



Old Chums

By Lily Idle

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Sir Harliess Darnesville leapt across a four foot chasm that snaked along the ground of the once glorious ballroom of the Winter Castle. Two feet of concrete crumbled beneath him as he jumped so he landed awkwardly on the opposite side. Steam rose through cracks in the ground from thermal vents in the mountain the castle sat atop. Looking up, Darnesville could see the sky through the mostly crumbled roof of the palace. And silhouetted against the sunset, the tall tower stood resolutely, unaware it sat atop a ruin.

Darnesville traced the path down from the tower with his eyes. The staircase to his right seemed the most direct path. He ran for the stairs, armor clanking as he went. He'd be fine if he reached the tower before the great beast awoke.

A low groaning growl signaled a complication in his perfect plan. Darnesville ran faster until he reached an arch that led onto a long open landing. He hesitated. He'd be terribly

exposed until he reached the staircase at the end of the landing. He straightened his helmet and leapt forward into a summersault.

Darnesville jumped up and twirled like a ballet dancer. He spun his way across the narrow crumbling stone in unpredictable motions. Just when he thought himself safe, a single bound away from the enclosed staircase, a blast of fire hurtled toward him.

Darnesville dropped into such perfect splits he'd have made the dance master at the Academy of Myths proud. But the trouble for Sir Harliess Darnesville had never been getting into the splits but getting *out* of them.

As he floundered on the ground, he wondered why he'd volunteered to rescue the stupid princess in the first place. She was without a doubt the worst one!

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The King's Summer Palace was now his only palace. His contractors had deemed the Winter Castle structurally unsound. The king's tantrum had lasted for weeks.

"This is how you get dragons!" he'd wailed.

His specialists gave the Winter Castle six months until Deliverance Mountain's thermal vents, originally intended to heat the castle, eroded its foundations entirely. So the Summer Palace had become the king's grandest castle, though technically it no longer had any competition.

The king stood on the raised dais in front of his throne. Three marble steps led up to the platform and at the foot of the steps stood the king's children. His two sons stood to his left and two of his daughters to his right. A few dozen courtiers stood scattered through the high-ceilinged hall all facing the dais. Harliess Darnesville stood centered in front of the king.

The king had his hands over his face and when he finally spoke, his words were muffled and inaudible.

"Father, we cannot hear you," said the eldest prince.

"My favorite daughter has been abducted by our enemy," the king cried as he lowered his hands.

The two daughters below him exchanged a bewildered glance.

"She has been taken to my Winter Castle, where she is guarded by a beast so horrid no

one dares to speak its name.”

“No one knows its name, father,” said the younger prince.

“And so they do not speak it,” the king said, annunciating each word. “Aradisa, my most beloved, most talented, most beautiful daughter must be rescued. I must have her returned for there is no child I value more.”

All four royal children stared in confusion up their father. The eldest prince and heir looked about to object but managed to bite his tongue.

Darnesville waited while two other knights dropped to their knees, pledging themselves as the best suited to rescue the princess. He then stepped forward with a casual, confident saunter.

“You majesty,” Darnesville said.

He stepped forward, flipped up the visor on his helmet, and dropped to one knee.

“Ah, Sir Harliess Darnesville. I did not recognize you with your visor down.”

“Indeed, your majesty,” Darnesville said.

“Rise, great knight. I do not see your equal in these halls,” the king said.

The two other kneeling knights shuffled backwards into the crowd. Darnesville got to his feet.

“Will you vow on pain of death to rescue my favorite child from the beast at my once beautiful Winter Court as you rescued my youngest daughter from that dreadful ogre?” the king said.

“I do so vow, your majesty,” Darnesville said. “I shall not rest until I—”

Confident footsteps parted the gathered onlookers and caused Darnesville to falter. He turned and grumbled to himself as Sir Arlen Fensdale stepped from the crowd. The captured princess’s infatuation and the eldest son of the wealthiest landowner in the country, Sir Fensdale did not need to seek out glory but sought it nevertheless.

“Sir Arlen Fensdale!” the king cried in glee.

“I apologize for my lateness, your majesty,” Fensdale said as he dropped to one knee. “I could not arrive sooner.”

“Rise, Sir Fensdale,” the king said. “My but this is quite the predicament. Two qualified knights and sadly only one daughter in need of rescue.”

“Your majesty,” Darnesville said, stepping in front of Fensdale. “Having already rescued

one of your beautiful daughters, I know I can safely return Princess Aradisa to you.”

“But we cannot rely on luck favoring Sir Darnesville a second time now can we?”

Fensdale said moving beside Darnesville.

Several courtiers chuckled.

“I’m glad to see you’ve finally dislodged the splinter that so conveniently held your tongue at a previous princess’s peril,” Darnesville said.

“Jolly, good, gentlemen. Jolly good,” said the king. “We shall resolve this in a simple manner.”

“A duel!” yelled the eldest prince.

“To the death!” added the younger prince.

“No, you nitwits,” said the king. “Why would I halve our number of qualified knights? He who returns Aradisa to me first shall win their weight in gemstones and Aradisa’s hand in marriage.”

Darnesville cheered his agreement along with Fensdale. He’d reach the castle first, slay the dragon, and spend the return journey planning how to get out of the marriage arrangement.

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The valiant Sir Harliess Darnesville couldn’t believe he was about to die by dragon in the splits. He’d been top of the class in dragon dodging! The top of his helmet was still hot from the first jet of fire that brushed over his head when he dropped down into his current predicament.

Darnesville moved both arms to his left side and leaned onto them as another blast of fire surged past him. He kicked his legs out to his right. He awkwardly pushed himself onto all fours. The growling grew louder and another burst of fire flew toward Darnesville. It illuminated the steam and the massive form behind it. Darnesville had a split second to register the immense size of the beast before he was forced to roll desperately to his left along the landing.

He leapt to his feet and drew his sword. His eyes fell on the ties of the only remaining chandelier in the crumbling hall. It just might be enough launch him straight across onto the

landing a story up. If not, he'd dangle helplessly above the hall, a fly in the dragon's web. He had no choice. Remaining was also death.

Darnesville grabbed the rope firmly with his left hand and slashed at its tie. He launched up across the steam and smoke filled hall. He let out a high shriek of surprise that he hoped sounded to his foe like a yell of exhilaration. He alighted on the next landing with more grace than even he'd expected. Bolstered by his success, he let out a fierce battle cry.

"Foul beast, you will rue the day you attempted to thwart the plans of the valiant Sir Harliess Darnesville!"

"Harliess Darnesville?" came a deep, rasping voice from behind a dense plume of smoke.

The dragon pushed its great head through the steam and smoke. It was dark green and each scale larger than a man's hand. A great tail with six large spikes waved side to side behind its body. It had vibrant and very familiar amber eyes. Harliess Darnesville flipped up his visor.

"Turnescent Gogswyld?" he asked.

"My goodness, what a pleasant surprise!" The dragon said. "My, how long has it been? Forty, no, fifty years?"

"Sixty five! Since our last class reunion," Darnesville said with a smile.

"No, it cannot be. I simply cannot believe it," the dragon said in his deep voice, as he shook his immense emerald head side to side. "My the time surely does fly."

"Not nearly as fast as you do!" Darnesville said.

Gogswyld chuckled.

"How have you been keeping, old chum?" Gogswyld asked.

"Keeping well. Really well," said Darnesville.

He sheathed his sword and gestured at his armor.

"I got new armor," he said.

"You did! You did! It looks spectacular!" Gogswyld said.

"Killed an ogre for it. I had to rescue another one of the King's wandering princesses."

"Not Glorgar, I hope," said the dragon in a worried tone.

"No, no. He's off terrorizing the Everlanes these days," said Darnesville.

"Oh, good for him. Good for him," said Gogswyld chuckling again. "My, look at that scar of yours. Your entire cheek! Battling that ogre?"

“Actually no,” Darnesville said.

Darnesville looked at his feet in embarrassment. He brushed his gloved right hand against the scar that dented his right cheek.

“I... uh... dated a banshee for a few years and it... we didn't end on good terms,” he explained.

“Was it Emersa?” Gogswyld asked.

“Uh, yeah... We tried it again,” Darnesville said.

“Oh, your poor sod,” Gogswyld said. “You broke Master Pickin's biggest rule not once but twice!”

“Though she may look like a beauty, always fear the heart of a banshee,” they said together in sing-song voices.

“What is that dreadful sound?” Darnesville asked.

“Oh that horrid cacophony? That would be the princess,” Gogswyld said with a shake of his head. “She thinks her voice sweet and haunting.”

“Well it's definitely going to haunt,” said Darnesville.

The two chuckled. Darnesville remembered their time at the Academy of Myths fondly. They were the most successful pair at Princess Capture and Release Drills.

“Listen, I've got a problem here Gogswyld,” Darnesville said finally and wrung his gloved hands awkwardly in front of him.

“You need the princess,” Gogswyld supplied, face turning solemn.

“Or it's my head you know. The king... he's...” Darnesville trailed off.

“Yes... Well, I cannot exactly *let* you take her. I need insurance and there's my reputation to consider...” Gogswyld said. “If word travels you can't hold onto a princess then one thing leads to another...”

“But, Turnescent. Perhaps if—”

“No, no, Old Chum. I will be the laughingstock of the land if it gets out I allowed a *princess* to escape like that” he snapped his front two claws together. The sound clanged around the entrance hall and made Darnesville wince.

“I cannot leave without her, Gogswyld,” Darnesville said.

The air itself seemed to grow cold with the sudden tension.

“What are you saying, Darnesville?” Gogswyld said, sounding much more like a dragon

than a friend.

“Are you *talking* to the *dragon*?” asked a perplexed voice to Darnesville’s left.

Sir Arlen Fensdale emerged from the archway, sword drawn. He looked at Darnesville’s sheathed sword and Gogswyld’s proximity.

“Do you two *know each other*?” he asked in horror.

“Keep him,” Darnesville said and pointed at Fensdale.

“What?” Gogswyld and Fensdale said in unison.

“This is Sir Arlen Fensdale, son of Lord Argulas Fensdale,” Darnesville said.

Gogswyld’s stern face brightened.

“*The* Lord Argulas Fensdale?” Gogswyld’s said. “The man who owns more land and has more gold in his coffers than the King himself?”

“His first born son,” Darnesville said and gave Gogswyld a wink.

“What a fine damsel he shall make!” Gogswyld cried.

“But, but, I can’t be a damsel!” Fensdale said. “I’m a man!”

“Not a particularly compelling argument,” Gogswyld said and carelessly flicked Fensdale’s sword from his hand with a single talon. “Not compelling at all.”

Gogswyld wrapped his right claw around the knight who began to scream for help. He flapped his great wings and rose to the top tower. Darnesville watched Gogswyld shove his open left claw into the tower’s window and remove it curled closed. Then he shoved the claw with Fensdale in it through the window and removed it open and empty. Gogswyld flapped back down toward Darnesville and opened his left hand to the ground beside him. The princess rolled out of it onto the stone.

“Oh Dear!” Darnesville exclaimed. “Is she...?”

“Oh no, no, old chum,” Gogswyld said. “She’s simply a fainter. At every little thing. It’s absurd really.”

Darnesville laughed. He picked up the princess and slung her over his shoulder. Fensdale’s shouts sounded faintly from the tower above.

“I do hope he’s a better singer than her,” Gogswyld said, looking momentarily concerned.

“He won the Masters of Minstrel contest only this past year!” Darnesville said.

“Delightful, delightful,” Gogswyld said.

Gogswyld extended an open paw and Darnesville hopped into it. The dragon flew across

the crumbling hall and up over the collapsing wall surrounding it. He lowered himself and then Darnesville onto the ground in front of the castle's entrance.

"What are you doing Wednesday evening?" Darnesville asked as he stepped from the dragon's paw.

"No plans at present," Gogswyld said.

"How about a pint at Radalphous's Tavern? They added that new open cavern space and its well suited for those your size."

"I've heard great things about Radalphous's from Vennesall the Verte," Gogswyld said.

"Is that what Vennesall is going by these days?" Darnesville asked.

"I'm afraid so."

"It'll take me until Tuesday to return this mess," Darnesville said as he walked towards his tied steed. He flopped the princess over the horse. "Then I can vow to rescue that Fensdale idiot. I'll tell the king my first concern was the princess's safety so I had to leave him behind. Something like that. I'll practice along route."

"You'll want Fensdale back so soon?" Gogswyld said shocked. "My, my. I—"

"Oh no, no, no," Darnesville said as he mounted his horse. "God, no. But they don't have to know that now do they?"

He winked at the dragon.

"Delightful!" Gogswyld said. "I'll see you Wednesday then!"

"It's so lovely to reconnect, Gogswyld!" Darnesville said.

Darnesville kicked his steed into a canter and set off down the mountain path.

"First pint's on me!" the dragon called after him.