

Chapter 15 - The Precious

The lair was protected by a sturdy bulkhead door. Fardon glanced at one of the security cameras, and Fiskul gave it a friendly wave. Fardon hoped that it would be interpreted as such, given the black dragon's ominous appearance.

"Who goes there, and what do you want?" a voice called over the intercom.

"Sir Fardon of Taria. I am performing a census for my King and have a few questions. May I enter?"

"Who's the other one? Is it bring-your-daughter-to-work day?"

"That's complicated," Fardon said. "They're relatively harmless, but... protective of me. I couldn't convince them to stay behind."

"I'm an adult, but I am small," Fiskul said. "If you prefer, I could wait outside."

"No, you may as well come in too," the dragon said. "Hunters have been active here lately... and others. No sense in risking anyone."

As the intercom went dead, there was a click, a buzz, and then the massive door began to grind open.

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The dragon was earth-brown, with leathery crimson wings and a baby-blue mane down the back of his neck. His horns were the same crimson as his wings.

"So," he said. "You wanted to do a survey...?"

"First up, I am not here to spy on you," Fardon reassured him, opening his visor as the armoured door shut behind them. "Lord Varl wants to ensure that his fellow dragons are safe, even in the disputed lands.

"I must say, your door *is* impressive, so I guess you don't need help on that count, but if you do need supplies or anything, those can be provided."

"Yeah, the front door is Tarian," the dragon said. "This isn't the first survey your

people have done, so I got it fitted after last time. Added the cameras myself, though. There's a back exit as well," the dragon added. "Just in case the Hunters try to dig me out with a backhoe or something. To tell the truth, I'm most worried about the air system, the Hunters finding the vents and blocking them or trying to gas me. If you have parts for a Draketronics 400 air scrubber, those would be most welcome."

"I'll try and arrange that," Fardon said, taking notes. "Are you the sole occupant?"

"Yes. I go by Acer."

Fardon checked his notes. "Ah, yes. That's fine. We don't need your true name, this really is a health check, not some kind of sting operation over taxes or politics."

"Did one of the small races give you that name?" Fiskul asked. "That's a kind of tree... an unusual name for a dragon."

"I flew into one when I was a kid," Acer said. "Got the nickname then and it stuck. Now, I presume you already knew about this lair from your notes. But out of interest, how might you have found it? How obvious is it?"

"Overall the concealment is pretty good, but I spotted the solar panels from the air," Fardon explained. "Unfortunately those are a bit of a giveaway."

"I was afraid of that. I do have emergency backup for winter or if the Hunters try sabotaging the panels to try and smoke me out, but... Urgh. If you have any advice there, that would be welcome."

"We have nuclear batteries," the knight said. "But they're not cheap. We can't just give them away, sadly."

"Well, it's good to know that's an option. I might try to get one next time I visit Tarnover. How many other lairs have you visited today, if I may ask?"

"This is the fifth," Fardon said. "Some were on the list, one is new and I've arranged for a door upgrade. One... no longer had a dragon in it," he sighed. "I hope they've just moved on to somewhere more permanent, but I fear the worst. A family of humans have taken it over now, and they wouldn't - or couldn't - tell me what happened to the previous occupant."

"They don't qualify for help," Fiskul added helpfully. "Doubly so if they took the place by force."

"The Hunters have been active here recently," Acer admitted. "I've been tuning into their radios. They have this new toy, the Watcher, they call it. Floats around. Some kind of surveillance drone. I've seen the thing a few times - the way it moves, it's probably made with dragonbone," he shuddered.

"If I may say so, you don't seem particularly worried about Hunters attacking you, for all that," Fardon said. "Or *us* attacking you, for that matter. Most dragons I have to interview are more cagey, or scared that I've come to seize their home or murder them or something."

"Well, like I say, I've seen a few of your surveys before. But I can defend myself," he said. "And... well, I have this now."

The dragon raised one of their forelegs, displaying a golden bracelet that had a faint glow to it.

Fardon looked at the thing with dismay. "Oh hell. Is that what I *think* it is...?"

"It is," the dragon retorted. "And I would very much like to keep it, even if that means moving away from Taria's influence."

"Where did you get this thing?" Fardon demanded.

"From one of Lord Thurr's thugs," Acer replied unhappily. "I had to kill him... It was self-defence. The bracelet looked pretty so I looted it from them as a trophy. Didn't know what it was at the time."

"It's a shame they had to die," Fiskul sighed. "But..." he glanced at the knight, whose eyes were bulging with astonishment. "Fardon...? Are you okay...?"

"Acer, are you crazy?!" he spluttered. "Are you trying to tell me that you killed an elite warrior... Who was wearing *a bracelet of invulnerability*?!"

"Yes, I did," Acer said, puffing himself up angrily and assuming a defensive posture. "It wasn't easy, and I still have nightmares about it. I got lucky, and it should have been *me* that died that day. No doubt it's put me *way* up Lord Thurr's wanted list - and

if you don't believe me, ask *him!*"

"I don't think you're lying, but... But how?!" Fardon asked desperately. "How did you kill someone who can't be wounded?!"

"I drowned him," the dragon admitted sullenly. "The fight was near Lake Alta, and I had to hold his head under until he went limp. I'm not proud of it, but when an invincible maniac is out to murder you because you refused fealty to his mad Lord, well, a dragon has to do what a dragon has to do. I got lucky that day. I should have died - but instead, I got some neat protective jewellery. I guess Alkrash was smiling on me that day."

"It does sound handy," Fiskul said, admiring the shiny object with wide eyes.

"Though it's a shame about the way you acquired it. And going by Fardon's reaction, I take it there's a catch. These things must be pretty rare, or everyone would have one and the whole Hunters-vs-Dragons thing wouldn't even be possible."

"I need to know if they're legal in Taria," Acer said, looking troubled. "If it's likely to be confiscated, I want to know first, before I turn up there and suddenly get arrested for possession. And don't even *think* about taking it from me right here," he added, eyes narrowing.

"No, no," Fardon said slowly. "They're not *illegal*. Lord Varl has one himself... But they *are* frowned upon. Enchantments to protect the wearer from harm, well, the theory is college-level magic, though it does only work on dragons... seems to need a large body mass for the effect to work properly. The hard part is that... Well, they need a power source to run."

"Oh... No, no, *no*," Fiskul looked dismayed.

"Yes," Fardon said grimly. "To make an invulnerability charm powerful enough to protect a whole dragon, you'll need the trapped souls from a hundred men... or from another dragon. Under the Pax Draconica, existing charms are grandfathered in, because they *are* shockingly useful... But they are tightly-controlled items and must be officially registered. To create a new one..? That is a capital crime in most lands."

"I was afraid of that," Acer sighed. "Something like this seems too good to be true. There is a strong argument to be made for destroying it and releasing the... power source. But... once you have an advantage like this, that could save you even from an

armour-piercing round to the head, that's a tough thing to let go of, and it has already saved my neck on numerous occasions.

"Still, I do visit Taria for supplies occasionally and I would not like to give that up either... Very well. I will take it to Tarnover and get it examined. If it needs to be registered, I will fill out that paperwork. If they decide it must be destroyed, then... Then perhaps that's for the best."

Fardon glanced at Fiskul. "Reckon it would be proof against *you*?"

"Not a clue," the small dragon sighed. "In all my life I've not come across these before... or at least, I didn't realise what I was seeing if I did. Otherwise... with a bunch of these things, I might have lost a lot less friends. But then... the price for that protection... I can see why Acer is so conflicted about it.

"As for devouring it, if it's all the same to you, I'd rather not experiment with something so precious. Besides, if it *doesn't* protect him against me, I'd end up devouring his wrist and *nobody* wants that."

Acer croaked with dismay. "Oh hell... You're not just some kind of goth kid? You actually *are* the Dark One? Or *think* you are?"

"Don't mind me," Fiskul said, looking embarrassed. "Just a wandering demigod looking for love and friendship. I like Fardon, I don't want him to get hurt again."

"As long as it's not the end times," Acer shrugged his wings. "But... After all you've said about the bracelet... Damn right I'm conflicted. I like my life... I don't want to lose it, not to Hunters nor to Lord Thurr and his cronies. But that *doesn't* mean I'm okay with soul-stealing."

"I wouldn't normally say this, but speaking as the Devourer-of-All-Things, I'd rather you kept it," Fiskul said. "Your willingness to sacrifice your own safety is commendable, but if you've made enemies of Lord Thurr, you need all the help you can get. Take it to Tarnover, get it examined. But if they confiscate it, I'd recommend you move to Taria for your own protection."

"But..." Acer looked troubled.

"Unless you're wanted as a war-criminal, we don't really care," Fardon said. "Taking down one of his elite mooks is a point in your favour. And if you are wanted by others, then we might be able to wangle some kind of amnesty. Ultimately, this is a

worst-case scenario... They'll probably let you keep it after it's been registered."

"I hope so," Fiskul said worriedly. "If he loses that protection bracelet, Lord Thurr could very well turn him into one. And I'd tell the officials that if they try to take it."