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People think dragons don't have problems—they're wrong. My current dilemma involves Nudlkopf, a sorcerer who ordered me to kill and devour his worst enemy. Not necessarily in that order.

I'll come back to that in a moment, but first, you need to understand that we really do have problems.

Oh, sure, magical beasts don't die from old age, and dragons aren't just an apex predator; we're the apex predator. (Grandad, when he's sober enough to speak coherently, which is rare, still brags about hunting behemoths eons ago at the Turning of the World.) At a ton-and-a-half, with a fifty-foot wingspan, and standing five feet at the shoulders when we're on all fours, there aren't any predators of comparable size on land. Add steel-melting dragonfire and scales that will turn most weapons, and reasonable folk (excluding brownies –

don't get me started on them) agree our impressive equipage of fangs and talons are overkill.

But no problems? Did you know that boredom can be fatal? After living a few centuries, most dragons have seen and done everything countless times. How often can you carry off a maiden, storm a castle, or wreak havoc on a village before it all becomes mundane, just another day on the job?

So, we drink. A lot. And a good dragon drunk is like diving off a thousand-foot cliff headfirst into a pool of molten gold, with white-hot ice sluicing your brain while grinning imps tickle your spine with a thousand feathers. Then it gets good. (Okay, I might drink a bit more than others, but what's the big deal? It's never caused problems for me before. At least, not many. I've always been able to stop when I wanted to and have done so a dozen times that I can recall.)

Beside the magical buzz we get from the hooch, there's also the fact that male dragons need to be significantly impaired of judgement to visit our mates, female dragons being small but deadly and having the temperament of a shrew on mind-altering herbs. (We love a good fighter, and the more vicious the better, but there's an obvious downside to that.) It's also worth mentioning that freshly hatched baby dragons are so vile that even the females have been known to take refuge in a frothy mug. Hence, our abiding fondness for the water of life.

And when a truly exceptional knight appears, one worth fighting, we have a lottery, and the winner gets to tackle Sir Manhood.

Sadly, more dragons die flying into a cliff while drunk than from any other cause (don't drink and fly, kiddies.) The worst way to go, for us, is from lethargy. When a dragon loses the joy of life, he curls up for a nap and never wakes up. After a few decades he petrifies and it's game over.

So, yeah, we've got problems. Mine began on an early spring morning in the unlovely land known as Wurstshire...

Just to be clear, I wouldn't have been in this predicament if it weren't for that damn troll, Stonegrinder.

It was a warm day in May when I first ran into him in the Fortunatus Mountains, the kind of day that makes you set down that tankard of ale and say, "Wow!" The scent of pine and jasmine permeated the air, heather and goldenrod decorated the hills with their purple and gold blooms under a steel-blue sky, and flocks of little birds filled the land with their joyful (and uncharacteristically in tune) song.

I was minding my own business, sitting on a mountaintop and enjoying the sunrise after a quiet night raiding farms and carrying off sheep, when a troll popped out of his hole in the rock and said, "Hi!"

Well, that scared the bejesus out of me! I mean, firebrakes are tough, but a good bit of sharp steel in the right place and Bob's your (late) uncle, if you follow what I mean. And there's always some human out trying to make a name for himself killing dragons, so we sleep with one eye open. I was most upset to have somebody sneak up on me like that.

But trolls are different. Bad reputation, of course, but really just happier with a bite of mutton than gnawing on somebody's shinbone. Even better, they brew the best mead in the Four Realms.

After I let the troll up, I dusted him off and apologized for crushing him under my bulk on account of being surprised and all that. Then we introduced ourselves properly.

"Me Stonegrinder," he said in a voice that could pass for a fart at the county fair.

"Draco," I replied, "at your service." I didn't suppress the subsonic undertones in my voice and could tell that pleased him greatly. Trolls like having a good tickle, but with skin made of stone, there's not much that can do the job. The low frequencies of a dragon's voice can make a mountain tremble or a courtesan blush, and old Stonegrinder got a good dose of it.

When he stopped giggling and thrashing around on the ground, he got up and patted me on the shoulder.

“You good fellow! Me not laugh like that since Chalkhands fall off cliff and break into pieces!”

“I’m glad I could oblige.”

“Now me return favor. You like mead?”

Well, of course I like mead. I’m a dragon, and we all have a weakness for the stuff. In fact, that’s how the whole nasty business of knights killing dragons got started. Seems one of my uncles had a bit too much for his own good and got into a brawl with some local humans. The bar fight escalated, and next thing anybody knew the whole village was burnt to the ground. There’ve been hard feelings on both sides ever since.

I folded my wings and plopped down next to Stonegrinder’s hole. It took him a while to fetch a barrel out of his cellar, which must have been deep under the mountain because the mead was a perfect drinking temperature; cool, but not cold. Just right for a morning in the sun.

As ol’ Sol rose, we swapped stories and gossiped until the barrel was empty. Stonegrinder got up to get another but was drunk and stumbled, falling down his hole. I heard him bounce a couple of times before he reached bottom, which I calculated to be about fifty feet down. I called down, but there was no answer. I figured he must’ve knocked himself senseless, which wouldn’t be a far distance to go, given the limited mental facilities he started with.

Anyway, it looked to be a while before he made it back up with a second barrel, and feeling just a bit woozy after polishing off the better half of the first one, I curled up on the sun-warmed granite to nap. There really is nothing better than a good nap with the sun on your back; one of the few points everybody in my philosophy discussion group could agree on. Even the nihilists admitted that. Heh.

Which was how I got caught. Nobody to blame but myself, but then a fellow should feel safe taking a nap on a remote mountaintop, shouldn't he? I mean, what kind of jerk would sneak up on somebody doing that? Apparently, my current master was of that ilk.

I found out later that the rascal had seen me drinking with Stonegrinder from a nearby ridge, and when I laid down to nap he hustled over hoping to catch me sleeping. And while I was contentedly snoring away, the wretch cast a spell of obedience over me.

Now, the key thing to remember is that I was asleep because it takes a polished wizard over half an hour to recite the mantra. It fails if any interruption occurs, such as the dragon killing and eating the mage, so it's rarely used. Except when you catch one of us napping.

When he finished the incantation, my new boss cried out, "Awake, fiend of heaven! Hear my commands!"

That's no way to rouse somebody from his morning nap. Annoyed, I took a breath to snort some fire at whoever was responsible, only to have it stall out before I could flambé the miscreant. That's when I knew I was in trouble. Still a bit tipsy and not fully awake, I asked, "Who are you, and, well, do you really need to shout? I've kinda got a headache"

"Know, fell drake, that I am a mighty wizard, schooled in the dark arts, and deep in hidden knowledge! I am Nudlkopf, and soon all lands will speak my name in fear."

"You don't look that frightening to me. Most magic doesn't work on dragons. Give me one good reason not to do the world a big, big favor and toast your lily ass like a marshmallow on a campfire."

"Because while you lay in a drunken stupor, I cast the German Spell of Obedience over you. Now you are in my power forever and must obey my commands!"

"Really? Try something."

"Owblay ightymay indway! "

“Hmm?” I puzzled over that for a minute, flogging some old brain cells awake before I recognized the language. “So, what’s with the pig-Latin? That was a party joke mocking a dead language before the Turning of the World, and I don’t think anybody’s used it in the eons since then.”

“It is the language of the arcane! See how the gale stirs at my command!”

“Arcane, my ass. More like the language of wannabes. And I wouldn’t call a summer breeze a gale.”

“Oh?” Nudl narrowed his eyes. “Give it a minute.”

“Yeah. I’m waiting. Still waiting. Still, yikes!” To my astonishment, a monster tornado appeared over the mountainside, bearing down on us.

“Do you see my power now, unbeliever?”

“I see that we’re about to get walloped by that funnel. Don’t know about you, but I’m out of here!” I spread my wings and prepared to lift off.

“Not yet, fiend! I’m not done with you.”

Gesturing like a bad actor in a melodrama, he screamed:

“Ibi manere!”

And with that, I found myself pinned to the ground, wings fluttering uselessly as the tornado bore down on us. Not that I was worried the storm would kill me, but a sprained wing would ground me for a couple of days, not a good scenario for somebody who’s on multiple knights’ hit list.

“Fine! Now tell me what you want before we both get shredded by the storm!”

My ears curled in dismay as Nudl smiled. “I command you to kill my worst enemy!”

“Who’s that? You must have plenty.”

Nudl sneered. “Not yet slave. When I’m ready, I’ll tell you who, but I can’t have you getting drunk and blurting out that information in a bar. Don’t worry; you won’t have long to wait. Events are in

motion, and by September's Harvest Moon your fangs will run red with my foe's blood. Now begone, slave!"

Nudl disappeared in a puff of green smoke that smelled like a dead rat, which was what he was going to be as soon as I figured out how to get out from under his spell. But first, I leapt off the mountain and veered away from the storm at flank speed.

2

ROLLED LIKE A CIGAR

I was in a nasty mood as I fled my encounter with Nudl. That improved when I spotted a tasty lamb frolicking in a meadow below.

Folding my wings, I pitched over into a nose dive. The afternoon sun glittered off my scales as I sliced the chill air in a silent rush of charcoal fury. I trimmed a bit to adjust to the lamb's position as it turned to the left, then I was on it.

The lamb heard the thunder of my wings at the last moment and rightly interpreted it as DFA (Death From Above; I promise, that's the only acronym you'll have to suffer through.) The little squirt took off straight for a stand of oaks that would slow any aerial predator.

Well, almost any. The ninny never looked back to see who had put it on the dinner menu, and while a dense stand of burl oak would definitely slow an eagle, it didn't present much of an obstacle to a

dragon. Most were just saplings anyway. I plowed into the trees at full speed, shouldering trunks aside as I grabbed the lamb in my claws, then pulled up to wing away with my prize.

The lamb kicked and struggled, upsetting my efforts at a smooth climb out. Totally annoying, so I bit its head off to quiet it down.

What? I'm a predator—all dragons are. Just be glad you're not on the carte du jour. Heh.

I polished off my snack as I glided west across the Fortunatus mountains toward the border with Brightshire. After harrowing Wurstshire last night, I figured I'd have better prospects for din-din in a different locale, and the prosperous land of Brightshire offered easy pickings.

With the sun high in the sky, though, I had to change my tactics. At night, I can fly over a farm unspotted, appearing out of the midnight gloom like a ghost at a funeral. But people have a distressing tendency to rush their flocks into sturdy barns when they see a dragon in the light of day.

Dropping low, I skimmed the treetops at speed, following the terrain as I looked for prey. Cresting a hilltop, I spotted a flock of woolies in a meadow. The shepherd saw me at the same moment I noticed him, and I have to give the boy credit; he didn't panic. Instead, whipping his crook overhead, he whistled up his sheepdogs and got the flock moving into a nearby wood while I was still banking around to get a line on them.

I swooped for a fat ewe, but the sheepdogs snapped at it, forcing it to change direction, and I caught nothing but air. Have I mentioned a particular dislike on my part of canines? Border collies, in particular?

Pulling hard right, I cut the legs out from under one of the collies with my tail and snatched a sheep while the dogs regrouped. I can't say it was tough; the dim ruminant had stopped to watch me try for the ewe and was clearly at the low end of the gene pool. The sheep equivalent of a Darwin award moment, if you will. I probably did the

farmer a favor, preventing a creature of such limited intellect from procreation, but what thanks do I ever get for such an enlightened act? Heh.

With the rest of the flock huddled in a wood and the shepherd and dogs on full alert, I figured my chances for an easy dessert were gone, and I decided to move on. As I flew away, I heard the shepherd blow his horn, joined moments later by the sound of warning horns from the surrounding area.

Giving up, I muttered a curse about well-organized defenses and turned back into the mountains to enjoy the one sheep I'd been able to snatch.

As I glided over a wooded vale, a familiar scent, earthy and slightly sweet, made me pull a high-gee turn, coming in for a hard landing in a clearing by a stream. A bearded man, tall, thin, and ragged of dress, stepped back from a still. He glared at me with suspicious eyes as he took another step back, braced to make a run for it.

Dropping the sheep's carcass, I said, "Relax. I'm not going to hurt you."

Glancing at the sheep, he took another step back. "I ain't aiming to land on ya'lls dinner table!"

Seems I get that a lot. "That's not why I'm here."

"Oh, it ain't, eh?"

"Nope. Caught the smell of something witching and thought I'd find the source."

"And then?"

"Maybe have a taste."

"Ah, ya'll got a hankering for the shine, do ye?"

"Depends. Is that straight corn mash, or did you add other grains?"

"Mostly corn with a bit o' wheat. No rye, if that's yer worry. Ain't telling how much of the wheat I put in. That's secret, like."

“No problem. I don’t drink rye unless I’m desperate; it gives me gas. But a good wheated bourbon would go down sweet with this mutton. How close are you to finishing the batch?”

“It’s got another day to go. But I still got a couple jugs of the last batch. It ain’t free, though.”

“Of course not! How about a nice shank of roast mutton?”

“Well, I recon that warn’t your sheep to begin with, so that ain’t much of an offer. Sides, I got a loaf and some turnips already for supper, don’t be needing much else. Not that I’d object to a bite, see, but what else you got to offer?” His eyes narrowed as he gave me a canny look. “Like, gold?”

“Oh, you’d like a bit of gold for your spirit, eh?” I curled up in front of the still as we got down to the hard bargaining.

“I just might. Sumthing wrong with that?”

“Not at all. Tell you what; I’ll give you a silver piece for every jug you sell me.”

“Hah! I git twice that from the townies, and dealin with a dangerous fella like you, I feels gold is more like than silver.” He folded his arms. “And besides, you ain’t even tolt me your name. Hard deal’n with a stranger, you know. Price goes up.”

“Oh, pardon me! Name’s Draco.”

“Howard. Please ta meetcha, Mr. Draco.”

“Just Draco. No mister.”

“K. Now then, about the gold? I don’t see no purse.”

I gave Howard a wicked grin. “Of course you don’t. And you won’t unless I want you to see it.”

Now, one of the advantages of being a magical creature is that I can have a back pocket without having a pair of pants. This makes it very convenient to carry loose change while forestalling pickpockets.

I pulled a leather pouch out of my pocket and shook out a handful of gold and silver coins. Picking out a couple of silver shillings, I put the rest away, slipping my purse back into my pocket

as I tossed the coins to the man's feet. "I'll take one of those," I said, gesturing to the blanket-covered heap behind him.

Howard scratched his chin for a moment, eyes flicking between my purse and the coins on the ground. After a moment, he picked up the money with a grin. "Deal!"

While the moonshiner got a jug from his stash, I trotted to the creek. Extending a talon, I skinned the sheep, then gutted it, tossing the offal aside. Returning to the clearing, I held up the carcass and gave it a good once-over with some dragonfire. Pulling off a smoking shank, I asked, "How do you like your mutton? Rare or well done?"

Howard stared for a moment and gulped. "A little more on the done side, if'n yous please."

A bit more work with dragonfire produced the desired result, and he passed over the jug as I handed him the meat.

The shine tasted as good as it smelled, sweet with light smoke and hints of vanilla. Howard knew his stuff and hadn't cut his product with a clear spirit to boost its strength. The first jug went down easy, and I bought another without hesitation.

As the evening set, Howard produced a fiddle and played some jigs and ballads. He couldn't play nearly as well as he brewed whiskey, but I'd had enough to drink that it didn't matter. At some point in the evening, I stopped putting my purse away and tucked it between my legs for quick access when buying more booze. When the stars began to dance around the moon, I guzzled one last jug, laid my head on my tail, and napped out.

3

CHARITABLE DONATIONS

A chorus of out-of-tune birdsongs woke me. It was early morning, and the sun's golden rays made short work of penetrating my sizzling eyeballs and lancing my throbbing brain. My heart beat its refrain of *re-gret, re-gret, re-gret*, as usual when hungover. Something that seemed to be happening more frequently of late.

“Howard? What did you put in that shine? Howard??”

There was no sign of the moonshiner, who must have snuck off in the night. A dozen empty jugs lay scattered, and it came to me that I had done most if not all of the drinking.

The caramelized vanilla smell of the brewing mash convinced me that Howard would eventually return, but not until he was sure I was gone. A lot of folk are uneasy around us, and at first I thought he might be in that crowd. But when I noticed my back pocket was

empty and my purse of gold coins was missing I developed a suspicion that there might be another reason for the rascal sneaking off. I cursed myself for an idiot, feeling a wave of shame as I considered the consequences of getting caught drunk again. The stolen gold wasn't just beer money; my mate needed it for her hoard, and she'd be furious at the loss.

My head spun as I got up, and I had to brace myself against a tree until things settled down. The brook was nearby, and I only knocked over a couple of saplings as I staggered down to it.

While I soaked my head in the creek to ease my hangover, I thought some more about the spell Nudl had put on me. The harvest moon was four months off, which gave me some time. The cold water steamed as I fumed, somewhat negating the effectiveness of the water.

Pulling my head out, I curled up on the mossy bank and gnawed on a leftover leg bone, cursing the wizard with every breath. The spell was potent, and I couldn't think of a way to break it.

Given my predicament, it seemed that my best course of action was to consult the wisest of my brethren. Taking to the air, I sped north toward Dragonmount.

While coasting over a low range of mountains, I spotted a lonely farm in a valley, and it occurred to me that my mate, who lived in the Mount, might not be pleased with me showing up without any gold or gems for her. Given her temper, an offering might be a good idea. And if she didn't want it, some fresh mutton might improve my chances of getting a useful, if not sober, opinion from the dragons' brain trust.

Swooping low, I snatched a fat little lamb right out of the farmer's pen.

As I did, the housewife screamed and threw herself over a half dozen brats that were so dirty that the only way to tell they were people and not just lumps of brown dirt was their mobility. Not that

she had anything to fear, on account of me already having a good bit of mutton in my talons, but we do have a reputation, you know.

Anyway, as I was flying off I noticed the farmhouse's roof needed thatching and there was more stone than whitewash showing on the walls, which were missing some bricks. The front of the barn was scorched to the rafters, and the fences needed mending on the animal pens. Banking over the hilltop, there were three crosses stuck in the mud; one big and two little ones, and then it hit me. The burned out barn, the absence of any man to shoot arrows at me and curse, and the graves; her farm had recently been raided, and not by a dragon. Like lightning, we burn things from the top down. That barn was burned from the bottom up, and only humans do that.

Damnation! It's one thing to steal a sheep from a prosperous land owner who can easily replace it. It's something else to grab one from somebody who's fighting to stay alive and losing.

I swept back down on the farm, coming in low and slow. And when I passed over the rocky patch of ground that passed for her vegetable garden I dropped a load.

Giving the woman a big, toothy grin I pulled up and reached for sky. As I flew off, she grabbed her chits and raced to the garden with a wheelbarrow and spades. Having a high protein diet, as we do, and being magical and all, dragon manure is highly prized by every agriculturist. The woman's garden would get a boost from that one load that would produce enough food to feed her kids for years to come.

That's the kind of thing that can make a fellow feel all warm inside, but I was pretty sure it was just gas from Howard's moonshine. It has that effect on me if the shiner blends rye with the mash, which I'm pretty sure he did even though he swore otherwise. The absence of my purse when I woke inclined me to believe he wasn't the most honest of humans.

I circled at some height to watch the woman's antics. Curiously, she wasn't spreading the manure over her garden but was scooping

up every smidgen of it and putting it in her barrow. It occurred to me that she might not know the agricultural value of the turds, but when she took off down the road with it, I had a feeling she was up to something.

I dropped down into a copse of woods a bit up the road from her where she couldn't see me. Then, when she came abreast, I slunk along behind her and followed her for a couple of miles.

She was so focused on where she was going that she never noticed me, which says a lot because even when we try dragons are not the stealthiest creatures on foot.

After a bit, she turned up a lane to a large, prosperous farm. Hailing the foreman as she approached the barn, she lowered the wheelbarrow and wiped the sweat from her forehead.

The foreman approached and nodded, "Good day, widow Glenkin! What brings you to Squire Barrelbottom's land? Is all well with you? I hear there have been dragon sightings this morn."

"Oh aye, more than sightings, goodman Donaldson. One of the vile creatures struck my land and carried off a prize lamb!"

"I'm sorry to hear that. The damned things are a nuisance, and I wish the king would do something about them. Did he do much damage? Are your children safe?"

"Yes, the chits are fine."

"What then, brings you here?"

"Before he left, the villain voided his bowels. Right on my prize turnips!"

"Really? That's odd."

"Indeed it is. But good fortune for me, and you too if the squire is wise."

"Ah, then the barrow ... ?"

"Yep. A full load of fresh dragon manure. And I'll sell it to you for a fair price."

That got the foreman's attention, and with a quick, "Wait here!" he ran into the barn. Moments later, he returned with a well-dressed man on horseback and a ragged peasant.

The squire was a sturdy man of round proportions, if you get my drift, and his ruddy face took on a calculating look as pulled up in front of the woman. "Good morn, widow Glenkin. My foreman tells me you have something to sell."

The widow knocked off a quick curtsy. "I do indeed, Squire sir. Here's a barrow of prime dragon manure, and I'm willing to sell it."

"Dragon manure? How did you come by that? And how do I know it is what you claim?"

I was pretty sure the foreman had already told the squire the woman's story, which meant the man was establishing a bargaining position. But the widow was canny too, and gave quite a rendition of events, embellishing them somewhat in terms of my size and depredations. Honestly, I didn't carry off her entire flock. Just one lamb. Heh.

When she finished relating her tale, the squire gestured to his foreman. "There's only one way to be sure. Test it."

Suddenly I understood why the peasant had been brought from the barn. At a word from the foreman, the peasant poked a finger into the steaming pile. He wiggled it around a bit, then put the finger in his mouth.

After getting a taste, he nodded to the foreman and said, "Good shite!"

The foreman nodded to the squire, who drew himself up and said, "Well, it seems you do have something of interest. I can give you, oh, a dozen shillings for the load."

"What?! It's worth a thousand times that! You can fertilize an entire field with this load. I'll not be cheated!" The woman picked up the barrow and made to go, but the foreman ran around to stop her.

Holding his hands out placatingly, the foreman said, "Wait, wait, good woman. I'm sure you misunderstood the squire's offer."

The squire grinned, and I fought down an urge to baste the jerk with some dragonfire for trying to lowball a poor widow. I mean, really. Some people are just the worst.

Leaning forward on his saddle, the squire waved the woman back. “Indeed, there does seem to be a bit of a mix-up. My mind was elsewhere, perhaps on the price of new boots or such. What I meant to say, was that I’ll give you ten gold pieces for the full load.”

Hands on her hips, the woman scowled. “Fifteen! And three of your new-foaled lambs to replace the ones that monster took.”

Monster? Me? Heh, got that right!

The squire haggled with the widow a bit more before they settled on twelve gold pieces and two lambs, which seemed a fair price to me. Spitting on their palms, they swived the deal and headed up to the squire’s mansion to fetch the coins.

I waited till the foreman and peasant had trundled the wheelbarrow into the barn, then took off. Soaring into the air I resumed my flight to Dragonmount.