

Cankeros the Dwarf

Carl Walmsley

Cankeros the Dwarf wanted nothing so much as to wade, thigh deep, through dragon dung. This was not a normal state of affairs, you understand. Ordinarily, Cankeros presented himself as a very well turned out fellow, resplendent in his ornate Dwarven armor, polished silver helm, and gleaming axe fastened upon his belt. The idea of rooting around in dragon dung would have been unthinkable under normal circumstances.

But, then, these were hardly normal circumstances.

For today, Cankeros was trapped, his companions dead, and a host of impressively bad-tempered goblins hot on his heels. Added to that, he had fled so far into the tunnels of the dragon's lair, he wasn't entirely convinced he would ever find his way out again; even if he didn't end up hacked to pieces by the grumpy green hides.

Huddled inside a damp grotto, doing his best to assume the air of a warrior poised to attack rather than that of a terrified and badly dented thief, Cankeros watched as the band of goblins continued to search for him. Muttering impatiently, they thrust barbed spears into the numerous nooks, crannies, and small tunnels that led out of the large chamber where they had last seen the thief. A rat scurried from a hole and was quickly skewered on the end of a spear. Cankeros frowned and tried to think himself smaller. He wanted nothing more than to rush the pointy-nosed little bleeders, but he knew a sudden and heroic death was not for him. With a grimace, he recalled the sound of Thrandor's bones crunching as the dragon scooped him up and started to chew. If Cankeros survived, he would work damn hard to put a positive spin on that, and devise a song which made his uncle's death seem more valiant and less daft and embarrassing. That was the least of his concerns right now, however. He did not need heroism. He needed guile and a calm head. Cankeros had been told more than once that he lacked the heart of a true dwarf, but he had also been told he was a cunning bastard. Right now, the latter was far more useful.

After a few minutes, and many goblinoid swearwords—which are what the entire race's inventiveness seems concentrated upon—the green-hides

Dragons Composed

scuttled off into the darkness, continuing to poke and prod with their rusty pikes. Cankeraus waited until they were well out of earshot, then unfolded his limbs and stepped awkwardly out of the little crevice and stretched aching limbs. He made a quick inspection of his stock inventory, noting with dismay that his crossbow was broken and there was no sign of the shield he had dropped during his flight. Bizarrely, the bottle of castor oil he had been taking for gut-rot had somehow survived, despite being made of glass! There was some solace in the fact that the goblet he had swiped from the horde—before the dragon had started eating his friends and family—was still tucked safely inside his loot sack. For company, it had a few gold coins and a nasty looking brooch. Cankeraus' eldest aunt had one just like it that she wore whenever she wanted to impress people. It was such a gaudy item, such a vulgar display of wealth, that all it really said was: *I wasn't born with much money, but I'd like you to think I have some now.* But then, the Blackhelms had never been a wealthy family, especially by Dwarven standards. Which was why the whole lot of them had been willing to try something as mind-numbingly stupid as to steal from a dragon.

Cankeraus sighed. The plan had seemed a good one. Uncle Throndor had an ancient key that opened a secret door into the dragon's lair. They would distract the dragon with a few tasty looking cows, strategically sprinkled outside the den, then sneak inside and pinch his loot to the fullest. Everyone had wanted a piece of the action, Cankeraus included. Now, Uncle Throndor, Cousin Mallit, Auntie Festling and all the others were resting inside the gullet of an extremely well fed dragon.

And so was the key.

Cankeraus plonked his bruised behind on an uncooperative rock and tried to put things in some semblance of order. He needed the key. The only other way in or out was through the main entrance, which was guarded by the goblins. Not to mention the fact that Cankeraus would have to sneak directly past the dragon itself. Not a good idea. Dragons were like a cross between teachers and mums; they seemed to notice things they had no right to.

"The key, then," Cankeraus muttered aloud, consolidating the fact that he needed to get it back.

How long does it take for a dragon to have a poo? The thought came to Cankeraus quite unbidden. But it was the right question. The key had gone in one end; it would eventually come out the other. Cankeraus realized that he had no idea how long it might take. He went pretty regularly himself, though nowhere near as often as Cousin Mallit. Mind you, his cousin ate all sorts of rubbish. He had once bought a kebab from a gnome and they had barely seen him for two days.

Carl Walmsley

Where does it go? Cankeraus recalled his brief visit to the treasure room. There had been nothing in the air to indicate that dragon-loo might be close at hand. One would imagine that it would give off a fairly noticeable smell. Cankeraus wrinkled his nose as he thought of Cousin Mallit once again.

Cankeraus mulled things over for a moment more, mentally scouring the situation for some other possible course of action. There was none. His task was painfully clear; find the poo, find the key.

The last of the goblins ambled from the chamber, noisily sucking a mouthful of meat off a crispy bone. His feet slapped on the cold stone as he mooched off down the corridor. Cankeraus sniffed the air. It stank of goblin.

Edging inside the roughly hewn chamber, he saw a large, poorly constructed table in the center of the room. Each leg was a different length so that it balanced awkwardly on three of its limbs, the fourth leg inches above the bumpy floor. On top of the table were clay pots, a few cracked plates, and a crooked candlestick. A mouldy candle burned dimly, casting an ugly light about the room and emitting a trail of sickly yellow smoke. Straw piles at the rear of the room marked out the sleeping area. Tattered and threadbare blankets were strewn about, most so old that it was only grime which held them together. A skull and antlers hung above the entranceway, tethered to the wall by a length of rope. The crooked teeth meshed into an unpleasant grin.

It did not take Cankeraus long to complete his search of the room. He found the goblins' supply of food: some moldy fruit and meat of dubious origin, along with several pouches of pungent herbs and spices. Judging by the age of the meat, the herbs would be needed to cover up the taste. Nothing else was worth taking. No hidden keys or escape routes, no weapons better than the dagger he already had, and certainly no giant dragon toilet. He was uncertain whether he was unhappy about that or not.

Wary of goblin sentries that might still be looking for him, Cankeraus made his way cautiously along the corridor toward the only area he had yet to search. Nearing the chambers adjoining the dragon's nest, the dwarf felt sweat trickle down his grimy forehead. In the distance, goblin voices chattered incessantly, accompanied by the scrape of tools and the ring of weapons; goblins loved to practice fighting almost as much as dwarves. Peering around a doorway, Cankeraus saw a big room, overflowing with green hides. They scuttled about excitedly, prodding each other with blunted spears. There was a sudden hullabaloo at the far end of the room, as one the long noses stabbed his fighting partner in an especially tender area. One goblin could be seen squirming around on the floor, another

Dragons Composed

standing over him, laughing uncontrollably. In the commotion, Cankeraus tip-toed past the room unnoticed.

The sounds of goblins arguing and fighting gradually faded. At the end of the corridor, Cankeraus came to the hefty door through which he had fled when the dragon had decided his family was, in fact, a mobile buffet.

Or rather a dragon-asborg. Cankeraus winced at his own joke.

Hidden in an alcove, he waited patiently.

His eyes were growing heavy and his head began to nod when the door finally opened, the old hinges whining painfully.

A single goblin, carrying something over his shoulder, emerged from the portal and sidled off down the passage. When the door had swung almost shut, Cankeraus emerged from his hiding place and darted through the gap. The door closed behind him with a resounding click.

This room was large. There were torches on the wall, but, by and large, one would still have described it as dark. A dragon-shaped mound rested in the shadows, a few scales shimmering in the torchlight. Cankeraus stood very still. He barely breathed. He had heard all sorts of stories about the senses of dragons. His uncle Throndor had maintained that they were all nonsense; rumors put about by dragons to scare away thieves and impress girls. Perhaps Throndor had been right. Of course, he had also been eaten by a dragon, and that alone raised many questions about much of what his uncle had said.

Cankeraus lifted his right foot, edged it forward a couple of inches, set it down again, toe by toe. He half expected to hear the dragon roar, or see a big, shiny eye blink open and pin him to the spot with an unflinching glare. Instead, the dragon slept on, as immobile as stone. Ever so slowly, the dwarf moved his other foot. Still nothing. He stepped again, and again, and soon he had made it half way across the chamber. The dragon purred softly, a sort of gentle snoring.

In front of the dragon was a pile of bones that shone in the torchlight. Cankeraus grimaced as he saw the scraps of cloth and splintered armour upon which they rested. Off to one side, a yawning doorway loomed. Cankeraus, with infinite care, crept towards it.

Beneath the jagged arch leading into the adjoining chamber, Cankeraus' sharp, Dwarven eyes adjusted quickly to the gloom. Away in the distance, several large mounds seemed to emerge from the darkness. As quickly as caution would allow, Cankeraus advanced towards them. He reached out and tapped the nearest mound, eliciting a sound not unlike a hammer upon stone. He checked the others. There could be no doubt. These be dragon turds. Each was the size of a haystack, and as solid as marble.

Carl Walmsley

His eyes were now quite accustomed to the half-light, and Cankorous could discern an opening in the wall. A channel below it had been cut into the rock by the passage of water over many years. Glancing at the ground beneath his feet, then across the chamber, the dwarf could see the course which this dried out river would once have taken. Were it not for the great drought which had accompanied the long months of summer, he suspected that water would even now be flowing through the cavern. The dwarf raised an eyebrow and nodded in understanding. Normally, the dragon poo would be washed away and the dragon's lair kept clean. It made sense. After all, dragon's live for centuries, sometimes leaving their caves only a few times each year to eat. He had never heard of anyone finding piles of dung the size of wagons sprinkled about the countryside. Dragons like to keep the location of their lairs a secret and a trail of giant turds would be a dead giveaway. Equally, over the centuries, the dung would certainly build up if the dragon did not have a way to get rid of it. Dragon hygiene; who would have thought?

Realizing that he was becoming altogether too interested in the toilet habits of dragons, Cankorous shifted his mind back to the problem at hand. A few more taps, all around the base of the dung, confirmed a number of things. Firstly, this stuff was too hard to get into. Chipping his way in like some kind of deranged sculptor would awaken the dragon. Secondly, it seemed unlikely that this was fresh. It had no smell, which meant that the dragon might not go very often. That was a real problem. He could not wait around forever. Finally, what if it came out like this, rock-hard and impossible to get into? Painful for the dragon, no doubt, but more importantly, inconvenient for him.

Cankorous felt himself grimace at the notion. He wrung his hands, then rubbed them together as though trying to wash them clean of the thought. Sadly, there was no avoiding it. He had to do something to make the dragon's poo . . . well, squishier.

The goblin was apparently dreaming about something very enjoyable. Its thin lips curled into a sinister smirk and it gurgled humorously between snores. Cankorous leant forward, mindful not to touch the sleeping green hide. He slipped the item he was holding into the creature's pocket. The goblin shifted and rolled onto its side, muttering something about barmaids and leather underpants. Cankorous did his best not to get distracted. He retrieved the other objects from his belt and hid them about the goblin's person. When he was happy that they were all safely stashed, he tiptoed quietly away.

Dragons Composed

Cankerous heard the ruckus long before he saw anything. There was shouting and screaming and some sort of crash. The sounds grew steadily nearer until he could no longer resist taking a peek.

The dragon was awake. Its enormous, sinewy tail uncoiled and scraped along the stone. A reptilian head lifted from within the folds of a leathery wing and swayed hypnotically from side to side.

A large group of goblins jabbered excitedly as someone was dragged into the room. It was one of their own, a terrified little green hide that struggle uselessly to escape the grasp of his captors. The unfortunate victim was forced to his knees before the dragon, then swatted about the head several times when he tried to stand. The dragon spread its wings, majestic and terrifying in equal measure. The goblin prisoner fell into a swoon, while his captors scuttled away.

The dragon's tail, which was ever moving, snaked towards the goblin. Dextrous as any hand, it slid around the creature's waste, the forked tail probing and searching. One by one, it retrieved the items of treasure concealed upon the goblin. The dragon hissed, its tongue flickering menacingly. From within the dragon toilet, Cankerous watched expectantly and felt the tension build within him.

When the dragon struck, it was as sudden as a fork of lightning. One moment the goblin was there, the next it had vanished in a blur of movement. The dragon crunched twice, rolled back its head and swallowed. All around the chamber, the other goblins sniggered and smirked. A few even imitated their hapless companion and the moment he had become a snack.

The dragon raised itself upon its hind legs, powerful muscles moving beneath its scales. The green hides quailed at the sight, and the dragon reveled in their fear. Its eyes grew wide and its mouth gaped open. The massive creature fully extended its wings, reasserting its authority.

Then the dragon stopped.

Cankerous noticed that the ever-moving tail was suddenly still. The wings slackened a little and the creature's eyes narrowed. The dwarf half thought he saw the dragon frowning. Then came a sound that no living creature had ever been permitted to hear for many centuries.

The dragon farted.

For such a large beast, it was a curiously little sound. So faint, in fact, that the goblins searched amongst themselves for the culprit. The dragon remained still, but something about its posture made Cankerous believe something was not right.

The second fart was louder than the first, and far longer. There's no mistaking where it had come from. The goblins looked questioningly at their majestic master, and a few even dared to smile.

Carl Walmsley

Trying to regain some semblance of dignity, the dragon reared, arms raking the air, and let out a terrible roar. Moments later, it was followed by an unmistakable squeak.

Within the dragon toilet, Cankeraus drew back, hurrying over to his hiding place among the rocks. He heard the dragon roar a second time and there was a rush of wind that swept into the chamber. Cankeraus held his nose as the chamber filled with a smell that almost ignited his nostril hairs.

The dragon bellowed in rage, swinging its great bulk to position its backside over the dried out riverbed. Though Cankeraus never saw what happened next, the memory of the sound would never abandon him. There was a gushing, squelching, squirty noise accompanied by a wet splattering. It was all Cankeraus could do not to gag. After a few moments, the dragon sighed. The noise came again and again, until the dwarf wondered if being eaten by the beast might have been preferable after all.

When the dragon staggered away, wings dragging despondently on the floor, Cankeraus climbed out of his hiding place. His plan had worked perfectly. He had hidden the treasure upon the goblin, hoping that his backstabbing companions would turn their comrade in. He had also hidden every rotten prune, every pouch of spices, and the bottle of castor oil on the miserable green hide. Apparently, even a dragon's redoubtable constitution seemed unable to handle that lot.

A door banged as the dragon moved off to sulk in some other part of its lair, no doubt eager to escape the pungent aroma which now filled the chamber.

As Cankeraus approached the unavoidable climax of his plan, he slipped off his jacket, rolled up his shirtsleeves and, pondered whether he would ever smell clean again.

The secret door opened outwards, inviting in light from the world outside. Cankeraus dropped the key into his pocket, took three steps forward and inhaled deeply. A more fragrant smell he had never enjoyed.

It is a shame I have none of the treasure, he mused as he pushed the door shut. *Still, I am alive.*

Somewhere on the mountainside above, a small brown bird whistled enthusiastically. It dropped down, as if to alight upon the dwarf. At the last moment, it veered away, screeching in alarm. Cankeraus shrugged. "Fair enough," he said aloud. "I probably could do with a bath."