

Chapter 13 - Healthcheck

Tarfal lay curled up on his hoard and dreamed of flying. Suddenly his peace was shattered by a noise and he jerked awake, scattering small objects as he went on the defensive.

The door of his den opened to reveal another dragon in the connecting tunnel, fierce, strong and blocking his means of escape. They wore body armour and were clearly well-armed.

Tarfal backed away, hit the wall and began cowering.

"Take it," he yelped. "Take the hoard! Don't kill me! I'm just a dragon!"

Fardon grinned wickedly for a moment, and then mastered himself. "Sorry," he said, flipping the visor to reveal amber eyes. "I am not here to kill you. Quite the opposite."

"...What?" Tarfal asked, blinking in confusion. His eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"I am Sir Fardon of Tarnover. One of my duties is to check for lairs in the wildlands surrounding the realm of Taria and take a census of the occupants."

"So it's a shakedown then?" Tarfal groaned. "You want me to pay protection money?"

"No," Fardon said irritably. "This is disputed land, we have no way to enforce taxes. However, the King is greatly concerned with the safety of his fellow dragons, even those who wish to remain unaffiliated or refute his rule. Whatever your political leanings, you *are* still a member of a threatened race and we do not want to see the Hunters get you."

"So if I don't pay, you'll tip them off somehow? Is that what you're saying?"

"No, no, no!" Fardon said, rolling his eyes. "If you want an ulterior motive, then here's one... We have been hoping to expand our territory to cover this area for a while. And if that happens, we'll want a rough idea of who comes with it. But until that day comes - *if* it comes - we want to know roughly how many people live here and make sure they're relatively safe."

"What are you going to do? Send a minder to report on me...?"

"No. But we can provide medical supplies and assistance. Security devices. Your front door, for instance - that was in a shocking state and wouldn't stop a determined Hunter. We can fix that, no questions asked."

"No obligations? What if you fix someone's lair and find they're an outlaw?"

"Stop panicking," Fardon said. "I really don't want to know. We're *dragons* - none of us are sweet innocents. But the main point is to protect our kind from Hunters, and we're turning a blind eye to other stuff right now. If we do ever take over this land, there will be a transition period and you can leave, no questions asked."

"I am not interested in serving your king," the dragon growled. "Please take your high-pressure tactics elsewhere."

"You think I'm a lair-to-lair salesman?!" Fardon snapped. "You think I'm getting a commission for doing this?! I'm risking my life here, trying to save *yours*, you ungrateful wretch!"

Tarfal glowered sullenly back at the knight, but couldn't think of a suitable retort.

"Listen," Fardon said urgently. "I don't think you quite *understand*. This is the third lair I've checked today. The last one was empty, and the den had... dried blood in it. *Lots* of it, hardened into a pool where the floor sloped. There... There were four sets of claw marks dug into the rock. Do you follow...?"

"Beheaded," Tarfal whispered.

"In their sleep, I would assume," Fardon said in a haunted voice, looking at the floor, his eyes unfocused, imagining the scene. "The claw marks dug in as their body spasmed in death... And when I looked closely at the entrance tunnel with an electric torch, there were scrapes and splashes of dried blood from where the body was dragged out..."

"You're... You're just saying this to *scare* me into joining your gang," Tarfal croaked, but he didn't believe it.

"I wish..." Fardon said, looking unusually vulnerable for someone in special forces

combat armour. "Oh, how I *wish* I was lying. But someone has murdered a magnificent creature like you or me in their own den, may Alkrash guide them. It *happens*. That's why we're trying to..."

A shot slammed into the back of Fardon's neck and he went down.

"Visor's open," the monkey called, glancing at the concussed dragon. "Looks like he's still breathing. You put a shell in his eye... *I'll* take the other one!"

"*You stupid bastard!*" Tarfal screamed at the fallen knight. "*You left the door open for the fucking Hunters! You've killed us both!*"

"You call that a door, beast?" the Hunter laughed, covering Tarfal with an anti-dragon rifle. "A couple of seconds with a cutting torch was all we needed!"

Tarfal bared his claws and teeth. "So... It has come to this," he snarled. "Then, if I must die, I shall prove my worth in battle! *Fight with courage!*"

"Naughty," the Hunter said lazily, aiming between the dragon's eyes with a laser sight. "None of that. It'd be a shame to ruin your skull. I don't want visible death-wounds spoiling my trophy. Not at the *front*, anyway..."

"Nick! Talking of head-shots, what the hell's keeping you...? The damned thing's asleep!"

As if in answer, a human head rolled down into the den, followed shortly afterwards by a generous trickle of bright blood.

"Oh *shit*," the monkey said, as his friend's head struck his boot and rolled to a halt. The distraction was all Tarfal needed and he lashed out, knocking the rifle from the Hunter's grasp. The monkey gave a cry of pain as his fingers bent the wrong way and a shot slammed into the roof of the cave, raining down a shower of rocky fragments.

"So, what's it going to be?" Fardon asked angrily, visor down as he considered the struggling monkey, whose legs were now pinned to the ground by Tarfal's foreleg. "Death or capture?"

"What's the difference?" the Hunter groaned. "Your king will butcher me for what I've done..."

"If *you* fired the shot at me, your life is forfeit," Fardon admitted. "But if your *colleague* did that, he's already paid that price, Anah forgive me. *You* on the other hand, might still live to see old age."

"...In a cage, as a dragon's *pet*?! NEVER!" the monkey shrieked, and drew a pistol. He thrust it under his own chin, but Fardon slapped it aside and the shot went wild. Two of Fardon's metal claws clamped down on the furre's head with a brief crackling sound. They spasmed for a few moments and went still.

"Dead...?" Tarfal asked, sniffing at the motionless Hunter, and glancing at Fardon questioningly. "How did you *do* that?!"

"Unconscious," the knight corrected. "My gauntlets have a taser function."

"And how did you recover in time...?" Tarfal asked. "Were you faking?"

"Not entirely," the knight said. "They took me out for the count, yeah. But my armour detected it and applied stimulants. But it was a close thing... So *very* close..." he whispered, looking shaken behind his tinted visor. "...And," he added, taking command of the situation, "Emergency stimulants *do* have consequences. I am likely to 'crash' in an hour or so, so we'd better wrap this up quickly before the after-effects kick in."

"'Wrap it up...?' HOW?!" the other dragon yelped, looking around wildly. "When those two don't return, more will come! They'll storm the place! What do we *do*?!"

"I'll radio base. You will have to come to Tarnover. You'll get a temporary visa, no questions asked. Once your lair is secured with a bulkhead door, you can return."

Tarfal looked between his hoard and the dragon knight with a horrified expression.

"...I know," Fardon sighed. "If there's anything of great sentimental value, grab it *now*. I can't promise your hoard will remain un-plundered, but we'll do our best. Someone *will* be sent to guard it, but if a dozen Hunters converge on the place to avenge "Nick" over there... Well, our man will have to make a strategic withdrawal."

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Mermul stepped out of the shower, his fur sodden, giving him the appearance of an Afghan hound the size of a minibus. He outstretched his wings and shook his body like a dog, covering the tiled walls in an excessive quantity of water.

This was his third day since arriving at Fardon's villa, and he'd already had to buy a bulk quantity of shampoo. Most dragons only needed shampoo for their manes, if they had one at all, but a frost dragon was entirely covered in fur. Not for the first time, he envied Fardon and the other scaled members of his race.

"You look, uh, damp," Fiskul said helpfully.

"I don't suppose you could devour the water or something?" Mermul asked. "My villa may have been owned by a psycho, but at least she had a full-body drier. Fardon doesn't really need one, and clearly he doesn't get frost dragons as guests much..."

"I... have no idea," Fiskul admitted. "I don't want to risk devouring you or parts of your fur by accident, and besides, removing water from the ecosystem by erasing it from reality... doesn't feel environmentally sound."

"True," Mermul said. "Did you get what you needed from your lair?"

"Yep," the small dragon looked happy. "Not that I have a huge amount of value there, but I always like having a bolt-hole in case I need one. For myself, or my friends."

"Do you have a hoard?" Mermul asked.

"I have multiple lairs," Fiskul said. "Some have probably been broken into, especially the ones on other continents. I've had time to wander, as you can probably imagine. But I like it around here.

"Point is, I don't have one central place to keep a hoard. Especially if people try to destroy my lair as a 'temple of darkness' or something. I have some nice stuff scattered around, but the items of greatest value, I started keeping those in bank vaults once the safe-deposit system was invented.

"For sleeping, I've learned to live without. Once, I might have needed the reassurance of lying on a pile of stuff a bit more, but having to live rough when people chase you away or cut off your head as a heretic... You learn to make do. But I *do* understand why people like it."

Both dragons turned suddenly as there was a crash. Fardon lurched into the room

unsteadily.

"Gods, Fardon..." Mermul said. "You look *awful!* What *happened* to you? Are you going to be okay...?"

"You nearly inherited another villa," the big dragon croaked.

"*Don't say that!*" Mermul squeaked, mortified.

"Hunters got me," Fardon said. "I was checking the lairs. One of them was already empty... some poor bastard... the *murderers!* The last one was occupied, got into an argument. Hunters sneaked up and shot me from behind."

"Did they... did they get the occupant?" Fiskul looked appalled.

"No. But I paid a price for it. My armour's automation detected the attack and drugged me back to alertness. We'd both be dead but for that, but now I feel like shit. The surviving Hunter's in custody, Sir George is guarding the lair, the occupant has been found a safe place in the city until we can get their lair better protected. But I... I think I'll need help getting to my den."

"Are you sure you're going to be okay...? Do you need a medic...?" Mermul asked, deeply concerned.

"They checked me out at base. I just need to sleep it off. Happened before..."

"Maybe you should have taken Fiskul with you," Mermul pondered, as they helped the exhausted dragon to his room. "They're... tough."

"That had been considered," Fardon admitted. "Lord Varl was quietly hoping that if they were brought along, they might make new friends. He's scared... scared of what Fiskul may do if, gods forbid, anything happens to you, Mermul. He wants to be sure that we aren't relying entirely on you to keep the world alive."

"There are others," Fiskul said, rolling their eyes. "But... Well, if I went with you, who'd protect Mermul?!" they objected, as the pair of them half-carried the knight into his den.

"That... is why we didn't ask," Fardon groaned. He collapsed on the pile of imitation gold coins and was asleep before they'd even left the room.