into the mound, spraying coins everywhere. Back on her feet, she slides towards her sword, grabbing it as she continues to evade her enemy, her chest pounding. It roars once more, causing her to cringe as her ears face its fury. Finding cover, she dives behind a stash of goblets and jewels, getting a moment to take a breather.

“*Think*, Amyra. You can’t just *stab* it like you usually do, so what do you-” her eyes scan over the dragon from toe to head, an idea funneling into her, a soft smile growing on her face. “-do....”

It was insanely risky, but she didn’t have much choice. Sword back in hand, she leaps back into the fight.

“*Oh no*,” she whimpers as she rolls out of the way of another tail whip from the dragon, relentless in keeping the intruder out of its home.

Her breath was running out, but she keeps pushing herself forward, tactically running away from the dragon and putting as much distance between them as she can. Fiddling her fingers, she desperately tries to recall a spell taught to her at school, regretting all the times she’d dozed off instead of paying attention. Those woes are quick to disappear, however, as the tips of her fingers start to expel gusts of wind, the speeds of which increasing rapidly. With an unsure but smug grin on her face, she harnesses the magic at her fingertips and thrusts it into the ground in front of her, the gusts launching her up into the air and face-to-face with the dragon. It snarls at her, opening its mouth wide and baring its sharp teeth, only for Amyra to grab onto one of them, swinging herself off of it and driving her sword deep into its eye. It lets out a roar of pain, its last, staggering side to side as it topples into its mounds of treasure, the beast slain. Amyra herself tumbles down a pile, her armour clattering slowly as she comes to a stop, breathless. She looks up through her panting, a silly smile growing on her face as she sees the corpse of the creature that she was once scared of engaging. She’d done it. Filled with the rush of adrenaline and excitement, she hops in the spot with a squeal, a lighthearted break from the exterior she put on during her adventuring. She strolls jovially toward the fallen beast, planting a foot on it as she pries the bloodied sword out of its skull.

“And *stay* down!”

With the whole cave to herself, she couldn’t help but feel a little giddy. There was a wealth of valuables right there, she could take her pick of what she wanted to take home with her. She turns back at the dragon one last time, wincing to herself for a moment, putting a hand to her chest, just as tight as it was when she was in the middle of the action. She brushes it off, owing it to the rush of adrenaline she’d experienced just moments prior. Making her way through the dragon’s hoard, she begins the long process of curating what riches she’d take back with her. Pendants, weapons, jewels, she had a large variety of things to choose from,

though she decides to make the reasonable choice and be sensible, taking only what would make the rest of her life comfortable. Stashing it all away in her satchel, she starts to retrace her steps, taking slow steps towards the exit. She holds onto her stomach, an ache starting to bother her while at the same time, something was prodding at the back of her tailbone.

“Stupid armour....” she mutters, reaching down her back, only for her hand to stop gliding and her heart to start racing once more. “What the-”

Her satchel falls to the ground as she spins around to take a look for herself, audibly gasping at the sight of a fleshy stump coming out of the bottom of her back, shards of red scales at the base of her new extension.

“*WHAT?!*”

She felt more unsettled as her hands begin to tremble, growing more and more uncomfortable in her gloves. Pulling them off reveals scales emerging across her arms, her nails sharpening and dark in colour. It was her feet’s turn next, the feeling of claustrophobia in her boots becoming unbearable as they claw to be free, her toes cracking bones to shape into their new form. The changes were uncomfortable, she felt hot all over but no beads of sweat formed. Amyra stares at her hand, or rather, her claw and back at the dragon, struck by a horrid realisation. Was she?

“*No, no, no, no, no....*” she murmurs to herself through yelps. “I can’t be- *Ow!*”

Her shoulder blades contort, causing her to collapse to the ground winded. It felt as though something was trying to escape from her back, furiously trying to thrust itself out.

“*AHHHHHHHHH!*” she screams as two victorious wings emerge from her back, sending her backplate flying as they span out into the world for the first time, small yet proportional to her body.

The scales had spread further across her body, now running up from her arms and legs up to her torso. She felt sick in the stomach, nauseous from all her changes. Her eyes gleam at the treasures, feeling somewhat attracted to the hoard.

“*No! I can’t- I- Maybe-*” she finds herself saying, unable to stop herself from being drawn to the wealths of the cave. Any thought of escape from the cave was slowly leaving her mind. “*Nest.*”

Amyra covers her mouth in shock. She didn’t say that, she couldn’t have. Through her hyperventilating and fingers, a puff of fire emerging from her mouth, only further signifying her lost humanity. She lets out a whimper as her ears turn to points like that of an elf, extending out as two more horns sprout from her forehead, emerging from her wavy brown hair. Was this a punishment or a curse? Her armour uselessly clatters onto the ground in front of her, the body it once protected having outgrown it, small spikes running down her spine and tail growing on the new dragoness of the cave. The more time went on, the less Amyra resembled a human anymore, her draconic transformation only further separating her from her humanity. A tingling begins at her mouth as it begins to extend forward, bringing

with it the sharpening of her once pristine teeth, now fangs that could maul prey. With her snout brings more red scales, spreading across her face like a rash, causing her to clammer at her face desperately, silently begging for her transfiguration to stop, unable to bring herself to speak. She stares in futility at her arms, spikes growing around her wrists, just as she herself was growing in size, whatever remaining on her body snapping and tearing off of her, leaving her bare in her scales.

*"C-can't....M-must I-I-"*

The words wouldn't come out, not anymore. Her once lush hair fades, disappearing as the red scales of the beast covers her scalp. She shuts her eyes as a final surge of pain shoots through her body, the last of the changes. Once they open again, they're no longer human, her sclera a murky yellow and her iris a deep black slit. The last of her fading human thoughts are that of horrible realisation, all the pieces of the mystery put together. No one returned from the dragon's den for a reason, the very same reason she'd fallen victim to. As one dragon had been slain that day, another was born and thus, Amyra the Paladin was no more.