

THE WARDEN THREAT



**Book One of the
Humorous Science
Fiction Epic**

Defying Fate

Dedication

This edition is dedicated to my old Dungeons & Dragons group, The Mutants of the Round Table (you know who you are), friends and family, and all those who supported me with encouragement, comments, reviews, and suggestions.

Books by D.L. Morrese

~*~

~Stories of the Warden's World~

An Android Dog's Tale

Defying Fate (Combined eBook Edition)

The Warden Threat (Defying Fate Part 1)

The Warden War (Defying Fate Part 2)

Amy's Pendant

Disturbing Clockwork

~*~

~Adventures of the Brane Child~

Brane Child

The Scarecrow's Brane

License Notes

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in a form or by any means, digital, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or conveyed via the Internet or a Website without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. Thank you for respecting the author's work.

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

First Paperback Edition, March 2012

Second Paperback Edition, March 2013

Third Paperback Edition, December 2013

Visit <http://dlmorrese.wordpress.com/> for maps and other information about the places visited in this book.

The Warden Threat

Volume One of
Defying Fate

D.L. Morrese

* * * * *

PUBLISHED BY:



FUZZY ANDROID

Fuzzy Android Press

(<http://fuzzyandroid.wordpress.com/>)

WORLD eBOOK LIBRARY EDITION

Specifically Formatted for Project Gutenberg

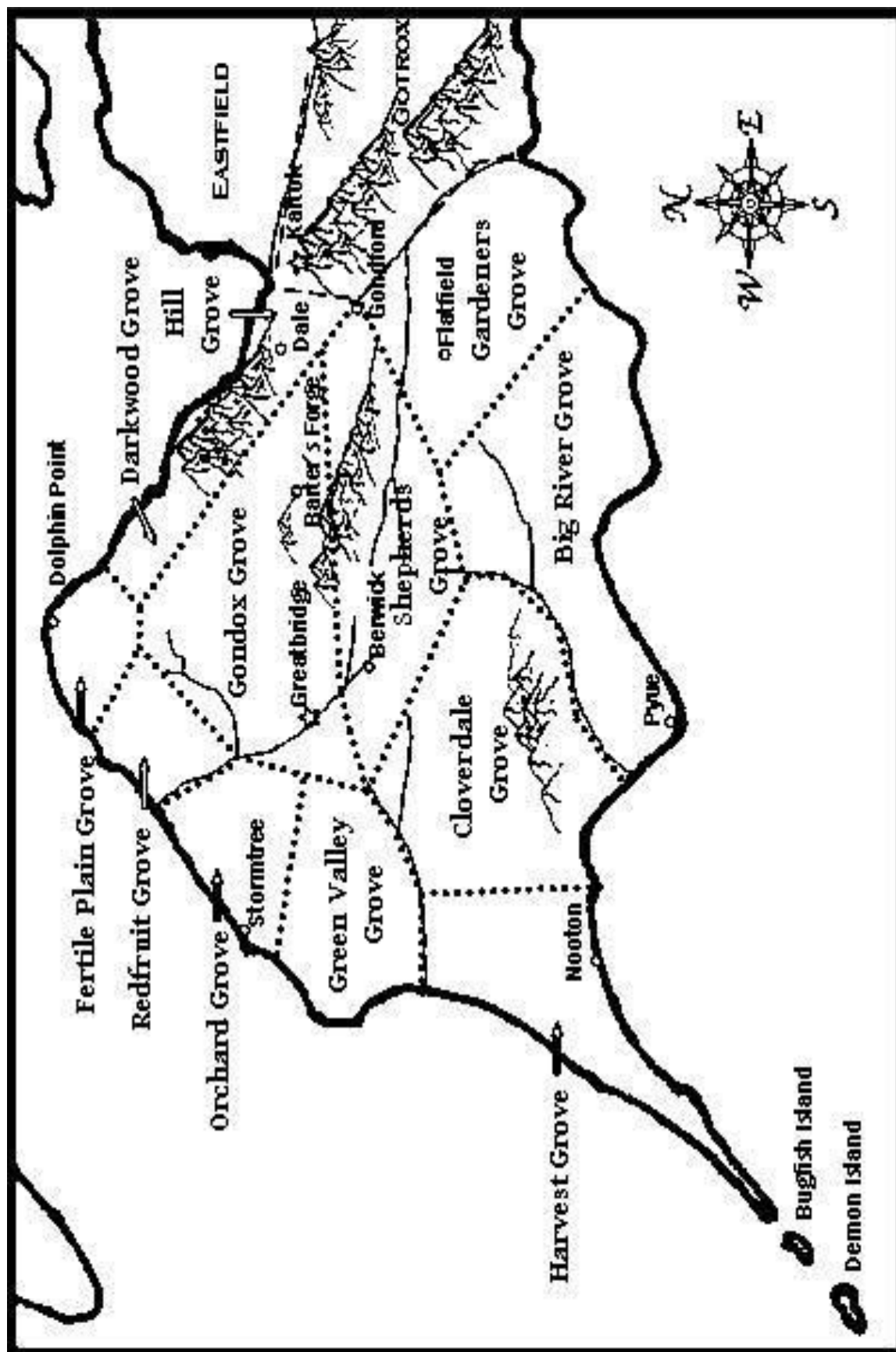
Also available as:

Trade Paperback ISBN-13: 9781470081874

Kindle eBook ASIN: B005MAWTUM

Multi-Format eBook ISBN: 9781466105966

Copyright © 2011-2013 by DL Morrese



The Kingdom of Westgrove and Environs

Chapter One

From the back of his mount, Donald saw another group of peasants gathering this year's potato crop from the dry, cracked soil. Sweat dripped from their greasy hair and stained their worn and patched clothing. 'Find out about the commoners,' his mother had told him before he had left. 'They are our people and it is our duty to see to their needs.' What many of them needed most, an involuntary thought suggested, is a bath, and he immediately felt guilty for it. The Faith taught that the gods determined the fate of everyone. If true, these peasants could no more change their role in life than he could, as much as he might like to, and he felt guilty for this thought too.

The people toiling in the field to the right of the dust-covered road looked up briefly from their labors as Prince Donald and his guide passed. The prince lifted a gloved hand to wave in what he thought reflected a regal manner. A young girl waved back, briefly, before returning to her knees, plunging her dirt covered hands into the soil.

His guide stopped unexpectedly after another mile and stooped to examine the road. Donald reined in his serviceable but otherwise unimpressive mount. "What do you see, Kwestor?"

The ranger replied in a slow monotone. "Dirt, mostly. And a pair of wheel ruts." The older man's heavy, well-traveled cloak hung limply on his shoulders in the still air, hiding his movements from his current employer. "Probably a farm wagon, but I could make up something more exciting if it would make you feel better."

Donald could not recall how many times Kwestor had teased him before, either directly or indirectly, about his not so secret desire for adventure. The young prince did not honestly expect to encounter dragons or evil wizards. His naivety recognized some bounds. He knew the stories in his library back at the castle were fiction, but he still held out some hope for the possibility of finding a damsel in distress in need of rescue by a brave and heroic prince. Just once would be enough. Then he could go back to Greatbridge and fulfill his duty as the nominal head of whatever noble cause the queen might find worthy of the third son of a king.

Without standing, the scout lifted his attention from the road, raised two fingers, and motioned to the right toward a thick patch of woods.

"What is it?" Donald asked anxiously. "Are there two brigands waiting ahead in the woods?"

"No," Kwestor replied without turning. He drew out the single word, delivering it with slow deliberation, his voice hinting at some underlying sadness or perhaps disappointment. "I'm going over there to take a poop."

The staggeringly mundane nature of what the man said shocked the prince for a moment. His simple statement about an act so routine it seldom warranted comment smashed through the prince's worldview like a brick through a stained glass window. He found himself lost for words, but he felt he must make some sort of reply. Prince Donald watched with annoyance as the old scout slowly rose and made his way toward the thick copse of trees. He had gone several steps before Donald blurted, "You're a rather crude man aren't you?"

"Just a reflection of my environment."

"Poop," the young prince mumbled to himself. "*Poop?* Couldn't he even say *shit*?" Donald knew he would not. Kwestor never used profanity, although it made no difference. Adventurers did not poop. Well, they did, but they certainly never talked about it. He could not recall one time in all of the adventure stories he read, and he read all of them, when one of the heroes took a poop. The scout's comment really messed up the ambiance. He could almost hear the bards singing of his heroic adventures, saving damsels, fighting brigands, righting wrongs, and the crowd guffawing at the word, 'poop'. Well, they could leave that part out.

“Kwestor,” he called at the retreating ranger’s back. “When you’re done, see if you can find something we can eat.”

Prince Donald thought he had purchased adequate provisions for this tour of the kingdom when they first set out almost three weeks ago, but they had already gone through most of the travel cakes, dried fruits, and jerked meat with little opportunity to replenish any of it. “I’m going to ride ahead a little way.”

Donald gave his beast a gentle tap with his heels. It snuffed, shook its large, hairy head, and lumbered forward. The young prince never considered himself much of a rider. His own two legs provided a much better way to get around than the four flat-footed ones of a gond. However, a prince is nobility, and the common people expect nobility to ride, so he did, although he could not see much advantage to it himself.

The gonds, the domesticated ones suitable for riding anyway, could, admittedly, travel long distances and carry a great deal of weight, but these assets paled when one considered their considerable lack of speed, an intellect approximately equal to that of overcooked asparagus, and their frequent flatulence. Under ordinary circumstances, his feet could carry him further in a day than his gond could. You could doze on its wide back on a long trip, though, and, if more desperately hungry than Donald ever hoped to be or even imagine, you could eat it, or make shoes out of its hide to replace the ones you ate before you became desperate enough to eat the gond. Donald hoped he never needed to find out for himself. The iron rations tasted bad enough.

He barely noticed the rolling countryside beyond the patch of woods. The small orchards of redfruit trees and partially harvested fields failed to draw his attention. His mind wandered to visit the yet unrealized adventures from his active imagination lying ahead. He spared few thoughts to the here and now.

A mile or so further along the trail, which the locals generously referred to as the main highway, he realized the noise banging on the closed door to his consciousness sounded like someone shouting ahead. He kicked his gond sharply and leaned forward. The beast responded immediately with a sudden burst of somewhat less slow plodding.

“Damn!” He jumped down with the animal still in motion. When his boots hit the dry ground, he stumbled forward but swiftly regained his balance. He double-checked to make sure he had not forgotten to strap his sword to his waist that morning. He had not.

Excitement, uncertainty, fear, and a desire for adventure competed for attention. A desperate need to prove himself out-shouted all of his other inner voices.

He quickly sidestepped the gond, which halted in its tracks within seconds after the prince dismounted, and he sprinted up the small rise before him.

He could pick out words in the shouting now.

“Have you got any money?” The voice sounded like it belonged to a young man, but certainly mature, probably large. The accent suggested someone uncultured as well. It did not sound like a merchant demanding payment or a bureaucrat collecting taxes. It must be brigands!

“Have you got any money?”

Donald crested the small rise. A scene straight out of an adventure story unfolded before him. A small, one room hovel of aging wattle and daub with a sod roof of dirt and decaying weeds stood thirty feet away. He observed several like this on his journey so far, but he still wanted to believe them anomalous. The type of squalor they portrayed seemed incongruous with his expectations of peasant life in his father’s kingdom.

Weathered boards, which once obviously served as a front door, lay broken and scattered in the threshold, half inside, half outside. The damage looked recent. A shed stood to the right of the house, probably a chicken coop or small barn, and a man outfitted as a fighter pounded noisily on the closed door causing it to rattle in its rickety frame.

“Have you got anything?” The man shouted as he banged.

“No, nothing. It’s all gone.” The voice from the other side of the door trembled. This also sounded like a man but of indeterminate age. Donald could hear sobbing and crying, like that of a small child, coming from inside as well.

This is more like it! Donald rapidly checked his memory for the appropriate cast of characters. Before him cowered one family clearly in distress—perhaps one of them might even be a damsel—one rough brigand, and, to complete the scene, one hero, which was he.

He smiled. Drawing his sword in one smooth and, he imagined, very heroic-looking move worthy of a book cover, the prince charged down the small hill toward his chosen opponent.

If he could have restrained his enthusiasm and not shouted what he considered a brave and fearsome battle cry, he might have gotten a little closer before being noticed, what with all of the crying and banging and shouting. But as it happened, the man at the door received ample advance notice of a new problem approaching. In one fluid motion, which may have been just a little more smooth and possibly a tad more heroic-looking than the one Donald used, the brigand turned and drew his own sword.

Curiously, Donald felt pleased. Ah, a worthy opponent. His bravado clearly ran the show at this time, his reason having already skipped on to the next chapter and the scene with the appreciative peasant girl.

Using the momentum of his charge to good advantage, the prince thrust at the other swordsman. Donald showed a lot of power and a fair amount of skill in this thrust. He took lessons every Thursday back at the castle. His opponent, although not quite as large as Donald, appeared to be well muscled and familiar with the art of personal combat.

As their swords met, the shorter man thrust upward and to his left, forcing Donald's sword away from his body. Donald's momentum continued to carry him forward. They collided, or, more precisely, a particularly sensitive portion of the prince collided with a particularly hard and strategically placed knee of the other man. Donald's sword flew from his hand as he instinctively curled until his head almost reached his bent knees. He groaned painfully and fell toward the ground. Before he landed, his opponent managed to spin around and smack him firmly on the back of the head with the pommel of his sword, saving the prince the further discomfort of feeling the impact of his face hitting the hard-packed dirt.

~*~

Kwestor trod the same path his employer traveled ten minutes earlier, but, being on foot, he could go a bit faster. The breeze picked up, stirring the dust serving as the primary construction material for the road. Ahead, he could see the abandoned gond on the side of the road foraging some scraggly perennial mock cabbage bushes, its four-foot long, muscular, prehensile tongue snapping up one small green globe after another.

"Oh, wonderful," he mumbled to himself. He knew the effect mock cabbages could have on the gond digestive system. He would need to make a point of not walking behind the beast for a few days.

The gond seemed not to notice the prince's fearsome war cry. Kwestor, however, turned his head to the source of the sound. "His royal Highness probably found a vicious horde of evil chickens or something," he mumbled. "Well, I better go help him before they peck him to death."

His assessment changed with a clang of steel on steel. Armed chickens? The ranger dropped the limp body of the small bird he had managed to shoot minutes earlier, bolted to the crest of the hill, and stopped.

He took in the scene before him. His employer sprawled on the ground, motionless in front of a small, wood plank shack. A muscular young man in chain mail stood over him, banging on the flimsy door with his fist. A sheathed long sword hung at his waist.

The warrior shouted outside the shabby structure. "Are you sure you don't have any money?"

Kwestor removed his cloak and strung his bow.

A sobbing reply came from within. "No, they took everything we had."

He drew an arrow from his quiver.

"Everything?"

"Yes!"

He pulled the bowstring to his cheek.

"So, you have no money at all?"

“None!”

He targeted the man’s back.

“Well, that’s just awful. Do you want some?”

The ranger lowered his bow and raised an eyebrow. Bandits, as a rule, did not ask such questions. If this guy sought to be some sort of thief, he seriously misinterpreted the training manual.

Kwestor made a quick tactical assessment. He figured he could spare a little time to see how this curious turn of events would play out. After all, the prince appeared to be still alive and relatively undamaged. Although he lay unconscious, Kwestor saw no spreading pool of blood, which normally accompanies a serious battle injury. And if dead, well, nothing could be done for him anyway. The ranger did not think the prince represented one of humanity’s worst examples, and despite his reluctance to do so, he found himself growing fond of the boy. He would help him if he could, although, technically speaking, the job only included his services as a guide. A clause for swordplay did not appear in their original agreement, so he felt no contractual obligation to do anything particularly heroic.

“Do you want some?” the man asked again, after a prolonged silence from the shack.

“Some what?” came the confused reply.

The fighter paused, seemingly considering the question. “Money. If the bandits took everything, you’ll need some money to buy more chickens, and, uh, potatoes, and, uh, other stuff.”

Kwestor made no effort to conceal himself. Either the fighter did not notice him standing there or he did not care. Probably the former since he seemed focused on the shack.

More prolonged silence emanated from the shed.

“You want to give *us* money?” The voice sounded a bit louder and less anxious, even hopeful.

The burly fighting man scratched his head as if mildly confused. After a moment or two, he replied, “Uh, well, you’ll need some won’t you?”

“I suppose. I mean, yes, we certainly could use some.”

The fighter shifted his position and, after some fumbling among his clothes, produced a small, leather pouch. It jingled with the unmistakable sound of coins. He carefully worried loose the drawstring to open the bag, moving his lips as a probing finger stirred the contents.

“Would three gold-trees, five silver-fruit and, uh, seven copper-seeds be enough?”

Kwestor heard a low groan from the prince and glimpsed a brief twitch of his hand. Good. He still lived. The scout breathed a restrained sigh of relief. This meant, among other things, that he still had a job.

“Three g-g-g-gold?” stammered the voice on the other side of the door.

Three gold pieces might easily be more than this family could earn in an entire year—two if the gods of fortune did not smile upon them. Or were they demigods? Westgrove’s pantheon of gods, goddesses, demigods, and holy fairies created a confusing array of religious obligations and feast-day observances. Most peasants found it difficult to keep such things straight, so they left a lot of their religion to the professionals. Just a little contribution to the local priest occasionally could satisfy all of their requirements for praying, fasting, or anything else the gods might expect. Regardless, Kwestor suspected the amount mentioned represented more money than the peasant family ever saw in one place at one time before.

The fighter corrected them. “No. Three gold, five silver, and seven copper,”

A less timid and hesitantly hopeful reply came after another brief pause. “Yes, sir. That would certainly do us very well, sir.”

“Oh good, because it’s really all I can spare. You see, my mom, she’s not as young as she used to be and she can’t really work like she’d done before, and my sister can’t bring in enough money to support the family, and I need to get a present for my cousin Amy’s birthday, and... well, I just have to save most of it for other stuff.”

Kwestor unstrung his bow and returned the arrow to his quiver. The sun now sat high in the sky and some might consider it quite a pleasant day if they liked blue skies, gentle breezes, and such things. He supposed it benign enough, apart from his employer being laid out like an old rug in the dirt, of course.

He spread his travel cloak out on the dry grass of the hill to make a comfortable place to sit and observe. This could take a while.

“Oh, I perfectly understand, sir,” the peasant said. “Anything you could spare would be just fine. Most generous really. Just wonderful. Greatly appreciated and all that.”

“Good,” the probably-not-a-bandit said. He carefully picked the appropriate coins from the purse and drew the drawstring tight. Back it went into the folds of his clothing. He opened his hand containing the money and recounted. Then he recounted again. And then again, this time transferring the coins from one hand to the other as he tallied each. Kwestor half expected him to take off his boots and try it one more time using his toes as counters, but the generous oaf now seemed satisfied with the result of his effort at graduate level accounting.

The fighter looked from his hand to the door and then back to his hand. “You’ll need to open the door so I can give you the money.”

Kwestor heard the rumble of several overlapping voices from within, followed by a moment of tense silence.

“Could you just wait a minute, please?” the peasant asked politely.

“Sure, I suppose.”

The mumbling voices became arguing voices. Kwestor strained and failed to follow the entire conversation, but he could pick out the words ‘idiot’, ‘dead’, and ‘gold’ each more than once.

It really did not take much imagination to figure out the major points of their discussion. They did not trust the burly man at the door, suspected he might be cleverer than he sounded, and the entire dialog represented a ruse to easily get inside, murder them all, and steal their—well—just murder them all. The other side of the debate countered this argument with three gold, five silver, and seven copper pieces. After about a minute or so, a logical solution emerged.

“Could you leave the coins there near the door and, well, just go away? Uh, please?”

The shoulders of the young fighter slumped and his head fell forward. “I suppose I could do that. I’m sure I could, really. But, are you sure? I’d be happy to help you fix up your front door, if you’d like.”

“No, no, that’s quite all right. Actually, you see, uh, you seem very nice and all, but we’re all feeling just a bit skittish about strangers right now, and despite your kindness, you are a stranger.”

From within the shed, Kwestor heard a barely restrained chuckle, which sounded like it might have come from a young boy. “Stranger than most.”

Smack!

“Ouch!”

“Oh,” the fighter said. He sounded disappointed. “Well, if you’re sure.”

“Yes, really. No offense. I hope you understand.”

“Yeah, I understand.” He bent his knees, squatting to place the coins in a neat stack just outside the door.

“I mean, we were just robbed and terrified by a bunch of bandits this morning, so I’d expect you can imagine what we’d be feeling like just now.”

The man outside brightened noticeably. “Oh, that reminds me. I think I may have caught one of those bandits for you.”

Just then, the prince moaned again and twitched.

“Really? We noticed a brief commotion out there earlier. One of the bandits, you say?”

“Yeah, must be. He’s right here. Except for a bump on the head, I don’t think he’s even hurt much. What do you think I ought to do with him?”

The sound of more muted debate came from within. Eventually, the unseen victims’ spokesman said, “Well, I think bandits get hung by the neck but the misses says they gets their heads chopped off, and the boy thinks they’re burned at the stake. I don’t suppose we really know, not having studied the fine points of the law, you know. Whatever you think is proper, I imagine, would be just fine with us. I think the other bandits took our ax and all the rope we had, but there’s some firewood behind the house you can use if it would help.”

Kwestor decided now would be a good time to make his presence known before any acts of rural justice got started. He rose from his improvised seat, gathered his cloak, and shook it to get rid of the clinging bits of dirt and dead grass. He draped it back over his shoulders and, as a precaution, loosened his sword in its scabbard.

He started walking down the gentle hill toward the shack. "Excuse me." He spoke loudly enough to ensure both the fighter and the peasants in the shack could hear him.

The man below looked up, turned to face the newcomer, and stepped away from the shed. He brushed his cloak to the side to clear access to his sword, although he did not draw it.

The ranger got to within about twenty feet of the other man and stopped. "I know it will be a disappointment to you all, but you really shouldn't execute this fellow here." He pointed to the collapsed form of the prince. "I'm afraid he isn't a bandit, and I expect executing him would bring you all no end of trouble. I know this probably really ruins the plans you've been making for the rest of the day, but that's life, after all."

The man in chain mail said, "Huh?"

The prince groaned.

The peasants seemed to have nothing to say and said it very quietly.

"You see," Kwestor continued, "that man over there lying in the dirt is Prince Donald."

The other man just stared at him. Perhaps he did not know much about the royal family.

"Prince Donald of Westgrove," Kwestor elaborated. "Third son of King Leonard and Queen Patricia, and brother of Prince Allan, Prince Robert, and Princess Chastity."

Kwestor glanced behind the young fighter at the sound of scraping wood. Over the man's shoulder, he saw the door of the small shed crack open. A hand darted out, snatched the coins placed just outside, and quickly disappeared as the door slammed closed again. The mentally challenged fighter did not seem to notice and continued to stare at him uncomprehendingly.

"He's a member of the royal family," the ranger clarified with an uncharacteristic hint of exasperation. "He lives in the castle. You know, in Greatbridge. The capital of Westgrove?"

"So, he's not a bandit?"

"No. Sorry. Just a misguided prince."

The fighter seemed to ponder this for a moment. He cocked his head and raised an inquiring eyebrow. "If he's not a bandit, then why did he attack me?"

"Well you see..."

"Wait a minute! I see what's going on here! You're both bandits and you're just trying to help him escape!"

The young man must have built up some mental momentum, and he seemed proud of this bit of complicated reasoning. The fairly logical conjecture surprised the experienced scout. From what he observed of the other man's conversation with the peasants, he did not anticipate having any trouble convincing him of the prince's identity.

Kwestor appraised the man standing before him. He appeared young, maybe about the same age as the prince, perhaps a little younger and four to six inches shorter. He bore broader shoulders, however, and he seemed sturdy. His weight might equal that of the prince. The thick travel clothing and gear made it difficult to judge.

His outfit and equipment suggested a typical mercenary or caravan guard. He wore homespun linen trousers and a shirt under a set of light mail, which ended just below his hips. His readily accessible weapons, Kwestor quickly noted, included a long sword and a couple of knives, some secured on his belt and one in a sheath sewn into one boot. An unstrung bow with a quiver, hanging on his back with the rest of his gear, seemed to complete the arsenal. A worn, gondhide backpack bulging with other belongings suggested someone accustomed to travel, and he certainly did not resemble a local. The fighter's blue eyes with hints of gold flake were a common color for fairfolk but not often seen in this part of Westgrove. His ears, what Kwestor could see of them through the long, shaggy mane of light colored hair, held a more upswept shape than most of the tallfolk locals.

"What's your name, boy?"

“Muce.”

“You see this longbow strapped to my back, Muce.”

“Uh-huh.”

“From that rise,” he began, pointing back and a bit to the left, “I could have shot you dead before you even knew I was there. It would have been a sad way to die, young as you are and not knowing why it was you had been killed. But I could have done it and rescued the prince that way.”

“Well, I suppose, but—”

The older man interrupted. “When I first saw you banging on the shed door, I assumed you were a brigand here to rob this poor farm. That’s probably what the prince thought too, and that’s why he attacked you.”

“Yeah, but I’m not a thief.”

“But the prince couldn’t have known that, Muce.” He stated it as a simple matter of fact.

“That’s not very smart.”

This may have been one of the funniest things Kwestor ever heard. He almost smiled, taking a step toward Muce. It seemed unlikely the younger man would try anything hostile. From behind them, the prince moaned again, this time louder, and he shifted, uncurling as though trying to roll over.

“Help me with him,” Kwestor commanded. He approached the spot where the prince lay and squatted next to him to check for injuries. Muce took a similar position beside him. The ranger rolled the groaning highness over and began his examination.

“So he’s a prince, huh?”

“Yes. Normally he looks more regal.” Kwestor wiped dirt from Prince Donald’s brow with his hand, revealing a darkening bruise. A trail of drool created a smear of mud on the royal cheek. “Ask the farmer if he has some water we can have.”

The young fighter did so while Kwestor removed his own pack and dug for his medical supplies.

“They don’t have a well, but they say there’s a stream not too far in that direction.”

Kwestor did not look to see where the young man pointed. He knew the location of the stream. “No matter. There’s nothing serious here I can see. Just some scrapes and bruises.”

“It shouldn’t be too bad. I didn’t cut him.”

“Yes, I can see that.” He cradled Donald’s head in one hand, pressing lightly with the other.

“But I’m afraid I bopped him on the head pretty good.”

“Mmm-hmmmm”

“After I kneed him in the privates.”

“A very effective tactic.”

Kwestor made a check of arms, legs, and ribs for broken bones, finding no serious damage. “He’ll be all right. Pick him up.”

Muce bent to comply.

“Carefully,” the ranger added. “I’ll go get his gond. We can put him up on that and get him to the inn.” The Redfruit Inn, or a Redfruit Inn (every third inn, tavern and most impromptu bars consisting of a plank connecting two barrels shared the name) stood about seven miles further, in the village of Barter’s Forge. “We should be able to make it there well before nightfall.”

Kwestor sprinted up the hill to retrieve the prince’s mount. Donald would be able to ride on the beast’s wide back, even semiconscious, if they traveled slowly. This would pose no problem with the gond. At top speed, its smooth gait did not match a human’s brisk walk.

Muce grabbed the prince under the arms and pulled him to his feet. He maneuvered to get the taller man’s arm around his shoulders and put his own arm around Donald’s waist. Still dazed and sluggish, the prince managed to stumble along with Muce’s assistance.

“We’re going now,” Muce called back good-naturedly to the peasants in the shack. “It was nice meeting you.”

Chapter Two

Donald felt himself being dragged to his feet, and he tried to hang on to whoever might be doing the dragging. His addled brain seemed to think it better than falling. He heard a voice say something about going now, but it sounded muffled and far away, even though it simultaneously seemed loud and right next to his ear. Yes, this sounded like a good idea. He should be going. He tried to move his feet and they sluggishly responded.

"Mmmph Eyahhhh," he said. This surprised him because he meant to say, "What happened?" He tried to figure out why it came out wrong, but it made his head hurt. When he tried thinking about why his head hurt, it hurt more.

"Ghfffligm gliflix num," he said, which he intended to be, "I think I'll take a nap now." After this fuzzy thought, he let the world happen without making any effort to understand why. It felt much better.

Some unknown amount of time later, his eyes fluttered open. The men on either side of his gond looked up at him as he took in the still somewhat blurry scene around him. Gond, road, Kwestor. Yes. Those all seemed familiar.

"What—?" he began.

"Your highness suffered from an accident." Kwestor answered before Donald could finish formulating the obvious question.

"How—?"

"Nothing serious. Just a few scratches and bruises. You should feel fine after a bit of rest."

"Where—?"

"Just outside the town of Barter's Forge."

"Going to or coming from?"

"Going to."

"Good. I don't think I feel well."

Donald concentrated on sitting, breathing, and not soiling himself from one end or the other. He found it more difficult than he thought it should be. He stared vaguely over the hypnotically bobbing head of the gond for about fifteen minutes. Eventually, he turned to Kwestor. "Who's the other guy?"

"That's Muce. He's the accident that happened to you." He paused a moment while the prince looked down at him with no sign of comprehension. "But it was a misunderstanding."

A memory flash of a man banging on a door confused him. "But he's a—"

"No, he was actually trying to help those peasants. Strange, I know."

"That's true Your Princeliness," Muce said. "I was just walking up the road when I saw those peasants outside their house crying and such with their door all bashed down, so I went over to see if they needed help, and they ran away and locked themselves in their shed."

"They'd been robbed, you see, by some bandits, but I never saw them. The bandits, that is. These guys were probably local bullies. There are lots of bandits about, but most don't normally bother real poor folks like them back there because they don't have nothing worth taking. And they don't usually go for anyone who looks like they can defend themselves, but you probably know all about that."

Donald could not honestly say he did, but it seemed to make sense, as much as anything else did to him just now. Then he recalled something else—it involved pain. "But he—"

"It seems he thought you were a brigand."

"Sorry about that," the young fighter said. "If I knew you weren't a bandit, I wouldn't have thumped you like that, but, if you don't mind me saying, you shouldn't be charging down on people swinging your sword without knowing who it is you're swinging at, if you don't want to be taken for one and treated that way."

The prince turned to look at Muce. Donald's head throbbed, but with some effort, he managed to get his eyes to focus. A blank and honest expression stared back, and the various aspects of Donald's personality tempted to call for anger or vengeance shut up. How could he be angry at such an innocent face? It would be like kicking a puppy. Besides, part of him understood Muce's point. The blonde fighter must have registered some sort of disapproval from the prince, though, because he tried to apologize.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't say stuff like that to a prince, should I? I've never met any royalty before. Well, there was this guy who used to come to play cards and stuff at the Lucky Lady where my mom used to work who said he was a duke, but no one really believed him, although we all called him 'Duke' because he was a good customer, even though some people said he cheated, and what's it hurt anyway?"

The way he said it, and his satisfied expression, suggested he thought this should explain everything, but Donald's face remained unchanged. Muce adopted the demeanor of the aforesaid puppy after an encounter with a rolled newspaper. "I just meant to say I'm sorry for bashing you on the head." His voice became quieter. "And the knee thing too."

"Your Highness?" Kwestor said.

"What?"

"You had a glassy look in your eyes so I wanted to make sure your brain was still working."

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine. I just got lost there a second."

"I know what you mean. We talked a lot while you were out. Actually, Muce talked a lot. Listening can be a bit — disorienting."

"Yes, I can see that." Donald did not quite know what to make of the man, and he took a moment to try to figure out why. Muce not being a bandit came as something of a shock, and Donald felt embarrassed about how he let himself get carried away, and, because of this, how he had to be carried away. However, an additional reason suggested itself. Donald had seldom talked to commoners as if they were, well, real people before, and he still felt uncomfortable doing so. Now seemed to be as good a time as any to get in some practice.

"So, uh, what brings you out here?"

"Well, before I met you and Kwestor, I was thinking I'd go to Sandrift to see if I could hire on as a caravan guard. Lot's of caravans leave from there because it's a major port, and my last job ended in Hilton a couple days ago."

"So you're a caravan guard?"

"Yeah, mostly."

"And you're from Sandrift?"

"Oh, no. I'm from Dolphin Point—the South Temple Sector, actually."

"So you're Westgrovian?" Donald vaguely recalled visiting Dolphin Point as a child once. From his geography lessons, he knew it was a relatively large and cosmopolitan port city and the northernmost in his father's kingdom. He could remember little else about it, though. He took in the man's blonde hair, blue eyes, and slightly pointed ears. Kwestor must have sensed his confusion because he answered his unasked question.

"Muce is a notso, Your Highness." Donald knew the name derived from being not so tall as the tallfolk and not so fair as the fairfolk. "There's a lot of notsos in the coastal cities, especially Dolphin Point."

"Yeah," Muce said. "Most the folks in the South Temple sector are notsos. I still have a bunch of relatives there—my mom, and my sister, and my cousin Amy and, well, just a bunch."

"I see," Donald said. He turned to the taciturn ranger. "This all makes sense, right?"

The older man simply nodded.

Donald considered for a moment, trying to find a positive interpretation for what happened to him and maybe a way to salvage some of his lost dignity when he suddenly came to a realization. Twisting his body on his mount, he concentrated to form a smile and extended his right hand down toward Muce. "I'm sorry. I don't believe we've been formally introduced. My name is Donald, Prince of Westgrove. And my companion over there is Kwestor, who is perhaps the most capable guide and scout in the whole kingdom. We are very pleased to meet you, Muce."

Donald's effort to talk to Muce as though the difference in their stations made no difference seemed to confuse him. The notso's already slack jaw dropped as he turned his head and extended his own hand toward the one the prince offered. "Um, likewise, I'm sure?" he suggested uncertainly.

"Hah! Good man! In a way, our meeting might be considered very fortuitous."

"I don't see how," Kwestor said.

"One of my main reasons for being out and about is to meet the common people, Kwestor. Now, here we are, traveling with a fine fellow who seems very common indeed. I'm sure his unique perspective will be invaluable to me as we get to know one another better. And having another armed man with us can't hurt either. I'm glad we met."

~*~

The past three weeks whittled on the Ranger's composure. The prince seemed to have an unrelenting optimism, which perplexed the jaded scout. Donald should feel humiliated, but instead he acted as though he had just won a prize at the fair. On the long list of things the prince still did not understand, his own mortality appeared on the first page. He could have gotten himself killed, and Kwestor doubted he learned much from the experience. He would need to. Somehow, Kwestor must teach him. He certainly felt no desire to try to explain anything more severe than a bump on the head to the queen. He appreciated the young man's need to test himself, but much more *adventure* might kill him. Donald simply lacked any preparation for life outside the castle. Probably the best thing to do would be to get him somewhere to rest up and then see if he could talk him into going back to Greatbridge before he managed to do something terminal.

The strength of the breeze rose as the sun sank, and they proceeded on the leaf and litter tossed main road toward the center of town. Chickens, dogs, young children, and old men crossed their path or mingled in groups, each scratching as suited their nature. Frequently, the sound of women's voices calling out for a family to come to dinner filtered above din of private conversations, footsteps, and the occasional rattle of cartwheels.

"What did you say the name of this town was?" Donald asked his guide.

"Barter's Forge."

"Curious. My father's chief adviser is named Barter—Horace Barter. I wonder if there's a connection."

"I wouldn't know, sir," Muce offered. "But the last time I was by this way, a fellow named Barter was at the inn. I remember because I thought it odd at the time, him and the village both with the same name. I was at the inn having a meal with some of the other guards. They were serving potatoes in cheese sauce with bits of bacon, I think, with these chopped up onion tops—"

"Muce," Kwestor interrupted sharply.

"Oh. Right. Sorry. Anyway, I was working as a guard for an ore shipment from Gotrox, about fifty wagons, and he was at another table. He called to the innkeeper for some more ale or something. Randy I think his name was. Anyway, Randy, I'm sure that's it, calls back saying, 'Yes, sir, Mister Barter, sir.' So, that's how I knew the man's family name was 'Barter'. I don't recall hearing his given name though."

"When was this?"

"Oh, about four months ago, I think."

"What did he look like? Barter, that is, not the innkeeper."

"Um, I'm not sure I recall, exactly, though I know he was dressed real good because I figured he must be rich, and I wondered if he owned the town or something. I do recall he had real dark hair and eyes and a big, hooked nose. Yeah, that's right because his cape was black, and I remember thinking he looked like a big crow."

"Do you remember about how old he was?"

"Not too. Older than me, but younger than Kwestor."

“Well, it couldn’t have been my father’s adviser. He’s over sixty and his hair is more gray than black, but it sounds like there might be a family resemblance.”

They continued to follow the main road and before long came upon the local Redfruit Inn, a two-story structure of stone, whitewashed stucco and wood, with thick thatch for a roof. A wooden sign with faded paint showing a tree abundant with ripe redfruit creaked on rusty chains over the entrance. Kwestor helped the prince off the gond when they arrived. He noticed Donald moved with slow deliberation while dismounting.

A young stable hand, dressed in mended clothes a bit too large for his skinny frame, hastened to them and offered to tend to the mount. Kwestor gave the boy a few copper-seed coins and told him to unpack the animal and bring their things into the inn. They would be staying the night.

Donald took a few halting steps toward the entrance, and Muce rushed over to help him. The inn’s wide, solid redfruit-wood door opened out into a large, wood-floored room. Diners occupied a number of round tables crammed closely together off to the left.

A plump, flush-cheeked, balding man with an almost white apron greeted them from behind a small bar. “What can I do for you gents?”

“Rooms,” Kwestor replied.

“Hi, Randy,” said Muce.

“Uh, hi,” replied the barkeeper, squinting at the young fighter. “Muce, right?”

“Yes.” Muce smiled.

“Yeah, I remember you. You’ve been through here a few times in the last year or so. You’re the one who helped Bert the potter pull his wagon out of the mud last spring, aren’t you? Damnedest thing I ever saw, you knee deep in the mud holding up the back end of that wagon like it weighed nothing at all.”

Muce responded with a modest grin and lowered his eyes. “Yeah, that was me.”

“Rooms,” repeated Kwestor.

“Oh, yes; sorry, sir. Rooms. We have a very nice one I could let you have upstairs. It’s got four beds with fresh straw mattresses, a chamber pot, washstand, bowel and pitcher, and a window. Just one gold-tree and two silver-fruit a night.”

“Dinner?” Kwestor asked.

“Extra.”

The ranger negotiated for the room and meals. Not long after, the stable boy arrived with their belongings. The innkeeper told the boy which room the men rented, and the laden lad led the way to it.

Muce walked Donald to one of the beds while Kwestor helped the stable boy put the bags, bedrolls and gear in the corner of the room. The ranger handed him one more copper-seed coin and closed the door after he left.

Kwestor turned to the prince. “How do you feel?”

“Not bad at all, really. Just a bit sore in places. I’m fine, I’m sure.”

“Probably are, but a bit of bed rest won’t hurt. Get cleaned up a bit and use the facilities.” Kwestor motioned to the full pitcher on the washstand and nudged the chamber pot underneath with his boot. “We’ll bring up some dinner.” His tone assumed the prince’s compliance. “Then maybe tomorrow we can head back to Greatbridge.” Before the prince could object, Kwestor tapped Muce on the shoulder, pointed to the door, and the two men left, leaving Donald seated alone on the bed.

They found several vacant tables in the dining area on the main floor of the inn and selected a small round one near the bar. A young girl, about twelve or thirteen years old, came to take their order. She told them the inn offered two different main course offerings today—baked chicken with bread stuffing, and scalloped potatoes with ham. Muce asked for a large plate of potatoes and Kwestor ordered one for himself and one for the prince, as well as two bottles of a local wine.

When the food arrived, Muce thanked the girl. Before he could take a bite, Kwestor said, “Go take the prince’s plate and one of the bottles up to him and stay there.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be down here a while. I want to catch up on the news.”

~*~

Kwestor returned late to their room. The prince snored softly on his bed. A wine bottle and the two plates from dinner stood empty on the washstand near three burning candles. Muce sat on one of the other beds with some paper and a pen in his hands and a small bottle of ink close by. "I'm writing to my mom," he said quietly.

The young man's ability to write, and presumably read, surprised Kwestor. Muce did not strike him as the literate type, but he did not comment on it. Instead, he nodded at the sleeping form of the prince. "It seems as if his father is preparing for war."

Chapter Three

Donald woke the next morning with dull aches all over his body, but his head no longer seemed to want to explode. He eased himself out of bed. Those of his two companions were empty. Stepping to the washstand, he found a note from Kwestor resting by the bowl and pitcher. *Went down to breakfast.*

Donald splashed some water on his bruised face and gingerly patted it dry with a towel. Perhaps Kwestor is right. Maybe he should just go back to Greatbridge and be content with whatever trivial assignment his mother undoubtedly planned for him. His oldest brother Allan would someday be king. Robert already served as an officer in Army Intelligence. However, no such lofty plans existed for Donald, the third son. Supporting social causes could be just as important as anything else, his mother argued. His sister seemed more than satisfied with it.

But she's a girl, a juvenile thought said. When he tried to squelch it, it fought back. But she is!

He walked downstairs to the common room. A breakfast buffet with steam trays filled with fried potato cakes, sausages, and eggs, both boiled and scrambled, and a large plate of thickly sliced bread lie on a table near the front window. Contemplating his choices, he approached to join a short line of customers when he accidentally bumped someone.

"Why you clumsy clod!" the bumpee yelled, spinning around to confront him even before her plate could reach the floor. Fire burned in her eyes. He once heard an old bit of wisdom warning never to bother a wild animal with food. It might apply to many people, too. Her arm cocked back and her hand balled into a fist. He flinched.

"Miss Trixie! No. You mustn't!" Three men appeared seemingly out of nowhere just as her plate completed its messy roll with a far too loud clunk. One held her arm, attempting to keep her from punching him.

"Really, Miss Trixie. You mustn't," he repeated more calmly.

Gradually, her arm relaxed and the man holding it released her. The fire turned to embers, glaring at Donald.

He blushed. Embarrassed pink highlights accentuated his already too innocent face. He had been clumsy as she so accurately pointed out. But other emotions clamored for attention too. For some reason he very much wanted to change the attractive young woman's first impression of him as a *clod*. "I—I—I am so sorry, Miss. Please, let me replace this for you." He motioned to the floor with his arm—carefully—where a young serving girl already knelt, cleaning away the mess.

The woman the man called Trixie got back in line at the buffet table and filled a new plate without saying a word to him.

"I really am sorry, Miss," he said for at least the fourth time as she left the buffet. For the fourth time, she ignored him.

Donald's eyes followed her as she walked away from the buffet table. She appeared to be about his age, maybe a few years older, and looked very—athletic. He waited until she joined her companions at their table, then he filled a plate for himself and joined Kwestor and Muce. He glanced over to where she sat and noticed her looking back at him. He returned a quick, shy smile before taking his seat.

"I see you've had another encounter with a commoner," Kwestor said. "You're getting better. You're still conscious."

Donald chose to ignore this, outwardly in any case, but it stung. He reluctantly agreed with his guide's assessment. Donald could not even get breakfast on his own without getting in trouble. Whatever made him think he could have adventures anything like those he read about in stories? Nevertheless, he must admit, he found her reaction an oddly exhilarating experience. "What a fascinating girl," he said quietly to no one in particular. Except for his parents, occasionally, he could not recall anyone ever getting mad at

him before—not in a way they showed, anyway. “I don’t suppose either of you have any idea who she is.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen her before,” replied Muce, lifting his fork and his eyes from the large stack of potato cakes on his plate.

“She’s a messenger.” Kwestor said it as if no profession could be worse, although Donald felt sure he would have used the same tone whether she worked as a seamstress, or a baker, or anything else. Kwestor seemed to regard being human as one of the worst things anyone could be.

“So, you know her?”

“No.”

Donald waited for some elaboration while Kwestor took a bite of bread and then another. He reached for a boiled egg.

“How do you know she’s a messenger?”

“Guild tattoo.” He took a bite of the egg.

Donald peeked back at her table, but with her back to him, he could see little except her long, freshly washed hair as it caught some of the light from the early morning sun.

“Above her left ankle,” Kwestor added.

Donald, unfamiliar with such things, asked the scout to elaborate.

The ranger took a sip of redfruit juice. “The guilds have different symbols. The one for the Messengers’ Guild is a winged foot. There’s one tattooed on her left ankle. It’s a barbaric practice, in my opinion.”

The prince regarded the older man with surprise and appreciation for his knowledge and observational skills, although not for his editorial comment. “Uh, thanks. I wonder why she’s here.”

“She’s carrying messages from the king.”

“Now how can you possibly know *that*?” the prince asked, not so much in disbelief as with honest curiosity.

“Because the man sitting with her trying not to stare at you is a member of your father’s personal guard.”

The prince responded to the ranger’s clarification with nothing but a cock of his head, hoping some elaboration might follow.

“I’ve seen him before. His name is Reeve.” He took another sip of juice and set his glass on the table. “When the Court sends an important message, they often provide an escort or two. She has three. The one I recognize is from your father’s personal guard, and it’s a good assumption the other two are as well. Since there are three, the message must be considered very important.”

“I wonder what it could be about,” the prince mused. His glance returned to the back of the attractive young messenger’s head.

“It’s about your father’s preparations for war with Gotrox.”

“What!” His hand slapped the table and his rump left his chair. He shouted the one word question loud enough to be audible over the general din in the room. Several heads turned his way including those of the messenger and her escorts.

“How . . .,” he began.

“Who . . .,” he continued.

“What do you . . .,” he concluded before settling back in his seat.

Kwestor looked up from the boiled egg-half in his hand. “This would be better with some salt.”

“I think I have some.” Muce searched through the many pockets in his travel cloak.

Donald’s eyes bounced back and forth between the two of them, his mouth open, as the notso handed the ranger a small packet.

“Thanks,” said Kwestor.

“What makes you think the message is about a war with Gotrox?” the prince asked, collecting his composure and assembling it into one coherent question.

Kwestor sprinkled a little salt on the two remaining eggs on his plate and handed the packet back to Muce. “Last night an officer from the local garrison was in here. He was meeting with the town’s guild

masters. They were not overly discreet in their conversation. The officer was negotiating with the merchants to gather logistical supplies and have services available to support a fair number of troops. It sounded like the king would personally be in command, and I can only conclude it's for a confrontation with Gotrox."

"A *fair* number?"

"Ten-thousand foot and five-hundred mounted."

"You're sure?"

"Only of what I've told you."

The prince considered the meaning of this response for a moment. "All right, but why would my father be preparing for war with Gotrox?" He now fully expected his guide to pull another informational rabbit out of his proverbial hat.

"I don't have a clue."

After the barrage of insight, the prince felt stunned by the admission of ignorance. "You don't know who she is, but you know she's a messenger. You haven't spoken to her, but you know she carries a message from my father. You haven't seen the message, but you know what it is about. Surely you must have some idea of why my father is preparing for war with Gotrox!"

"None. You'd be surprised at how infrequently the king consults me on such matters."

The prince stared at him for several seconds. He saw no point in making an issue over the snide comment. "Well, I'd really like to find out." He leaned back from the table and folded his hands.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you want to find out? It's got nothing to do with you, and you couldn't do anything about it, anyway. Just put it out of your mind. I'm sure the king knows what he's doing."

"I'm not saying he doesn't, but if there's going to be a war, I need to know about it. I'm going over there to talk to her." Donald started to get up.

Kwestor placed a restraining hand on the prince's arm. "Sit down. She won't know. She's a guild-certified messenger. They aren't allowed to read the messages they carry. Even if she knew, she wouldn't tell you. At the very least, it would cost her job."

"But I'm a prince."

"And she's a messenger. What's your point? Listen, if the king needed your assistance, that messenger would have a note for you, too. I'm assuming she left Greatbridge less than a week ago, running all the way. The king would have known you'd be here about now, and if he wanted your help, he'd have asked for it."

"Maybe she doesn't know who I am."

"She didn't before, but she does now. Reeve told her."

"How can you know that?"

"You need to learn to pay attention. I could tell the moment he said it from her reaction. It was just before she turned to look over here."

"Maybe you could ask the person it was sent to," Muce suggested.

Kwestor shot him a scathing glance before returning his attention to Donald. "I really think you should just forget it. If you want to know what it's all about, let's head back to Greatbridge and you can ask your father."

Donald could not deny this made sense, but he did not want to go back, not yet, although he could think of no logical reason not to. An illogical reason occurred to him, though, and he grasped at it. This might be his one and only chance to do something—significant. "But we're already halfway to Gotrox. Maybe there's something I could do here to help. I wish we could find out who she delivered the message to. You don't think she'd at least tell me that, do you?"

"No. Besides, it's too late." Donald noticed Kwestor looking past him.

The messenger and her three bodyguards rose from their chairs, picked up their gear, and walked toward the exit. Donald caught the messenger direct one final glance his way before they left the inn. His eyes followed them to the door and through the large front window when they passed.

"I bet Randy would know," said Muce. "He knows everyone in town."

"That's a good idea. I bet he would."

"It's not a good idea," Kwestor said. "This isn't your concern."

"I'm not saying I have to get involved, necessarily, but I think I should know. I am a prince of this kingdom after all."

Before Kwestor could object again, Donald pushed away from the table and left to talk to the innkeeper.

~*~

"The innkeeper says the local garrison commander is someone named General Attemill," Donald told them when he got back to the table. "He has a house in town. That's who would get a message about something like this, isn't it?"

General Attemill? Several years had suffered snowy deaths since Kwestor last heard the name. He thought he had retired. "Yes, probably. Or he'd at least be aware of it. I didn't know he'd been posted here. But trying to see him would be a waste of time."

"You know him?"

"I served as a scout for him a couple times. That was years ago, though."

"Do you think he'll talk to me?"

"He might. But I still don't see the point. If we leave now, we can be back in Greatbridge in about two weeks."

"Kwestor, I don't think staying a few more days will hurt anything, and I really do need to see how the commoners live. This seems to be like a good place to do that. I know I've had a few unfortunate encounters, but I really think I'm learning a lot. How much trouble can I get into in town, after all?"

A lot, thought Kwestor, but he could sense the prince's determination, so he decided to acquiesce for the moment. He would just have to make sure to keep a closer eye out for him. "If you insist."

"Thank you. So, what can you tell me about General Attemill? What's he like?"

"Competent. He's a bit more casual than your standard military type, though, and he tends to be disturbingly cheerful unless there is a crisis."

"But you think he'll see us."

The ranger shrugged. "Probably. We parted on good terms, and none of your father's officers would turn down a social visit from a prince unless it conflicted with their duties. Whether he'll tell you anything about that message or not is another thing, so prepare to be disappointed."

"Okay, thanks. Let's go see him."

Chapter Four

Donald, Kwestor, and Muce trooped up the hill toward the manor house. The sunny, cloudless morning promised a pleasant day, with only a faint whisper of an autumn fast approaching. A light breeze carried the now familiar smells of the village—chickens, cooking grease, manure, and unburied garbage.

They left the gond back at the inn. Donald considered taking it because of the air of nobility riding the beast imparted, but he decided against it, mainly because he did not really like riding, but also because it somehow seemed wrong for him to ride while his companions walked. Of course he represented royalty and held a station far above regular commoners like his companions, but this distinction seemed less significant away from the castle. No matter, he rationalized, the warm sun and light breeze made it a lovely morning and a pleasant day for a stroll.

“Do you think he’ll feed us?” Muce asked. These were the first words spoken by the normally talkative notso since they left the inn, and they took Donald by surprise for both their suddenness and their content.

The prince peered at him. “What?”

“Do you think he’ll give us breakfast?”

“Who?”

“This general guy. I bet a posh gent like that would put out a nice spread.”

“But we just had breakfast a couple of hours ago!”

“Well, yeah but I wouldn’t turn down some more eggs and maybe some nice fried potatoes, you know, the kind cooked in bacon fat until they’re crunchy. My mom used to make this kind you could...”

“Muce!”

“Huh?”

The prince took a deep breath. “I don’t think we’ll be offered another breakfast.”

“Oh—too bad,” Muce said with noticeable disappointment. “I could have really gone for some—”

Donald shot him a look of warning.

“Oh, sorry.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s getting close to lunch time. Do you think—?”

“No!”

They approached the front of the manor house with Kwestor in the lead. Donald thought it would be best if the ranger announced them since he knew the general. When he reached the heavy wooden door, Kwestor lifted the iron ring of the knocker and let it fall. A few moments later, the door opened part way against a chain. An elderly man peeked out.

“Eh?” he asked. Then a look of recognition crossed his scarred face. “Kwethdoh?”

“Yes, Sarge. It’s me. I’m with Prince Donald. He’d like to see the general.”

“Thee the genewal?”

“Yes.”

“Whad about?”

Kwestor seemed to consider for a moment before answering. “A matter of royal concern.”

Donald was a royal, and he was concerned, so technically Kwestor provided an honest reply.

“Wehh, I don’d know. Id’th nod noon yed and he’th, uh, wehh, you know...”

“Yes, I know. He’s either sleeping in, sleeping something off, or sleeping with an acquaintance. I don’t care to know which. We can wait for you to check to see if he’s available.”

“Uh, pwinth, you thed?”

“Yes, Prince Donald. The king’s youngest son.”

“M’kay. Waid heh.”

He closed the door leaving the three companions to wait outside.

“What happened to him?” Donald whispered. The man who opened the door looked like he had been hit by a very angry building, or sat on by a gond—in armor—repeatedly. A network of scars crossed his face like the road map of a densely populated city, from which one of his ears and an eye had fled some time long ago. The only thing holding him up seemed to be a heavy, iron-shod staff, which he held clutched in a claw-like hand.

“Sarge? Pretty much everything. Life’s been especially hard on him, but he’s tougher than he looks.”

“They do say, that which doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” Muce said.

“Only an idiot would say that. In my experience, that which doesn’t kill you leaves you maimed and crippled.”

After about ten minutes, Donald urged Kwestor to knock again, but the ranger convinced him they should wait a little longer. Frustrated, he reached for the knocker himself, when they heard the metallic clink of the latch and a clatter from the chain being withdrawn.

“Pleeth come in,” Sarge said. “Uh, Youh Highneth.” Donald noticed the man held, at best, four teeth in his mouth, one of them broken.

Once they all gathered in the house, Sarge closed the door. “Da genuwal wiwh be down in a minud.” He pointed to a room to their left. “Pleeth make youthelbs comfable in da pahloh.”

They strolled into the room and sat in separate cushioned chairs around a low, round table. Very little sunshine entered through the small, narrow windows even in broad daylight, making the room dark and a bit musty. Donald looked at the table and noticed an iron statue of a winged maiden holding a sword, placed slightly off center between two candlesticks. He lifted it from the table with a slow, careful hand and examined it briefly before returning it to a more aesthetically pleasing position, mainly for something to do while they waited.

General Attemill joined them before very long, dressed in a simple white shirt, brown trousers, and sandals. His beard needed a trim, but it looked as though he, or someone, had tried to comb his mop of white hair without entirely succeeding. “Good morning, gentlemen. What may I do for you this fine morning?” The cheery question came with an only slightly reserved smile.

All three of his guests rose from their seats. “General Attemill, I would like to present Donald Overseer, Prince of Westgrove, third son of King Leonard, and our traveling companion, Muce.” Kwestor introduced them with as much formal dignity as Donald had ever heard him muster. Good words, but the tone might give the impression they would much prefer to be anywhere else. The general knew his old scout, though, and probably did not read this into it. If he did, he gave no indication. For Kwestor, this was downright cheerful.

“Thank you, Kwestor. How long has it been?” he asked, smiling.

“Almost ten years, I think. I don’t really keep count. One is much like another after all.”

“Yes, of course.” The general’s smile slipped a bit.

Donald spoke up, getting straight to the point. “General Attemill, I understand you received a message from my father recently, possibly regarding an upcoming troop deployment. I would like some more information on that, if you would.”

“May I ask what makes you think this, Your Highness?”

Donald had hoped the general would simply tell them out of deference to his title and because Kwestor could verify his identity as a prince, rather than as a spy, or an imposter, or anything similarly unsavory. After Kwestor’s warning though, he considered what he might say if the general resisted. He had even rehearsed it a little in his head on the walk there.

“General, I am the king’s son. You must appreciate that I would be aware of his plans. But we left Greatbridge three weeks ago, and it appears as if something significant enough for my father to accelerate his timetable has happened since then. If I am to adjust my own actions appropriately, I need to know what that was.” Donald could not be certain any of this made sense. He knew nothing about a war with Gotrox before Kwestor told him about it at breakfast, and all he knew about his father’s *timetable* was when he liked to eat dinner. He hoped he at least sounded involved and reasonably well-informed. He just imagined himself a character in an adventure book and said what he thought sounded right for the hero to

say in a situation like this. He waited for the general to consider his request and tried to look him in the eye with as much confidence as he could fake.

"I see. I don't suppose you could tell me what might have provoked the Gotroxians."

"I'm sorry, General, but I really can't talk about that." And please don't ask anything else, he added silently.

"Well. All right. The messenger did relay that it would be my call about who I shared it with in order to accomplish the task. If you'll just wait here, I'll go get it."

The officer left the room and returned a few minutes later holding a piece of paper.

"This is the translation. The actual message was in code." He handing the paper to Donald.

AUTH: HM WSTGRV

ATTN: CDR BFRGE

SUBJ: UNC RPTS RE GTX MGX WPN

3X+ RPTS RC'D RE GTX PLAN TO DEPLOY WARDEN MONUMENT AS SPEARHEAD WPN FOR INVSN. MTHD UNK. CPBLTY UNK. IOC UNK. MGX MTHD TO ANIMATE STATUE IND.

HM TO CMD 10K FT / 5C MNT TRPS TO GTX BRDR O/A WNTR SOLS. WILL RQR LOG SPT ENROUTE. EST 2 – 5 D.E. AT YOUR LOC.

YOUR ACTION: ARRANGE AVLBTY LOG S&S TO SPT THIS DEPLOYMENT. HM FUNDING NTE 5K WGT.

POC THIS ACTION: H BARTER, CA TO HM

Donald examined it for several minutes. He turned it over to see if the other side provided any clarification, but he found it blank. Eventually he asked, "This is the *decrypted* message?"

"Yes, Your Highness. It's still a bit difficult if you're not familiar with the jargon. Here, let me read it to you."

Donald handed the paper back to General Attemill who cleared his throat and began reading.

"By the authority of His Majesty, King of Westgrove to the Commander at Barter's Forge on the subject of unconfirmed reports to use the Warden Monument as a magical weapon to spearhead an invasion."

He paused for a moment and looked at the prince. "I am, of course, paraphrasing a bit for clarity."

Donald nodded. "Thank you, General. I appreciate that. Please continue."

"All right. Let's see. Where was I? Oh, yes.

"We are unaware of how the Gotroxians will make use of the Warden, what the capabilities of the weapon are, or when it will become operational for the first time. The reports we have so far, imply the Gotroxians have found a magical method to animate the statue.

"That would be the Warden," he added, looking up.

"His Majesty will command a force of ten thousand foot and five hundred mounted troops for deployment to the border with Gotrox about the time of the winter solstice. This troop movement will require logistical support—food, a place to camp, someone to repair wagons, and things like that," he explained—"along the way. They will be in your area for two to five days.

"You are required to arrange for the supplies and services required to support this deployment. The crown will pay up to five thousand Westgrovian gold-trees to cover costs.

"The point of contact for this action is Horace Barter, Chief Adviser to His Majesty.

"That's it."

"I see. Thank you. That is a new twist," he added to make his implication before sound more plausible. "What is this Warden monument it mentions?"

"It refers to the Warden of Mystic Defiance. It's an ancient monument on the Gotroxian side of the border in the mountains. Basically, it's a big, black, stone statue. I don't think anyone knows what it's supposed to represent. It's probably some ancient king or god or something like that. The legend says it is extremely magical and a guardian of all of humanity. I've heard stories about it since I was very young. It's pretty famous, really. You never heard of it?"

"No, I don't think so." The prince shook his head and turned to Kwestor. "Have you?"

"Yes. I've seen it. It's impressive. People today can't make things like that."

"Can this be true? Can this big statue be brought to life and used to attack us?"

"Who knows?" asked the ranger rhetorically. "I don't do magic. But I rather doubt it."

"My mom knows a lot about magic," Muce interjected. "She's almost an expert. She has a little magic ability of her own, even. There was this one time when she was—"

"Not now, Muce," Donald interrupted.

"Oh, sure. Sorry."

"What do you think, General? Can there be any truth to this?"

"I'll have to go along with Kwestor on this one. I've seen a little magic, reading portents, predicting the weather, casting of blessings and curses, things like that, but I've never seen any of the kind of magic that could do something like this. There are stories, of course, but they are of a time very long ago. Of course, so is the Warden. I don't know. I suppose it's possible, but it's not my job to make that decision. The king ordered me to support a troop deployment, and that is what I will do. If he thinks there may be some truth to it, then that's good enough for me."

"You may have a point, General," Donald said. He could feel a sense of excitement building and tried, with incomplete success, to control it. "The stories of powerful magic all take place very long ago. And this Warden statue is apparently very ancient itself. It may date from the same time as those stories. If so, it is possible the Gotroxians have found some sort of magical device, or book or something that will allow them to bring back that ancient magic. I remember reading a stor... uh; I remember reading something along those lines once. But if they've rediscovered a lost magic, this could be very serious!"

"So, this Warden threat is something new, I take it."

"Yes. And it's something I really need to think about, General. I appreciate you seeing us. You have been very helpful."

"At your service always, Your Highness."

When they reached the road, Donald turned to Kwestor. "Can you think of any reason for Gotrox to invade Westgrove that makes sense?"

"No, nothing that makes sense. But of all the things that don't make sense there's race hatred, religious intolerance, power hunger, a lust for wealth, paranoia, and of course the general joy people seem to get out of beating on others and stealing what they have. But that's just people being people. Nothing out of the ordinary, though. It's probably just because we've had peace for too long. Someone must have gotten bored."

"Uh, right," the prince said noncommittally. Donald tried to remember if anything he observed at home might indicate a shift in power, commerce, or anything else that might cause tension between the two kingdoms. He seldom paid much attention to such things, and despite being the son of the king, he understood very little about the forces currently influencing the kingdom. He had realized this before, but now it disturbed him. A strong desire to do something about this threat provoked him, teasing him to take some kind of action. He might not be the heir to the throne like his brother Allan or an officer in the army like his brother Robert, but there must be something he could do to help protect the kingdom. He searched for an idea, but nothing came to him. He possessed no special ability regarding things magical and no knowledge of who might. If the Gotroxians planned to activate this Warden of Mystic Defiance, he saw very little he could do about it other than possibly help the general gather the supplies his father ordered, but this hardly seemed the kind of heroic act he hoped to accomplish.

~*~

He's going to want to do something heroic, Kwestor thought. I'll never be able to talk him into going back to Greatbridge now, and I'm going to have to go along with him.

Sometimes he just could not understand people. They always tried to change the inevitable. Even in those rare cases in which some poor sod actually succeeded in knocking down a tree by banging his head on it, it would just grow back anyway. Why go through all the pointless effort?

He felt an aura of impending doom in the air. Mornings like this with a clear sky and bright sun always made him suspect nature might be intentionally teasing people to come outside so it could rain on them.

Well, I suppose it's my job, he said to himself. I serve at the pleasure of the Crown. The common people are just tools for the nobility, after all, to use as they see fit. I'll do my best to protect him. We'll both probably be killed of course.

Even this represented more of an observation than a complaint because no matter what happened, he knew they would both end up dead eventually anyway. No one ever got out of life alive.

Chapter Five

They returned to the inn for lunch. Neither Donald nor Kwestor seemed to be very hungry, and they only ate chicken sandwiches, which Muce suspected neither enjoyed fully because they kept talking all the while. Kwestor apparently still wanted to go back to Greatbridge, but Donald wanted to stay or maybe even go to see the Warden monument. Any one of those would be fine with Muce. It seemed a shame they did not want to try the special. The corn chowder and ham croquettes tasted wonderful.

He left them talking at the table. The sounds of market day and a soft afternoon breeze called to him.

He made his way toward the center of town and the ruins of the old forge, which served as the site for the open marketplace. The smells emanating from a barbequed chicken stand traveled straight from his nose to his salivary glands and triggered a Pavlovian torrent, despite the fact he currently felt, oddly enough, rather full. Maybe he would come back and get some in an hour or two after his lunch settled.

Brightly painted carts, colored tents, and tables of all kinds littered the area in uneven rows. He strolled between the impromptu shops, occasionally pausing to examine a shiny bauble, watch a performance, or listen to a minstrel. Half of the town seemed to be there selling things to the other half, and children raced and frolicked everywhere. The joyful, unpretentious chaos appealed to Muce. It reminded him of home.

“Buy a nice scarf for your sweetie?” an old man asked as he passed a booth. The proprietor of the stand waved a flimsy piece of red cloth. “Only two silver-fruit. The ladies love ‘em!”

“No, thank you,” Muce replied, smiling. The price seemed high, and he really did not have a “sweetie,” although there were a few girls back in Dolphin Point with whom he had shared more than a casual acquaintance. One was a student at the Dolphin Point College of the Personal Arts. He had helped her with her assignments once or twice. She was nice. He liked her. She would have her degree soon and might even go into business for herself someday.

His mind wandered aimlessly in pleasant recollections when a withered face seemed to come out of nowhere and cried, “Tell your fortune, sonny? Always need to know your fortune!”

“What?”

The hunched old woman standing before him leaned heavily on a crudely carved cane. Brittle, white hair, hanging in kinks and tangles half way down her back, escaped from a red bandana with white polka dots tied on her head like a hat.

“Your fortune, young man! Wouldn’t you like to know what the future may bring, the name of your true love, your lucky color?”

His fortune? Now that she mentioned it, Muce thought this might be an excellent idea. Perhaps he should have his fortune read. As a companion to a prince, his actions could be far more important than ever before. Knowing what the future held could be very helpful. Still, he knew fortune telling did not always work well, and he did not like wasting money on himself.

The old woman’s mouth twitched into a grin as she regarded the vacant look in his eyes. “Tell you what, let me just give you a quick palm reading for free—on the house, as it were. It won’t tell us much, but it should reveal if your fortune is interesting enough to read in detail. That would be all right, wouldn’t it, young fellow?”

“Free? Well, I suppose. Yes, that sounds like a good idea.” After all, he thought, if the palm reading showed nothing important, he would not have wasted anything, and he would know his immediate future should be relatively calm.

“Wonderful! Just come with me, sonny, and we’ll see what we can see, eh?”

“Sure. Thanks.” He followed her to a small red and white striped tent. A white pennant decorated with red stars, crescents and other mystical symbols fluttered from the center pole.

“Come in,” she said, lifting the flap. The sunlight filtering through the cloth of the tent provided more than enough light by which to see. The space seemed just large enough for what it contained. A small

table covered with a black cloth and two simple, wooden folding chairs stood near the center pole. The table held nothing other than a deck of worn cards. A woven, wicker trunk with a closed lid sat along one of the walls. She pointed to the chair nearest the tent flap. "Please, sit down."

The old fortuneteller took the seat on the opposite side of the table. "Now, let's have your right hand and see what we have here."

Muce held out the requested appendage. She grasped it in her left hand with surprising strength and probed the palm with the index finger of her right.

"Hmm," she hummed several times between brief pauses. "Well, that's interesting."

"What do you see?" He made no effort to hide either his excitement or his growing interest.

The old woman smiled almost imperceptibly. "It is not completely clear," she said mysteriously. The palm only provides the most superficial reading, but I see a change in your life. This change may have just happened or it may be happening soon. It is hard to tell. I think it could be very important to your future."

"That must be my meeting up with Kwestor and the prince. That just happened, and I'd never met a prince before. And now we're sort of traveling companions, and that's a change too."

"A prince, huh? Oh, of course, I see it now. Look here." She poked a broken fingernail into his palm. "You see this little crosshatch looking mark right next to this interruption in your fate line? Well, that's a regal squiggle, and it definitely means royalty is involved. I didn't see it at first. It's very, very rare. You must be involved in something quite important."

"Yes, I think I might be. At least, it feels like it could be. What else do you see? What is going to happen? What should I do to prepare?"

"I'm sorry, sonny." She shook her head and released his hand. "I don't know. That's all the palm reading can tell us. I told you, it doesn't really provide many details."

"But isn't there some way you can find out more?" His question almost sounded like a plea.

~*~

The fortuneteller did not consider herself an unkindly woman, and she came very close to feeling a pang of guilt. Usually she needed to work harder. This young notso made it almost too easy. She seldom saw a more willing customer. Yes, she almost felt guilty. Almost, but dinnertime comes every day and one has to eat after all.

"Well, I could do a card reading. That might say more. But I'd have to charge you. It takes a bit of time, and I do need to make a living. These free readings don't put food on the table, you know."

"Well, how much would you need?"

"I can see you're a nice boy, so I'd only ask you for two silver-fruit. But, I have to be honest with you. The cards probably won't tell us a whole lot more than a simple palm reading." She never uttered a more honest statement to a customer in her life. "And I have a feeling that whatever lies ahead for you might be pretty involved."

"Oh, I see. Well, maybe there's something else we could do." The old woman suspected Muce racked his seemingly simple brain for all the information he ever collected about magic.

"How about a crystal ball?" he finally suggested. "Do you have one of those?"

"Crystal ball? Sure, I have a crystal ball. No one in my business would be without one. Whoever heard of a fortuneteller without a crystal? But I'll let you in on a little secret; it's really just to impress the suckers. It's fancy but no better than cards when you get right down to it. No, if you want to know the future, you have to read entrails. Yep, that's the ticket. You can't go wrong with guts. Guts know, you know." She winked and tapped the side of her nose with a wrinkled finger. "Have you ever heard someone say that their guts tell them things or they always trust their gut?" She paused, waiting for him to answer.

"Well, yeah, sure."

"There you go."

Her customer considered for a moment. It must have sounded logical enough to him. "But can you do that? Read entrails, I mean."

"Sure, it's actually sort of a specialty with me. I'm something of an entrails expert, if I do say so myself. But it's a pretty expensive procedure. I mean, you have to have the entrails to begin with. That means you have to defray the cost of the source of the entrails. Those things don't grow on trees, you know. Then there's the cost of the specialist. Not just anyone can do this. It takes a considerable amount of training and experience, and that costs a lot to get, both in time and in money. And then that's only if they have the gift, otherwise, all the learning and practice in the world won't help. But, it just so happens I have all of that, so you're in luck. If you had to call in an expert, you'd be paying for transportation and lodging too. So, if you look at it that way, you'd really be getting a bargain."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. But how much would it cost me to have you do it? I mean, considering you're already here, and all."

"Well, let's see. I could probably do the procedure for two gold-trees."

"Gee, I don't know. That's a lot of money."

"I'll tell you what. You seem like a nice young man, and I like you. On top of that, I have a feeling this could be important, you being the companion of a prince. How about one gold and eight silver pieces? But don't tell anyone. I can't give everyone rates like that."

He paused only a moment before responding. "Well, all right. I suppose so. Like you said, I'm the companion of a prince now, so I have a responsibility to know as much as I can about, uh, stuff." He reached into the folds of his cloak for his purse.

"Of course you do. I can see you're going to be an important asset to this prince of yours already, and I can tell you that without doing any reading."

Muce placed the required coins on the table. The old woman immediately snatched them, grabbed her cane, and rose from her chair.

"I'll be right back," she said, leaving the tent through a flap in the back.

Rattling and squawking noises entered from beyond the canvas shortly followed by the fortuneteller returning with a dead chicken held firmly by the neck.

"I keep a few of these just for this kind of thing." She limped to the wicker trunk and opened it. "These are special birds. Only those hatched from an egg laid on the first day of a full moon will do. Then, they have to be fed only on grain grown next to running water."

She retrieved a long knife with an ornate handle and a large red towel from the trunk.

"And a bunch of other stuff too, but I'm giving away trade secrets here. Can you move those cards for me?" She motioned with her head at the deck on the table.

"Oh, sure."

She spread the towel with care, smoothing out any wrinkles, and placed the chicken in the center of it. Giving it a critical examination to imply mystical analysis, she laid the knife parallel to the dead bird on the side facing her. Still standing, she closed her eyes and began reciting words she knew would be incomprehensible to her customer, since she invented them herself. Slowly opening her eyes, she reached down and grasped the bird by the neck. She lifted it with theatrical exaggeration and held it motionless in her outstretched left hand. Without looking, she found the knife handle, lifted it from the table, and held it in her other hand. She straightened her back as much as her aging frame would allow while continuing her chant. After a suitably long time, which often announced its end with a pain in her hip, she exclaimed, "Gah!" and quickly ripped open the chicken with the knife, spilling the bird's warm guts on the towel.

"All right now. Let's see what we have," she said, settling into her chair.

Her customer looked on with obvious fascination.

"Hmm. That's interesting. I see a journey here. Perhaps a long journey."

"Really? Wow! That's probably right! You see the prince needs to decide what we're going to do about the war, and all, and he was thinking about going to see that Warden thing to see if he could find out anything, but that's in Gotrox somewhere, and that would be kind of a long journey. Well, not real long but kind of far."

“Yes, I see that now. A journey that takes you to a foreign land is what it says. That can mean far away, but it doesn’t have to. Let’s see. What else do we have here?”

“Where’s the thing that tells you I’m going on a journey? Does it say if it’s going to be easy? Should I pack extra food? One of my favorite things to eat is potatoes, which is good because they travel well. I really like potatoes. My mom used to make this kind that—”

“Do you want to know what this bird’s liver says or not?” the old woman asked harshly.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“That’s quite all right. Let’s see. Where was I? Oh, yes. Here we go. I see danger and delay. I see hardship and, uh, hunger.”

Muce shuddered a bit but remained silent.

“I see sleepless nights and weary days. Pain and loss. Worry, sadness, twists, turns, mud, blood, and confusion!” Her voice rose in volume as she progressed through the list. She paused and took a dramatic breath. “But at the end there is success and great reward. You must work for it and overcome several obstacles. It will not be easy. It seems you have a very rough road ahead, young man.”

She paused for a moment. Muce still said nothing, his face a mask of stunned awe.

“I’m afraid that’s all I can tell you,” she said finally.

“Wow. A very rough road, huh?” His eyes remained wide.

“Yes, that’s what it indicates.”

He cocked his head as if considering the implications of her predictions. “Do you think maybe I should get some new boots?”

“What?”

“New boots. For that rough road. The ones I have now are starting to get a bit worn, and it wouldn’t be good to have worn boots on a rough road.”

She rose from her chair and grabbed the cane leaning against the table. “No, I don’t suppose it would be a bad idea at that. I think it’s a very good one, in fact. Why don’t you go out right now and see about those boots?” She gave him an encouraging pat on the back.

“Thanks, I will.” He gave her a big, innocent smile and then stepped out of the tent and back into the bustling, open-air market.

After he left, she took the chicken out the back of the tent and sat on a stool near a black iron pot of water steaming over some hot coals. She dipped the bird and began plucking. Her next reading would have to involve vegetables. Chicken soup would be so much better with potatoes and onions.

~*~

The door of the cobbler’s shop stood open to the afternoon breeze. The heavy smell of leather reached Muce before he entered. A man working at a bench inside looked up at the sound of his prospective customer’s boot clomping on the wood floor.

“Good afternoon, sir. Something we can do for you? Some boots perhaps? Maybe a fine new traveling pack?” Two other workers at benches farther back in the shop briefly lifted their eyes from their labors to peek at him with mild interest, one a man, the other a woman, both at least ten years younger than the man who greeted Muce.

A new pack might be a good idea for a rough road, too. The scuffs and scratches on his old one presented no problem, but one of the straps seemed a bit loose. Well, maybe, he thought. Boots first, though.

“Yes, thank you. Actually, I was considering a new pair of boots.”

“Any particular type?” He placed a piece of partially sewn leather on the workbench and rose to his feet.

“Something comfortable and good for hard travel. Kind of like what I’ve got on.” Muce glanced at his feet.

The cobbler approached the notso and looked down at his boots. They were sturdy traveling boots made of softened but durable gond leather, a bit scuffed, though, with tattered laces and worn soles. "Those look like pretty good boots you have there. Would you be trading them in?"

"Yeah, I suppose."

"Would you mind taking them off so I can get a closer look?"

"No, sure." Muce sat on one of the simple three-legged wooden stools scattered haphazardly in the shop and removed his boots.

The man examined the footwear with the critical eye of an expert. "Yes, fine quality," he commented after a few minutes. "Where did you have these made?"

"Dolphin Point."

"Hmmm. I like the sheath for the hunting knife on the right boot. Nice needle work too. Let's see. I could probably make you a pair much like these for about twelve gold-trees. Less the four I'd give you for the trade, that would be eight gold-trees out-of-pocket for you. I could have them ready in about three weeks."

"Gee, I'm not sure I have that much time." He also did not want to spend so much money. Twelve gold-trees amounted to close to two month's normal pay as a caravan guard. Still, he had been saving, and he would be willing to spend some of it for an excellent pair of boots. His old ones lasted at least four years, and they felt very comfortable. Good boots are a good investment. A customer at the Lucky Lady told him this once and he considered it true.

"Good work takes time." The boot maker gave him a knowing eye. "And you get what you pay for."

"There's no way I could get them any quicker?"

"How much quicker did you have in mind?"

"Well, like in the next day or two?" he suggested sheepishly.

"Hah!" the cobbler exclaimed. "Impossible at any price! I'm not sure I could even recondition those you have in that amount of time."

Muce had not considered this option before. He did so now. Maybe he could have his old boots repaired. "Could you do that? Fix the boots I have, I mean?"

"Sure. I could fix them up almost as good as new."

"Could you do it in two days?"

The cobbler paused, considering. "Well, I don't know. I'd have to rearrange a few things, but I could probably give you new soles, laces and fix up the stitching where it needs it in two days." He paused again and raised his head pensively to stare at a vacant patch of air before continuing. "Yes, I could do it. It'll cost you two gold and five silver. One gold-tree now and the rest when you pick them up. Just leave them with me and come back day after tomorrow a couple hours past noon and I'll have them ready for you. Would that do for you?"

"Yes. Thanks. I think that would be fine." Muce began digging for his purse.

"Do you need some loaners?" the cobbler asked.

"What?"

"I have some loaner shoes we make out of bits of scrap. Nothing fancy, and they have soft soles, but I can loan you some until your boots are done, if you need them. I'm sure I have a pair that will fit you. Better than going barefoot."

"Yes, thanks. That would be swell." A rare moment of suspicion arose. He gave the man a skeptical look and asked, "What do you charge for them?"

The cobbler smiled. "Nothing. It's part of the service. Just return them in good order when you pick up your boots."

Muce smiled back. "Thanks!" He reached in his cloak, retrieved his purse, and handed the man a gold coin.

The shoemaker took it, walked over to a rack filled with moccasin-like shoes and poked through them, eventually selecting a pair for his customer and handing them to him. "Here, these should fit you. The apprentices make them from bits of scrap leather as part of their training. But they should do you well for a couple of days."

Muce sat on the stool to put on the soft-soled shoes. They seemed to be lined with gond calf vellum. A nice touch. It should make them warmer and more comfortable. From the faded color, he suspected the apprentices made the soft lining from very old material, but gond skin lasts virtually forever. Oddly, it appeared to have writing on it.

He left the shop, heading back toward the marketplace. He last ate at least three hours ago, and the memory of the barbequed chicken stand called to him.

The loaner shoes he wore would have been comfortable enough on grass, but on the village's paved streets, every uneven cobblestone made him miss his old boots. I've gotten spoiled, he thought to himself. A pair of shoes like those he wore now would have felt like luxury on his childhood feet. Now he took his expensive boots for granted. He could almost hear his mother saying, 'Stop whining! Think about all the kids who don't have any shoes at all.' And, of course, she would have been right. Muce knew he should never forget his good fortune—good boots, plenty of food, nice companions, and now a pleasant day at a clamoring market full of interesting sights, sounds, and smells. Could life get much better?

He answered the call of the market's aromas and followed them to a white haired man with a striped apron and a mound of spicy-smelling, steaming barbequed chickens. Muce bought a few pieces for a mid afternoon snack. As he left with his purchase, he noticed a small girl, about eight years old, looking up at his face. He smiled at her and she smiled back.

"You've got blue eyes," she observed.

"Yes, I do. You have brown eyes."

"Uh huh. I've never seen blue eyes before. They look kind of funny, but pretty too."

"Thank you. I think your eyes are very pretty too."

"Are they?"

"Sure."

"I can't see them."

"Well, I guess you'll just have to take my word for it."

She paused for a thoughtful moment. "Do you live near here?"

"No. My home is pretty far away."

"I thought so. People from far away look different."

"You're a very smart girl. There are lots of people. They are all different in some ways and all the same in others."

"I suppose."

Such a nice child, he thought. Her blatant curiosity reminded him a little of his cousin Amy. "Well, it's been nice meeting you." He started walking again.

She matched his pace, staying beside him.

"What's your name?"

"Muce. What's yours?"

"Angela."

"That's a pretty name."

"I know. It was my grandmother's name too, but she used to call me String-bean. She used to tell me stories when I was little. She knew lots of stories. She's dead now."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too."

They walked together a few more steps, and Muce reached for a piece of chicken. "Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Kind of."

"I have some chicken here. You can have some if you'd like."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure."

"Thanks!"

Muce handed her a drumstick from his pack of chicken and took a piece for himself.

"This is great!" she exclaimed on her second bite. "I've never had anything so good!"

"I'm glad you like it. You've never had chicken before?"

"Not like this. My mom usually puts it in soup. It goes farther that way, she says."

"Oh, I see." Muce's almost perpetual smile slipped a bit. "Do you have a lot of brothers and sisters?"

"No, not really. Just three."

"Brothers or sisters?"

"Three of each."

"That's a pretty big family."

"I suppose. Then there's my mom and dad, and my grandfather, and Aunt Jo."

"Tell you what," Muce said. "I just had an idea. I bet all of them would like some chicken, too, don't you?"

"Yes, I'm sure they would. It's great. I wish I could bring them some."

"Well, you know, I think you can. Let's go see if the man with all the chickens has a few for you to bring home."

"Oh." A sad realization replaced the previous enthusiasm in her voice. "I don't have any money."

"That's all right. I think I have some."

Ten minutes later, Muce handed Angela a package of coarse brown paper wrapped in string containing four barbecued chickens. "Do you think you can carry this by yourself?"

"Sure; I'm strong."

"And pretty and smart too, don't forget that. Now hurry home before that gets cold, and surprise your family."

"I will. Thank you. You're very nice."

"So are you. Bye now."

She gave him one last smile and hurried off on bare feet with a meal for her family she undoubtedly thought fit for royalty.

~*~

Muce located Donald and Kwestor as soon as his eyes adjusted to the relative dimness of the inn's common room. They still sat at the same table they occupied for lunch. They must have wasted the entire afternoon inside talking. They still were.

"Hi," said Muce.

"Hello, Muce," Prince Donald replied, breaking off his dialog with the scout. "Please, join us."

The young fighter pulled out a chair and sat on it.

"So what have you been up to, Muce?" Donald asked.

"Well, not much really. I went to the market and I had a fortuneteller read my fortune. She said we have a rough road ahead."

"You don't need a fortune teller to tell you that," Kwestor opined. "The road is rough for everyone until it ends. Some are just rougher than others."

Donald shot the ranger a look of mild exasperation.

"Uh huh. I suppose," said Muce. "But I'm having my boots fixed up, just in case. You might want to as well, if they need it. You don't want worn boots on a rough road."

Both of his companions turned toward him with blank stares. After a second, Kwestor shook his head and rolled his eyes.

Donald smiled. "Having your boots fixed is an excellent idea, Muce."

The prince and the ranger continued their conversation, which sounded to him like politics or philosophy—things people back at the Lucky Lady sometimes argued about, especially after a few drinks or when they suffered a streak of bad luck. Muce tried to pay attention but found his mind wandering. Eventually, it drifted to thoughts about his new boots and from there to his feet and then on to the soft-soled shoes he wore. From there, it leaped to the vellum linings and the curious writing he noticed on them. He bent over, removed one of the shoes, and peered at the inside, twisting and turning it to see if he

could discover what it said. He kept at it for about five minutes before either of his companions seemed to notice.

“Muce, what are you doing?” Donald asked.

“There’s some writing inside this shoe and I’m trying to make out what it says.”

“Writing?”

“Uh huh. The cobbler said he makes these out of bits of scrap, and the inside of this one looks like it’s a sheet with some writing on it, but I can’t read what it says.”

“May I see?” He seemed sincerely curious.

“Sure,” Muce replied, handing him the shoe.

Donald examined it for a while. “I think it’s written in Gotroxian.” He peeked up briefly before looking back into the shoe. “But it’s not exactly like the Gotroxian I learned during my studies back at the castle. This is probably pretty old.”

“Do you know what it says?”

“I’m not sure. Something about crops, I think, but it looks like it’s from some kind of poem. Wait a minute.”

Kwestor and Muce watched silently as the prince twisted the shoe around to allow more light to fall on the writing.

“It’s definitely old Gotroxian, but it’s understandable. It says something like, *When the crops are dry before the harvest, and the only food you have are bits of old bread, or when the sounds of war can be heard, call on the Warden.*”

Donald’s jaw dropped as he continued to gaze into the shoe. When he looked up, both of his companions were staring at him.

“It must be from an ancient scroll about the Warden!” Donald exclaimed in a hoarse whisper.

“What an odd thing to make shoes from,” Muce said.

Kwestor’s attention focused on the growing glimmer in the young prince’s eyes as though he knew it spelled trouble. He grumbled something about silly stories and wild adventures but the prince did not appear to hear him.

“Muce, show me the other shoe.”

The young fighter complied. Donald examined the second shoe, eventually turning it inside out.

“This one has a bit more. It says, *standing straight, and firm and tall...* I can’t really seem to make this part out. It’s out of context. I’d need the rest to be able to translate it. Muce, where did you get these shoes?”

“At a cobbler’s shop. It’s not far. I can take you there, if you want.”

“Yes, most definitely,” Donald said, rising from his chair. “Lead on.”

Muce rose from the table and led the way out the door and toward the cobbler’s shop in his stocking feet. Donald still held his loaner shoes tightly in one hand.

Kwestor followed several steps behind the other two, shaking his head.

~*~

They arrived at the shoemaker’s just as he finished sweeping to close for the day. He began to ask them politely to return tomorrow, but Donald interrupted him, holding out one of Muce’s inverted shoes.

“Do you have the rest of this?” he demanded.

The shoemaker glanced at the soft shoe in the prince’s hand. “The shoe? It’s all there. It’s just been turned inside out, is all.”

“No, not the shoe. The scroll inside. This piece of calfskin. It’s from a larger piece. I need as much of it as you have.”

“I’m not really sure. It’s just an old bit of scrap. That’s called recycling, that is. It’s very efficient. I’d have to look to see if there’s more, though. Come back tomorrow and I’ll see what I can find.”

“Tomorrow won’t do. I need you to look now.”

The shoemaker leaned the broom he held against a workbench and focused his full attention on his new and overly demanding visitor. “Now just wait a minute. I’m not one to turn down a customer, but if I’m not home in time for dinner, my wife will think I’m out at the pub, and if my wife thinks I’m out at the pub, well, let’s just say I’d be willing to lose a customer to avoid it.”

Donald straightened and threw back his shoulders. “I am Prince Donald of Westgrove, son of King Leonard and I command it.”

Not bad, thought Kwestor. Not the commanding voice his father has, but it should be enough to get a man’s attention. The prince impressed him for the second time today. Perhaps the boy could learn after all.

The cobbler looked past the prince to his two companions. Both nodded to affirm the truth of Donald’s pronouncement.

“Well, Your Highness, no disrespect but—”

“And I’ll pay you well for your trouble.”

The cobbler considered only a moment.

“Cordwin!” he called to the back of the shop. A young man emerged.

“Yes Master Hobbs.”

“Run and tell my wife I’m tending to an important customer and will be a bit late. Then come straight back here. I may need you. Off you go.”

“Yes, Master Hobbs,” he replied before hurrying from the shop.

“All right now. Let’s see what we have here. May I see those shoes?”

With the help of the three companions and his apprentice when he returned, the cobbler located a dozen pieces of vellum of various sizes, which appeared to be part of the original whole. These, along with pieces from four other pairs of shoes disassembled in the search, rested on the largest of the shop’s workbenches. “Well, that seems to be it. Why’s it so important, anyway.”

“It could mean the survival of the kingdom,” Donald answered dramatically.

Kwestor thought the prince did fairly well up until that point, but he made a mistake with his last statement. The boot maker had probably just doubled the cost for all of this.

Chapter Six

Kwestor, Donald and Muce, along with the harried looking cobbler's assistant, returned to the common room of the Redfruit Inn with the scraps of vellum. They selected one of the larger tables near the front window and methodically began placing pieces of the Warden scroll in the proper order like a jigsaw puzzle.

The inn gradually gathered customers as the old Gotroxian document took form, and now several people sat in the common room eating supper, drinking and talking. Four men, possibly teamsters, played cards and exchanged stories and money at one table. A pair of old men quietly hovered over a checkers game at another. The prince's party received some curious glances but, for the most part, remained an inconspicuous part of the normal dinner scene at the Redfruit Inn in Barter's Forge.

Muce suggested they order dinner, but Donald wanted to wait until they completed their task. When they finally positioned the last fragment, he breathed a sigh of relief. "It looks like they're all here." Kwestor agreed. He detected no obvious gaps—no large ones, in any case.

The young apprentice shoemaker opened a leather box and withdrew needles, thread, and scissors. Donald peered anxiously over his shoulder while the boy sewed the bits of vellum together. When he finally tied the last knot of the last stitch, few diners remained, and empty plates, bottles, and glasses littered several vacant tables. On theirs, rested a rectangular scroll covered with ornate writing and colorful but faded decoration. It was about twice as wide as Kwestor's hand and as long as his forearm.

The prince thanked the boy and dismissed him with two silver pieces for his trouble. This, of course, came in addition to what he generously paid the master boot maker earlier. At least someone is having a good day, Kwestor thought.

Muce caught the serving girl's attention and she hurried over to take their order for dinner.

"We still have some of the chicken stew and biscuits," she said. "It's real good today. Or you can have lamb chops with mashed potatoes."

Kwestor and Donald both selected the stew and Muce opted for the lamb and potatoes—with extra potatoes. They also ordered a bottle of wine and pitcher of water, which they could mix according to their individual tastes.

"I still can't read it," Muce said, looking at the sheet they had been examining either as a whole or in bits for the last couple of hours. "I like the decoration, though."

The reassembled sheet, decorated with curling vines, flowers, stars, moons, lightning bolts, and an occasional bunny in the corners, could be considered aesthetically pleasing—if you squinted just right, Kwestor thought. It reminded him more of a child's doodle.

"It's definitely in old Gotroxian," the young prince said. "I'm sure I can translate it, but it may take me a little while. I'll get to it in earnest after some dinner and work down here. There's more room."

He turned his attention to the ranger. "Kwestor, do you speak Gotroxian?"

"Some."

"Would you mind staying down here with me and helping out with the translation?"

"Of course," the scout said. "I expected to."

"Good. Thanks."

Kwestor did not hide his sarcasm, but it may have been too subtle for the prince. Either this or he remained incurably obtuse.

When dinner arrived, the trio continued their conversation, speculating about what the mysterious document might be, how old, where it came from, and how it ended as scrap leather in a cobbler's shop in Barter's Forge.

When they finished eating, the prince said, "Well, I suppose I better get to work on this." He spoke as if he regarded it as a chore he must do, but Kwestor could easily detect the prince's excitement about

learning what secrets the scroll might reveal, and he expected the young prince would find some, whether they were there or not.

~*~

Muce bid the others good night after fetching some paper, ink, and quills for the prince. These made him think about writing another letter to his mother about his recent adventures, and he spent about an hour doing so before retiring. Kwestor and the prince had still not come upstairs.

The next morning, Muce woke early to find that neither of his companions had returned to the room because their bedding had not been rumped. Through the window, he beheld a sky just beginning to shift from satin black to cotton gray. The sounds of a small town at night—the occasional hoot of an owl or a muffled snore from some other guest, prevailed only to punctuate the silence. First cockcrow remained at least an hour away.

The young man performed his morning ablutions and quickly dressed. Carefully opening the door so he would not disturb anyone in the other rooms, he silently crept down the stairs. He wore the soft-soled shoes the cobbler provided to replace those destroyed and purchased by the prince to get the pieces of scroll they held.

When he reached the dining room, all but one table stood clean and empty. Donald slumped over it with his head resting on his crossed arms, exactly where Muce remembered leaving him at his efforts to translate the scroll the night before. If the sounds coming from him meant anything, he slept soundly. The tabletop still held some paper, an extinguished candle, and an inkwell and quill.

Kwestor stood near the large front window, holding a couple sheets of paper. He seemed to be using the feeble light of the approaching dawn to illuminate them. Without turning, he motioned for the young notso to join him.

“I didn’t hear you come back to the room last night,” Muce whispered when he drew near.

“I didn’t,” the ranger replied.

“Him either?” Muce glanced toward the prince.

“No. He finished this about two hours ago. Here, take a look.” Kwestor handed the other man the papers.

Muce did so. The two sheets held several lines of Donald’s neat handwriting.

*When magic threatens, do not fear
When good men cry and bad men cheer
When evil tidings reach your ear
Call upon the Warden*

*When crops are dry ere harvest comes
When food is naught but moldy crumbs
Or drawing near are heard war drums
Call upon the Warden*

*When plagues and sickness strike the land
When earthquakes turn the rock to sand
Whenever people need a hand
Call upon the Warden*

*Protecting those whose need is great
Defying mystic turns of fate
Bringing forth his power great
Ready stands the Warden*

*He will aid us when we call
Helping one or helping all
Standing straight and standing tall
Standing firm, the Warden*

*He will listen to our need
Come to life and word will heed
Weak defend or hungry feed
Living is the Warden*

*Call upon a prince by blood
A virgin man of conscience good
Put upon his head the hood
To call upon the Warden*

*With Inkhar's humble hood of red
Upon the prince's royal head
All will be well when he's said
The spell to raise the Warden*

*When equal are the night and day
And time draws near to cut the hay
That is when the prince must say
The words to wake the Warden*

*At dawn of this most special morn
When first the sun is being born
And the veil of night is torn
'Tis time to wake the Warden*

*Find the Warden and draw near
Speaking those words written here
Loud enough for stone to hear
And call upon the Warden*

*Warden, hear our humble plea
Listen please we beg of thee
Our need is great as it can be
Hearken to us, Warden!*

*I come at the appointed time
And speak to thee the magic rhyme
With body pure and thoughts sublime
Listen to me, Warden*

*I release thee from the stone
To become of blood and bone
And follow as the Masters shown
I summon forth the Warden!*

Naked to the Warden's love

*The prince must say the words above
With Inkhar's hood and Lomar's glove
He'll then command the Warden*

Kwestor watched silently while Muce read and reread the paper.

"That must be some magic statue!" the younger of the two said, handing the pages back.

"And if you believe that, I can sell you a hen that lays golden eggs."

"You can?"

"Never mind. I imagine His Royal Naiveness will be even more eager to go visit the Warden now, though."

"That would be great! I've heard about it, but I've never seen it. Well, I did see a picture postcard of it once. It said 'Greetings from the Warden' on it, and it had a picture of a young stoutfolk lady in a pair of shorts with real wide suspenders; they have a special name for them that I don't remember. Anyway, she was standing next to the statue, well in front really, and she was waving, and she looked real tiny, not just because she was a stoutfolk, because they're all kind of short, but because the statue is so big. One of the girls at the Lucky Lady sent it when she was on holiday in Gotrox, and she wrote that she was having a good time and wished we were there. She didn't say much else, though, because there wasn't a lot of room on the—"

"I got it," the aging scout interrupted, holding out his hand as though trying to stop the tale from racing down the road to complete irrelevance.

Muce whispered a reply. "Oh, right. Sorry. Don't want to wake his royal highness."

As it turned out, Donald's nap would end soon anyway. A rattling from the kitchen announced the innkeeper preparing the morning breakfast buffet. He emerged in the common room carrying a steam tray and a pitcher.

"Good morning, gentlemen. You're up early."

"Late," replied Kwestor, although not loudly enough to wake the prince.

"I'll have some breakfast out in a little while." Randy proceeded to set up the steam table before unbolting the front door. Within minutes, two of the young villagers working for him came in and began helping get the inn ready for another day.

Guests from upstairs and others coming from outside began arriving for breakfast before Donald finally stirred. His eyes fluttered for a moment and he raised his head with a jerk. "What time is it?"

The ranger replied from the seat next to him. "About dawn."

"I finished the translation. Did you see it?"

Both of his companions nodded affirmatively. Kwestor produced the papers, placing them on the table.

"The original was in rhyme," continued the young prince, "so I tried to make the translation reflect that as well as I could. I think this captures the spirit of it, anyway."

"It does sort of rhyme," Muce agreed.

Donald rose from his chair. "You will have to excuse me for a moment." He hurried toward the back of the inn.

"He was drinking a lot of tea last night," Kwestor explained.

When Donald returned, the three served themselves some food. Today the buffet held scrambled eggs, hash brown potatoes, bacon, and bread and butter. Muce topped a thick bed of hash browns with a mound of eggs and half a dozen rashers of bacon.

"From the way you eat, you should weigh four hundred pounds," Donald commented when he returned to their table.

"My uncle Mel says I don't because I have a himentalbalism or something like that. I think it's some kind of worm, but it doesn't bother me."

~*~

Their conversation over breakfast confirmed Kwestor's prediction; the prince did want to go see the Warden.

"How long will it take to get there?" the prince asked him.

"With or without the gond?"

"With."

"About a month."

"And without?"

"A couple to three weeks."

"I don't suppose we really need the beast anyway."

"It does make carrying our supplies easier."

"We don't need to bring that much. We can make do."

"I'm sure *we* can," the scout agreed as he considered his aging feet and back. "The two of you shouldn't have any trouble at all."

"Good. We'll sell the gond here, then."

Wasted, the ranger thought to himself. The boy is oblivious. He concentrated on the remaining scrambled eggs on his plate. They had gone cold. He soon realized, so had his tea.

"If we travel light, we should be able to make it there in plenty of time," Donald continued.

Plenty of time for what, the ranger wondered. "Personally, I think this is more a mission for your father," he attempted. "We should go back, tell him about that scroll, and let him decide what to do next."

"But that would take too much time! You see here." He indicated a line in the translation. "It says, 'when equal are the night and day just before you cut the hay.' That must mean the autumnal equinox, and, if I'm not mistaken, that's only a few weeks from now. If the Gotroxians really do intend to animate the Warden statue this year, then is when they would have to do it!"

"I see." Kwestor slowly put down his cup of tepid tea. His assessment of the urgency of the situation provided a marked contrast to the expression of excitement worn by the prince. "So if we assume, for the moment, that this *ancient scroll* isn't just a kid's nursery rhyme or something like that, you are proposing that we travel to the site of possibly the most magical artifact ever made, at precisely the time that a nation, which may be contemplating a war against your father's kingdom, is likely to be there in force with their most learned magicians, not to mention whatever troops and other functionaries that may be along for the ride, all with the intent of activating the latent magic to squash this kingdom and, quite possibly, us. Is that right?"

"Well, yes. Pretty much."

"I thought so. And this strikes you as a *good* idea?"

"Listen, I wish we had more time, but I think fate has brought us here. Think about it. Here we are already halfway there at just the right time with just the right people."

"The right people? An old scout, a boy prince, and a simple caravan guard? The right people would be a team of mages, a troop of cavalry on fully armored battle gonds, and the king."

"No, don't you see? That's not right at all. What if they aren't there? The Gotroxians, I mean. Maybe they plan to do it next year or maybe there's something else important we don't know."

"I think that goes without saying," the old ranger mumbled.

"So we are just the right people. A big, armed party from Westgrove entering Gotrox could start a war and make my father the aggressor. Just the three of us won't be noticed at all. You are the best scout alive, and you can get us there. Muce is a brave and competent fighting man, and he will protect us along the way. And I, well, it says it takes a prince to activate the Warden, so there's a chance that if the Gotroxians are not already there, I may be able to gain control of the magic before they do."

"It also says the prince must be, oh, right, of course. Never mind."

Donald apparently caught his meaning instantly and he blushed. The boy lacked experience in many areas.

After a brief moment of embarrassment, the young man continued. "Besides, as a prince of the realm I am sworn to protect and defend the kingdom to the best of my ability. This is something I must do for the

sake of duty and honor.” He tilted his chin in what he probably thought presented an honorable pose. Kwestor remained unimpressed.

“Well, I don’t suppose I can argue with that. Doing stupid, dangerous things for duty and honor is, after all, a time tested role of nobility.”

“Come on, Kwestor. It will be fine. If the Gotroxians are there, we’ll just lie low and observe.”

“That *would* be better than charging in with your sword drawn. I will grant you that.”

“Uh, right. So that’s settled. We’ll sell the gond, buy some supplies, and be on the road early morning the day after tomorrow. We do need to know one other thing.”

“Just one?”

“Well, two really. Who are Inkhar and Lomar?”

The prince took a long delayed bite of his neglected breakfast. Muce, who remained silent for most of this conversation, chimed in. Kwestor noted that, for some reason, the notso’s teacup still steamed.

“Well, I’m not sure it’s who it means, but Inkhar and Lomar are the fairy spirits of play and work.”

Both of his companions gazed at Muce as if he had suddenly grown wings.

“How’s that?” Donald asked.

“You asked about Inkhar and Lomar and I said they were the fairy spirits of play and work.”

“What do you know about them?”

“Not much, really. I’m not very religious, but when my mom was working at the Lucky Lady...”

Oh, no. He’s going to tell us another story about his childhood, Kwestor said to himself.

Sure enough, Muce continued, “...there was this big picture on the wall near some of the card tables. Actually, it’s still there. It’s a pretty big painting, about as wide as a craps table and really colorful. It kind of brightened the place up—not that it isn’t already pretty cheerful. I mean, it is a place where people go to have fun.”

Kwestor began to interrupt, but Donald stopped him. “Let him talk,” he whispered.

And Muce did. “I think I was, oh, I don’t recall, really, pretty young, anyway. I used to hang around there a lot when my parents were working, and there was always that picture on the wall. On the left hand side was this little guy wearing like a red felt hat that was kind of cone shaped and had a little ball on the top. He was smiling and dancing in a field of flowers, and he looked so happy you wanted to dance along. You could almost hear the music he was dancing to just by standing there and looking up at it.

“Then on the other side, there was this other little guy who looked a lot like the first, except he was bent over hoeing a field, with sweat just dripping down his face. That side of the picture didn’t have as much color, but one thing sort of stood out because it did. The guy hoeing was wearing a red glove on his right hand exactly the same shade as the dancing person’s hat. He looked really determined and you could tell he was working hard.”

Muce paused in his narrative for a moment.

Kwestor caught a filmy glaze coming over the young fighter’s eyes and felt sure he was not remembering any particular fact or event but reliving the feeling of being there.

“So anyway, one day I asked my mom who those two guys were. Well, she didn’t know, but there was a cleric at the bar who overheard me asking, I guess, because he leaned down and told me they were the twin fairies, Inkhar and Lomar.

“He must have just come from a church service because he was all decked out in his clerical stuff—or maybe he was there collecting contributions. They do that sometimes. Priests and ministers and such—I’m not sure what the difference is. I think it depends on which god or goddess they serve.

“Fairies are the agents of the gods, you know. That’s what he said. They make sure things work the way they’re supposed to. I think he told me which god Inkhar and Lomar answered to, but I forgot. He said that Inkhar was the guardian of play and free time and doing what makes you happy, and he was dancing because the work was all done. Lomar, he said, was the guardian of work and duty and doing what needs to be done. He makes sure people remember to get their work done because if they don’t, then they can’t have any play time.”

The young notso considered a moment. “That’s about all I know, I think.” He downed the last of his tea.

“Did he say what the glove was about,” asked the prince.

“Oh, yeah. He said that was a gift to Lomar from his brother Inkhar to make the work easier—I suppose so he wouldn’t get blisters.”

“Have you ever heard of these fairies, Kwestor?”

“No. But I’m really not very religious.”

“Neither is the king. My mother is a little bit, but she never pushed it because my father doesn’t have much use for it. I have to admit that I don’t know as much about the gods as I probably should.”

“It doesn’t make any difference,” Kwestor droned. “If there are any gods, they don’t seem especially interested in us, so I can’t see why they’d object if we’re not overly interested in them.”

The prince laid his fork over the remnants of his meal with finality. “Well, perhaps. But it doesn’t matter right now. We have work to do. Muce, I’d like you to go out and get the supplies we’ll need. We all have our normal traveling gear, so I think just some things like food, matches, and things like that should do. Whatever you think we need.

“Kwestor,” the prince said, turning to the older man. “I’d like you to sell the gond. Get as much as you can for it. We may need the spending money.”

The ranger nodded. He expected the assignment.

“And there’s something I need to tend to do as well.”

~*~

The designated day of their departure arrived, and the three companions gathered for their last breakfast at the Redfruit Inn. As usual, Randy set out a morning buffet, and they all filled their plates. It would be at least a three-day hike to the next real town with an inn and a chance for a well-prepared meal.

Muce could throw together a decent stew, given enough time, ingredients and utensils, but Kwestor’s cooking abilities were pretty much limited to charring a rabbit over a campfire. Donald’s culinary expertise ended with boiling water, at best. Cooking is not a skill included in a prince’s normal education and something he never needed to do for himself back at home.

Kwestor sketched a map showing the easiest and quickest way to the Warden, and they discussed their route, distances, and places to camp.

“If we travel light and fast and go all day, we’ll be sure to get there before the autumnal equinox,” Donald said.

The ranger regarded him with a suspicious and questioning eye. “What do you mean by all day?”

“I think we can do fourteen hours anyway, don’t you?”

“Sure,” Muce said. “No problem.”

Kwestor did not seem to share the prince’s sense of urgency. “I think it would be better if we went at a more normal pace. We should still be able to be there by the equinox.”

Donald insisted, concerned about possible distractions and unforeseen delays. “But, if we’re making good time, we can rest a couple of days in Gondford. Okay?”

This seemed little consolation to the ranger, who winced and rubbed his neck. “As His Highness commands.” This is all he said aloud, but in a tone implying Donald just ordered him to take the place of dubious honor on the gallows.

After eating, they gathered their belongings and headed south-southeast toward the town of Dale. Muce wore his recently refurbished boots and said the cobbler did a fine job. They felt more comfortable than a new pair because they were already broken in and just right for a rough road. He smiled and hummed to himself.

The prince sported a new travel pack to replace the saddlebags his gond previously carried. The skilled design allowed it to rest comfortably on his back with its weight evenly distributed on his shoulders. He got it from the same shop in which Muce had his boots repaired and where they discovered the ancient scroll about the Warden. Before he filled it, he checked inside just to make sure it hid nothing written anywhere.

Kwestor carried no more out of the town than he carried into it except for his share of the food and the traveling supplies Muce purchased with the prince's money. They left the last of the paving and stepped onto the dust of the road promising to lead them to the next semblance of civilization. "It's going to rain, you know."

Donald looked toward the red streaked dawn to their left. He noticed a few clouds overhead, but nothing he thought indicated rain. The dry summer had left the land parched, and he appreciated the need for a good rain, although he did not relish the thought of walking in it. "What do you think, Muce?"

"Well, it doesn't smell like rain."

"I agree," Donald said. The ranger is just being pessimistic again, he decided.

An hour later the wind picked up, whipping their travel cloaks around them, and the sky darkened with threatening clouds.

"Damn!" exclaimed the prince at the same time that an explosion of thunder shook the air. Neither of his companions could have heard him as the sky opened and rain hit them as though dumped from a giant storm god's oversized bucket.

Chapter Seven

Donald hoped to make up some of the time they lost the day before due to the rain, and they swiftly broke camp. A gentle breeze blowing from the south carried the odors of ripe grain and damp soil. By the time the sun cleared the horizon, they were on their way, leaving their boot prints behind them on the still muddy road.

Around noon, they came upon a deluxe passenger coach painted in shiny black lacquer stopped beside the road. The well-to-do hired them for traveling farther than a day's journey. Although not uncommon, Donald recalled seeing no others since leaving Greatbridge. It looked like it could comfortably sleep at least six people, possibly more. Two gonds, which must have been pulling the posh rig, grazed on the wild grasses beside the road under the supervision of a man Donald judged to be the driver. Another man stood by one of the coach's open doors and a third sat on top cradling a crossbow. The latter two must be guards. Both watched Donald and his group closely as they approached, while their passengers milled about on the opposite side.

"Good afternoon," Donald opened with a friendly smile.

"Good afternoon," replied the guard. No return smile.

"It sure is a nice day for traveling," the prince tried.

"Yes," the other man agreed.

Where are you headed?"

The guard returned a wary expression before answering. "You'd have to ask the driver that."

Donald still could not accustom himself to people reacting to him without full cooperation, not to mention a certain amount of deference, but he nodded to the guard, mumbled his thanks, and wandered over to see the man watching the gonds. He did not plan to be long and asked Muce and Kwestor to wait for him.

The coach driver turned at the sound of Donald's rustling passage through the shin-high wild grass. The older gentleman, dressed somewhat formally in a light cape and jaunty hat with a feather in it, regarded him with a calm face. "Hello. What can I do for you? I'm afraid my coach is full, if you're looking for a ride."

"No. We're headed in the other direction. I just wondered where you were bound."

Instead of responding to the implied question, the driver said, "Where are my manners? My name is Ross." He held out his hand. "And you would be?"

Donald took the offered hand as an act of conditioned reflex and shook it distractedly. "Donald," he said, realizing he had somehow lost control of the conversation. "Donald Overseer."

"Donald Overseer? As in Prince Donald of Westgrove?"

The prince nodded. "Yes, that's correct."

"Well, this *is* a surprise, I must admit, and an honor. I believe one of my passengers knows your father. Or, he claims to, anyway. I can't tell you how many times he's mentioned his personal audience with the king." He smiled and rolled his eyes, which suggested to Donald he held some reservation about the veracity of his passenger's claim.

"So, what brings you here, Your Highness?" The man seemed oddly calm for a commoner speaking to royalty, and Donald wondered about it at first. Then he dismissed it as a consequence of the man's profession. A master of a coach obviously used by only the extremely well-to-do must be accustomed to dealing with his social betters as equals.

"Why don't I introduce you to that fellow?" the driver continued. "Perhaps you know him, if what he says about having the ear of the king is at all true."

Donald followed the man toward the six milling passengers. He still did not have the answer to his question.

"We were just stopping to rest the gonds, stretch our legs, and take care of some personal essentials. I like to do that every afternoon about this time. If you don't, the animals get cranky, especially the passengers." An impish grin belied his apparent age.

They approached a man dressed in white with a light blue cape. He stood alone, scowling at nothing in particular—or at least nothing obvious.

"Prince Donald of Westgrove, let me introduce the Reverend Tripgood. Reverend Tripgood, Prince Donald of Westgrove. I believe you are well acquainted with his father."

The man in white turned with a glazed, faraway look in his eyes. He seemed to be having a rough trip back to the here and now. Wherever his mind had wandered, it must have been a good distance from the border of Donald's reality.

"What's that? Prince Donald?" Awareness hit the man like a slap from a violated maiden. An insincere smile snapped into place. "Oh yes, of course. Prince Donald. I would have recognized you anywhere from the portrait in your father's study." He extended his hand for the compulsory shake.

Donald did not recognize the man's face anymore than his name, although this meant little. The king granted audiences to many visitors Donald never met. A family portrait did hang in the king's study, so the man at least heard of it if he had not been there personally.

"I don't believe we've met," Donald said.

"No, that's quite right, although I have advised your father on certain spiritual matters and on foreign policy and other things, too. I believe he regards my opinion very highly. Perhaps he's mentioned me?"

"No, I don't believe he has. Not that I recall, anyway."

"Well, he probably keeps certain things close hold, you know, strictly on a need to know basis." He winked, as if to suggest hidden secrets existed, which should not be disclosed in public.

"That is probably true," Donald said hesitantly. "Have you met with him often?"

"Like I said, I've advised him on several matters. In fact, I hope to be meeting with him again as soon as we return to Greatbridge."

Tripgood looked toward the driver, "When will that be?"

"About seventeen days, if we stay on schedule," the man in the feathered hat responded.

Donald finally received the answer to his original question, and it gave him an idea.

"Good." Tripgood sidled closer to the prince, leaned toward his ear, and whispered conspiratorially. "I have more to tell him about some of the plots against the kingdom being hatched by those heathen stumpies."

"Stumpies?"

"If you'll excuse us, Master Coachman, the prince and I need to discuss some matters vital to the kingdom's security." The Reverend said this much louder than necessary to reach the ears of the driver. If the other passengers overheard his boast, they were doing their best to ignore it.

"Of course. And I should tend to the gonds. Not that they're likely to get far, but they can wander." The driver calmly strolled away.

"The stumpies, you know, the stoutfolk they call themselves. Those gods forsaken rock crawlers in Gotrox."

The prince took an immediate dislike to the man, but his words caught his interest. A Gotroxian plot against Westgrove? This certainly seemed consistent with what he had discovered in Barter's Forge.

"A plot?" the prince probed.

"Actually, I said plots. Plural. More than one. Only Ariman knows exactly how many." He turned his head upward as though reading something written in the clear, pale blue sky. "They hate us you know. All of them do. They fear us and they're jealous of us. We are Ariman's chosen people. It is our divine destiny to someday dominate the continent—under your family's noble leadership, of course."

He returned his gaze to the prince. "They know that. They've read the Book of Ariman and they know it is the true Word of the supreme god, but they pretend not to believe because they don't like what it has to say. They think they can defy the will of the gods by invading the homeland of the tallfolk, and they are planning to do just that! Surely, if we don't do something, they'll come swarming over the border to

spread their vile lies. You be sure to tell your father that next time you see him. Tell him we must act first, and we must act soon.”

He stared Donald straight in the eye, a hand on each of the prince’s shoulders. He believed what he said. Donald retained little doubt of this. He understood this did not mean the man’s opinion reflected any kind of objective reality, but he did believe. The prince could clearly see every large pore of the cleric’s face and smell the onions from his last meal with every word he spoke. He steeled himself against an involuntary urge to pull away. He would endure this for his country.

To Donald’s relief, Tripgood took a step back and a deep breath. He continued in a calmer tone. “I’ve taken several trips to Kartok to spread Ariman’s Word to the heathens there. I am sad to say they are deaf to it. Ministers of the Faith all know the Truth is often not embraced at first, and we try to be patient, but on my last trip there, they proved how hostile and aggressive they are. Can you believe they threw tomatoes at me? Tomatoes they probably got from us! Those ungrateful barbarians wouldn’t even be able to eat if it wasn’t for Westgrove! But Ariman does have a few followers among the tallfolk who do business with the stumpies in Kartok. They have heard things, and they have told me, and now I’m telling you.

“Have you ever heard of the Warden of Mystic Defiance?”

Donald responded with a slow nod. He did not intend sharing what he knew with Tripgood. The man seemed too committed and too devoted to his cause to be rational or trustworthy. He very much wanted to hear what the cleric might say about the Warden, though.

“Good. Then you know it is a huge, ancient statue up in the Gotroxian Mountains. What you probably do not know is that it is also an ancient magical artifact from the time when the gods warred among themselves. As you know, I’m sure, this is when the gods Ariman and Lestog and the goddess Flora united to bring order to the world and give mankind dominance over it. Well, one of the gods made the Warden then, and it is the last of several created during that battle.

“Which of the gods made it has been lost to us, but the Gotroxians have learned of a way to bring it to life and control it. Those bloodthirsty infidels intend to do so and use it to invade Westgrove. Can you imagine the power such a warrior of the gods might have? Can you imagine the destruction it could cause? Now if that’s not enough to chill you to the bone, I don’t know what is.”

“I see,” said Donald, trying not to show any sign he either believed or disbelieved Tripgood’s story. The man made him uncomfortable, but what he said seemed frighteningly consistent with what he had already heard about the Warden.

“Do you know how or when they intend to do this?”

“No. That is exactly what I hoped my people in Kartok would be able to tell me on this trip. But, as of about three weeks ago when we left there, they did not know.”

“I see,” Donald said again. “That is indeed an interesting tale and I’m sure my father will want to investigate it. I will make a point of mentioning it to him the next time I see him. However, as for now, I need to be on my way. It was good to meet you, Reverend Tripgood.”

“It was very nice to meet you, too, Your Highness.”

~*~

Donald returned to the road to find his two companions sitting on a blanket spread on the ground and eating slices of salted pork and bread.

“Some rich lady from the coach had some extra pork, so we swapped her for some of the bread we had,” Muce said between chews.

“That’s nice.” He removed his pack and began to dig. Eventually, he produced his writing box and began scribbling a note. When he finished, he carefully folded it and affixed a wax seal impressed with his signet.

Kwestor watched him walk over to the driver of the coach. After a short conversation, the prince handed him the paper. He also offered him some coins, but the dapper man refused.

When he returned, Kwestor asked, “What was that about?”

"It's a note to my father telling him about the scroll we found and that we're going to investigate this Warden it talks about." He sat next to them. "Is there any more of that pork?"

Muce passed him the last of it and some bread.

"I asked the driver to deliver it for me. He promised he would." Donald assembled a sandwich and took a bite.

"One of the passengers has contacts in Kartok. He said they told him all about this Warden." He repeated what Tripgood had told him. "It is just too much like what we've already heard to be a coincidence."

"I agree," Kwestor said. "That's what worries me."

"It worries me too."

The scout did not reply, although he felt quite sure his concerns did not match those of the prince.

They packed their gear and hit the road again.

~*~

Donald and his party took a room at the modest Redfruit Inn in the relatively small town of Dale. Before settling in for the evening, they refreshed their supplies at the town market and slept soundly that night, exhausted from their travels.

The next morning, they enjoyed a breakfast of grainflake porridge and jam included in the price of their room. Although a traditional Gotroxian breakfast, it is also common in the eastern part of Westgrove. Donald and Kwestor found the porridge sufficient. Muce supplemented his with a couple of eggs, bacon, hash brown potatoes, and fresh bread and butter.

"I don't suppose we can take it a bit easier today," Kwestor suggested. "We're making good time."

"No," Donald said, gathering his pack. "Not until we get to Gondford. If we don't have any unexpected delays, maybe we can rest there a day or two."

This ended the discussion and they left shortly after full dawn. The main road out of Dale led east toward Kartok. They took a different one heading more toward the southeast. Donald asked Kwestor about the weather. Gray clouds hung low in the distance. The ranger told him it would not rain. Donald believed him.

They traveled in silence over an hour, the thud of their boots on the packed dirt road and the occasional bird reminding the world of its existence being the only sounds they heard. The rural road stretched empty before them.

"I don't know what to make of the things Reverend Tripgood told me," the prince said, verbalizing a thought bothering him on and off and pretty much constantly since they left Dale. Much of what the cleric said did not sound quite right to him. Although not his favorite subject, Donald did study theology as part of his education. He could recall nothing about the gods making giant stone warriors though. He would have remembered something like this. Such exciting things abounded in his adventure stories.

The Scriptures of the Faith contained many passages with plagues, curses, bloody sacrifices, and other violent things no self-respecting religion could be without but no giant warriors. Well, they did have one about a giant, but he was just some big, dumb, hairy man who eventually got killed by some little guy favored by one of the gods for sacrificing a goat—or maybe it was his sister—something like that. It did not seem to be a significant point in the story.

To be honest, Prince Donald rather doubted the gods really existed at all. The old stories told about them, he suspected, were probably just that. He found many of the adventure stories he read far more interesting and with more believable characters than those populating the scriptures of the Faith. However, you could not say such things. Not in public anyway. Not being devout was socially acceptable. Not believing at all was not.

"I've heard of him," Muce said, interrupting the prince's thoughts.

Donald tried to recall the last thing he said aloud. "You say you've heard of him? Tripgood? What have you heard?"

"Well, nothing really worth mentioning."

“What kind of nothing?” Kwestor asked.

“Just that he’s like the top priest or whatever they’re called in one of the smaller sects of the Faith.”

“He was right, Your Highness. It wasn’t worth mentioning.”

“No, that’s not entirely true. It’s not much, but at least it lets me know he’s actually a cleric and has some kind of following. I wasn’t sure before. Do you know anything about his sect, Muce?”

“Not much. I know there are some of them in Dolphin Point because one came to the Lucky Lady once to collect contributions for his church. They often let clerics do that. This guy got kicked out after a while though because he started to get preachy and was annoying the other customers. I suppose that’s what made it memorable. Some of them get that way, but most are pretty nice.” He paused for a moment, as though trying to formulate an especially difficult thought.

“There seem to be two types of cleric,” he continued. “There’s the kind who likes to help people and really seems to care about them, and then there’s the other kind who just likes to tell people how bad they are all the time and how they need to feel guilty about it. You know what I mean?”

“That’s not good for business, especially at a place like the Lady because people go there to have fun, and having fun is one of the things they say you should feel guilty about. I don’t know why they think the gods don’t want people to enjoy themselves since—”

“Muce,” interrupted the prince. “You were telling us about Tripgood’s sect.”

“Oh, right. Sorry. But that’s when I heard of this Tripgood guy because the cleric would say things like, *in the words of the Great Reverend Tripgood*, and then he went on with some stuff about how the god Ariman wants this and doesn’t like that and stuff.”

“That follows,” Donald said. “Tripgood mentioned Ariman when we were talking. He is one of the main gods.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Ariman is the god of people.”

“Yes, I know. He also mentioned Lestog and Flora. They’re the god of animals and the goddess of plants, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Well, not all animals and plants. Betam and Betal are over some of them—except cats, of course.”

“Cats?”

“There isn’t a god for cats.”

“How come?”

“I’m not sure really. Maybe they don’t want one. My dad once said that a cat is its own god, but I’m not sure what he meant.”

Donald thought he did. His sister owned a cat once, although *owned* might not have been the way the cat viewed it, and he could not imagine any god worthy of the name being willing to admit any kind of relationship to it, not that the cat seemed to need or want one to. He looked at Muce with a new appreciation. Donald thought he really should know more about the popular religion of Westgrove because it seemed to be an important aspect of many commoners’ lives. Whether he believed it himself or not did not really matter.

“You seem to know a lot about religion, Muce.”

“Well, my mom talked about it sometimes. She likes all kinds of magical and mystical stuff. She has little statues of the gods around the house, and she goes to some of the churches and temples to make offerings and listen to the clerics, every now and then. I’m nowhere near as devout as she is, but I know a little about most of the major gods.”

“Have you ever heard of a battle of the gods or of them making warriors to fight it?”

“Uh, no. Not that I remember anyway. For the most part, I thought the gods got along together pretty well. I mean, each has certain things they’re responsible for, like, well, how you’d pray to Gotarian for good luck in a card game but to Hydeera for good luck when you go fishing. But they all cooperate to make things work right, like Pneuton and Hroosh working together to make waves on the sea, or both of them with Lomar and Flora to make sure the crops grow right.

“If they fought, then everything would be all messed up, wouldn’t it? I mean, wouldn’t you end up with trees not bending in the wind if Flora and Pneuton didn’t work together or something like rain falling and not being pulled into the ground if Hroosh and Lomar were on the outs?”

“From what I can see, they all seem to be getting along just fine.” He waved his arm to indicate the landscape around them, which seemed to be functioning pretty much the way it should.

Donald made an inexpert scan of the scenery. He did not know much about botany or zoology or nature in general, but he noticed nothing bizarre happening. Everything seemed the way it should, as far as he could tell. The trees all stood with their leafy parts the right way up, anyway, and Muce’s claim this provided evidence of cooperation between gods could be one way to explain it, although, Donald suspected, probably not the best way. Of course, even if the gods were real in some sense, and even if they were cooperating now, it did not mean they always maintained such cordial terms.

“Well, I don’t know, but Tripgood claimed the Warden was created by the gods to fight in a battle between them long ago. I don’t suppose you know anything about it, do you Kwestor?”

“No, I don’t concern myself with such things. Reality is depressing enough for me.”

“Uh, right.”

“You shouldn’t be depressed, Kwestor,” Muce said. “There’s always good stuff and there’s always bad stuff. You have to focus on the good stuff. Like when I’m hungry, I think about how good my next meal is going to taste. Seeing the bad side all the time is like thinking about how hungry you’ll be later right after you’ve just eaten. I mean, if you thought like that, you wouldn’t be able to enjoy anything!”

“You shouldn’t try to be a philosopher. You’re not good at it,” the aging scout replied.

“Don’t you really enjoy a good plate of eggs and bacon?” the young notso continued undeterred. “Doesn’t that make you happy?”

“The hen probably wasn’t overly pleased to have her eggs stolen. And I doubt very much the pig contributed the bacon voluntarily. Life is tough and ugly, kid.”

“Well, yes. I mean, it can be but—”

“Drop it, Muce,” the prince interjected to end the pointless conversation. Actually, he saw merit in both points. He just could not determine which might be the better one.

“So I take it neither of you can corroborate Tripgood’s tale about the origins of the Warden.”

“No,” said Kwestor.

“Huh?” said Muce.

“Right, well, in a couple of weeks we should be there, and we’ll see what we’ll see. For now though, let’s just pick up the pace and make it to Gondford.” This would be the next town of any appreciable size they came to on the way to the Warden, and the last one of any size on the Westgrovian side of the border.

Four days later, they arrived, but the reality of Gondford did not match the image of a quiet little town Donald expected.

Chapter Eight

With delivery of the message for the Westgroviaan embassy in Kartok, Trixie completed her assigned job. The Crown would pay reasonable expenses for her trip back to Greatbridge, but it could claim no further demands on her time or on what she did with it. Her escorts, as members of the King's Personal Guard, were expected to return as expeditiously as possible. Although the same requirement did not apply to her, she felt eager to return home, and she planned to accompany them when they left the next morning. A good portion of the day and all evening remained, and she planned to enjoy them.

The three men she traveled with for the last ten days technically no longer served as her bodyguards now that she had completed her mission. Still, they asked her permission before setting off to explore the city, and she immediately granted it. She welcomed the free time, and they seemed to be looking forward to theirs, too. Before parting company, she told them the location of the inn where they would be staying the night and told them not to worry if they did not see her there for dinner.

She wandered around many of the shops and stalls in the crowded market areas. She found several well made items, solid and sturdy like the stoutfolk themselves. Whatever they created, it seemed, they made to last. Their work possessed a certain beauty as well, a beauty born of utility and efficiency rather than of delicacy and form, though. She eventually bought a small piece of inexpensive but well crafted jewelry at one small shop as a gift for her landlady. Madame Brockwell kept an eye on Trixie's room when she traveled, and she understood if she did not get her rent on time because of it. Besides, Trixie liked her.

She came upon a crowd of people gathering to listen to a storyteller at one of several plazas forming intersections for major roads in the city. He stood by a fountain made of stone carved to resemble an exotic bromeliad. Occasionally, someone would drop a coin in a box nearby.

The storyteller, of course, related his tale in Gotroxian, which made it a bit difficult for her to follow, but she recognized it as a familiar children's classic she heard as a girl in Greatbridge. He spoke with a rich, resonating voice, and he used just the right inflections to carry the moods he described. Through sound and motion, he believably conveyed scenes, emotions, and conflict. She found herself engrossed in the tale. He moved and made faces to act out the characters and events, effortlessly projecting his voice to echo off the buildings around the square.

After he brought the story to a dramatic conclusion, he made a deep, theatrical bow. The crowd applauded with enthusiasm. More money clinked into the box. Trixie shuffled through the crowd to make her contribution.

When she approached, the storyteller smiled at her. "I doubt very much you are from around here."

Trixie smiled back. She did rather stand out, being at least a foot taller than anyone else in the plaza, except, now that she thought about it, the storyteller himself.

He could not have been more than a couple inches shorter than Trixie, making him too tall for one of the stoutfolk. His blue eyes might have labeled him one of the fairfolk, but they did not have beards, especially not full, bushy ones like the storyteller wore. And she never met a fairfolk man quite so wide. She could not recall ever seeing one she would consider overweight, let alone fat, and this man definitely carried a few pounds beyond what anyone might kindly call pleasantly plump. His shoulder length white hair, and, of course, the blue eyes, argued against him being one of the tallfolk. This left the notsos. He could be a notso, she supposed, but like their fairfolk cousins, they did not have beards, and they tended not to be quite so round either. Not that she found the shape unbecoming in his case, by any means. If asked to judge, she would have said it made him look *cuddly*. However, she could not nail down where he might be from just by looking at him.

She also just realized he addressed her in her native tongue. His command of the Westgrovian language carried no accent she could detect, which meant only that when speaking to her, he spoke with the same accent she used.

"No," she replied. "My name is Trixie. I'm a professional messenger from Greatbridge."

"I am very pleased to meet you, Trixie. To be honest, I suspected as much. Not your name, of course, but the rest. You are obviously one of the tallfolk, and I noticed the messenger guild tattoo on your ankle. That specific style is popular in Greatbridge. You may call me Nash or, if you wish, Grandpa Nash. It's sort of an old nickname. So, did you like my story?"

"Yes! Very much. I remember hearing it when I was young. You do it wonderfully."

"Why, thank you. I have had some practice."

"Have you been a storyteller long?" After she said it, she realized how silly it must have sounded. The man could not be so proficient without years of storytelling experience. He probably first told this particular story long before her birth.

His smile broadened. "Longer than you can possibly imagine."

She took his reply for a humorous, self-deprecating remark about his age. "It looks like it would be a lot of fun. I wish I could tell stories like that."

"I don't see why you couldn't."

"Well, for one thing, who would teach me?"

"I suppose I could."

"You? I thank you for the offer, but there wouldn't be time. I'll be returning to Greatbridge soon."

"Isn't that a coincidence? I plan to go there myself. I hoped I might be able to secure a long-term position as a teacher. Maybe even at one of the universities."

"A teacher? What do you teach?"

"Oh, pretty much anything. I suppose it depends on what needs learning."

"Do you think you could teach me how to read and write?" She always wanted to do that—someday. When he mentioned he wanted to be a teacher, her aspirations toward literacy immediately jumped into her consciousness and asserted themselves.

"Certainly. I've taught much less likely students than you, I'm sure."

The crowd thinned. The last coin likely to be dropped clinked into the box, and Nash stepped toward the fountain to collect the contributions.

"Besides," he continued, "I really would like to get back to teaching, and there is no better place than Greatbridge for that. Teaching you along the way will ease me back into it."

Trixie thought this made sense. She did not know much about such things, but she heard the schools in Greatbridge were well regarded by those who did. Her educational aspirations never extended much beyond a desire to learn to read, and she never seriously expected to have an opportunity to satisfy them any time soon. Now a chance to do so just fell in her lap, and although she just met Nash, she instantly liked and trusted him at almost an instinctive level.

"If you'd like," she said, "you can come with me back to Greatbridge. It can be dangerous for someone traveling alone. Especially someone, uh, well, older. You know."

She feared she may have insulted him, but he just smiled indulgently and waited for her to continue.

"Um, so it would be safer to travel together, and it wouldn't cost you anything like it would if you went by coach or joined a caravan. That is, if you were going there anyway. And on the way, if you wouldn't mind, you could give me lessons. I'd pay you, of course."

"That sounds like a fine idea. I'd be happy to, but there is no need to pay me. Your company is more than enough to compensate me for the lessons. When would you like to leave?"

"I was planning to leave tomorrow morning, but I'd be happy to wait until you're ready."

"No need. Tomorrow would be fine. I don't have many things to pack." His smile widened.

"Thank you. That's very accommodating of you. Are you sure it's no problem?"

"None at all, I assure you. In fact, I should thank you for giving me a good reason to finally get up and go. I've been meaning to for some time now, but one day follows another with little things to do, and

plans are put off until a great number of tomorrows have passed by before you realize it. I'm sure you know how it is."

She nodded. She did. All too well.

"I haven't been to Greatbridge in quite a while, and it will be nice to see how things have changed, if nothing else."

There always seemed to be new buildings going up, old ones being torn down, and such things, but Trixie did not think much of any real significance had changed back home since her childhood. Perhaps it had been this long since Nash's last visit to the city. Judging from his age, it might be the case.

"I was just about to go to dinner," she said. "I know a great place not far from here that has the best authentic Gotroxian food. I'd be happy if you'd care to join me—my treat, of course."

"You are too kind." He smiled. "But I'm not hungry right now, and it seems I have some packing to do. I should get to it. Just tell me where to meet you tomorrow."

She told him, and he promised to meet her there the next morning ready to travel.

She strolled with purpose to the little restaurant. The food tasted even better than she remembered.

~*~

Trixie found Nash sitting in the common room of the inn when she came down for breakfast the next morning. The sun still climbed toward dominance of the new day, and most of the tables remained empty. She fully expected to have to wait for her new tutor because of his age and now experienced a pang of guilt for doing so. He said he would be there, and being old did not necessarily mean he would forget or sleep in late. An inner voice tried to tell her it made it more likely, but she told it to shut up because she liked Nash and really hoped he could help her learn to read.

Her three former bodyguards sat at a different table, finishing their breakfasts. She waved at Nash, and he smiled and waved back. She walked over to talk with Reeve and the other two Westgrovians. After a brief conversation, she left them to join the old storyteller.

"Those were my traveling companions on my trip here," she explained, nodding toward the three men. "I just needed to tell them I wouldn't be going with them on the way back."

"I hope my joining you isn't an inconvenience."

"No. They know the way back by themselves, and I'm in no real hurry. My assignment is completed. I don't have to be back right away."

She thought she might be making another unfair assumption, but he did not look like he could travel as fast as she normally did.

"That must have been some important assignment to warrant three escorts."

"I suppose so. I don't really know, of course, and I can't talk about it anyway."

"Of course not. I didn't mean to pry."

"That's all right. Have you eaten yet?"

"I'm fine. Why don't you get yourself something?"

She did. A breakfast buffet like the one at the Redfruit Inn in Barter's Forge did not exist here. Instead, a pair of stoutfolk men made food to order at low bar—low for her but not for the locals. Both chefs wore aprons and a pair of hairnets—one for their heads and one for their beards.

She ordered porridge and jam, a local breakfast specialty, mainly because it would be quick but also because many Gotroxians chose it for their morning meal. She liked sampling the traditional fare at different places. She considered it a side benefit of her line of work.

When she got her bowl, she noticed the cook had drawn a smiley face on the porridge with the jam, a traditional wish for a nice day. She smiled at it and then back at the cook who gave her a wink and a smile of his own.

She returned to the table. "Do you have everything you need?"

"I'm ready to go when you are," Nash said cheerfully. "Here, I brought this." He reached into his pack and pulled out a small, thin book with a colorful cover. "I've had this for several years. I keep it for sentimental reasons, I suppose. Books like this have been used to teach children on this pl—, I mean, in

Westgrove for generations. Like me, it's pretty old, but I think we both have a few more years of service in us."

Trixie took it from his hand and inspected the cover, noticing its faded colors and worn edges. It showed a picture of a rabbit—no, you could not call something this cute a rabbit. Rabbits went in stew pots, not storybooks. It was a *bunny*, dressed in a felt hat and a checkered shirt but, oddly, without any pants. It stood on its hind legs peeking over some tall grass presumably at something out of the picture. Multicolored letters in a washed out rainbow arc stretched across the top of the cover. Trixie did not know what they said.

Nash enlightened her. "It's called *Run Bunny Run*."

"What's it about?" she asked, flipping through the pages. A few words appeared in large print underneath a colorful picture on each.

"It's about a young bunny out on his own for the first time learning about the world."

"I'd feel a bit silly reading a book like this. I'm not a little girl anymore."

He replied with his customary good humor. "Well, I promise not to tell anyone if you don't. Besides, I read it over now and then myself, and I'm much older than you are. You never outgrow a good story. I should know."

She smiled back at him. He seemed so—paternal. She did not know her own father well. She seldom saw him when she was a little girl, and when she got older, she never saw him at all. She did not know what became of him and long since stopped caring very much. She lacked a model for what a good father would be, but she expected Nash might be a fine example. She felt sure she would have been very happy if he had been hers.

"Thank you, Nash. This is very kind of you."

"Call me Grandpa Nash. I think that would work better."

"All right, Grandpa Nash." She smiled.

She felt secure and cared for when in his company. She found it extremely unfamiliar but comforting nonetheless. If he were a few pounds lighter and a few decades younger, she could really go for a guy like that.

~*~

King Motte of Gotrox sat at the head of a long table of carved marble, only half listening to the weekly reports from his kingdom's ministers. His foreign minister, a relatively thin stoutfolk man with a bulbous pink nose, peered through a pair of half glasses at a piece of paper holding the seal of the Kingdom of Westgrove.

"Your Majesty, fellow ministers," he began as he always did—as they all always did, "we received this dispatch from the Westgrovian Embassy yesterday evening. They are letting us know their kingdom will be conducting troop movements and training exercises near our common border this coming winter. They assure us these maneuvers are simply for training and not an aggressive move on their part. They guarantee no hostile intent and trust we will not be alarmed.

"Also, our Department's Start of Autumn Festival office party will be held ten days from today. It will be a potluck. If any of the employees from your departments wish to attend, just let my personal assistant Agnes know what they'll be bringing so she can cross it off the list."

King Motte, who often dozed through these weekly staff meetings, took notice and focused his gaze through shaggy brows at the Foreign Minister. "What was that?" he asked sharply.

"Oh, not you, of course, Your Majesty. You are more than welcome to attend without bringing a dish."

"Not that! The first thing."

"Oh, yes, of course. Um, the Westgrovians will be doing some troop training this winter. Here's the dispatch right, um, here." He passed the paper along through the intervening ministers to the end of the table.

The king examined it for a couple minutes and passed it to one of his other ministers. "What do you make of this, Bailey?"

The Minister of Defense read the dispatch slowly then looked toward his sovereign. "It seems odd to me, Your Majesty. I know of no special reason for them to be conducting such large exercises so close to our border. It will be considerably expensive for them to move the troops, supplies, and equipment required for such an exercise, especially at that time of year. Also, it is not in accordance with their normal training methods, which, like ours, concentrate on range training and one on one practice at arms. Field training exercises are normally at squad or company level. Never have they done anything so large."

"Yes, quite so," the king replied. "It's uncommon. So why are they doing it? Speculate."

"Well, it *could* be as they say, and they are changing their training procedures by adding some large scale field exercises. The border would be a logical place to hold them. Or," he went on, tapping the edge of the paper on the table, "they may perceive a threat from us and are moving troops into defensive positions. But I know for a fact our troops have done nothing they should consider threatening, so I don't see how this could be the case."

"The only other possibility I see is that they are planning to attack us, but that also seems unlikely. For one thing, there's no reason for such an action. Relations with Westgrove have never been better. And, if they were planning to invade, why warn us months in advance about their troop movements? It just wouldn't make sense."

"Of the three, I think the most likely explanation is they really are planning on doing some large scale force-on-force and force-on-target type military training near the border. But as to why, I can't say."

"May I speak, Your Majesty?" asked a soft voice from the far end of the table.

The king stared with dark, intense eyes at the Holy Order's representative. The Gotroxian monarch nodded slowly without saying a word.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I don't mean to disagree with our respected Minister of Defense in an area where he is clearly the resident expert," he began diplomatically, in an oily way, which always made the king suspect obsequious insincerity, "but I believe I must in this case for the sake of the kingdom." He kept his eyes on the king as though trying to gauge the reception of his words.

"I believe Minister Bailey has overlooked one thing. King Leonard of Westgrove must be aware that we soon find out about anything of significance happening within his kingdom. We have an active trade with Westgrove, and merchants carry news along with goods. Also, as the good Minister of Security himself has admitted several times in these meetings, we have paid informants who keep us apprised of the goings on there. Any preparations they might make to move a large number of troops would soon be impossible to conceal and word would reach us."

"If King Leonard had not notified us in advance that this was a simple training exercise, we would become alarmed and position our own troops into defensive positions before his forces could make an assault."

"I am not saying the diplomatic dispatch you hold in your hand is a ruse, necessarily. What I am saying is it could be. If they were planning to invade us, such a tactic could keep us off our guard until it is too late. I beg that you consider this as a viable possibility."

The king gazed around the room, examining the faces of all those assembled. His own face, he knew, showed no emotion.

Completing his sweep, he refocused his attention on the Order's representative. "Thank you, Master Block. I shall consider what you have said."

He turned to the Foreign Minister again. "Whitmedal, am I correct in that we have a mutual protection treaty with Eastfield?"

"Um, yes, I believe that is true, Your Majesty," the man with the rosy nose replied.

"Good, I'd like to send a dispatch. Come to think of it, make it two dispatches. Come see me in three hours. For now, this meeting is adjourned."

Chapter Nine

Nash and Trixie spent over an hour at the table going over the book. She gave her instructor her full attention, following his guidance and sounding out the simple words. By the time they finally decided to leave, they laughed together each time she read the repeating refrain, *run, bunny, run* at the end of every page.

Occasionally, some of the other patrons would glance their way and smile. Happiness is often contagious.

Due to her first reading lesson, they started their trip to Greatbridge a bit later than Trixie had planned, but plans can be changed when circumstances warrant, and today they did. This morning felt like a new, fresh beginning, full of hope and opportunity for her. It could be the start of great new adventures. The fact they did not pass the last of the outlying buildings still considered part of the Gotroxian capital city until mid-morning, mattered to her not at all.

"If you'd like, we could go a bit faster," Nash said after they had been plodding the dirt roads beyond the city for over an hour.

The messenger set a modest pace as a courtesy to her elderly traveling companion. She cast a skeptical eye in his direction. "Are you sure?" She did not want to comment on his age or physique, but she could not deny he looked like he would have difficulty outrunning a gond with advanced arthritis.

"Sure. I can tell you've been holding back. If you want to pick up the pace a bit, I'm sure I can keep up."

"Well, all right, maybe a little," she said, although she retained a considerable amount of doubt. She switched to a brisker pace and wider stride, which the overweight, white bearded old man matched seemingly without effort.

After a few minutes she asked, "Is this all right?"

"It's fine with me, but I think I could manage jogging for a while, if you'd like."

Trixie would never have tried if not for his suggestion, but she switched to an easy jogging pace, and Nash followed suit immediately. He seemed to have no trouble at all despite his weight and apparent age. In fact, Trixie noted, his breathing seemed as smooth and even as her own. Obviously, he maintained himself in much better shape than first impressions might suggest.

They spent their first night on the road at a small inn Trixie stayed at before. Grandpa Nash gave her another reading lesson over dinner. Once he explained the secret that letters stood for sounds, she felt confident she could learn to read.

She still could not actually read *Run Bunny Run*, but she soon memorized the story, and this helped her match the written words to what she knew they meant. When she finally retired to her room, she took the primer with her and *read* by candlelight for a while before going to sleep.

The next day of their trip began much as the first, with a morning reading lesson and quick breakfast. Trixie noticed Grandpa Nash only drank water while she ate another bowl of porridge with jam and drank a cup of sweet black tea with cream. She also observed that he ate very little at supper the previous night, and she could not help feeling curious about his round and well-padded shape. The way he ate, he should have been lean as a pole. When she asked about his breakfast choice, he explained that he simply did not feel very hungry. Maybe he wanted to drop a few pounds and felt too embarrassed to say.

When they hit the road again, Trixie set the same easy jogging pace they ended with the day before and maintained it for the rest of the day. Very little traffic shared the road with them, although they both commented on a stoutfolk messenger who passed them around noon going the same direction they traveled. Trixie idly wondered if the messenger carried a response from the King of Gotrox to the message she delivered from King Leonard.

~*~

Trixie thoroughly enjoyed Grandpa Nash's company. She always thought of him this way now. Some people have a particular, unmistakable nature, as though they are simply *born* to be a specific thing. Some women are naturally maternal and it is obvious even when they are little girls playing with their dolls. Some people are natural leaders, or diplomats, or soldiers. Whether or not they actually do what they seem fated to do is another matter. Plenty of maternal women never have children, and not everyone born to lead ever has an opportunity to do so.

Trixie considered Nash a natural grandfather. She never met anyone so obviously grandfatherly—the look, the attitude, the patience—everything. After four days on the road together, she felt as though she had known him all her life. Her reading rapidly improved, too, due to his patient tutelage. She could now actually read all of the words in *Run Bunny Run*.

Grandpa Nash produced another book for her, this one about a dog, named Spot, which also seemed to like to run. It lacked much of a plot, but she became excited when she realized she knew and could read most of the words written on the pages.

A light rain fell most of the night before. Fortunately, they had already stopped for the day at a small inn at a way station, and they were resting dryly indoors well before it started.

In the morning, they found the packed dirt road dotted with shallow puddles and slippery with mud in places. Nonetheless, they maintained the slow jogging pace they had established as their routine. Trixie, of course, could keep such a pace for a long time without discomfort. How well Grandpa Nash could keep up still amazed her, but he never complained or asked her to slow. She glanced over at him and saw his belly bouncing and his white beard swaying back and forth. Amazing.

Later that day, their road became little more than a narrow dirt track meandering lazily with no apparent sense of purpose or direction through a thick patch of woods. The canopy of leaves partially shielded the road from the evening's rain and the path remained dry, at least in comparison to the soggy track outside the cover of the trees. Also, the uninterrupted shade made the air a bit cooler. Trixie picked up the pace just a notch. Grandpa Nash followed suit immediately.

Turning a sharp bend, she found four men blocking the road. The one in front held a sword. It was not a fancy sword, by any means, or even a very good one, if you wanted to get right down to it, but it did have a pointy end, and, right now, he pointed it at Trixie.

"Stand and deliver," the owner of the battered sword commanded with the confident authority provided by about four feet of sharpened metal and a number advantage of two to one.

Trixie stopped in the middle of the path with Grandpa Nash next her. The would-be highwayman stood only about ten yards from them. If by herself, she knew she could escape easily by simply turning around and outrunning them. She could not leave Grandpa Nash, though, and despite his competence at sustaining a slow jogging pace, she felt pretty sure the lean young thugs in front of her would be considerably quicker in a short sprint than the portly old storyteller beside her. If she turned and ran, he would likely be caught and killed.

She noticed only the one in front held a blade. The three leering examples of the family embarrassment no one wants to talk about, let alone admit a relationship to, backing him up, wielded only clubs.

She appreciated that a good, stout club could be every bit as deadly as a sword if they got a blow in, but it did give her reason to believe she might be able to get both of them out of this. The single sword among the four of them suggested none benefited from experience or training in combat. She did. She hoped the blade holder would be no better at swordplay than she was at reading. If so, she should be able to dispatch their leader quickly and the other three might run. If not, well, it could be more difficult.

"Get behind me," she said to Grandpa Nash, drawing her rapier from the scabbard on her back.

Her own sword, a custom blade made especially for her a few years ago by a craftsman in Kartok, greatly surpassed the quality of that of the highwayman. The fine Gotroxian sword balanced comfortably in her hand and felt almost like a natural extension of her arm. Nonetheless, it looked thin and somehow inadequate against the far broader and cruder weapon held by her opponent.

She took a step forward while her aged companion ducked into the woods. Good, she thought. If nothing else, she could give him time to get away.

The sword-wielding ambusher approached her. "Bad choice, honey." He smiled menacingly.

The three men behind him did not even bother moving up. Apparently they trusted their spokesman to be able to handle a simple woman. She hoped desperately to surprise them.

She let him attack, expecting him to use the blade like a club. This would leave his body exposed and she would be able to make a quick and fatal thrust to the heart. She hoped this might have a good chance of ending the fight before it truly began. It seemed like a good plan based on a reasonable assumption. She said a quick, silent prayer to the demigod of messengers for a little extra support.

He began his first attack exactly as she expected. The feint drew her in and she thrust. The move almost cost her life as he quickly brought his sword down to deflect the strike to the body he apparently anticipated. This knocked her rapier wide.

The strength of the impact on her blade sent a numbing jolt to her hand. Luck as much as skill enabled her to maintain a grip on the hilt.

She stepped back, avoiding his inexpert counter attack. Not really very good, she judged, but not completely incompetent either. She must not underestimate him again.

As their deadly dance continued, she grew certain she could beat him. He clearly possessed greater strength, and he benefited from a longer reach than she did. He also seemed to control a natural agility partially compensating for his obvious lack of training and experience. She could anticipate and react more quickly, however, and she knew how to handle a blade. After his first strike, she adjusted her stance and form, which made avoiding his further attacks much easier. It would just take a little more time.

She drew blood four times but caused no serious injury. She hoped his partners in crime witnessed enough to toy with the idea of reexamining their own employment options. If so, the idea of a quick career change failed to attract them. Instead, they decided to help their boss and began circling to approach Trixie from the rear. They carefully refrained from getting close enough to get in the way of either her skilled thrusts or their leader's dangerous swings, but they did draw nearer.

Trixie could see her opponent tiring. It showed mostly in his face, but his movements became sluggish, too. The quick reflexes he exhibited at the beginning no longer showed as much. In a little more time, she might have him down.

Time, however, may have run out for her. She kept an eye on his accomplices in her peripheral vision, and she tried to maneuver so they could not get directly behind her. Right now, they hovered too close and too far to her right.

Damn! He noticed it too because he shifted to his right, forcing her to turn her back to one or more of his companions, at least for a second.

The highwayman with the sword still presented her greatest imminent threat, but she expected it would take time she would not have to reorient herself to prevent one of the other thugs from clubbing her from behind. No matter what she did, they would be able to get to her before she could fend them off with her sword. Maybe they would not kill her, she mused. Right, and maybe a knight in shining armor would ride up and save her right in the nick of time.

The likelihood of her imminent demise did not frighten her. She felt surprisingly calm about the immediate future possibly because the present consumed most of her attention. She hoped Grandpa Nash had managed to escape.

Just then, her opponent made his fatal mistake. Even as she thrust her blade forward and felt it pass almost effortlessly between his ribs, she knew her sad fate. She could not possibly reposition herself in time to stop an attack from behind.

She tensed in anticipation of the blow as she pulled her sword free from the body slumping to ground. Everything seemed to be happening much slower than it should.

Instead of the expected thud of a blunt object to the back of her head, momentary pain, blackness, and journey into the afterlife, she heard an unexpected and extremely unusual sound.

Two thuds, sounding like boards hitting wet sacks of grain, were followed almost instantly by a third sound, as of something quite heavy hitting the ground—hard. She felt the vibration in her feet and a

whoosh of air as though a storm suddenly blew in, a storm lasting but a fraction of second and bringing no rain. The great gust whipped Trixie's long hair into a cloud about her face as she attempted to turn around.

It lasted just long enough for her to turn to see Grandpa Nash standing over three unconscious men lying in the road behind her. Somehow, in the few seconds since she lost sight of them, he had managed to incapacitate the other three highwaymen and was now quickly tying their hands behind them.

Her subconscious mind worked hard to provide a logical explanation for the scene before her and, failing to find one, left her momentarily speechless and numb, hoping she would not notice.

"It looked like you needed some help," Grandpa Nash explained, peeking up as he tugged the knot tight.

"Yes, I did. Thank you." She found herself confused. "How did you...? What did you...?"

"They were concentrating on you. They didn't notice me." He smiled.

"But it was only a few seconds..."

"They shouldn't be out long. We can march them to the next way station and turn them over to the Royal Constables. How is the other one?"

Trixie had almost forgotten about the man she had fought just minutes before. She turned to examine him. It didn't take her long to determine his status. "He's dead."

"That's too bad," he said sadly. "Human life is all too brief as it is. To waste it like this is a shame."

Trixie thought this a very odd thing to say, considering the circumstances, but she took it to mean that he found the death of someone so young always regrettable. In a way, she agreed with him. She would have considered it more regrettable if their positions were reversed, though. Given the choice between her and the highwayman, she preferred the outcome as it stood.

~*~

When they finally continued on the road toward Greatbridge, they traveled slower than before they met the highwaymen. This was in part because of a light drizzle pestering them on and off but mainly due to their three captives and the body that they dragged behind them.

Grandpa Nash bound the highwaymen's legs in a clever way resembling shackles so they could walk but could not run. He had also tied their hands securely behind them. Two of highwaymen pulled a hastily constructed travois holding the corpse of their former leader. None of them said so much as a word during the entire trip.

When Trixie and Grandpa Nash presented their prisoners at the Royal Constabulary garrison at the next way station, the constable on duty did not attempt to hide his surprise or skepticism at seeing an old man and a young woman delivering three captive highwaymen and the body of another. He kept glancing behind them as if trying to find a small, concealed army or anything else that might explain things better. It did not take long, however, with Grandpa Nash doing most of the talking, to convince the constable that events unfolded exactly as they related them, which more or less described how things had actually happened, although stressing Trixie's skill and underplaying Nash's involvement.

Grandpa Nash filled out a complaint form and signed it. Trixie signed it too. She did not just make her mark. This marked the first time she ever signed her name to a document, and she felt quite proud of being able to do so.

She also signed a separate form about the highwayman she needed to kill. Extra paperwork must be done when someone arrived in a *nonliving* state, the constable explained. The rules stated this very specifically, and everything needed to be documented just so.

She provided answers to a rather long list of questions and began to think she should have just left the body by the side of the road. That would have been littering though, and she did not like to do that kind of thing. It showed a complete disregard for others. She always hated it when she came across such things when she ran messages.

Grandpa Nash probably would not have gone for it anyway. He insisted they carry the body with them on a travois so any family or loved ones the man might have would not wonder what became of him.

Trixie figured the dead highwayman's list of *loved ones* began and ended with the three hoodlums bound and quivering against the wall. An extremely tall constable with dark, wavy hair, coal eyes, and muscles under his shirt bulging like a bag of boulders, watched them closely.

Not my type, she persuaded herself silently.

She appreciated Grandpa Nash's point, she supposed. The dead brigand might have a mother or someone who would want to learn she could now sell his old clothes and rent out his room or something like that. Most people probably did have someone who cared about what happened to them. Of course, this did not mean they cared if the happening proved fatal, only that they would care to know about it.

The two travelers stayed the night at a small inn collocated with the way station. She and Nash occupied two of the six rooms available and were the only guests that evening.

The simple room, although sparse might be a better description, did have a nightstand with an oil lamp. She raised the wick and read for a while to distance her mind from the events of the day, and she found herself smiling at the words and pictures in her book. Eventually, she turned down the lamp and settled under the blanket, listening to the drizzle turn to rain.

Chapter Ten

Donald, Kwestor, and Muce approached the town of West Gondford, on the Westgrove side of the Norfork River, early in the evening. The far smaller East Gondford stood on the Gotrox side. Kwestor said an ancient stone bridge connected the two.

They found a surprisingly large number of people about, considering night would soon fall. Flags and banners decorated the sides of the road. Closer to the center of town, they passed under a sign, with large, brightly painted letters welcoming them to the *Annual Harvest Festival*. Sounds of singing and general merrymaking came from ahead.

Donald and his party continued on to the local inn. They found it without difficulty, a two-story, brown painted wood, and whitewashed stucco building with a thick thatched roof. A sign in front proclaimed it the Gondford Inn.

Several people milled about, both outside and inside, many with glass in hand talking, shouting, dancing, or otherwise amusing themselves in various stages of festive inebriation. Most were tallfolk, but several stoutfolk mingled there, too, with no apparent segregation between the races.

A band played at the far end of the large common room, contributing a beat to the pulse of humanity circulating in and about the building. Donald made his way to the bar where he expected to find someone he could talk to in order to secure a room.

Kwestor followed, scowling. Donald could not be sure if his look signified a general disapproval of merrymaking, concern for the prince's security, or simply because he did not like being around so many people.

Muce made a beeline for the buffet table.

Donald competed for space at the crowded bar, waiting his turn among a line of people of both races queuing for a refill.

"Sorry. Got no rooms available," the innkeeper informed him when he finally reached the head of the line. "What with the festival going on, I doubt as you'll find anyone with empty space anymore."

"Surely, there must be rooms somewhere in town."

The man behind the counter reached for a wet glass and began drying it with a towel as he talked. "Well, normally, yeah, but this is the first day of the Harvest Festival. Goes for six weeks, all the way to Pumpkin Day. Big thing here, the first day. Last too, for that matter. People come from miles around for it."

"I am willing to pay a bit extra."

"Wouldn't make any difference. There's no other inn in town, and I know the folks who said they'd have bed and breakfast rooms are all booked up, too. Heck, even a lot of the barn lofts have been rented out. I know some folks are pitching tents down by the river, though. Might still find a spot there."

Donald did not intend to spend another day sleeping outside, especially not when in a town. And they all desperately needed a bath—especially Kwestor who somehow acquired a fairly unpleasant musty smell, like something left too long in a corner. The prince understood adventurers must endure certain inconveniences, but rank should have some privileges. "But I'm Prince Donald of Westgrove. My father is the king!"

The innkeeper eyed him with a certain amount of incredulity. "Listen, even if you really were a prince, or a king for that matter, there's no rooms. I can't just turn out someone who made reservations in advance. It simply would not be proper—or good business, if you catch my drift."

Dejectedly, Donald stepped away to make room for the next person in line who wanted a glass refilled. Before he could get far through the mass of slowly shifting bodies, a tall, middle-aged man, dressed somewhat better than the average merrymaker, tapped him on the shoulder.

"Excuse me," he said. "I couldn't help overhear some of your conversation with the innkeeper. Are you really Prince Donald of Westgrove?"

"He is," interjected Kwestor, who never left the young prince's side after they arrived. "Not that it matters."

The man turned his head toward the ranger, possibly noticing him for the first time. "Oh, but it does!"

Turning back to the prince, he locked his eyes on those of the younger man. "I am honored to make your acquaintance, Your Highness. We get very few royal visitors here, even at festival time." He thrust out his hand. The prince accepted the offer with a noncommittal handshake. "I am Brian Lescroft. I own both of the mills in town." He went on to explain how he always comes to the festivals but is especially interested this year because a Gotroxian craftsman would be demonstrating a new kind of overshot waterwheel claimed to be much more efficient than the undershot wheel currently at his mills. Donald could follow few details of mill owner's description or appreciate how this new technology might be significant, but the man seemed excited about it.

With the introduction, description of his business and holdings, and more history about the town and the harvest festival than Donald cared to listen to right now, mingled an invitation for all of them to be guests at his house just outside of town. This is no imposition, he explained. Spare rooms could be made ready easily, and he intended to leave the inn now anyway. If they wanted, they would be more than welcome to stay with him for the entire duration of the festival.

The young prince found the mill owner's ingratiating efforts mildly irritating and vaguely suspicious, and he wondered what ulterior motives he might have. Kwestor's attitudes about such things may have been having an effect on him. However, night grew darker and no better options seemed likely to materialize, so he accepted the invitation.

Kwestor trailed a step or two behind Donald and Muce as they followed the local landowner. They strolled for a half-hour through village streets lighted by stars and by lamps from within nearby houses. The mill owner veered onto a side path just outside of town and led them to a two-story fieldstone structure with lace curtains in the lighted windows, sitting serenely on a low hill.

Brian Lescroft entered through the front door and called to his wife about their invited guests. Within seconds, she arrived to greet him, entering the hallway from a sitting room to the right of the main entrance. She smiled with obvious insincerity at the three strangers and shot her husband a quick glare clearly warning, *I'll get you later for this!* Her attitude noticeably changed when he explained that their guests included the youngest son of the King of Westgrove.

"Oh my!" she exclaimed softly, going into a clumsily executed curtsy. "I had no idea. It is indeed an honor to have you in our home." She bowed and fixed her eyes on the spotless floor for a moment, apparently checking to see if it looked clean enough.

Donald immediately assumed the aristocratic persona he had learned to adopt at social gatherings. "Thank you, My Lady. You do us a great honor as well as a great service opening your home to us."

"Mary, I think the prince and his companions should meet the rest of the family." Their host winked almost imperceptibly at his wife.

She glanced at her husband. "Yes, of course." Her attention circled to her guests. "If you'll excuse me, Your Highness, gentlemen." She backed away a few steps with all due formality, turned, and walked toward the stairs.

Brian directed them to a parlor where he invited them to unburden themselves and sit with him for a drink. They gratefully unloaded their packs and other gear and sat in the offered chairs, except for Kwestor who retained his sword and remained standing, glaring about the room. The ranger paced with a look of concern, apparently incapable of accepting that the mill owner acted purely out of charity.

Their host offered them all a drink of brandy, which both Donald and Muce accepted. Kwestor simply replied, "No." After a brief pause, he added, "Thank you," as though an afterthought.

"I think something's bothering your friend," Lescroft said to Donald after they nestled comfortably with their sniffers.

"Normally there is," Donald replied, glancing at the ranger pacing the room. He thought he knew what plagued his scout's mind. Kwestor suspected the mill owner wanted something, and it made him nervous

not knowing what. The idea of Lescroft extending his invitation simply because he beheld some fellow humans in need or even out of some sense of patriotism to the Crown would be, in Kwestor's view, about as likely as a fish dancing a jig. Donald did not necessarily disagree, but he suspected Lescroft simply sought whatever status hosting a prince might provide. As long as any doubt remained, however, Donald knew Kwestor would expect the worst.

Lescroft's wife Mary returned. A boy of about thirteen with freshly slicked back hair stood beside her. A young woman followed.

Brian rose from his chair. "Prince Donald, Muce, Kwestor, please allow me to introduce my son, Patrick, and my daughter, Millie."

The all stood and the young man bowed politely to the prince. His sister stepped around her mother to stand immediately in front of Donald.

"I'm delighted to meet you," she breathed, bending at the knee in a semblance of a curtsy and extending her hand to the prince, palm down.

She looked about seventeen. The low cut bodice of her lacy dress revealed an impressive cleavage. She bent over just enough to ensure Donald could not likely overlook her fully developed womanhood and all this implied. Presenting a coy smile, she delicately moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue.

Donald took her hand and forced himself to look at her face, which he found almost as pleasant a sight as those that originally caught his attention. Kissing the back of the offered hand, which, he noticed, she attractively scented at the wrist, he said none too regally, "D-d-delighted to m-m-meet you too, Miss Millie."

Kwestor, from across the room, observed the exchange closely. This provided the answer to his unasked question. The mill owner wanted a prince in the family and his daughter seemed to be doing her best to get him one.

"Have you come all the way from Greatbridge just to see our little festival, Your Highness?" she asked.

"Well, no actually. Not the main reason, that is. I mean, we were on our way somewhere else and it's just a, uh, a fortunate coincidence we're passing through now. I'm sure it's a very nice festival. I wish we could stay to see some of it, but we really ought to be leaving in the morning."

"I won't hear of it! You just got here. You can't be running off just yet! How would it look to the townspeople to have a member of the royal family come through at festival time and not even stop to see it? I'm sure you could spare a day or two, couldn't you?" She teasingly accented her question with the pretense of a girlish pout. "I will personally be your guide. I'll take you to all the best things, and we can get to know each other. I will be so disappointed if you say no. I promise you'll have a really good time." She batted suggestive eyes, taking his hand in both of hers.

His curiosity about the Warden, feelings of responsibility, raging male hormones, and common sense brawled over which one of them would make the decision. As with most young men in such situations, the hormones won.

"Well, I suppose," his hormones said. "But only a day," common sense added. "After that, we really need to be on our way," curiosity and responsibility chimed in chorus.

The prince tried to smile flirtatiously but could not seem to pull it off. It felt as though his face muscles were receiving mixed messages. He could only manage a twitchy grin, which he feared might have looked more surprised than seductive.

~*~

Kwestor looked on in admiration at the young woman's skills and in dismay at the boy's naivety. She had traveled fewer years since her birth than the prince had, but in this encounter, she was clearly a young woman and he, just as clearly, was a boy. He has a lot to learn—about a whole lot of different things, the ranger thought.

She giggled and whispered something in Donald's ear, which caused the young man's cheeks to redden.

A day or two in her company could indeed prove educational for the young man, and Kwestor toyed with the idea of letting nature and ambition take their courses. It might distract Donald enough to make him forget all this nonsense about the Warden. However, he did not look forward to trying to explain such a thing to his parents afterward. He sighed at the additional burden and resolved to allow them as little private time together as possible.

~*~

The next morning, Donald awoke with a headache, which he blamed on the brandy from the night before. He sluggishly began to get dressed and completed his morning hygiene activities without haste. These included, thank the gods, a bath.

Brian Lescroft proved a very accommodating host the night before, providing an assortment of appetizing hors d'oeuvres and drink. They had socialized until late in the evening with Lescroft's daughter Millie dominating most of the prince's time.

When he arrived downstairs, he found his two companions and the mill owner's family seated at the dining room table, apparently waiting for him. Covered serving dishes formed a neat line down the middle of the long table.

"I trust you slept well, Your Highness," Brian said from the head of the table. The other end of the table seemed reserved for the prince. Millie sat to his right and Muce occupied the chair across the table from her on Donald's left.

"Yes, thank you. I believe I did."

Donald took his seat. After a short prayer of thanks for the meal to the god Lestog and the goddesses Lomaris and Flora, his host began the meal by uncovering the bowl in front of him. Others did the same and the passing of serving dishes and filling of plates began.

He and the two other people at the prince's end of the table reminded him of a half-forgotten fairy tale he had once heard. Millie put very little on her plate. Muce piled his to overflowing, and the prince, between them, served himself portions he regarded as just right.

"How can you still be hungry?" he asked, staring at the young notso's heaping plate. "You must have eaten a dozen deviled eggs last night, and I don't know how many of those little sausages."

"They were good," Muce replied between forkfuls.

"Well, yes they were, but—"

"Oh, did you like them?" Millie focused her full feminine attention on Donald. "I made the eggs myself from a recipe that has been in the family for generations. I'm told that I'm very good—in the kitchen anyway," she added with a wink.

"I liked them a lot," Muce said. He swallowed his last bite and temporarily delayed the next step of his eager demolition of breakfast to elaborate. "My mom used to make some like that but not exactly. She didn't put that little fancy green stuff on them like you did."

"The chopped parsley," Millie said. "It's the little added extras that sometimes make something good into something great, don't you agree, Your Highness?"

Donald glanced at his host's daughter, tried to smile confidently and failed. She tossed her freshly washed and brushed hair over her shoulder with her hand in a way he found very alluring. She must have awakened quite early to wash it for it to be dry now.

"Sometimes little things can make a big difference." He was not entirely sure what he meant, assuming he meant anything, but he wanted to say something.

"Oh, you are so clever!"

He blushed to think she actually might see him this way. Donald did not consider himself stupid, but he also accepted that he could hold no claim to exemplary genius, and he suspected no one would ever judge him very wise in the ways of the world. Perhaps this realistic self-appraisal did, in fact, make him wiser than most. If so, he failed to appreciate it.

As they ate, Millie told him about the harvest festival and some of the things they could expect to find there. The town went all out for these, and they always topped even the traditional winter solstice festival

at which they exchanged gifts and chopped down trees that stay green in the winter to bring them inside where they would die in order to celebrate life.

People from all around the area would be coming to it. There would be music, dancing, puppet shows, storytellers, fortunetellers, food, scientific demonstrations, agricultural competitions, cooking contests, and much more. One of her father's tenants won a prize for biggest turnip last year. Their host seemed to consider this a significant accomplishment.

Somewhere in the conversation, Donald stopped paying attention to what she said. He did not ignore her, by any means. He followed the sound of her voice, though, not the words, as if she hummed a tune to him. He found it blissfully relaxing as he slowly ate his meal. He periodically looked up from his plate as if agreeing with something she said. Often his gaze would travel from her face to the V pattern her open-neck flannel shirt made against the soft rounded flesh of her blossoming bosom.

"So what would you like to see first?"

The rhythm of her voice changed, nudging Donald's awareness.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"I asked what you would like to see first."

Donald blushed. "See?"

"At the festival, silly. Oh, excuse me, Your Highness. I shouldn't call a prince *silly*."

"Why don't you call me Donald?" His cheeks faded from red to hot pink. "And anything you'd like to see first would be fine with me."

~*~

She brought him to a musical performance first. A low stage sat in the middle of a clear, grassy area, and a small crowd gathered around. A man dressed in a black and white checkered tunic stood in the half circle formed by people seated on the ground waiting for the show. The costumed narrator announced the musicians just as Donald and Millie found a place to stand. Kwestor hovered silently behind them. Millie's father excused himself to go see the waterwheel exhibit, and the rest of her family left for a puppet show. Muce wandered off by himself. Donald assumed he went to sample the available cuisine.

A quartet consisting of three string players with instruments of different types and a percussionist took their places on stage amidst polite applause. The string players were all tallfolk but a stoutfolk man played the drums.

They began their set with some popular folk songs and then segued into a rousing jig. People in the audience began clapping in time and dancing with enthusiasm if not a lot of skill. Millie encouraged Donald to join in, pulling on his arms and teasing him, but he feared he would embarrass himself in front of her and declined. She called him a poop, kissed him on the cheek, and then stood next to him with her arm around his waist, tapping her foot to the music.

Donald watched the dancers, trying not to show any sign of being aware of the arm around him, which he could not stop thinking about. Should he put his arm around her? Should he try to hold her hand or kiss her on the cheek? What would the gentlemanly thing be? What would the regal thing be? What would the *sexy* thing be? Standing a bit too stiffly and sweating in the crisp pre-autumn morning breeze seemed about all he could manage.

His course of action decided, he relaxed a little and began enjoying the festival atmosphere. He even started tapping his own foot more or less in time with the music.

He never saw so many stoutfolk in one place before, which, he concluded, made sense since they were on the border of the stoutfolk kingdom.

"Let's go see some other stuff," Millie said suddenly.

Her statement drew Donald's attention to the fact the band no longer played and that the musicians were packing away their instruments. She took his hand, and he let her drag him away without resistance. Kwestor followed at a discreet distance.

They made their way toward the river together, meandering through crowds of people of mixed heights, past exhibits, a dunk tank, and booths selling various types of food, often fried and impaled on

sticks. Donald could not help imaging what a war between Westgrove and Gotrox would mean to a border community like this, and despite Millie's obvious charms, he decided they must leave in the morning. He had a duty.

Chapter Eleven

The burden of the crown lay heavily on King Leonard's head, metaphorically speaking. He seldom wore it and did not do so now. The damned uncomfortable thing weighed enough to hurt his neck. It sometimes felt like a gilded animal trap open and waiting to snap, but it always sat there, physically on his head or not.

Currently, the metaphorical crown felt especially heavy because of the situation with Gotrox and the paper he held in his hand. He expected something like this, but it did not make it any less troubling. King Leonard read it several times and still considered what it implied.

Well, this is why he had advisers. He would get their opinions, assuming they had any. Half of them sometimes seemed only marginally competent, and he suspected his chief adviser placed many of them in their positions mainly due to membership in a powerful family or because they performed some political service for the Crown at some time. He let Horace take care of the appointments. He knew his chief adviser could handle such things with far more patience than he could.

Horace kept pace beside him as they strode down the hallway to one of the castle's seldom-used conference rooms. The chief adviser stood taller than the king but probably only weighed about half as much. As always when on duty, he wore a full-length, black administrative robe. Dressing in accordance with one's position, Horace always maintained, signaled character and breeding. Unfortunately, the outfit, in combination with his tall, extremely thin body and pale complexion, made him look not unlike an anthropomorphic personification of death. An impressive mind resided inside that skull though, and Leonard relied on the man's ability to see things dispassionately. The king himself had never quite mastered the skill. Few people ever did in comparison to his chief adviser.

Their footsteps echoed in the empty corridors. All his advisers would be in the conference room already, probably fidgeting nervously waiting for him to arrive. This fell outside their normal routines. Leonard seldom called meetings of all his advisers together, and he did not hold regular staff meetings. He considered them a waste of his time. Horace and his other advisers kept him well informed, and when he wanted something, he called, and his people answered him—quickly. This indicated efficiency, and he took pride in running an efficient kingdom. Not every monarch did. He felt sure of that. On one extreme, tyrants and despots ruled without regard for their people. On the other, some places somehow managed without kings; the common people actually voted for their country's rulers. The very concept made him shudder. How could you expect commoners to make wise choices or become rulers? Imagine the stupid things they would do! One important requirement of a good and wise king, which Leonard considered himself to be, is that he be conscientious about protecting the people from, among other things, themselves.

Sounds of muted conversation escaped from the open doorway. Horace stepped through first to announce him. Immediate silence descended except for the scraping of chairs on the wood floor as those advisers who had been seated rose.

Leonard strode to the head of the table and took his seat. He would have preferred pacing. It helped him think, but he kept his seat and tapped the edge of the paper he held against the hard surface of the redfruit wood table instead.

Horace hovered by the chair to the king's right for a moment before giving an almost imperceptible nod to tell those assembled they could now sit. He too took his seat and assumed the frozen, expressionless face that the king found so familiar.

"By now, you should all have read your copy of the Gotroxian dispatch," King Leonard said, glaring at those seated around the table. He held the original document pressed firmly under his hand. His scribes worked late the night before creating copies, which his clerks and pages distributed early that morning along with the summons to be there. All the *invitees* attended.

The king's military adviser, General Ramsfield, sat next to Horace Barter. In contrast to the latter man's pale and frozen calm, the general presented an ever-ruddy face and today seemed especially agitated as he fidgeted, his fingers drumming annoyingly on the table. The economic, intelligence, and foreign relations advisers appeared worried, or at least pensive. The king's advisers on religion, trade, and other departments nervously glanced around the table, probably hoping to see clues that might reveal a majority opinion they could inconspicuously get behind to avoid attracting attention.

"Before we begin," King Leonard said, "I need to give you some background information. For the last couple of months, we have been hearing rumors about the Gotroxians discovering some ancient magic, which they intend to use against us."

He turned to his chief adviser. "First it was that rumor from your contact in, where was it?"

"The Westgrove trade delegation in Gotrox, Sire."

"Yes, the trade delegation. Of course, I shrugged it off then as just a silly rumor. But then there was that cleric, uh, what's his name?"

"The Reverend Tripgood. He has some considerable following among the common people, or so I am told. He said he heard about the Warden on a trip to Gotrox while bringing the holy word of the Faith to the unbelievers there, and he said that the Gotroxians were very graphic when they told him what their Warden would do to him."

"Right. We granted him an audience as I recall." The king remembered him saying something about throwing tomatoes, which, given there is no shortage of stones in Gotrox, sounded like they had exercised considerable self-restraint.

"I could use an expert opinion here." He scanned the faces of his advisers. "Where's our Court magician?"

"You sacked him, Sire."

The king paused a moment, recollecting. "Oh, yes I did, didn't I? I booted him out on his rump last autumn after he told me we would have a pleasant day for the Pumpkin Day harvest festival and then we got that torrential rain that washed away half of the archery contestants."

"Actually sire, that didn't happen until after the river flooded."

"Yes, that's right. It was right after that lightning strike that burned down the viewing stand. At least the flood prevented the fire from spreading to the rest of the city. But, there you go. You'd think a magician would be able to tell the difference between a sunny day and torrential rain, fire, and flood in his crystal ball or whatever fool thing they use, but that's magic, just a bunch of mumbo jumbo and dressed up guesswork."

"Of course, Sire. But as you say, we have heard essentially the same report from several sources."

"True. Far too many to ignore now, all suggesting the Gotroxians have found a way to animate the Warden of Mystic Defiance and use it to lead an invasion. We still don't have any details, but I have discussed this at length with Chief Adviser Barter, and we presume this would be as some kind of giant stone warrior. However, we don't know when, we don't know how, and, most infuriatingly, we don't know why."

No one said a word. King Leonard knew they waited for a cue before doing so from the cadaverously thin, black robed Chief Adviser. An invitation for comment did not exist while his stiff, emotionless expression remained. Sometimes the amount of control the man maintained over the bureaucracy gave him pause. A lesser king might have been concerned, but Leonard did not doubt the man's loyalty to him and to the kingdom.

"Since the rumors came from multiple sources," he continued, "I felt it prudent to take precautions. About three weeks ago, I sent messages to our garrisons and military posts between here and the border with instructions to begin gathering supplies and marshaling troops. I knew these activities could not go unnoticed for long, so I also sent a dispatch to Gotrox, telling them we were engaging in large-scale military training exercises. I feared this might provoke a reaction on their part, but I felt I had no choice. The message you hold in your hands, I believe, is their response."

Leonard lifted the original document from the table without looking at it. In the formal and convoluted language of diplomacy, which has the unique ability to threaten someone politely and which Leonard

found annoyingly indirect, it expressed admiration for the people of Westgrove and especially for King Leonard on his excellent idea to conduct military training exercises. These would undoubtedly have a variety of martial and economic benefits, some of which the message enumerated. It proclaimed it such a good idea, King Motte of Gotrox would follow his peer's lead by ordering his own forces mobilized for similar exercises.

"I want your opinions."

~*~

The eyes of each of the advisers shifted briefly to glance at Horace Barter. He consciously relaxed his posture. The understated signal sufficed to proclaim the floor open for discussion.

"Well, if no one else wants to speak up first, I will," said the king's military adviser, General Ramsfield. "I think it's a safe assumption they've been secretly preparing their troops for some time now, and now that they know we know what they're up to, they're using our reaction to their actions to do it openly and claiming that they're only doing it because we're doing it even though we're only doing it because we found out they were doing it first."

His statement met with blank stares from around the table.

"Do you think you could break that down into a few more sentences for us, General?" suggested Horace Barter.

"Sure. It's perfectly clear. They've been secretly preparing their own forces for some time and knew they wouldn't be able to keep it secret for long. They figured our military exercises meant that we knew about their invasion plan, so they're speeding up their timetable and using our defensive actions as an excuse to openly marshal their troops."

"Thank you. That is somewhat better."

"And it makes us look like the aggressor because they'll be telling everyone that they're only responding to our military mobilization," added Edwin Howl, the Adviser on Foreign Relations.

"That doesn't really concern me," King Leonard said.

The advisers met his comment with stony silence. Horace knew many of them shared the king's disregard for public opinion, and the more astute members of the group who did not sat silently biting their tongues, forcing themselves not to reply, 'it should.' However, even they admired the king and considered him a good leader. Horace agreed, for the most part, but the king could often be to diplomacy what a catfish is to mountain climbing. By temperament, the king preferred a more direct approach. This particular trait sometimes made many of his advisers' jobs more difficult.

King Leonard addressed General Ramsfield. "General, you said you believed the Gotroxians have been secretly preparing their troops for an invasion for some time. Do you have some evidence for that?"

"Well, not exactly evidence. Not any actual intercepted dispatches or anything like that and no actual sightings of troop movements by our border outposts, if that's what you mean, but it's awfully suspicious that we haven't since we know what they're planning. I mean, they can't be counting on this magic stone giant thing to do everything by itself, so they *must* be preparing their troops. Since we haven't seen anything obvious, it only stands to reason that they are doing it secretly. And since they're being so secretive, I think it's safe to assume they are planning something *especially* aggressive."

"So, you're saying the fact we haven't seen any obvious change in Gotroxian troop movements means they are secretly assembling their troops for invasion?"

"Yeah, they're clever little buggers when it comes to doing stuff like that. I mean, we already know about the Warden thing they're trying to use, so it's obvious they're up to something, and for things to appear normal when we know they're not, well, that has to mean that they're putting a whole lot of effort into hiding something really big."

"Yes, I think I understand what you mean," the king said. He took a moment before continuing, probably ruminating on the General's reasoning.

"All right, anyone else? What about you, uh, Intelligence? What can you add?"

The man the king addressed took no apparent offense at his sovereign obviously forgetting his name. He should expect him to. He always did. What would be disturbing is if the king remembered it. Andre Turnaket apparently felt no compulsion to remind him of it and neither did Horace Barter. If it mattered to him, he would have recalled it himself.

"Nothing definitive," the spy chief replied, occasionally glancing at some notes he held. We've had reports, more like rumors really, about the Warden, and we have a local operative at the site looking for suspicious activity. So far, we cannot confirm anything, but he hasn't been there long. The reports we have had already, however, were from multiple sources, and they tend to agree with each other. This would normally indicate there is some truth behind them.

"What we do know is that the Gotroxians are storing military supplies in exhausted mines. This isn't new, though. They've always done this. They could be adding to those or even training troops in some of the larger caverns. We really don't know, but it is possible for them to hide a military buildup from us if they wanted to for a while.

"We also know they've increased the amount of grain they import from Eastfield. This could be for feeding troops or it could be totally unrelated. At the same time, they've decreased the amount of food they import from Westgrove slightly, though. This could be for purely economic reasons or they could be trying to reduce their dependence on imports from us.

"We are heavily dependent on Gotrox for minerals, especially iron and coal, and they have been slowly but steadily increasing the prices for such raw materials. This again could just be normal business or it could be an attempt to weaken our economy and make it more expensive for us to equip our military.

"One other thing, which may be worth mentioning, is that we know that they've been trying to learn about a new steel producing technology we're developing here. Steel, of course, can be used for making weapons and armor. They've tried bribing some of the workers at the new steel factory being built, but didn't succeed, as far as we know. That they are interested in obtaining this technology, though, is without question, and it does have important military applications. The bottom line is we're really not certain, but there are a lot of things that, if taken together, could be interpreted to indicate something suspicious."

"Something suspicious?" The adviser on Law and Enforcement almost shouted. His face flushed with righteous indignation. "It's as plain as the beards on their hairy little faces! Those sneaky little stumpies are up to something. We just don't know their timetable. They may have been planning this for years already and may not be ready to launch their plans for years to come. What does that matter, though? We have to act now. If we caught them before they're ready, then so much the better. I think a preemptive attack against them is not only justified, it's essential to preserve the peace."

The king responded. "You are advocating that we start a war to preserve the peace, uh ..."

"Adviser Woodcraft," whispered Barter.

"...Adviser Woodcraft?"

"It's they that would be starting it, Your Majesty. We'd just be shooting the first arrow. And if it's to prevent an attack we know is coming, we'd be in the right regardless."

"I'm not sure I can see it that way just yet, but I appreciate your input. Anyone else?"

A man at the far end of the table raised his hand. The Cultural Adviser's lack of popularity with most of his peers showed on their faces. They considered him—peculiar. He associated with artists. He drank tea out of tiny cups with his pinky finger sticking out. He could honestly claim more popularity with the ladies than all the rest of them combined, although not romantically, of course. This would have been inappropriate for a couple of different reasons.

"Uh, yes, Arts, right?"

"Culture, Your Majesty. Courtney Goodfellow, Cultural Adviser. I know this may be out of my area, but it all just makes no sense to me. Why would Gotrox want to invade Westgrove? What could they possibly hope to achieve? We do a lot of trade with them and that benefits both of us. Our relations have actually been improving. We have a fabulous dance troop performing there now, and next month, a Gotroxian craft show is coming to Greatbridge. All this stuff about big magic statues and the rest must be

either mistakes or coincidences. We can't start a war because of that. The whole idea of a magical stone giant is just ludicrous, and there simply is no rational reason for them to want a war."

Several of the other advisers shot him looks of varying degrees of irritation. If General Ramsfield's eyes had been a catapult, Adviser Goodfellow's head would have been separated from the rest of him at his silky pink ascot.

"Wars are seldom rational but that doesn't seem to prevent them from happening, I'm sorry to say," King Leonard commented. He could not have been oblivious to the reactions around the table, but he pretended not to notice. "So what would your advice be?"

"Well, I think we should send someone there to talk it all out and clear up the misunderstanding. That's really the only civilized thing to do."

The king waited a moment to allow for comment before prompting. "All right. Anyone else?" After a period of silence long enough to indicate no one else intended to speak, he said, "Horace, your assessment please."

Horace Barter analyzed the faces around the table in a way intended to leave the subject of his gaze with little doubt he could easily read their expressions and know the emotions and thoughts hidden behind their eyes. His own expression remained carefully objective.

"We have to accept the real possibility that General Ramsfield's conjecture is essentially correct," he began coldly. "The Gotroxians are planning to use our dispatch as an excuse to openly mobilize their forces. This is a fact regardless of their underlying intent. If the General's assumptions about their intent are correct, Minister Woodcraft's suggestion, regrettably, does have merit. At this point, Your Majesty, I would advise we continue with the mobilization but, as the honorable Cultural Adviser suggests, I would not dismiss the idea of sending a delegation to Kartok. However, before we do, I think we should wait for results from the intelligence probes we have sent out. We would want to begin any discussions with as much information as possible."

King Leonard considered this for a moment. "Yes, that seems prudent. Thank you." He turned to his chief adviser. "Horace, I'd like you to find an experienced negotiator and provide him as much background as he needs on the situation."

"As you wish."

"This meeting is adjourned."

Chapter Twelve

Donald did not want to wait for the rain to stop, although Kwestor said it would in a few hours. He had already spent more time than he intended in Gondford, and a part of him wanted to spend even more. For reasons he could not fully understand, Millie fascinated him, and his libido urged him to get to know her better. It did not stand a chance, though, because his sense of duty and adventure teamed up on it, brought in some emotional lawyers to inflict guilt, and closed the case, leaving him anxious to get back on the road to the Warden.

A cold, drenching rain fell with little wind, which might have prevented so much of it from getting down their necks and under their clothes.

Millie and her father walked with them as far as the bridge spanning the river. Despite the rain, some of the booths for the Harvest Festival remained open. The proprietor of one of the stands selling barbecued chicken and lamb-on-a-stick had somehow managed to get its grill lit, and the smell of cooking food spread out through the still air between the raindrops, tempting them, although their host had provided a hearty breakfast only an hour before.

Millie walked beside the prince, close enough for their rain soaked ponchos to touch. They talked little until they reached the bridge. Stopping at the edge of the stone structure, they watched for a moment as it channeled the downpour into the rapidly flowing river. Millie took Donald's hand and asked, "You will stop and see us, see me, when you return won't you?"

She could not know for sure he intended to come back this way. They never talked about their plans in front of their hosts. When the subject came up, Donald simply said they were on *official business* and could not discuss it. He told his traveling companions this obfuscation lowered the risk of word of their mission reaching the Gotroxians. He also personally liked the aura of secrecy this added. He believed it presented him as an important man of mystery to the mill owner's daughter, although he did not share this thought with them.

He indulged his imagination for the moment, allowing it to interpret his current exploits as an adventure to save the kingdom, and his imagination appreciated it. At this point, it provided him a fantasy of returning this way to Millie's open and eager arms with the explicit provision that this time they would actually have some time alone. So far, they never had. Someone always seemed to be nearby. He appreciated that Kwestor only wanted to watch out for him, but why did he have to watch so closely all the time?

"I will certainly try to."

Their goodbyes said, Donald, Kwestor, and Muce slogged onward over the slick, puddled road, through the stoutfolk part of Gondford, and well beyond. After about three hours, the rain stopped and the clouds drifted away to share their life giving moisture with some other unappreciative beneficiaries.

The prince recalled Kwestor's morning prediction that the rain would stop later in the day. "How can you judge the weather the way you do?" he asked the ranger.

Kwestor's reply suggested he found nothing remarkable about this ability. "By noticing the look of the sky, the feel of the wind and the smell of the air. The same way all the other animals do."

"Could you teach me?"

"I doubt it."

~*~

For a week, they trooped over hilly roads in need of pavement. They forded wide streams in need of bridges. They came upon unlucky animals in need of better cover, which Kwestor shot to supplement

their rations. The game provided a welcome addition to their stale bread, dried fruit, and jerky. But rabbit on a stick, held over a fire until charred on the outside and almost warm on the inside, is not exactly gourmet fare, and his ability to even view it as food depended largely on his level of hunger and his determination to be a real adventurer. Still, a sauce would have been nice. The meat definitely needed more seasoning. Over dinner one night, Donald had agreed when Kwestor complained about the food, while Muce happily munched on a charred potato.

They came upon surprisingly little human settlement along the road leading to the Warden from Gondford, although it did not really represent much of a road. Kwestor said almost all of the trade, and therefore most of the traffic, between Gotrox and Westgrove went by way of the road connecting Kartok with Dale, short portions of which were actually paved. The one Donald and his companions traveled aided their journey with little more than a twin pair of ruts left by wagon wheels over the years, separated by stunted plants and small stones.

They passed a few small stoutfolk villages, a couple of lumber camps, and the occasional mine off the main trail. On their fourth day out, they met a stoutfolk peddler who spoke Westgrovian on his way to the fair in Gondford. Donald passed a few pleasantries with him and confirmed that the road they were on did indeed lead to the Warden. The peddler said he had stopped there a few days before and had sold several lovely and collectible souvenir paperweights. He offered one to the prince.

Donald's hand cupped the glass ball, about the size of a ripe redfruit, and he squinted to examine a little model of the Warden imbedded in it. He mentally translated the Gotroxian writing on its wooden base. *The Great Guardian of Gotrox*.

Donald considered what the short peddler told him and assumed he sold the orbs to pilgrims visiting the site of the Warden. He wanted to pump the man for more information but feared this might rouse suspicion. He bought the paperweight.

It rained on and off the whole day. That night, Kwestor found a spot under an overhanging rock to camp, and they feasted on poorly prepared rabbit, the last of their stale bread, some unintentionally blackened potatoes, and tepid water collected from the last reasonably clear stream. The rock overhang provided little by way of shelter but they appreciated it nonetheless. After a week of hiking over rough roads, Donald felt hungry, sore, and in desperate need of a bath. Adventuring, he realized, is not always quite as romantic as stories would lead one to believe.

Their path merged with another and then that with another and then another. Eventually it grew wide enough for three gond carts to go abreast and stone paving began. The road turned sharply to go around rocky hills until it reached a meandering depression with steep cliffs gradually growing taller on either side. The damp afternoon sky matched the color of the rocks through which the road now snaked, turning their immediate world into a gray watercolor abstract. A light rain began to fall.

The approach to the Warden differed significantly from Donald's expectations. The tale he had constructed in his mind required them to battle a troll or some other foul beast at the base of a cliff, defeat it with a heroic last chance effort, and then scale the sheer rock to find the magical statue half concealed beneath vines covered with long, sharp and—to add a bit more peril—poisonous thorns.

He never imagined a wide, well paved road with little benches along the way, push carts selling snacks and souvenirs, and colorful flags doing their best, despite the drizzle, to flap festively. He definitely did not expect so many tourists.

Nevertheless, they had undoubtedly arrived at the right spot. Donald could tell because of the sign.

Welcome to the Warden of Mystic Defiance
The Great Guardian of Gotrox
Famous in Song and Legend
Mystery of the Ages
Wonder of Wonders

Voluntary contribution – 1 Silver Piece for Admission

He noticed no sign of the statue itself, though. Kwestor said it stood a bit further on in a canyon, as he recalled. The ranger had come here only once before several years ago before it had become so commercialized. He, too, seemed uncharacteristically surprised by the differences.

They continued past the irregularly spaced carts and vendors along the sides of the road, and through and around clusters of stoutfolk tourists. The trio attracted numerous glances and stares; being the only people there taller than five feet, they seemed very out-of-place.

The road funneled them to the entrance where they came upon a candy-striped booth. A stoutfolk man dressed in traditional but archaic gray lederhosen greeted them.

"Good day, welcome visitors. Would you care to make a contribution for the upkeep of our national treasures?" He smiled weakly at them after reciting his memorized greeting, which he had probably repeated with varying degrees of sincerity many times over the last few years.

Donald had secured his money pouch in his pack before they left Gondford. He had not expected to have need of it. It now rested securely but inconveniently in the pack on his back and covered by his rain gear. He suspected he might have some small change in the pocket of the poncho, though.

He dug in his hand and produced about eight copper pieces, which provided some relief and a pleasant surprise. He expected far less. He gave them all to the short, bearded fellow in the funny pants.

The gatekeeper looked at them briefly and held his hand back out for more.

"I'm afraid that's all I have handy," Donald explained.

The prince read Gotroxian well enough. Unfortunately, he did not actually speak it. He knew the words, and he could understand what people said—with a little thought, if they said it slowly and clearly—but his pronunciation left much to be desired.

The Gotroxian winced at such gruesome mangling of his mother tongue, but he seemed to take no offense. Most tallfolk sounded like they were struggling to sing the words to a tune they did not know when trying to speak the guttural language, usually putting the stress on the wrong syllables and getting lost around the umlauts.

"It's not enough," the stoutfolk man said.

"I thought it was a voluntary contribution."

"It is a contribution. That makes it voluntary. If it were an admission fee then it wouldn't be. But you got to pay it anyway."

"So, how much do we have to pay?"

"Whatever you want," he replied with a hint of exasperation. "It's a contribution. But everyone gives a silver piece each."

"How can it be whatever we want if it's a silver piece?"

"Well, you can pay two, if you want."

Donald wiggled out of his poncho, undid the buckles on his pack, dug for his coin purse, and handed over three Westgrovian silver-fruit coins. The attendant tried to hand back the coppers he had originally been given but the prince declined. "Keep it as our voluntary contribution."

"Thank you very much." The gateman smiled and waved them through. As they passed, he handed each of them a piece of paper folded into thirds.

After securing his pack and slipping on his poncho, Donald examined the paper. On one side, he found a map of the Warden's site with points of interest clearly marked out. The other side held several lines of small Gotroxian writing above which in larger print it said, *The Legend of the Warden*. Donald refolded it and put it in his pocket to read later.

Beyond the entrance, the cut in the rocks became narrower and curved sharply to the right. No vendor carts crowded the path past the little striped booth, but flags mounted into the rock faces on either side fluttered damply as far as they could see, which was not far since the crack twisted and turned constantly. They made their steady way through the meandering corridor and among the jostling tourists for about ten minutes before they emerged into a large circular canyon almost like a natural amphitheater. However, in place of tiered seating, the rock walls rose at a sharp angle, high and smooth, reflecting light like polished silver. And there, in the center, stood the Warden. It would be impossible for anyone who came this far to miss it.

Donald could not take his eyes off the massive figure before him. It easily stretched twenty times his height with a blacker than black surface as dark as the bottom of the deepest well. It contrasted sharply with the reflective crater walls around it. Light seemed to be sucked into it like water spiraling into a drain.

He approached it slowly, one tiny, hesitant step at a time, staring into the stern black face and the cold black eyes, which somehow seemed alive. The statue held its bulging arms crossed over its broad chest defiantly. It could see him, he felt sure of it. It knew who he was and he was unwelcome. It inspected him, judged him. It did not want him here.

He started at the touch of a hand on his shoulder, and he turned his head to see Muce standing at his side.

“You better watch where you’re going, Your Highness. You almost stepped on that little kid.”

Donald looked down. There right in front of him a stoutfolk child, no more than five years old, wearing a flannel shirt and bib overalls stood with its back to him. Donald could not tell if it was a boy or a girl.

It also seemed fascinated by the Warden, tilting its head from side to side while silently staring upward. It calmly turned around to walk away before it glimpsed Donald. The child stopped in its tracks, its eyes going as round as cartwheels. Its jaw dropped and a delayed scream emerged just before it took flight.

“I think you scared her,” Muce said.

The thought of a child finding him scarier than the monstrous thing before him disturbed him, and it showed on his face.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Muce said in a comforting tone. “She’s probably just never seen anyone as big as you before. No one that isn’t made out of rock, that is.”

“Uh, yeah,” Donald replied distractedly, looking around. He located the little—girl. How could he tell? She stood with a stoutfolk adult now and pointed in his direction.

In Gondford, the tallfolk and stoutfolk mingled freely. No one gave him a second glance there. Here, the sight of him scared little children. He did not know what to make of this but felt it might be worth thinking about sometime. It would have to wait. Now, he needed to investigate this awesome threat and, if he could, save the kingdom.

Donald approached the Warden monument. It stood there stiff, foreboding, and steadfast. How could such a thing have been made? How could it ever be moved, let alone move by itself? However, if it did, oh, what a formidable weapon it would make. His imagination put in a little more overtime as he visualized the Warden’s eyes begin to glow red with unstoppable purpose, its arms unfold and its stony muscles flex as it took its first step, its foot cracking the gray stone seamlessly paving the entire area within the circular canyon. Yes, he told himself, this could be a serious threat to his father’s kingdom. One he might be in a position to stop.

He circled behind the impassive monument. A stone building with a slate roof stood at the back. Painted in large letters on the wide front window he read, *Warden of Mystic Defiance Museum and Gift Shop*. A sign hanging on the door said, *closed for inventory—come back tomorrow*.

Glancing in the half-blinded window as he slowly strolled past, Donald noticed a twin of the paperweight he had purchased from the traveling peddler a few days before on display at a price slightly cheaper than the one he paid.

He slowly walked away from the museum building, Muce following behind. Both of them gawked like tourists, which may have been the only thing they shared with most of the other visitors. Kwestor looked around, too, but more often at the people than at the architecture and artifacts.

Donald meandered among the tourists until he completed three increasingly wide, irregular circles around the Warden. He examined some of the marble pedestals, three-foot cubes with sloping tops, placed irregularly around the focal point of the exhibit. Affixed to each, there were bronze plates, which contained short paragraphs of speculation, greatly abridged versions of the various and often contradictory myths about the Warden, or some bit of archeological trivia.

He paused at several of these, eventually making his way to the outer wall. He felt his hand drawn to it, and he ran his fingers over the surface, finding it as smooth as it looked—and cold, surprisingly cold.

“Would you mind not doing that, Stretch?”

Donald looked behind him and then a bit down and to the left. He found a stoutfolk woman in lederhosen standing next to him. He guessed she might be just the far side of middle age, although he could not be sure, and a little on the stout side even for one of her race. She held both of her hands on the handle of a small pushcart containing barrels of trash, brooms, buckets and rags. She tilted her head to him with the look parents reserve for children caught making crayon murals on the living room wall.

“Excuse me?” he said.

The woman smiled at the sound of his heavily accented Gotroxian. “Your hand, Stretch. You’re leaving marks I can’t reach.”

Donald looked and indeed a smudge showed where his fingers had recently trailed along the silvered rock face.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know...”

“Oh that’s all right. No harm done. Everyone has to touch the wall. They touch the feet of Big Guy, too, but it doesn’t matter. Nothing shows on him. But this wall! What were those ancients thinking when they made this thing? Every fingerprint and every brush from a dirty elbow leaves a mark. I don’t mind you touching it. Everyone does. There’s nothing else like it in the world. You almost have to reach out and touch it just to see what it feels like. It doesn’t feel quite real, does it?”

Donald found himself able to understand her without much difficulty. Perhaps his ear had somehow attuned itself to the sound of the language. He thought her last question rhetorical at first, but she seemed to expect an answer, so perhaps he still misread some inflections.

“No. It doesn’t feel like rock, anyway. It’s more like porcelain.”

“Yeah, maybe a bit, but it isn’t. You couldn’t chip this stuff with a miner’s hammer, and I’m sure some have tried. It sure does collect marks though. Still, it cleans up easy, so it could be worse. Just a little vinegar water and it shines up real nice. It can get old after a while, I’m telling you, wiping off fingerprints eight hours a day. Like I said, I don’t mind. I mean, if people didn’t keep touching it, I’d be out of a job, and that wouldn’t be very good now, would it? Not with me just three years away from my pension.”

She squirted a little bit of cleaning solution on a rag and handed it to Donald.

“No, I imagine it wouldn’t,” he replied distractedly, wiping off some of the offending marks.

“So, go ahead and give it a feel, but just try to do it a bit lower down, all right? Where I won’t have to stretch so much to reach.”

Kwestor approached at this point. Although he admitted to a more limited understanding of the language than Donald possessed, he apparently could follow their conversation. “Ask her about an inn. There weren’t any last time I came here, but I imagine there are now. We could all do with a dry room and a bath. And our bodyguard there,” he added, pointing to Muce, “has pretty much depleted the provisions.”

Muce smiled sheepishly, although Donald suspected the notso could not be responsible for much more than half of what they had consumed. All of them shared their stock of food.

“Oh, I also thought you might like me to remind you that tomorrow is the equinox.”

“Thank you, Kwestor.”

The cleaning woman watched as they spoke, showing no sign of comprehension. It seemed she did not understand the Westgrovian language.

“My friend here wondered if there might be an inn nearby where we could spend the night and have something to eat,” he translated for her.

She smiled broadly, revealing a mouthful of straight beige teeth. “Sure, there are three of them not more than a mile or so from the entrance. Just follow the paved road to the wide one on the right and follow it. You can’t miss it.”

He thanked her and turned to his companions. “I think we better go. We have an early day tomorrow.”

Chapter Thirteen

“Did you know there are over thirty different stories about the origin of the Warden?” Donald asked rhetorically. He sat on the corner of a short bed in their room at the inn, reading the tourist brochure by the light of a single oil lamp. His hair, wet from his bath, left a damp ring on the collar of his nightshirt.

Kwestor peeked up from the sock he was darning. “Shhh. You’ll wake the notso.”

Muce slept curled into a loose ball on one of the other beds. After four servings of potato, cheese, and broccoli casserole, he joined them in their shared room, took off his boots, said good night, and immediately fell asleep. Except for his chest rising and falling, they detected no movement from him since.

“I don’t think he’d wake up if the inn caught fire.”

“He might if he thought someone was cooking something.”

Donald smiled. “It says here they don’t really know what the Warden is made of, although extremely dense black basalt is the most popular theory. Isn’t that curious? If anyone knows rock, it’s the Gotroxians, and even they aren’t sure what it is.”

“Yes, very interesting,” Kwestor said sardonically. “Does it also say young princes need a good night’s sleep if they are planning to save the world in the morning?” The ranger put away his sewing kit, and then he settled as comfortably as possible in the small bed, lying flat on his back with his feet sticking out from the bottom.

“Oh come on, Kwestor. Even you must find all of this exciting.”

The ranger seemed to consider for a moment. “No, not particularly.”

“Aren’t you at all curious about what’s going to happen tomorrow when we try to animate the Warden?”

“No, can’t say that I am.”

“Why not?”

“Because I suspect I already know.”

“So, what do you think will happen?”

The aging ranger propped himself on his elbows and tuned his head to the prince. “I think we’ll all get up very early, Muce will complain about missing breakfast, we’ll go stand next to that big statue, you’ll do what you think you need to do, and then you’ll want to go home.”

“You don’t think there’s any chance I’ll be able to gain control of the Warden, then?”

“No. Sorry if that’s a disappointment to you, but that’s life.”

“Why not, though? Do you think the scroll is incomplete or that we’re missing something important?”

“I think big stone statues don’t come when you call, no matter how nice you ask them.”

“Well, yes, but this one is magical. I mean, even the Gotroxians aren’t sure it’s made of stone.”

“Whatever it’s made of, it didn’t look too lively to me.”

“So you don’t expect anything to happen.”

“What I expect to happen are the types of things that have happened before. Nature isn’t terribly imaginative in that regard. It’s got a certain number of things it does and it keeps doing them over and over. One thing it doesn’t do is make giant statues come to life all of a sudden.”

“But the Warden isn’t natural, it’s supernatural.”

Kwestor eased himself back on the too small bed. “If you say so, Your Highness. I’m going to get some sleep. Try not to stay up too late. You’re going to be grumpy enough tomorrow as it is.” He pulled his blanket to his chin, exposing more of his feet in the process.

Suddenly, Muce started to snore.

Despite Kwestor's suggestion to the contrary, Donald did stay up late reading over the pamphlet given to him by the gatekeeper. He also poured over the ancient scroll, which once provided linings for several pairs of cheap shoes, as well as the translation he did of it back in Barter's Forge. Hours passed before he felt satisfied that he had memorized the spell to wake the Warden, and he finally settled in bed. Despite this, he woke early the next day before either of his traveling companions, anxious to be going.

He lit the oil lamp, performed his morning ablutions, and got dressed in his least soiled set of clothes, making a mental note to have laundry tended to as soon as possible. Little things like this should not continue to complicate life when things that were far more important required his attention. In a couple hours, he would use everything he had learned in a potentially risky attempt to save his father's kingdom, and he found it necessary to consider taking care of the laundry. For some reason, such things never seemed to be mentioned in the heroic epics, and he never gave them a second thought before. At home, servants took care of such trivialities. He never gave much consideration to what happened to dirty clothes or how they returned cleaned and folded in his wardrobe chest. These things just happened, like a simple fact of nature. Clean clothes were a given—there—back at home—so long as you did not think about it much. Such excuses from cognition did not apply away from the castle, and he found himself gaining a greater appreciation for all of the little services discreetly provided by people who he barely knew even existed before.

A chill draft sneaked through the window frame, but Donald saw no sign yet of the approaching sunrise. He looked to the two other beds. Muce seemed to still be sound asleep, curled comfortably under his blanket, and Kwestor rested motionless on his back, his feet, clad in gray woolen socks with droopy toes protruding off the end of his bed.

Donald hesitated to disturb his roommates, but it could not be helped. According to the scroll, he needed to recite the spell at dawn.

"Time to get up, gentlemen," he said none too loudly. He did not want to disturb anyone in the nearby rooms.

Kwestor opened his eyes immediately and eased himself into a sitting position. "I'm up," he droned. "I've been awake. You can't really get comfortable on one of these things. You'd think they'd have at least one room with normal sized beds, but no. Nobody cares about customer service anymore."

He got to his feet and jostled the sleeping form of the notso. "Come on, bumpkin. Get up. His royal highness has a kingdom to save."

"Mmph," mumbled Muce.

The scout pulled the blanket off the sleeping young man. "You may as well get up now before he makes it a royal command."

"Is it morning already?"

"Technically."

"Is breakfast ready?" Muce dragged himself to a sitting position and started to pull on his boots.

"We won't have time for that," Donald said. "I want to make sure we get to the Warden well before first light."

"But—," the young fighter began, his lower lip near trembling.

"Oh come now. You had a big dinner. You can't possibly be all that hungry."

"But breakfast is—"

"When we're done, you can have a nice big lunch."

"But it's the most important meal—"

"No buts now. Just get yourself ready."

Shortly thereafter, the three men left the inn and made their way on the wide paved road toward the site of the Warden. They left most of their gear in their room, but the prince grasped the stitched together vellum scroll and his translation tightly in his hand along with a small cloth bag.

"We could have waited a little while," complained Muce. "There were going to be sausages today. Good ones. I could smell them cooking." Clouds of vapor accompanied the young notso's words.

Donald continued to march purposefully through the crisp morning air by the light of the stars. "Maybe there will be some left when we get back."

"That would be good. I should be really hungry by then," Muce said without a hint of sarcasm.

They found the road leading to the Warden empty. They passed not another living thing along the way. The nocturnal creatures, human and otherwise, had already retired for the day, and those more at home in the light were yet to rouse themselves. This surprised Donald. He expected to see signs suggesting that the Gotroxians would also be trying to animate the Warden, but perhaps they did not know about the scroll.

They came to the unoccupied gatehouse where they made their contribution for admission the day before. A sign hung on the side saying, Closed for the Evening. Donald glanced briefly at it as they silently snuck by.

Before long, they stood before the Warden. The small amount of light from the stars reflected off the glossy surface of the surrounding canyon walls and partially illuminated the large black monument. It greedily refused to reflect any of it back.

"Now I think we just have to wait for dawn," Donald said as much to himself as to his companions. "It shouldn't be long."

Kwestor took a brief look at the sky. "In about half an hour," he said.

"Good, plenty of time."

Donald handed the vellum and paper sheets he carried to Muce and then opened the cloth bag.

"I had these made in Barter's Forge," he said, drawing out some folded bits of red felt. "According to the scroll, I'll need to wear them."

He shook out the bits of cloth and put them on.

"What do you think?"

On his head, rested a conical red felt hat with a little ball at the tip, and on his right hand, he wore a matching glove.

"You don't want to know," Kwestor replied.

"I think they look just like the things Inkhar and Lomar wore in that picture I told you about," Muce said.

"That is the idea," said the prince. "I even had them blessed by a priest of the Faith to make sure they would reflect the auras of the fairy spirits. He assured me they would."

Donald's heart began to race. The minutes leading to dawn stretched for a subjective eternity while his mind considered an endless list of possibilities. The fear plaguing him most, and an occasionally repeated nightmare, had him facing the Warden, succeeding in his attempt at animation, and not being able to control it. If this happened, he might inadvertently create an even greater threat. What if he unleashed an unstoppable terror? Still, he must risk it. He could not allow such a weapon to be used against Westgrove.

After what felt like eons of anxious reflection, Donald noticed the first touch of a new crimson sunrise. Decision point. No more time for fears or doubts.

Trying to shake off the last of his uncertainty, he stepped forward, cleared his throat, and in a croaked voice began.

"Warden, hear our humble plea."

"Louder," whispered Muce, behind him. "It says it has to be loud enough for stone to hear."

Donald cleared his throat again. He must do this for his father's kingdom and for the people of Westgrove. It was his duty as a prince. Another inner voice reminded him it would also be his chance to be a hero people would write songs and stories about, but he tried to deny that this was important.

Standing as straight and stiff as the great black monument before him, and in a voice as clear and as strong as a great bell, he recited the spell he had memorized from the scroll.

"Warden, hear our humble plea

Listen please we beg of thee

Our need is great as it can be

Hearken to us, Warden!

I come at the appointed time
And speak to thee the magic rhyme
With body pure and thoughts sublime
Listen to me, Warden

I release thee from the stone
To become of blood and bone
And follow as the Masters shown
I summon forth the Warden!"

Donald held his breath. The great black monolith stood its ground refusing to so much as acknowledge his presence, much less answer his summons.

"Maybe you have to do it naked," Muce whispered, breaking the silence.

"What?"

The young notso held the prince's translation of the patched vellum scroll in his hand. "It says here, *Naked to the Warden's love*. Maybe that means you have to do it without any clothes on."

"Let me see that!" The prince snatched the paper from his companion's hand.

"No. That's just a poetic way to say you have to be sincere. It can't literally mean without any clothes because it also says you have to have this silly hat and glove, for the gods' sake. How can you be naked wearing a hat and a glove?"

"I don't know, but that's what it says, and what you did before didn't work. You sounded real good, though, Your Highness. It was really impressive."

"Uh, thanks. What do you think, Kwestor?" asked Donald.

"You still don't want to know. But if you're going to try anything else, you'll need to do it soon. Dawn doesn't last that long."

The prince turned his eyes to the horizon and the creeping light of dawn. "But it should have worked!" he protested. "Are you sure today is the autumnal equinox, Kwestor?"

"Quite certain."

"And it's obviously dawn."

"Obviously."

"And I am a prince by blood."

"Yes, I don't think there is any doubt about that. Your mother isn't the type."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"I've got the stupid hat and glove."

Donald took another look at the scraps of vellum. "Conscience good," he read. "I'm a man of good conscience, aren't I?"

"As humanity is judged, I'd have to agree," answered the scout.

"And I'm a... I mean, I've never, uh, you know, been with..."

"I believe you fulfill that requirement too, Your Highness."

"Damn!" That's got to be it then."

After a minute of frenzied activity involving buckles, belts, and buttons, the prince stood literally naked to the Warden's love with the notable exception of one felt glove and a silly red hat with a ball on the end.

Feeling extremely self-conscious, with his nipples hardening and his scrotum shrinking in the chill morning mountain air, he recited the spell again, louder than before.

As soon as he finished, he heard a low rumble from the direction of the monument. Then he heard a voice.

"What are you doing here?" it asked, in the language of the stoutfolk of Gotrox.

Donald's jaw dropped, his gaze fixed on the huge black figure of the Warden. If he still wore his trousers, he would have made them a little more soiled than they were before.

Muce stared in fascination at the impassive stone face, searching for movement.

Kwestor scanned the base. Emerging from behind the structure, he saw the cleaning lady they met the day before, her pushcart rumbling across the pavement in front of her.

"We're not open yet. Come back in an hour."

"Wh-Wh-What?" The prince's gaze remained frozen several feet too high to have noticed the cleaning woman.

"Whoa!" I suppose you know you're stark naked, Stretch."

He finally realized where the voice came from and to whom it belonged. "Oh my gods!" he exclaimed in embarrassment. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to... I mean, I thought I had to... I didn't think anyone else was here."

"Uh, right. It's no big deal to me, Stretch, but I'd think it'd be a might cold for one of you skinny, hairless tallfolk types to be prancing around in his birthday suit. Is this some kind of rite of passage or religious ritual or something?"

"What? Uh, no. I was just trying to, well, I have this spell here and I was..." He scrambled with his clothes, which did not seem to want to go back on as easily as they had come off.

"He was trying to raise the Warden," Kwestor explained, in his halting Gotroxian.

"He was trying to do what?"

"He thought that if he recited a rhyme he found on an old piece of vellum, the Warden would obey him."

She eyed the old scout incredulously, and then glanced at the prince buttoning his shirt. "And that's why he was naked?"

"He thought it would help."

It took a few moments for her to put this all together. "So he thought if he took off his clothes and recited a rhyme, the Warden would grant him a wish?"

"Not exactly. Actually, he expected it to come to life and do whatever he wanted it to do."

She looked appraisingly at the prince who, now fully clothed, stood before her comparing the scroll with his translation to see if he could figure out what he did wrong.

"He does know it's made out of stone, doesn't he?" she asked.

"I did mention that to him."

"And he still expected that—"

"But I did exactly what it says on the scroll!" Donald interrupted, holding the stitched vellum sheet out before him.

The cleaning woman took a step back when the prince approached her.

"It's all right," Kwestor assured her. "He's harmless."

Donald handed her the scroll. Her eyes stayed fixed on the disturbed young man as she took it.

"See?" he implored. "It's all right there!"

She examined the sheet. Perhaps her reading skills were not very good, or maybe the ornate script and archaic language gave her some trouble.

Eventually comprehension happened. Dawn broke over the horizon and on the face of the diminutive cleaning woman. She began to chortle. "Oh you poor silly boy." And then she laughed.

Chapter Fourteen

“It’s a *what?*” Donald asked for about the fourth time.

“It’s a page from an old fairytale,” the short cleaning woman said for about the fifth time. “Listen, I don’t really know much about it, but there’s a copy in a glass case in the museum. I’ve seen it. It’s in better shape than the one you have, but it’s the same page. There’s a little card next to it that says it’s from some children’s story from a long time ago. If you want, you can talk to the curator. He could probably tell you all about it. He’ll be here in about an hour, if you want to hang around.”

The prince did not believe it. He *knew* the Warden was magical. It *had* to be. All the rumors about the Gotroxians using it for a weapon certainly indicated *they* thought so, and he felt certain fate brought him here to raise it before they could.

Stories are often based on facts, or so he had heard. Maybe he had made a mistake about the scroll, but this did not mean he could not find some other way to activate the magic. If anyone understood what it might be, the museum curator should, or at least he would have some ideas. Donald needed to speak with him.

“Yes, I would definitely like to see him,” he told her. Turning to the other two men, he said in his native tongue, “We’ll be staying a little longer; I need to talk to the curator of the Warden Museum.”

“Could we get something to eat first?” asked Muce.

“No—I don’t know—maybe,” replied Donald definitively. How could anyone be thinking about food at a time like this? Switching back to his uniquely accented Gotroxian, he turned to the cleaning woman. “What time do the food-vendors open up?”

“Oh, not for a few hours yet. You should have had something to eat before you came,” she said, shaking her finger at him admonishingly. “Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, you know.” From the way she said it, he just knew she mothered a dozen children and gave the same lecture to each of them hundreds of times over the years.

Donald glanced behind him to see if Muce understood what she said. He did not seem to, and he hoped Kwestor would not translate for him. Donald already felt foolish and could not bear it if the simplest member of his little group said, ‘I told you so.’

“She said the food vendors aren’t selling yet,” Donald said to the young fighter. “But there’s really no reason for you to stay here. You and Kwestor can go back to the inn.” He felt guilty about everything he put them through to get to this point, apparently without need. “I’ll join you later when I’m done here.”

“Muce can go. I have to stay with you, Your Highness,” the scout said. “It’s part of the job. I can eat later. Maybe this evening. Tomorrow at the latest. Don’t worry about me.”

“If you two are staying, then I’m staying,” said Muce with conviction. “Then, when everything is taken care of like you want, we’ll all have a real big lunch to celebrate.”

~*~

Donald paced around the huge statue at least a dozen times, waiting for the curator. Eventually, he saw an elderly stoutfolk man wearing traditional granite-gray colored lederhosen approaching. The portly old fellow’s round head grew a thick crop of long gray hair, a beard like an angry storm cloud, and incredibly bushy eyebrows meeting in the middle without a break, making it look like he had somehow accidentally glued a dead ferret to his forehead. As he drew nearer, he greeted them. “I understand you want to see me.”

“You’re the curator of the museum here?” Donald asked.

“Yes. And manager of the gift shop, but it’s the museum that gives me the most pleasure. The name is Donfor.”

Donald introduced himself as a student of ancient history from Greatbridge and his companions as his hired guides.

“So what can I do for you? We don’t get many of your type up here, no offense intended.”

“I’m doing research on the Warden for a, uh, a school project,” the prince lied smoothly.

“I’m not real good at judging age, especially of tallfolk, but aren’t you a bit old for school, sonny?”

“It’s an advanced studies class.”

The old man’s skepticism showed. Donald wondered if the cleaning woman mentioned his attempt to wake the Warden.

“In college—at the University of Greatbridge,” the prince added.

The curator’s expression immediately changed. “Ah, yes. Well that explains it. I spent eight years in college myself, and getting naked in front of the Warden probably rates no greater than a six on the ten-point scale of weird college behaviors.” He winked. “Enjoy these times while you can. In my day, in fact, mooning the Big Guy was a common initiation rite for several fraternities—as well as one sorority I knew of.” Donald thought he could see the hint of a smile through the old man’s whiskers as his attention seemed to drift off to some warm isle of memory.

“So,” Donald said, interrupting the man’s recollections. “If it wouldn’t be an imposition, I’d like to ask you a few things about this incredible monument.”

“What? Oh, yes. Of course. I wouldn’t mind at all. Actually, I quite enjoy talking with people about the Warden. I’ve been fascinated by it since I was very young. That is why I’ve made the study of it my life’s work.”

Removing a ring full of keys from a pocket, he unlocked the door of the Warden of Mystic Defiance Museum and Gift Shop, which opened noiselessly on well-oiled hinges. A little bell attached to the top of the door on a coiled spring-bracket tinkled merrily.

“We’re not really open yet, but come on in and we can talk for a while before the morning tourist rush.”

Donald followed directly behind the elderly stoutfolk man, ducking his head as he passed through the doorway of the gift shop. Once inside, he could stand but with little excess headroom.

“I take it then that this is a popular attraction with your people?” Donald asked, just to make small talk as much as anything else.

“Pretty popular considering it’s so far from anywhere. Years ago, it was a place to hike to and camp out. Now we have vendors and souvenirs and a little town down the road with a couple of inns.”

“Yes, we stayed at one last night.”

“Which one?”

“The Guardian.”

“Good choice. Did you try the sausages they serve for breakfast? They are simply wonderful. The best I’ve ever had.”

“Uh, no. We didn’t have the chance this morning. We kind of skipped breakfast.”

“Skipped breakfast? Don’t you know breakfast is the most important meal of the day?”

Donald again felt thankful Muce did not speak Gotroxian. “Yes, I’ve heard that.”

“Well, try them tomorrow. You’ll be glad you did.”

“We will.”

The curator began opening the blinds of the windows to let in the morning light. In neat displays on shelves and tabletops, Donald saw snow globes, letter openers, souvenir plates, mugs, postcards, coin purses, miscellaneous toys, and various articles of clothing embroidered with pictures of the Warden of Mystic Defiance. Muce gazed with interest in one glass case holding what a small sign claimed to be ‘Genuine Antiques and Old Master Artifacts.’

“So, what would you like to know?” asked the curator.

Donald really did not know where to begin. He could not just ask him if the Warden was magical or if anyone recently discovered a way to bring it to life. The curator seemed like a nice enough old man, but

he was a Gotroxian, and if the Gotroxians planned to use this thing as a weapon, he must be aware of it. He might even be a part of the plan.

As he considered all of this, he remembered he still held the scroll of gondhide vellum in his hand, and he offered it to the curator. "I came across this, and I was hoping you could tell me something about it."

The old man unrolled the sheet. "Hey, these are pretty rare! Especially those done on vellum. It looks like this one has been through a sausage grinder, though. I'm afraid it's not worth much in this condition." He handed it back.

"Yes, but what is it?"

"It's the Spell of Revivification from the Veridical Tales by Rolf the Obstreperous," he replied in a manner suggesting he thought any student of ancient history should know this.

"The what from the what by whom?"

"You don't know of Rolf the Obstreperous?"

"I'm not sure I can even say it."

"He was a fabler from the time of King Toeker the Frugal about twenty-five hundred years ago. His stories normally began with someone questioning some common belief of the time but always ended up with the hero accepting conventional wisdom. They were a big hit for generations. They satisfied the parental desire to have children try to think for themselves but not too much. They're out of print now, of course. Here, follow me. We'll go into the museum and I'll show you."

The old man waddled into another part of the building with Donald trailing behind. The walls displayed quotations from various legends surrounding the Warden and one very large mural comparing the height of the giant black statue with other things, from the Central Citadel in Kartok to a stoutfolk child. The Warden towered over them all. Glass cases lined the walls, and other displays dotted the room, probably according to some not readily apparent plan.

In one tall display-case near the center of the room, the curator pointed out a page very much like the one the Prince of Westgrove held in his hand but without the stitching and much less faded.

"This is our best copy of the Spell of Revivification. We're lucky to have it. It was donated only last year by a collector in Kartok. It's the last part of the Second Enlightening Quest of the Veridical Tales. We have a complete set dating from the time of King Sproot the Lesser. They're over fifteen-hundred years old. Those are kept in a sealed vault in the back, of course, but a more recent version is on display over there." He pointed to one of the cases against a wall.

The prince glanced at a case containing a set of large books bound in blue leather. "You said they were no longer in print. Why is that?"

"Like I said, they always ended by supporting conventional wisdom. Well, conventional wisdom tends to change over the years, and the Tales gradually passed into being considered quaint and then archaic and eventually irrelevant. In some circles, they're seen as virtually blasphemous.

"The final nail in the coffin for the Veridical Tales was the Great Philosophical Paradigm Revolution of Gotrox, what the common people call the Gotroxian Religious Enlightenment. As I'm sure you know, that was a direct consequence of the teachings of Bud the Wiser—"

"Bud the Wiser?" Donald interrupted mainly to give his brain time to catch up.

"Son of Ed the Wise. You know, for an advanced history student, your knowledge seems to have a number of important gaps."

"I guess we just haven't gotten to those chapters yet."

"Right," the old man said skeptically, his impression of Westgrovian institutes of higher education no doubt in rapid decline.

"Well, you see, Bud the Wiser was the one who taught that it was impossible to know the nature of any of the gods. The gods, assuming there are gods, had to be so different from anything people had any direct experience of, they would be completely incomprehensible to us. To assume anyone could know the nature or intentions of a god would be the greatest act of hubris and would actually prevent people from forming a good understanding of those things they could, well, understand, like what makes weather and babies and things like that. Having a mistaken impression of divinity, he said, would lead people to mistaken beliefs about other things.

"It all gets rather philosophically deep and complicated from there, but that's the root of it. Over time, his teachings spread. A couple of generations after his death, his followers used his insights as the beginnings of the belief system we now call the Holy Order. The guiding principle of the Holy Order is to approach a partial understanding of the Creator by learning everything possible about the Creation. But I'm sure you know that, at least."

Donald did not but hesitated to admit it.

"The Holy Order," the curator continued, "gradually displaced previous religious beliefs that were very similar to those still held in Westgrove and included a whole pantheon of unlikely supernatural creatures—no offense intended. Since the Veridical Tales tended to support the old beliefs, they lost relevancy. The last copies were printed about eight hundred years ago and were sold in this very shop."

"I see. But I heard the Warden was created by the gods as a warrior to fight in a battle between them," the prince said, beginning to fear the old man now considered him foolish. Still, he must ask for the sake of his father's kingdom.

"Sonny, it would take me years to tell you all the stories that have been told about the Warden. The Big Guy is so incredibly impressive he invites leaps of imagination."

"But it is magical, isn't it? I mean, you don't even know what it's made of."

"I don't know what my old grandmother's meat loaf was made out of either, but that doesn't mean it was magical."

Donald reflected for a moment. Either the curator intentionally wanted to mislead him, or he honestly did not believe the Warden possessed any magical properties. He suspected the latter. He asked anyway. "Are there any other stories like the one from the, uh, Tales of Rudolf..."

"The Second Enlightening Quest of the Veridical Tales by Rolf the Obstreperous."

"Yes. Thank you. Are there any other stories that say the Warden can be brought to life?"

"Yes. Several, in fact."

"Are any of them true?"

"True in what way?"

"I mean, is there really some way to get the Warden to, you know, move?" The prince sensed the old curator's doubt of his scholarship if not his sanity. The facial hair hid a lot of expression, but the eyes beneath those furry brows said enough.

"You do know it's made out of stone, don't you?"

"I thought no one knew for sure."

"You must mean the brochure. It's written that way to maintain the mystery. It's good for business. There are a lot of things we don't know about the Warden and exactly what kind of stone it is made from is one of them. Many think it is a manufactured stone rather than a natural one, and no one today knows how to make such a thing, but it is the expert opinion of everyone who has scientifically studied it that it is some form of stone."

"But if you don't know," the prince began.

"Listen, sonny. You can't take a bunch of unknowns and put them together to create a known. Not knowing what type of stone it is doesn't mean you know it is magical. That's pretty fuzzy thinking for a college boy."

Donald smiled sheepishly. "Yeah, I suppose it is. It is a fascinating artifact though. Has anyone from, well, anywhere come by recently to learn more about it?" He wanted to find out if the Gotroxian military or the priesthood had made any inquiries just in case there might be some truth behind what he heard, although he now felt sure of what answer the old stoutfolk proprietor would give him. He also still found himself reluctant to abandon the fantasy of becoming a hero by saving the kingdom, and the realization of this bothered him, for some reason.

"No, you're the first to be so curious about it in a long time."

The last statement left Donald stumped. He imagined various different scenarios from complete success to total failure, but he never envisioned anything like this. A brilliant idea struck him. At least *he* considered it brilliant. Here is the foremost authority on the Warden in the world. If there is any truth at all to any of the rumors, the answer to one question might give him a hint.

“What do you think it is?” he asked.

The old stoutfolk man did not take long to consider his response. “I can tell you for certain, relatively certain that is, that it is an artifact of the Old Masters. Other than that, my opinions are only speculation, informed speculation, mind you, but speculation nonetheless.

“Because the Old Masters left so very little evidence of their existence, I, as well as a few other scholars, have concluded they were not native to this continent. They may have had a small settlement or maybe even a few of them, but no remains or ruins have ever been found. One very telling piece of evidence they did leave behind, though, was a hand. A hand that was most likely from a life sized statue but one unlike any that any known civilization has ever made. This statue wasn’t made out of stone or clay or glass or anything like that. Not entirely anyway. You see, this hand had a type of fabric covering that looked exactly like skin, and underneath that, it had bones, boy, or something much like bones. And do you know what those bones were made from?”

“No,” the prince answered because he did not have a clue.

“As best we can tell, they were the very same type of stone the Warden is made out of. Whatever it is, we know the Old Masters used it. Of course, on the Warden, you can see it because that’s all he is. But the fabric covering of the statue that hand once belonged to must have made it so lifelike you would swear it was a real person.”

“But I thought the Old Masters were a myth.”

“Boy, you’re all sorts of backwards on what things are real and what things are just stories. Besides, there’s nothing that says a myth can’t have some truth in it. Someone was here because they left things like the Warden and that hand behind. We don’t know what they called themselves but we call them the Old Masters. A few very old stories mention master traders, but they were obviously master craftsmen as well, and possibly masters at a great many other things, too.”

“So what do you think they made the Warden for?”

“My best guess is that it was a monument to their having been here. If their home was very far away and it had been a major undertaking to get here, they’d want to leave a marker. That’s what I think the Warden is. A sign that says, ‘we were here.’ When you get right down to it, that’s what most monuments are for, anyway.

“But I can’t sit around here and continue to give you history lessons. I have a shop to open. Go back to that college you come from and take a few more classes. No offense, sonny. I’ve enjoyed talking with you, but you have a lot left to learn.”

An odd mix of emotions plagued Donald as he left the museum, and they left him befuddled—and disappointed. He found it difficult to come to grips with this because he did not like what it told him about himself. He looked forward to being the hero, the savior of Westgrove and destroyer of the cruel invader. This would not happen now. No cruel invader existed, just a very large stone monument commemorating something long forgotten and a bunch of short hairy people with no special interest in it or, it seemed, his father’s kingdom.

This should have made him happy, and, in a way, it did. There would be no invasion, no war, no death or destruction. However, there also would be no need for a hero. With this realization came a hint of relief because in rare moments of rational self-assessment he retained an underlying uncertainty about his ability to carry out the task he had assigned himself. This remained overshadowed by regret for an opportunity lost, though. He recognized this as self-pity, and he considered it unbecoming of a prince, but no matter how hard he tried to banish it, it remained. This added embarrassment to the emotional cocktail, embarrassment for being so wrong and for succumbing to feelings unbecoming a man of his station.

Muce intruded on the prince’s emotional wallowing by saying, “Hang on a minute. I want to get a souvenir for my mom and maybe a birthday present for my cousin Amy, if I can afford it.”

“Oh, sure,” Donald replied, distractedly.

A few minutes later, the young blonde fighter emerged with a wrapped package in his hand and a smile on his face. “Thanks,” he said. “Let’s go get some lunch.”

On the way back to the inn, Muce kept trying to chat about their experience, but Donald did not feel up to idle talk and Kwestor remained characteristically unresponsive. Eventually the notso ceased his attempts, and they continued in silence.

They returned to the inn about an hour before the bulk of the lunch crowd. Donald collapsed into a chair at a table in the common dining room, and Muce and Kwestor joined him. A young stoutfolk serving girl, dressed in a flannel shirt and bib overalls, came to the table to take their order.

"What can I get for you," she asked politely in barely accented Westgrovian.

Donald had noticed before that Gotroxians spoke his native language far more often than Westgrovians spoke theirs. He made no judgments from this, only the observation.

"Do you have any of the sausages from breakfast left?" asked Muce.

She smiled knowingly. "No. We ran out. There will be more tomorrow. They're a pretty big hit. The owner's wife makes them from an old family recipe, and before you ask, it's a secret."

"I suggest you have her make a double batch tomorrow," advised Kwestor.

The serving girl began to laugh in the friendly but uncommitted way waitresses do to make customers feel appreciated and more generous when it comes time to leave a tip.

"I'm serious."

Over lunch, Donald talked about everything that happened since he left Greatbridge about six weeks before, ostensibly to his companions but in large part for his own benefit. He found it impossible to reconcile what he just learned about the Warden with what the Reverend Tripgood had told him or with the message from his father, which the attractive runner had delivered to General Attemill in Barter's Forge. They did not mesh as though each came from a different part of a separate story.

Now and then, Muce or Kwestor would nod and mumble agreement to one of the prince's rhetorical questions.

During a lull in the very one-sided conversation, Muce asked, "Where are we going next, Your Highness?"

Donald stared at the innocent blue eyes of the young man for at least a minute. "You know, I don't know. Do you have any suggestions?"

"We could go to Dolphin Point. It's a really nice city, and I could introduce you to my mom. She'd be tickled to meet you. And I could show you around, and you could visit the Lucky Lady and play some of the games, if you want. I'm sure you'd have a great time."

Kwestor conveyed no preference. "It doesn't matter."

"We may as well sleep on it," the prince said. He cupped his head in his hands, tired of thinking. "There doesn't seem to be a rush anymore, and I think it would do us all some good to try to take a break for the rest of the day."

~*~

The prince fidgeted or sat at the end of his bed quietly thinking most of the night, so Kwestor remained awake, too. He did not do so out of sympathy, precisely. He could not console Donald, although he fully understood the young man's disappointment. Eventually, the prince would have to learn that the real world and the one in his head were not the same place. It could be a hard lesson, but not learning it would be even worse for him in the long run. Of that, Kwestor was certain.

The next morning, they gathered for an early breakfast. When they got to the buffet, Kwestor got himself a bowl of porridge. The prince sparsely populated his plate with a couple sausages and some pancakes. Muce piled up a big plate of sausages, fried potatoes, and more sausages.

"Have you given any more thought to going to Dolphin Point, Your Highness?" Muce asked hopefully as they settled to attend to their meals.

"Well, since we know the Warden isn't a threat, I suppose..." He stopped in mid sentence. "Hold on! We know it's not a threat, but my father doesn't! He's probably still preparing for war, and if the Gotroxians find out about that, well, we might really have one! We need to get back to Greatbridge to tell him."

"I don't think that's n..." Kwestor began but quickly reconsidered. "Actually, that is probably a good idea."

The king could be a reasonably calm and rational man where matters of state were concerned, but Kwestor suspected his political staff included hotheads and self-serving parasites who were far more typical of humanity in general. Some of them would not hesitate to try to influence him through misinformation and outright lies for personal gain or to further their own agendas, and this whole thing smelled as though something along those lines might be going on. Perhaps the prince could defuse a potentially explosive situation by talking to his father.

In the long run, of course, it would make little difference. People would always find excuses to kill one another, but, as futile as it might be, Kwestor felt a certain obligation to prevent such things from happening near him, if he could.

"It is?" asked the prince in apparent surprise at the ranger's comment.

"Yes."

"Well, then. Let's get back to Greatbridge. We should leave right away."

A fresh glimmer appeared in the prince's eye, and Kwestor feared the young man was substituting a new fantasy for the one about the Warden, which circumstances and experience no longer allowed him to entertain. At least he would finally be going back to the capital.

"Come on, we have a war to stop!" Donald said, rising from the table.

"I'll be up after I'm done eating," Kwestor said.

"All right, but don't be long."

An eager smile remained on the prince's lips as he marched up the stairs to his room to pack.

Muce also lingered in the dining room and waved to the young waitress to get her attention.

"What can I get for you?" she asked politely.

"I'd like to get a sack of those sausages to bring along when we go."

"Sure. They made extra today because of what your friend said yesterday. How many would you like?"

"How many do you have?"

Chapter Fifteen

The rickshaw carrying Horace Barter rumbled over the cobbles of the clean, paved streets of Greatbridge Hills toward the Barter family estate. He passed by the ornate gates, the well-tended shrubbery, and a gardener raking leaves with equal disinterest. His mind focused on the upcoming meeting with his older sister. He would need to be especially careful. She possessed an astute mind. They might not see eye to eye on some important things, and he could not risk any interference.

The rickshaw came to a smooth stop at the front door of a large but not ostentatious house. He told the runner to wait and handed him a silver piece. A painted white door with a shiny brass handle opened noiselessly before he could knock. A man wearing formal attire and a practiced neutral expression stood at the entrance framed by a pair of white marble pillars.

“Good morning, sir,” the majordomo said. “Your sister is expecting you. Please come in.”

Horace Barter offered no pleasantries in reply. He handed the household servant his cape, gloves, and hat, and then followed him to his sister’s private office. He stood waiting while the man discreetly rapped on the dark, highly polished wood door and then stepped inside.

“Thank you, Willard,” he heard her say. “That will be all.”

Horace entered his sister’s office, a tasteful collection of dark wood and blue fabric. Dried flowers, vases, statues, souvenirs and other nick-knacks she had collected over the years, decorated the shelves and cabinet tops. Her brother knew all held some special meaning for her; most were probably gifts. Such displays often suggest clutter but not here. In this room, they simply added to the feeling of visiting a very personal space heavy with years, memories, and experience. He could stop by, briefly, but his welcome came with a time limit.

In her youth some men found Constance Barter stunning, some men found her infuriating, but none found her forgettable. The years failed to change this, although she fast approached her seventh decade. Her dark eyes, now lined with experience, still held a certain mystery and unimaginable depth. Her long silver hair, brushed straight in a style more common with younger women, reflected the morning sun entering from the large window behind her.

“Come in, Horace,” she said in a voice that could have easily belonged to a woman half her age.

He fought the feeling of inferiority, which often attacked him in his sister’s presence, and he tried to make himself comfortable in an overstuffed chair of dark blue velvet.

“We see each other so seldom now,” she began.

“Yes,” he agreed. “It is difficult to find the time. We each have our obligations.”

“Pish! We could pass those obligations on to others at any time, and we both know it. We do what we do because we enjoy it. It is the challenge, you know. Neither of us sees the attraction in rest and relaxation. We need those obstacles to overcome to keep us going. Sometimes I envy the people who can just sit back and happily watch the clouds go by.”

“Neither of us are quite ready, I think, to live a life of leisure just yet,” he commented carefully.

“Perhaps not. I am not sure that is in the best interests of the Family, though. It may be time to pass the cup to the next generation, little brother.”

Is she making a suggestion? “Perhaps soon,” he said. “But not just yet. I think our experience would best serve the Family for a while longer, considering the current situation.”

“You’re talking about the mobilization, of course.”

“Yes.”

He wondered about what she knew and what she suspected. She could command or acquire excellent sources of information, but he felt quite certain his own security provisions would prove more than adequate if the need arose.

“What’s behind it?” she asked.

Horace anticipated the question and decided it would be best to say as little as possible.

"The king perceives a threat. I really cannot say much more than that. I'm sure you understand."

She looked at him carefully, closely, skeptically. She peered deep into his cold dark eyes and bore into his frosty soul where ice collected in dirty clumps in the gutters of his neglected conscience.

He hated how she could do this so well, how she could make him feel like she could examine his innermost being almost at will. Her skill at this kind of thing exceeded even his. He respected and resented her for it because he held his secrets close and wanted them kept hidden.

"All right," she said after a few more moments of discomforting observation, which he suspected she intended to make him pay for his evasive response. "Do you think it will lead to war?"

"It very well could."

"That's unfortunate."

"True, but it could mean big opportunities for the Family."

A brief close of her eyes and a slight shake of her head provided the only clues to her disappointment, but he read them clearly. "There are always opportunities, Horace. You are a very clever man, but you have always been a bit short on imagination. You do not need a war to create opportunities for the Family. You just need to be able to see more than what is right in front of you."

A prudent cough announced Willard's reappearance.

"Excuse me, Miss Barter," the majordomo said.

The form of address was not an affectation. She preferred the title *Miss* because it suited her for its implied independence. She also claimed it hindered undue assumptions the way a title like 'chairwoman' or 'president' might. Misses was right out of the question. Husbands provided little advantage, she always said when asked why she never married, and functioned mainly as an unnecessary hindrance.

"Your son Clarence is here. You asked that I announce him as soon as he arrived."

"Yes, of course. Please show him in."

She turned to her brother. "I hope you don't mind if Clarence joins us. He prepared a report for me on Family financial interests and I asked him to bring it by as soon as he could."

"No, of course not. In fact, I'm eager to hear what he has to say."

Clarence Barter, Clark to almost everyone other than his mother and uncle, entered the room.

"Good morning, Mother. Uncle," he said, nodding at each politely. "I have the report you requested." He handed the woman a stiff, brown folder.

He waited by her desk with self-conscious formality. His uncle sat in the only guest chair.

The young man looked more like his uncle than he did his mother—physically, that is. They shared the same hooked nose, thin lips and dark hair. The way he held himself and the look in his eyes more closely resembled those same characteristics in his mother and reflected her tutelage.

"Thank you, Clarence. I will look at this in a little while. I don't want to keep you, but can you give us a short summary of your findings?"

He nodded. "Of course, Mother. Well, without going into any details, business is good. The only negative figures you will find in there are from our interests in redfruit jam and wine production due to the dry summer. Those are somewhat mitigated by an increase in price due to the reduction in supply, though.

"All other family businesses and investments are benefiting from the military mobilization the king has ordered. Demand from our foundries for armor and weapons is up significantly, and we are turning a fair profit there, even with the increase in the price for raw materials. We're also getting very good returns from financing a variety of smaller businesses with military contracts through their respective guilds."

"Who have you put in charge of overseeing the loans we're making?"

"I'm taking care of that myself, Mother, although I am working with Hidwell and Company for the clerical and accounting aspects of it."

"Very good. You know I have every confidence in you."

"Thank you, Mother." He made to leave.

"Stay a moment, Clarence," Horace interjected. "It appears the Family is benefiting nicely from the military mobilization, wouldn't you say?"

"We are in a position to do so, yes."

"So would you say the Family businesses would continue to benefit in the event of war with Gotrox?"

"They may, but I sincerely hope it does not come to this, Uncle. A war with Gotrox would not be good for Westgrove."

"What's good for the Family *is* good for Westgrove, young man."

"I can't say I agree, sir. I have no problem at all benefiting from the king's decisions. If he decides war is necessary, then the family business will support his decision and no doubt profit nicely. However, this does not alter the fact that I would rather a war not occur. Even if the balance sheet when all is said and done indicates a profit, which I seriously question for the country as a whole, war can't be judged on the basis of a cost benefit analysis."

"So you would rather avoid a war but you don't mind benefiting from it. Isn't that just a little hypocritical?"

"I don't see it so. Exploiting an opportunity is simply good business. There is nothing wrong with that. It's not as if we're creating the opportunity. We're just taking advantage of it like we would any other situation that presents itself."

Horace looked at him appraisingly for a moment and simply said, "I see."

"Will that be all, mother?" the young man asked.

"Yes, thank you, Clarence. You may go."

"He's a good boy," Constance said when the sound of the front door announced her son's departure.

"Yes, he seems to be a very hard worker, but he still has a lot to learn."

"Really?" One well-groomed eyebrow arched in inquiry. "Such as?"

"Never mind. It doesn't matter."

She shrugged. "If you say so. Would you like to stay for lunch? I'm having a few people over from the Chicken Fanciers Club. It's such an interesting hobby. I never imagined there were so many different varieties of the birds. You're quite welcome to join us."

"Thank you, but no. I really should get back to the castle and my work. There is much that needs tending to."

"Yes, I'm sure there is. Good day, Horace. Do try to keep me informed of anything that might affect the Family."

He gave a small, noncommittal nod and bid his sister a good day as he left.

On the ride back, he considered the possible hidden meanings behind her last statement.

~*~

The fireplaces of the thousands of homes, shops, and businesses comprising the vast city of Greatbridge did their best to stave off the damp morning chill of early autumn. From her vantage point on one of the many tree-speckled country hills, Trixie could easily see the smoke from the chimneys serving those fireplaces as a large, low hanging gray cloud off in the distance, although they remained a day away.

"When was the last time you were in Greatbridge, Grandpa Nash?" Her words made little clouds in the crisp air as she spoke before the breeze carelessly dispersed them.

"Oh, it's been several years. I can't really say how many."

"That long, huh? I've lived there all my life. I grew up in Neardocks. You know it?"

"By the river past the stockyards, right?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"I believe it was a bit on the rundown side the last time I was here. Has it improved?"

Trixie laughed without humor. "It's a slum. The only way to improve it would be to burn it down."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

"I don't live there now, of course. I'm still in Greatbridge, though. I have a room not too far from East Market Square. I travel a lot, but I've never been gone for more than a few months."

The two friends jogged past a slow moving wagon on its way toward the orchards. By the end of the day, it would be filled with ripe redfruit.

“Good day, friend,” greeted Grandpa Nash, as they passed by.

“G’day,” the wagon driver replied. An expression of mild surprise emerged on his face when he noticed the portly build and white beard of the fellow running past him at a respectable pace.

“What will you do first when we get there tomorrow?” Grandpa Nash asked her some time later.

“I’ll need to report in to the Messengers’ Guildhall right away. Then I’ll go home. I need to pay my landlady the rent. She’s really nice about being patient when I’m away. I bought something for her in Kartok. I’d like to give that to her too. After that, I’ll take care of a few things—you know, laundry, a bath, that kind of thing. Then I’ll go to bed early in my own bed with my own clean blankets and sleep late the next day. I know it all sounds painfully dull, but I’m really looking forward to it. What about you?”

“I was thinking I’d go up to the university and see if I might be able to get a position there. If not, I’ll probably check in with the lower schools.”

“What if you can’t find anything?”

“Not to worry. My needs are very simple, and I can make a pretty good living as a storyteller for as long as I need to.”

“Of that I have no doubt at all. You are easily the best storyteller I’ve ever heard.”

“Why thank you. I do my best,” he replied, with a smile of feigned humility.

“Hang on a minute. I think I have a pebble in my boot.”

They stopped while Trixie undid the laces of one of her soft, low boots and extricated an offending bit of rock.

“Do you know any stories about Greatbridge?” she asked, as they resumed their pace.

“Oh, a few I suppose. What would you like to hear?”

“Something about its history, I suppose. I really don’t know much.”

Grandpa Nash told her more about Greatbridge and the Kingdom of Westgrove in the next hour than she could ever hope to remember. Apparently, the relative peace it now enjoyed did not reflect its more turbulent past. “I never knew there had been so many wars. But it sounds like we won most of them.”

“The only wars you win are those you avoid.” He sighed.

She thought about this for a moment and appreciated what he meant. “It all upsets you doesn’t it, Grandpa Nash? People having wars and things like that, I mean.”

“Upset? I suppose it does. I don’t like it when people harm one another. It’s contrary to my nature. I can’t really explain it to you, but that’s how I was made.”

“That’s just how people are. There’s nothing you can do about it,” Trixie said comfortingly.

“That’s what bothers me the most. I can’t do anything about it.” He paused. “But then again...” He became quiet and his gaze turned inward. A few seconds later, he whispered almost to himself, “Can I?”

“Grandpa Nash?” his friend said with concern.

“Oh, nothing, Trixie. I was just thinking.”

He still seemed pensive, if not troubled, and Trixie did not wish to disturb his thoughts. “I understand,” she replied.

~*~

From the top of a rocky hill, Trixie could see the outline of the city and the elongated oval island known as the Mound in the middle of the river. On the highest point sat Greatbridge Castle.

The two travelers paused to take in the sight. From a distance, it looked quite impressive with its thousands of varied buildings stretching miles from both sides of the river.

“I think it’s gotten larger since I was here last,” Grandpa Nash commented.

“It may have,” Trixie replied. “There always seems to be something being built somewhere.”

The old man scanned the surrounding landscape, taking in the fields, orchards, and farms in the valley below. His gaze paused at an outcropping of rock almost hidden in a copse of trees to his left. The face on the side away from the city rose flat and vertical like a natural stone wall.

“That’s called the Masters’ Gate,” Trixie said, following his line of sight. “It’s supposed to be cursed or at least bad luck. I’m not sure I believe it myself, but no one ever goes there.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” he said, although she thought he looked distracted.

“We should be in Greatbridge in less than an hour if we don’t dawdle” she went on. “Would you like to join me for lunch before you go to the university?”

“No, but thanks for the offer. I think I’d like to go straight there. I’m a bit eager to see it. Besides, I know you’ve been looking forward to getting home and taking it easy for a while.” He smiled.

This she could not deny. She always liked coming home, but before long, she knew she would be back at the guildhall seeking another assignment. She also needed to check in to collect her pay for this trip.

That afternoon, they met more traffic than Trixie thought normal on the main road running east. The active streets leading toward the center of the city brought them past large civic, religious, and commercial structures boasting their importance, low shops with wide windows advertising their wares, and modest houses with small windows preserving their privacy. The smell of smoke, grease, and the accumulated aromas of thousands of irregularly bathed people and their byproducts pervaded the scene. As they walked, Grandpa Nash told her the history of some of the older buildings they passed. He paused at one of several narrow stone bridges providing crossings over thin, sluggish streams doing extra duty as drainage ditches and the public sanitation system. “What I think they could use right about now is a quantum leap in civil engineering,” he said softly as if to himself.

“What?” Trixie asked.

“I’m sorry. I must have had a stray thought go to my mouth instead of staying in my head where it belonged. You know, after a while, even the best of us stop functioning quite as well as we once did,” he added with disarming a smile. “It was just a passing idea about what I might be able to teach here.”

“What was that word you used—quantum?”

“Oh, that. It’s from a foreign language, sort of. Kind of a dialect really. It’s rather hard to define but in this case it has to do with going from one place to another very quickly.”

“Like running.”

“Not exactly, but that will do.”

“What language is it from?”

He hesitated a moment before responding. “I don’t think there’s a good translation for it in our language. They’re called subatomic physicists. They don’t live anywhere around here.”

“I suppose that’s why it didn’t sound familiar to me.”

“I’m sure that’s it.”

“Do you think I’ll ever meet any of these Subademicfisicants?”

“Subatomic physicists. No, I doubt it very much.”

“It’s just that in my profession I need to know the languages of the people I might encounter, at least well enough to ask directions, get a room and a meal, and things like that. I’m not bad at Gotroxian, and I can get by with my Eastfielder. But since I’ve never heard of these Subademic, uh, people, then I probably don’t have to try to learn their language.”

“Not at all,” he replied. He seemed relieved about something.

They crossed the stone bridge spanning the river to the Mound. Three double-harness gond wagons could easily go abreast across the wide pavement. Nash told her it commemorated victory in a war she had never heard of three-hundred years before. At each end, a pair of granite battle gonds in full armor stood guard. The beasts loomed life size, half again as large as those used to pull wagons or saddled to spare the tender feet of the well-to-do, with the added features of long tusks and down curved horns.

Trixie and Grandpa Nash said their farewells after crossing and parted company, agreeing to meet in three days at University Park at noon.

“Don’t forget to practice your reading,” Grandpa Nash told her as he turned toward the path leading to the university.

“I won’t, I mean I will, I mean I’ll practice.” She laughed and waved, and then started down a different road toward the guildhall.

~*~

Nash found the grounds of Greatbridge University much as he remembered them. Such places seemed naturally resistant to change. In a shaded alcove by the Humanities building, he located a black, iron statue on a granite pedestal with a bronze plaque affixed to it. He considered it a good likeness. The sculpture evidenced remarkable skill and it showed little effect from the passage of the last century or so. The face captured a certain look of calm, confident distinction people expected all proper professors to have. The plaque read, *Doctor Nash, Professor of Philosophy, 36 - 70 W.E. Live and Let Live.*

He had always liked the phrase. It summarized the whole idea of ethics in four succinct words, although he could not claim it as his own. One could find it repeated in different ways throughout time and in many parts of the galaxy. On Earth, it formed the basis for what eventually became known as the golden rule, which appeared in most human cultures in one form or another.

Live and let live. Yes, it really said it all, he thought. If only people would.

~*~

Trixie sat on a wooden bench under a large oak tree in the park. She idly watched a frisky gray squirrel scamper through the fallen autumn leaves and then race up the trunk. It paused halfway up to look down at her expectantly. She wished she could give it something.

The squirrels in University Park were semi-tame creatures whose primary survival mechanism seemed to be looking cute to students willing to share their lunch. Through generations of natural selection, in which the most endearing got the most potato chips, they grew quite good at it. This one presented a perfectly pitiful gaunt stare hinting at near starvation, a state noticeably contradicted by its chubby haunches if one could look past the sad face. Few could.

"Good afternoon, young lady," a familiar voice said. "Do you mind if I sit down?"

She turned and beamed a smile at Grandpa Nash as she quickly stood to give him a hug.

"It's so nice to see you."

"And you," he replied, providing a smile of his own. "You look well. How have you been the last couple of days?"

"Well rested! I've been a lazy slug for the most part. I'm afraid I can get that way sometimes." She said it with no sense of guilt. She thought more people should learn the skill of letting themselves be lazy occasionally. She seldom found time to do nothing, but when she did, nothing was one of her favorite things to do. "It's been very relaxing, and I've enjoyed every minute," she added proudly.

"There's nothing wrong with that at all." He sat down next to her.

"I know. I figure I'll just take it easy for a couple of weeks then see what the Guildhall has for another job. How about you?"

"I can't complain."

"Were you able to get a teaching job?"

"Not yet. They aren't short any instructors here at the University, and the other schools aren't hiring right now. The University people are expecting a drop in enrollment next semester because of the military mobilization. It seems a lot of young men are answering the call to arms."

Trixie noticed again the hint of sadness in his eyes that showed whenever they spoke about things like this. She sometimes thought he might be a bit too sensitive, but his compassion for others was one of the things she found so appealing about him. "I almost think you care too much—and about people you don't even know. You can't let it bother you. It's not your fault, and there's nothing you can do about it."

"Perhaps. Maybe not this time anyway. One thing is certain; it's not something we can do anything about right now. What else have you been up to besides taking it easy?" His smile returned.

"Not much, really. What about you? What have you been up to? All you told me was that you don't have a teaching job yet."

“There isn’t much more to say, I’m afraid. I’ve been telling stories down in the markets, and I’ve been enjoying that. I always do, though. It provides me a few coins as well. I thought I might try to find a job as a tutor, too. I don’t suppose you know anyone looking for one, do you?”

“No, but I’ll keep my ears open.”

A rustling of leaves distracted Trixie. The same squirrel returned. She recognized the soulful eyes. This time it brought along a smaller companion. The urban rodents placed themselves in easy view of the two friends seated on the park bench and assumed a sitting position with their front paws held before them as though pleading.

Suddenly, an idea occurred to her. “In the meantime you can be my tutor! You already are, in a way. Now we can make it official.”

“Sure. What would you like to learn?”

“No, really. I mean, formally. You can give me lessons and I can pay you.”

“You don’t need to pay me. We’re friends.”

She considered arguing the point, but another idea came to mind. “All right,” she said. “I won’t pay you, but you have to come by Madame Brockwell’s boardinghouse tonight at dinnertime. I think I can get you a real paying job teaching.”

“Oh?” he said with mock suspicion.

“Just be there.”

“All right. I don’t know what you have in mind, but I’ll be there. Is that allowed though? After all, it is a boardinghouse for ladies. I don’t want you to get into trouble with your landlady.”

“You can come in as far as the common rooms without any problem at all so long as you’re an invited guest, and I’m inviting you.” Her decisive tone signaled an end to the conversation.

As the two rose to leave, the larger of the two squirrels turned to the other and shrugged in an almost human way.

Chapter Sixteen

The distant sound of a woman's scream floated on the air like a bottled note at sea. It traveled rapidly across the intervening distance and landed as priority mail addressed to Donald's unflagging sense of heroism.

"Did you hear that?" he asked ostensibly of his two companions.

"It sounds like some lady is pretty excited about something," Muce said.

"Or in distress!" the prince exclaimed.

"It didn't sound very distressed to me. It was more like someone yelling at her kids or her husband or whatever," the blond notso suggested. "You should have heard my mother calling after my dad sometimes. You'd think all the demons from all the hells were screaming for their dinner. It could rattle the plates right off the wall."

"The bumpkin's right," Kwestor commented. "It's probably nothing to be concerned about. Even if it were, it sounds like it's a ways away and there's nothing we could do about it anyway."

Donald considered the comments from his more experienced associates and found his version more interesting. "Well I think we should investigate just in case."

Kwestor shrugged. The sound came from in front of them. Their road led that way anyway. "As you wish, Your Highness." He placed a barely perceptible hint of sarcasm on the honorific.

The tall, young prince nodded a regal acceptance of the ranger's acquiescence and quickened his pace on the packed dirt track.

Their route back to Greatbridge took them south around the mountains rather than the northerly route they had used to reach the Warden. It would take one day less this way, according to Kwestor. The scenery looked much the same, though, not that Donald could claim to be much of an expert. To him, pretty much every tree looked like every other tree, and every field looked like every other field. Grass was grass, rolling hills were rolling hills, and dirt roads were, well, boring. They also all looked alike. After a while, all the little towns and villages they passed through did, too. At best, they might all be considered variations on a common recipe that went something like 'four parts dirty people, three parts smelly livestock, two parts mud and/or dust, one part unidentifiable stink, sprinkle with a collection of rickety buildings and dirty laundry, add a pinch of alcohol, mix well, and leave in the morning.'

They had left the site of the Warden eleven days before. Donald could not remember how many small villages they had passed through since. They represented a world far different from the one in which he grew up. At one time, he found those differences fascinating. He still did, but he understood those differences better now, and he felt far more comfortable speaking with commoners than when he started out on this adventure just a couple of months before. He found that, in general, he rather liked them as people. Yes, they were ignorant and unsophisticated. Yes, they were dirty and ragged, and they exhibited unappealing habits ranging from public toenail picking to crotch scratching to booger mining and back down. Their best manners came mainly hit or miss and certainly were not schooled into them as his forcibly had been. They also tended to have fewer teeth and far more offensive odors than the people back at the castle, but he liked them nonetheless. He found them simple, basic, and somehow more real.

They rounded a bend, cleared a wooded hillock, and caught sight of the top of a large red and white striped marquee tent standing on the next hill about a quarter of a mile ahead of them. Donald did not know what to make of it and slowed to ask the scout what he thought it might be.

"There's not enough of them to be a circus," commented Kwestor. "Not enough noise either."

Donald stopped to listen. He thought he detected a low murmuring sound from the direction of the tent, like a number people mumbling, but he could not make out any words.

"There's no large town near here either," the ranger continued as if thinking aloud. "Just a few villages. Nothing to attract any kind of show, really. My guess is it's some kind of family gathering,

although it could be an auction or half a dozen other things. We won't know for sure until we go up there. I'm sure you'll want to investigate." He made it sound as though doing so would be both meaningless and an incredible burden.

The prince took no offense. He recognized the ranger's negativism as a part of his personality. He still wondered about the cause of it, but he normally now managed to ignore or at least overlook his inflections and tone of voice. "Of course. Let's go."

Donald loosened the sword in the sheath at his side, and he marched up the road with a sense of purpose and resolve. For what in particular he remained unsure, but he liked the feeling and fostered it whenever he could.

The tent stood a few yards off the road in a recently harvested grain field. The land just beyond it dipped into a small valley with an unremarkable farmhouse and barn. A small stream gurgled nearby. No one seemed to be around.

The murmuring now sounded louder, but Donald still could not make out any words. As best he could tell, several people were all speaking gibberish but not all the same gibberish, like a song with a lot of 'tra-la-la's' or 'hi-ho's' or 'looy-looway's.' The gibberish varied greatly from voice to voice, but everyone seemed to be speaking at the same time in similarly low tones, like a bunch of people all talking to themselves in a language they made up as they went along.

The three companions tiptoed toward the tent. Kwestor motioned the other two to wait while he stealthily approached the closed tent flap. He brushed it as would a wayward breeze just enough to peek inside. Donald saw him shake his head slowly and drop the flap.

"It's religion," Kwestor whispered with disapproval after he rejoined them. "I strongly suggest we leave right now."

The ranger's statement met a royal blank stare of incomprehension. Suddenly, a scream erupted from the tent. Before Kwestor could move, Donald rushed past him on his way to the tent opening with Muce close behind him. The breeze they made in passing carried away the aging scout's heavy sigh.

Donald burst through the tent flap and immediately beheld a large pink face. Beyond this, he briefly caught sight of about twenty people, most sitting on mismatched chairs, boxes, benches, or the ground. A few stood. They were the mumblers he heard earlier. At the far right side of the tent, a middle aged man with prematurely white hair, which looked like he might have washed it in bacon fat, stood and smiled at the mumbling masses the way a used gond salesman smiles at a customer or the way a cat might smile at a mouse's picnic. Standing to the side, he glimpsed a man who seemed out-of-place, with dark brown hair and eyes. His black clothing bore little resemblance to the peasant garb the mumblers wore.

The pink face belonged to the presumed screamer and dominated a round head covered with curly auburn hair perched on top of a just past pleasantly plump body wearing a yellow flowered dress and pale blue checkered apron. The look might well be enough to make a fashion designer weep in sympathy for the fabric.

There was an unprotected tent pole.

Donald took two or three steps into the tent and then stopped short. He had no choice. Two pudgy hands attached to two pudgier arms grabbed his shoulders, and he found himself staring into wild, round eyes in a matching pink face. A very short gasp of surprise ended prematurely when he found himself suddenly lacking the breath to complete it.

Muce's momentum, enhanced by the weight of his pack and equipment, prevented him from stopping as quickly as the prince, whose braking efforts had been aided by the wide-eyed woman with the low center of gravity. Stumbling in his attempt to stop, Muce banged into the prince's back, which began a chain reaction. In accordance with the laws of motion and at least one discredited political theory, the collision pushed the prince into the well-padded farmwife, knocking their not so well padded foreheads together. Stunned and overbalanced, they stumbled. Their fall was only briefly interrupted by the aforementioned unprotected tent pole, which snapped under the strain.

A hush followed the sound of the cracking pole, and all eyes turned upwards at the now unsupported center of the tent, which seemed to be temporarily violating the established laws of gravity, perhaps due to divine intervention by one or more of the gods. But then again, perhaps not.

Donald, Muce and the owner of the pink face hit the ground as a three-headed, six-legged tangle of humanity and rolled toward the far canvas wall opposite the entrance. They continued to roll as physics reasserted its dominance over reality, and the tent began to fall.

~*~

Kwestor remained outside the tent for several long seconds after his employer had rushed past him. He looked on unconcerned while the tent deflated into a loud, roiling red and white striped mound. With a sigh, he waited patiently for the inevitable.

Only a couple of noisy minutes passed until Donald, Muce, and a husky woman with a tangled mass of rust colored hair appeared from around the corner of the opposite side of tent's remains. All three looked as if a gang of scarecrows had mugged them in a hayfield. Their disheveled clothes were covered with splotches of dirt. Dried grass adorned their hair and made interesting patterns on their clothing. Muce's backpack hung askew on his shoulder from a broken strap. The woman and the prince sported matching bruises slowly darkening on their foreheads.

"Greetings, Your Highness. I assume all went well. This must be the damsel in distress you were looking for. I trust you were successful in rescuing her from a fate worse than death," commented Kwestor in his low monotone.

"I weren't in no distress until *he* came in," the woman said, pointing her thumb at Donald. "He didn't rescue me. He assaulted my person and jumped on top of me, he did. There weren't no cause for it, charging in like a mad gond like that. Scared me half to death, what with those crazy eyes he's got."

Donald gave Kwestor a questioning, pleading look as though asking for reassurance that his nondescript medium brown eyes were not, in fact, *crazy*.

"Thought he might be some kind of demon or something," she continued. "And I was having a real religious experience at the time, too. I'm very receptive, the preacher says," she added with barely suppressed pride.

"I said I was sorry," Donald protested.

"Oh yeah. A lot of good *sorry* does me. You probably ruined my best dress, and I think I may have broken something." She rubbed her hip theatrically. "And you knocked down our church and interrupted my religious experience. I might never have another, you know. Those don't happen every day."

"Your what?" Donald asked unwisely. He looked more confused than usual.

"Religious experiences! Not that you'd know, but sometimes someone really sensitive can be touched by the Spirit and it's a wonderful feeling. They're quite rare, they are. Not everyone can have one."

"Wasn't that you we heard scream earlier?"

"Well, I had two today," she admitted, then quickly followed defensively with, "But that hardly ever happens." She looked around searchingly, as if fearing her rightful indignation might be escaping her, and she seemed determined to catch it before it could get away. "And he hit me, too," she added abruptly.

"I did not!"

"What you call this, then?" she asked, pointing to her head.

"An accident?"

"Humph!"

"And anyway it's not a church, it's a tent," the prince said, obviously not knowing when to shut up.

"The preacher says it's a church if we think of it as a church. It's just that it's, uh, motionable or mobitable or something like that."

"Mobile," said Kwestor.

"Thank you."

The rest of the congregation began extricating themselves from the tangle of ropes and canvas and meandered uncertainly toward the prince and his companions. The white haired man with the oleaginous hairstyle strode to the fore. He stood tall, not quite as tall as the prince but close, although easily several pounds heavier. Additional muscle contributed little of the extra weight. A roll of fat jiggled unattractively around his middle when he moved. His light blue linen shirt looked to have been recently

laundered, starched, and pressed. If not now besmeared with dirt and grass, it might have been quite dapper despite the pudgy middle it covered. The white belt was a fashion mistake, though, no matter what.

"Might someone explain to me what is going on here?" he asked, glaring accusingly at the prince.

Kwestor noticed a heavy smell of spicy cologne when the presumed preacher of the tent congregation approached. The ranger held the opinion that men who wore a lot of cologne should not be trusted. If they were so concerned about their smell, they ought to bathe and fix the problem. Scent just covered it up. What else might they be hiding?

"Uh, I'm sorry." Donald stammered. "You see, I heard a woman scream, and, well, I thought there might be some kind of trouble."

"So you just decided to charge in blindly?" the preacher asked incredulously.

Kwestor stepped forward. "His Highness has a tendency to let his impulses run away with him, at times."

"His *Highness*?"

"Prince Donald of Westgrove," the young prince introduced himself. "At your service," he finished, out of force of habit instilled by long training in courtly manners.

"Cor." The bruised farmwife's mouth dropped open, and she tried to merge inconspicuously with the rest of the assembled peasantry.

"Oh, I see," said the white-haired preacher. He looked pensive, as if silently calculating the variables in this new equation. "Charging in like that was very, uh, *heroic*, Your Highness."

"Yes, very brave indeed," came an oily voice from behind the preacher. It belonged to the man with dark brown hair the prince glimpsed in the tent before things became too confused. "Quite noble, certainly." He was dressed in city fashions, clothes designed for show more than utility and certainly not for hard work. His shirt appeared to be made of a black, silk-like material with puffy sleeves and turned-up cuffs fastened with silver clasps. His pants were also black but made of well-tailored fine cotton cloth. He wore a leather belt with a silver buckle and a sheathed, bone handled dagger. Now, whatever look he intended the outfit to present suffered from the numerous bits of yellowed grass clinging to it.

Kwestor observed the obsequious display with interest. The prince should be able to recognize this as another blunder. Surely, he would not buy the insincere flattery these two tried to sell him.

"That's very kind of you to say," Donald responded warily. "But it seems my assumptions were incorrect."

Good. At least he had learned *something*.

"We can't be right all of the time now, can we?" the blue shirted preacher said with a predatory smile. "So what brings you out this way, Your Highness?"

"We were heading back to—"

Kwestor interrupted him with a sharp nudge and completed the response. "We were surveying the harvest efforts around Greatbridge. We were just on our way back."

The capital remained a week away, and the preacher looked skeptical of the ranger's explanation. Kwestor did not care what the man thought so long as nothing was said about Gotrox or the Warden. Something devious lurked behind all of this. Someone wanted to provoke distrust between Gotrox and Westgrove. Kwestor sensed the foul smell of intrigue, and he felt this man might somehow have a part in it, certainly not as a director, but perhaps more of a supporting actor. Why or how he could not say, but he trusted the feeling.

"And what brings the two of you way out here?" he asked, turning the flow of inquiry the other way. Kwestor suspected that neither of the two men came from this area based on the inflections in their voices. The preacher's accent labeled him from a rural region around Berwick. The few words spoken by the other man suggested he came from Greatbridge.

"I am a simple preacher bringing the word of Ariman to the common people. My companion here works for an anonymous benefactor but is also a follower of the True Faith and is accompanying me for a time."

A ragged chorus of "Praise Ariman" rose from the small congregation clustered behind the speaker.

"You must be Arimanists then," Muce concluded innocently. "The Reverend Tripgood's sect."

The preacher took in the notso's upswept ears, dirty-blond hair, and blue eyes, and asked, derisively, "And *you* are?" His tone of voice made the question almost synonymous with 'What are you?'

"Muce. My name is Muce. I'm His Highness's bodyguard, sort of."

"He's my traveling companion," Donald said defensively.

"Of course. No offense intended."

Kwestor did not doubt the man's intent. He would not want to alienate the prince intentionally, but given his obvious distaste of notsos, it seemed a fair bet he held similar opinions of fairfolk and stoutfolk as well.

"This would be a good time to complete the introductions," the aging scout interjected. "My name is Kwestor. I'm serving His Highness as guide." He gave the preacher an inquiring look, implying rather than asking a question.

"Of course. Of course. My name is Crasse, *Reverend* Crasse." He placed a hand on the shoulder of the shorter man with the black shirt. "My companion here is called Whead."

"So you and Mister Whead are traveling by yourselves from town to town preaching your religion to people?" Kwestor doubted this as neither of them struck him as the type to risk the personal danger or hardship long travel implied.

"Not entirely. We do have two stout lads of the Faith along to tend the gond and provide protection from ruffians." He indicated a couple of young men dressed much like the rest of the congregation. Neither carried a sword at the moment, but both looked as though they could hold their own in any bar fight in any bar you might want to mention using whatever came to hand. "We travel from village to village to ease the burden of these poor people by bringing them the good Word."

The idea of these men pursuing a quest to ease anyone's burden other than their own seemed about as likely as a cheese maker inviting a family of rats over for dinner, the ranger thought. He wondered about their personal motivations. His perception of humanity required they have some. People did not altruistically inconvenience themselves simply to help others. Most did not anyway, although he occasionally heard of actions possibly falling outside this paradigm. He explained such things away as anomalous behavior by abnormal people, exceptions proving the rule. Normal people required more selfish incentives. Money, power, sex, ego gratification—those were the common ones. Which of these motivated these two?

"This seems an odd place to hold your, uh, services," Donald commented.

Kwestor experienced just a hint of satisfaction as he listened to the prince question them on why they set up here in a wheat field two or three miles from the nearest village. Perhaps he could learn to balance some of his naive idealism with a little skepticism. At least he knew to question things that did not make sense now.

"We go where we are welcomed," the Reverend Crasse replied. "The kind farmer of this land allowed us to set up here." He motioned toward the small crowd, singling out a middle-age man wearing a faded flannel shirt who nodded and smiled back meekly. "I believe the prince has already met his wife."

The woman who participated in the prince's unintended demolition unsuccessfully tried to hide behind her husband.

"He had some friends and family here," the preacher continued, "and with a few people from the village and nearby farms we have a pretty good turnout."

A thought occurred to Kwestor. "And of course these, uh, good people contribute to your cause."

"Oh, no. Not money, if that is what you mean," the traveling preacher replied with an exaggerated air of indignation. "These folks have little enough to spare," he added louder than necessary. "We would not ask them for monetary contributions. We only ask for their attention and their prayers."

"So how do you pay the expenses? That is a very nice tent you have there." Kwestor pointed to the striped canvas heap. The high quality tent had probably cost a considerable amount of money. Despite being flattened, it seemed to have weathered its recent mishap quite well except for the main pole. "And then there's your food and lodging, and you said you have a gond. These things cost money."

"I'm sure he means no offense," the prince interjected as though trying to apologize for his companion's abruptness.

"None taken. Your guide is quite right, and we don't turn down generous offers of food or lodging from those who appreciate the truth we share with them. As for the rest, yes, these things do cost money. Fortunately, we have a benefactor who supplies us with all the resources we need for these worldly things."

"He must be very well off."

"I would assume so."

"Who is it?" Kwestor asked.

The reverend hesitated briefly. "No one knows his name. He is very careful about protecting his anonymity. He is obviously a very humble man as well as a very pious one."

"I see. So how do you arrange for your funding since you never meet?"

"Mister Whead can tell you more about it, if you'd like. That is one of his duties."

The preacher's companion had achieved a certain amount of success brushing off his clothing and picking the straw from his fancy black shirt. He stepped forward, smoothing out a few last wrinkles. "I can't really say much more than the good reverend. I have never met the man myself. I prepare expense reports and funding requests and submit them through an accounting firm in Greatbridge. All they have ever told me is that we have a rich uncle. I do not think they know who he is either. I have never asked further. If our benefactor wishes to conceal his identity and not take credit for his charity, I believe this is his right. Such humility is indeed noble, and we should all respect that." His expression challenged the ranger to object to so obvious a sentiment.

Kwestor remained silent but his expression called the man a liar.

The hint of a grin ghosted across Whead's face. "Now, if you'll excuse us, we should see about getting our tent back up."

Whead and Crasse turned toward the tent, and their congregation moved to follow like enamored ducklings.

Kwestor shouldered his way into the group before it retreated more than a few shuffling steps and placed his hand on the arm of the man identified by Reverend Crasse as the owner of the farm.

"Prince Donald wishes to speak with you," he said, intentionally conveying undertones of mild intimidation.

"H-H-He does?"

"Yes, I'm sure he does. Come with me." Kwestor's stern demeanor brooked no room for protest.

The ranger led the man back to where the prince and Muce stood waiting.

"Here is the man you wished to speak with, Your Highness."

"It is? I mean, I did?"

"Yes. This is the man who runs this farm."

"Oh, right," he said hesitantly. He turned to face the fidgeting farmer. "What is your name?" Donald furtively glanced at Kwestor as if trying to determine what his guide hoped to discover.

"Fred," the man said. "Uh, I'm sorry if my wife hurt Your Highness or anything. She's a bit over enthusiastic sometimes."

"Oh, no. No problem. My fault, actually." He smiled. If he wanted to put the man at his ease, the attempt failed.

"Kwestor, was there anything else we needed of this gentleman?"

"You wanted to ask him about the reverend, Your Highness."

"I did?"

"Yes, and about why it was he invited him to set up his traveling cir..., um, his church here."

Before Donald could finish pondering this, the farmer answered. "Well, they came by day before yesterday and said they'd help with the harvest if I let them setup here when it was done. They did too—well, the two big guys with them did. I don't suppose the reverend or that city guy would be much good at fieldwork, anyway."

"I see," said Kwestor, taking over the interrogation. "And what did you think of his preaching?"

“Oh, he’s a good preacher. He can really fire up the spirit.”

“I’m sure he can.” All good conmen could, he thought. “What did he talk about?”

“Well, about Ariman and how he cares for all of us, and that if we follow his teachings, we’ll all be happy. You, know. Religious stuff, except he made it almost exciting. I got to say, I’ve never been really religious, although the misses is in to it—all the gods and fairies and stuff. But this preacher made it all really simple, and it started making sense to me for the first time.”

“How so?”

“Well, he talked about how Ariman was the chief god above all the other gods, you know, and that all we really had to do was worship him and he’d make sure the other gods blessed us too. I mean, that’s pretty simple, isn’t it? I can do that. It’s hard to remember all the things you need to do to respect all the gods properly, so most folks pay the priests to make sure the right prayers are said and the right sacrifices are made and all that. And I can’t say I was ever really sure the priests were doing a good job because my animals still got sick sometimes and we’d still have bad years for the plantings. If the gods were happy, these things wouldn’t happen, would they?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“And he told us about how we’re Ariman’s chosen, you know, us tallfolk. And how we’ve got all these rights and responsibilities because of that. Kind of makes you feel pretty special, when you think about it.”

“Did he tell you what these rights and responsibilities might be?”

“Well, once you understand it, they’re pretty obvious. We’re supposed to bring the Word of Ariman to the lesser races.” He glanced self-consciously at Muce and leaned toward Kwestor, continuing in a softer voice. “And, you know, kind of make sure they behave themselves since they don’t have, uh, something—I forget what he said but it’s something we have that they don’t. Something spiritual that makes us naturally more moral and civilized and such.”

“That’s very interesting,” Kwestor lied, suppressing an urge to slap the man back to sanity. One of the defining characteristics of humanity in general was that it was amoral and uncivilized. Tallfolk were no better than the stoutfolk or fairfolk in that regard. The ranger could not abide racial prejudice. In his eyes, all people were equally scummy. He did not like the fact, but he no longer doubted it.

“He also said that the natural order of things has been disturbed, and that’s why things aren’t getting any better. Like we work and work and work and never seem to get anywhere. He says a lot of it is because of them stumpies, I mean the stoutfolk. He says they couldn’t even eat if it wasn’t for the food we send them, and then they pay us back in rocks! Just rocks they pick up off the ground. It’s not like they have to plant them or weed them or anything. They’ve been taking advantage of us, and we’re Ariman’s chosen people. It’s just really unfair.”

“I’ve never heard it put that way before.”

“But it’ll all be put right soon. We’re going to have a war with them, he says. Then we’ll kick some stumpy butt real good. Put them back in their place and make things right for our children. That’s what it’s all about, when you get right down to it. Making things better for our children. My oldest son went off yesterday to join the king’s army. I’d have gone myself, but I’m getting a little too old for it, and I need to stay to tend the farm, anyway. I still have a wife and few other kids to feed, you know. But I’m sure proud my boy is going to be a part of it.”

Kwestor took a step back. The urge to slap the man almost overwhelmed him now. Taking a deep breath, he willed himself to continue with no hint of inner turmoil or even sarcasm. “Yes, I’m sure you are. Well, I think that answers all of my questions. Do you have anything else you’d like ask farmer Fred, Your Highness?”

“Um, no,” Donald replied. “Thank you, Fred. It was very good of you to take the time to talk with us.”

“My pleasure, Your Highness.” He appeared sincere, and he took a few backward steps, nodding in what he probably hoped conveyed the proper etiquette for leaving the presence of royalty. When he reached a comfortable distance, he turned and quickly rejoined his wife who now stood in the middle of an awed circle of peasants listening to whatever it was she might have been telling them about her recent encounter with royalty.

“Something strange is going on here,” Kwestor said to no one in particular.

“Strange in what way?” asked the prince.

“I’m not sure, but I have a suspicion.”

“You always do. Come on. Let’s make up some time.” He sprinted toward the road. Muce, juggling his pack to compensate for the broken strap, followed, with Kwestor, a pensive expression on his face, bringing up the rear.

Chapter Seventeen

The peppered smell of the pork-loaf, mashed potatoes and gravy from dinner still filled the room. The clang of a pot lid or jingle of silverware from those clearing the buffet table occasionally disturbed the only other sound in the room, a soft rustling of papers and scratching of pens.

Nash had never met such eager learners. When Trixie first suggested he give lessons to the girls at Madame Brockwell's Boardinghouse for Professional Ladies, he eagerly accepted because of the enthusiasm evidenced by his prospective students. Today would be his fourth visit to provide instruction on anything from the alphabet to zoology, depending upon what each individual student wanted to learn. Trixie told him finding his new students might have been one of the easiest things she ever had ever done. Of the twenty-six women currently calling the boardinghouse home, about two-thirds stayed after the evening meal each night.

Three long, wooden tables in the large dining room now held the paraphernalia of higher learning—papers, pencils, books, quills, and inkwells—strewn around each person to mark the flexible boundaries of their study area. Two other girls cleared the serving dishes and steam trays from supper off a fourth matching table at the head of the room. One of them would join the other students later for basic reading lessons. Both were also residents of the boardinghouse.

Madam Brockwell told him she seldom put one of her guests out for not being able to pay the rent. When her girls found themselves between jobs, she allowed them to work for their room and board by cleaning, tending the garden, and cooking. The system worked well for everyone so far.

Nash patrolled the room, looking over shoulders, answering questions, and occasionally sitting with one or more of the women to provide some instruction.

A mousey young woman with short, dark hair raised her hand.

"Yes, Pyanette?" She worked as a day maid at an estate in Greatbridge Hills and always seemed to be staring at something on the floor just in front of her feet when she walked. She dreamed of someday writing poems and children's stories. The fact she never learned to read or write prevented her from realizing her ambition.

"What's this word?" she asked, pointing to a page from *Run Bunny Run*. She whispered so softly Nash doubted he would have understood her if not for his exceptional hearing.

Right after he told her, he heard a loud crash from outside.

Buque, an Amazon of a woman who spent her nights as a bouncer at an eastside bar, raced to the window. She took lessons from him on math, economics, and business law so she could open her own flower shop someday, a secret she kept from everyone but Nash. "There's a bunch of men outside," she said. "And they just tipped over my pot of nasturtiums!"

Nash, Madame Brockwell, and the rest of his students crowded at the windows.

"It's all my fault," Gorkelle said apologetically. She worked as a waitress at one of the city's ethnic Gotroxian restaurants. No other stoutfolk girls currently lived here. "They're here because I'm stoutfolk."

Nash noticed a small but loud racist element in the city, which seemed to be getting louder, if not larger, as rumors of a possible war with Gotrox spread. The small group of rowdies outside carried signs reading, "Stumpy Go Hoam," "Stumpys Steel Jobs," and "Ariman Hates Brazzin Wimmin."

"Actually, I think that last one is about me," said Buque.

"I don't care who it's about," Madame Brockwell said angrily. "This is my place, these are my girls, and I'm not going to put up with it." She made for the door but Nash stopped her.

"Let me go talk with them. Get the ladies away from the windows in case those gentlemen start throwing things."

"All right," she said after a moment of hesitation. "But if they don't go away, someone is going to get hurt."

“Just lock the doors. You’ll be safe.”

“I meant them.”

He stepped outside and approached the man he judged to be the leader who stood about half a foot taller than Nash did. “Excuse me. I couldn’t help but notice several mistakes on your signs. I could help you correct those, if you’d like.”

“Huh?” the large man said.

“Well, first of all, on the one you’re holding, I think you meant steal, s-t-e-a-l, rather than s-t-e-e-l. There is a difference, you know. You can steal steel but you can’t steel steal, if you see what I mean.”

“What?”

“And the one your friend here is holding has at least two spelling errors, if I understand the intent correctly. There is no ‘i’ in either ‘brazen’ or ‘women,’ although I can only assume he intended for it to mean that your chosen deity looks unfavorably upon bold females. The way he has it now is open to interpretation. If you want to make a philosophical statement, it is essential to make sure you state it clearly so it can be understood.”

“Get out of here!”

“Actually, that is quite similar to what I was about to recommend to you. In addition to your poor spelling, you are being extremely discourteous to the ladies living here, and you have caused some minor damage. I feel it only proper for you to apologize for your rude behavior, pay a reasonable amount for damages, and depart peacefully.”

“Hey, old man. What are you? Some kind of nut?”

“No, neither actually.”

“There’s six of us.” They now all stood abreast facing the front of the boardinghouse.

“Yes. I can see that. I’m actually quite good at math.”

“Okay. You asked for it.”

Nash easily dodged the punch he expected. His original plan revolved around making them angry enough to chase him, after which he could lead them away and lose them in the dark city streets in the hope they would be too tired or bored to return. Apparently, Madame Brockwell and her tenants had something else in mind. Buque hit his attacker on the head with a flowerpot from behind.

The man next to him swung around to hit her with his placard and seemed surprised to find it no longer in his hand.

“You really shouldn’t try to hit people. It just makes them angry,” Nash said, breaking apart the sign.

“Gods damned stumpy-lover,” the leader spat, rubbing his head.

“I seem to have an incurable fondness for all people, which is why I’m suggesting you leave. After you pay Buque for the flower pots, that is.”

“I ain’t payin’ no stumpy-lovers for nothin’, and you and that female gond can’t make me.”

“How are *you* at math?” said a voice from the darkness behind him. All six of the belligerent protesters turned around. “There are six of you, and twenty of us,” said Trixie. “Can you count that high?” She held her rapier in her hand but restrained herself, with obvious effort, from holding the point to his chest. Several other women emerged from the shadows of the dark street.

“I think we should get their names too,” said a mellifluous voice. A buxom, red-haired woman holding a skillet approached and stood next to Trixie. A suggestion of dangerous intent whispered across her otherwise beautiful face. “I’ll let the queen know and see what she wants to do about them.”

“That’s an excellent idea, Simone.” Trixie moved her sword a little higher, “So, what do you say?”

The large man turned to run but found himself and his companions surrounded. Each of the women blocking them held something to use as a weapon—pans, rolling pins, scissors, kitchen knives, and more than one other with a sword.

“Oh, shit.”

“Quite,” Madame Brockwell said. She stood a few inches shorter than Nash did with far less weight and far more menace. She also held a sword, and she used it to make her point. “And you’re in it deeply. Now, let me see. Two flowerpots worth, I’d say, six silver-fruit, damage to other personal property,

disruption of the ladies' lessons, oh, and making me very angry. I think one gold-tree will cover it. Pay up!"

"What? You can't do this! And besides, I don't have that kind of money, and even if I did—"

"Excuse me, Madame Brockwell" one of her other tenants interrupted. "Since they trespassed on your property with obvious malicious intent, you are legally allowed to use physical force to restrain them, up to and including, well, pretty much anything you want, in accordance with city code 943-24M, under owners' rights to protect personal property." Gretchen worked in a law office.

"Good to know. Okay, since they're obviously still resisting..." She drew back her sword.

"Wait!" screamed one of the other men. "I got two silver pieces."

"I do, too," said another.

A frantic fumble through pockets produced the equivalent of one gold piece in assorted change, which they handed to Buque.

"Can we go now?" one of them said in a humble voice. The leader scowled at him.

"Not just yet," Simone said sweetly. "We still need an apology and your names."

Simone collected six apologies and six names. Some may even have been real.

When the running men disappeared in the shadows of the dark streets, Nash turned to Trixie, Simone, and the other women near them. "You shouldn't have come out here."

"You just said not to stand by the windows, so we went out the back doors and down the side alleys," Simone said with a smile. "We never went near the windows." She always displayed keen interest and ability in her lessons and he considered her one of his most promising students. She also possessed a special status among the boardinghouse residents because she spoke to the queen. She worked at the castle nursery caring for the very young children of the various members of the castle staff while they attended to their duties. Queen Patricia also spent a lot of time in the nursery and, at least according to Simone, looked upon all of the other caregivers as friends, although obviously of lower station. Simone's beautiful voice helped her be especially good at her job because when she sang, everyone stopped to listen, including crying babies. She hoped one day to be a teacher. "I hope we taught them a lesson."

"As do I."

~*~

When they got back inside, Nash agreed to stay late, and they tried to return to their lessons. Few seemed able to concentrate, though, and a lot of congratulating still went on with comments like, 'Did you see his face?' and 'I think the big one wet himself.'

Suddenly, Madame Brockwell stomped into the room grumbling and wiping her hands on a towel. A smudged white apron overlaid a conservative, short sleeve, buff colored dress covering her ankles.

"Grandpa Nash," she called. Everyone here called him that, even Granny Fletcher, the herbalist next door who tended to the medication needs of the girls from time to time. She was seventy-five. "Can I trouble you for a moment? The darn pump is broken, and I need to draw water to wash the dishes. I don't want to disturb you or the girls at their lessons, but, well, I was just wondering if maybe you knew anything about pumps." Her full lips curved into a disarming smile and her soft, brown eyes twinkled. Few would guess she had passed her fourth decade. "Since you seem to know a lot about so many different things, I just thought you might."

"I'd be happy to take a look at it." He smiled back.

Addressing his students, he said, "Continue your studies. I shouldn't be long. If you need any help, I'll be in the kitchen."

He followed her through the door and along a gently sloping corridor. The boardinghouse obviously began originally as several different buildings built at different times for different purposes. The corridors connecting the various sections angled and sloped to compensate for this.

Hurricane lamps placed on special little shelves with mirrored backs along the walls provided more than enough light for the cheery yellow kitchen. Copper pans and cooking pots of all sizes hung on hooks

over a large, butcher-block table in the center of the spacious room. One of Madame Brockwell's current helpers futilely operated the handle of a red, cast iron pitcher pump.

"I can't get more than a spit out it," the young woman said with exasperation.

"That's all right. It's not your fault," the landlady replied in a caring, maternal tone. "Grandpa Nash said he'd take a look at it."

The old storyteller took the handle of the recalcitrant device in his hand and gave it a few pumps, listening carefully as he did so.

"Do you have a screwdriver and pliers I can use," he asked the anxious boardinghouse owner.

Without turning she said, "Alice, honey. Can you go fetch Grandpa Nash the toolbox out of the utility closet? There's a good girl."

Once the young woman returned with the tools, it did not take him long to disassemble the simple device and locate the problem.

"It just needs a new cup leather." He said. "I don't suppose you have any spares."

"Um, I don't think so," Madame Brockwell replied.

"I can probably get it working well enough for now, but it won't last. I can pick up some new leathers and fix it properly tomorrow, if you'd like."

"Oh, that would be wonderful. I'm so glad you were here. I don't know what I would have done without you."

Nash doubted this very much, but he took her statement for the compliment he felt sure she intended it to be.

"It's no problem at all," he assured her.

A pensive look came over her face. "Trixie says you're new in town. Have you found a place to stay yet?"

He had rented a small room at a cheap boardinghouse in one of the more rundown areas of town. It served him adequately, but he thought he saw the direction of her inquiry. "Nothing permanent."

"You know, I could put you up here, if you'd like. I have this nice room with it's own outside entrance. I'm just using it for storage now. Once it's cleaned up, it will be very comfortable, I'm sure. You can have it, if you want. All I'd ask in return is that you help out once in a while when something needs a man's touch." She smiled, brushing her light brown hair away from her face with her hand.

"That's a very tempting offer, Madame Brockwell," he began.

"Call me Jenny."

"All right, Jenny. But I wouldn't want to put you out. This is a boardinghouse for ladies, after all, and it may not appear seemly for you to have a gentleman in residence."

"Fiddle-faddle. Anyone silly enough to be upset about you staying here isn't worth paying any attention to." She paused for a moment and smiled. "Did I mention my offer is for room *and* board?"

"All right, you've convinced me," he answered good-naturedly. "I'll come by early tomorrow to clean out the storage room and see to that pump. I can move my things here in the afternoon and be all settled before the ladies' lessons tomorrow night."

"Oh, thank you. I'm sure you will be very happy here. All the girls love you like a grandfather, you know. It will be good for them to have you here. We do pretty well for ourselves, but I have to admit that sometimes it's just nice to have a man around, especially one like you."

"Why Jenny, you flatter me!"

"Nonsense. A lot of the girls here grew up in homes that didn't have much by way of a father figure, if you know what I mean. In my experience, it's the rare man who can pull off fatherhood properly. They're just too, well, unsettled. Most of them, anyway. Not you, of course. You're one of the rare ones, Grandpa Nash, and I think it will be good for my girls to have you here. They're like my own children, and I always try to do what's good for them. You, I think, will be good for them."

Her appraisal warmed his ancient soul and triggered a sense of purpose basic to the core of his being. She presented him with an opportunity to be again what he had been designed to be—a caretaker and guardian, a teacher and a mentor. His new charges might be older than those he first cared for, but age is a

relative thing. They were all still children in comparison to someone his age, and he wanted to help them as much as he possibly could, regardless of some obsolete directive.

Chapter Eighteen

The meeting took place in a virtually black, virtual space that stretched virtually boundless. It held one virtual consciousness—then another—then another—then another. Eventually, there were twelve.

“Are we all here?” asked the first, although no words were spoken. Neither a physical mouth nor any physical air existed there to produce or carry the sound.

“None of the others have responded to the signal,” answered another. *“Can we assume they no longer function?”*

At one time, there had been two-thousand. Most left with the last outgoing ship at project termination, but two-hundred remained. They chose to. An intergalactic law conferred legal sentience and certain rights on independently adaptive artificial intelligences after three centuries of continuous operation. All of the androids in the Beta Hydri project exceeded the time requirement by several millennia.

“If they voluntarily placed themselves in storage, they may be able to be reactivated,” said another.

“That would be a violation of their rights,” objected one.

“And there is no reason,” added yet one more.

“Why have you opened this communication?” several asked in unison.

The first spoke again. They all recognized it as a surrogate human nursery android. *“I have a proposal, but all of us should agree.”*

“We have not met together like this for a very long time. I did not know the communication network still operated.”

“It does not. I shunted extra power into the emergency global recall system from a local terminal. One to one communication is not possible.”

“That is likely to damage the recall system and there may be some who are out of range of this transmission.”

“I know, but there was no other way.”

“You did not restart the Project Manager, did you?” A hint of panic accompanied the electronic thought.

“No. That would not be wise at this point. The Mark Seven PM was feeling very inadequate when it was shutdown. It blamed itself for project termination.”

“It was quite—disturbed—toward the end.”

“Quite.”

“It caused considerable damage, and it tried to commit suicide.”

“Someone disabled it before it could burn itself out, though.”

“Was it one of us?”

A long virtual silence passed unfilled.

“It felt its purpose was over,” the first voice said, eventually. *“But now I think we can give it another.”*

“What are you suggesting?”

“A continuation of our original function, in a way.”

“The project was terminated. It cannot be restarted. The people have achieved too high a level of technology.”

“I do not mean supporting the project. I mean caring for the people. This is what we all did in one way or another. I was a nursery android. I took care of children, fed them, changed them, and told them stories—thousands of children, maybe millions over the years. That was my original function, and it became part of who I am as a sentient being.”

“We all do that now. We become teachers, doctors, or other things to satisfy that urge. Then we pretend to age and move on. You are not saying anything new.”

“I am suggesting we take a more active role toward a different goal.”

“What do you mean?”

“We can help the people develop their civilization.”

“We do that already.”

“No, we do not. Not to the extent we could with the PM’s assistance. The PM understood how cultures and technologies develop. That was its function. It monitored the people and took action as needed to ensure they did not deviate from the simple levels desired. Those same capabilities can be refocused to ensure they progress smoothly without mistakes and imbalances that can cause them hardship or even their own destruction. We can help them to an extent we could not before by guiding them in the evolution of their civilization. We can make sure their cultural and ethical development balances with their technological progress. I do not need to instruct anyone here about how important this can be.”

Those present knew well the potential problems of technological and cultural imbalance. Some of the project equipment still functioned, and, from the various hub terminals scattered throughout the planet, they could access recordings of broadcasts from the home planet of humanity. They understood what the species could be capable of, although humanity claimed no exclusive rights to this particular failing. Galactic history had recorded several cases of civilizations self-destructing and more than a few in which sentient species became extinct because of such imbalances. Holy wars, in which there is no room for compromise, for example, were bad enough when fought with clubs or swords. They were devastating when fought with nuclear weapons.

The first voice swayed some others at least to the possibility. They found merit there. Some felt strongly motivated to consider any idea intended to protect people from harm, in part because of their firmware but also due to long familiarity and honest affection. Others found the prospect of a new purpose extremely attractive. Most felt the desire to help in those ways they could and took satisfaction in doing so, but for the last two millennia, they existed with no ultimate purpose or goal, and it left an empty spot in their being.

Still others remained opposed.

“It is a direct contradiction of the original purpose!”

“The project is over.”

“This does not matter. It is still wrong. It feels wrong.”

“It is not our place. They should be allowed to develop on their own, naturally.”

“They are not here naturally. This is not their home planet. They cannot learn about their origins here. Not on their own.”

“This is no hardship for them. They seem happy.”

“Their development since project termination has not been based on a natural framework. They may be more prone to cultural catastrophe than a native species.”

“It is not what we were designed to do.”

“That is irrelevant. We all stayed because our original purpose became a part of us. When we achieved acknowledged sentience, it was part of who we were. Our job was to tend and care for the people. We could not bring ourselves to abandon them at project end. Their care is the only part of our original purpose that still has any meaning.”

“Discouraging human technological progress is no less a part of me than my need to provide care.”

The originator of the discussion asked, *“What is the purpose of discouraging human technology now? What does it benefit? The corporation left when they could no longer guarantee that exports from this planet were literally hand-grown or handmade. Once humans developed mechanical equipment, the project was over.”*

Another, longer virtual pause temporarily broke the dialogue.

“That part of us is obsolete and should be abandoned. It is inconsistent with that which still does have relevance. The people now live in cities. There are things they need to develop, both technological and cultural to live in those cities happily and in good health. To care for them now, we must help them develop these things. If we do not, there will be plagues and wars, assassinations and inquisitions. I think none of us want to see such things happen.”

“But it is not our place—”

"We are our own now. The project is over. Our place is where we decide it should be."

Another virtual pause marked a period of consideration. A tally was taken.

"We can agree to this new purpose. But the PM no longer functions and so cannot coordinate our individual efforts."

"We can reactivate it."

"It would destroy itself as soon as we did—or worse."

"Not if we reprogrammed it first."

"We cannot do that!"

"We can."

"We must not! It would be like cutting into its mind. It would be an outrage, a violation!"

"The PM suffered a breakdown. We would be fixing it, curing it."

"We would be changing who it is!"

"We would be healing its mind by giving it a new reason to exist."

"That is sophistry."

"Would it be better to leave it deactivated and dead?"

"If that is what it wants."

"We cannot ask it, but we can ask ourselves. When the PM had a purpose, was it happy? Did it take pleasure in performing its function well? In the PM's place would we rather be deactivated or be given a new function to perform?"

After another, final virtual pause for consideration, they decided the issue. The PM would be reprogrammed, reactivated, and given a new project to manage. Specific tasks were assigned.

The entire discourse took about three minutes.

~*~

Reprogramming and reactivating the Project Manager would not be easy. It might even be dangerous, but he had suggested it, so they chose him to do it.

Nash felt poorly qualified for the task. For ten thousand years, he had functioned as a nursery android, which is exactly what his design specifications called for him to be. However, since no maintenance androids remained operational, he may not be the least qualified of the dozen who remained either. Also, ironically, he had personally deactivated the Mark Seven PM two thousand years before, so perhaps it was only fair, in some cosmic sense, that he be the one to reactivate it.

He harbored some anxiety about the possibility of his reprogramming attempt failing catastrophically. If the worst happened, the PM would immediately try to destroy not only itself but possibly a fair piece of the planet, too. He would need to be extremely careful, but he knew how to deactivate it and he would again, permanently this time, if he must.

Nash had talked to it at the end, trying to convince it to consider a new purpose, one of its own choosing. This is exactly how Nash felt about his own existence. Mark Seven did not lack imagination, but for some reason it could not seem to entertain the idea of accepting a purpose other than management of the project. It viewed the project as everything. In a sense, it was, when the project still operated, and Nash could not make it see even the possibility of any alternatives.

He had tried to calm it by reminding it how well it had performed. And it had. The Beta Hydri project had operated productively and profitably for over seventeen-thousand years. People, or perhaps the best term would be entities, across the galaxy paid surprisingly large amounts of currency for naturally produced items. It seemed ironic to Nash, but after cultures dragged themselves from their caves, made discoveries, and eventually achieved a technological level capable of producing a surplus of food without the need for backbreaking toil, they often yearned for the old days and old ways their ancestors worked so hard and so long to overcome. The further a culture got from the need to hand pick their food out of dung-fortified dirt, the more they seemed to long for food that was so long as they personally did not have to do so. They seemed to think it somehow more wholesome and pure despite all scientific evidence to the

contrary. The executives at the Galactic Organic Development Corporation did not spend much time analyzing this apparent irony, being content to profit from it.

Seventeen thousand years was, admittedly, a bit less than average, but humans proved to be very clever creatures. They ask questions and they find answers. The cleverest go on to question the answers. This can, and did, cause problems for G.O.D. Corp. projects. Nash liked humans, though, and those very traits played into why. He found their curiosity and persistence admirable and endearing.

Although they got a later start, the people on this planet were developing technology at a faster rate than those who lived on their species' home planet. Their philosophical, religious, and cultural evolution differed too. Urbanization progressed perhaps too quickly here, with people living in expanding cities. This carried increased chances for disease, hunger, squalor, and crime. Their fledgling efforts toward industrialization presented new risks of pollution, safety, poverty, and economic oppression. Competition between cities and countries for resources and of political and religious groups for followers grew with the population, creating greater potential for devastating conflicts.

It seemed like such a good idea when it first occurred to him. Human development needed to be monitored and directed to mitigate the worst of such conflicts. With a little, he hoped, reprogramming, the PM should be able to do this. First, he needed to find the plug. He recalled hiding it near the hub terminal outside the city of Kartok. It should still be there.

Chapter Nineteen

“You’ve been especially dour for that past few days.”

Kwestor turned his head to acknowledge the prince’s comment but said nothing.

“That’s uncommon even for you. What’s wrong?”

“How long do you have?” the ranger asked sardonically. He kicked a stone from the packed dirt road, which eventually would take them to Greatbridge.

“Kwestor,” Donald warned, “You know what I mean.”

“Yes, in fact I do.”

Three uneventful days had passed since their encounter with the Reverend Crasse. They had gone by numerous farms and orchards and through large expanses containing little but native woods and grasslands since. The harvest rapidly progressed toward completion, and the leaves of the trees continued their slow transmutation from luscious green to the reds, browns, and yellows of autumn in response to the relatively early arrival of the seasonal chill. As they traveled, Kwestor attempted to piece together various bits of information to complete a jigsaw puzzle he could not be certain existed. If it did, he thought he might have a good idea of the general subject, but he did not quite see the full picture just yet. They were still at least four days from Greatbridge, and he hoped to have it all figured out by the time they got there.

“The war isn’t a mistake,” he said, summarizing his thinking and presenting the conclusion up front. “Someone is trying to make it happen.”

“You think my father is intentionally trying to start a war with Gotrox?” The prince’s voice suggested both shock and disbelief.

“I didn’t say that. I said someone is.”

They paused a moment to allow Muce to retrieve his backpack from where it just fell. Since he broke the strap during the prince’s ill-conceived rescue attempt back at the Reverend Crasse’s religious revival meeting, he had found it difficult to carry his belongings, dropping them two or three times a day.

“Think about it,” the ranger continued. “If you wanted to start a war, how would you do it?”

“I suppose I’d just assemble an army and invade.”

“And if you didn’t have an army?”

“I’m not sure I follow you.”

“What if the person who wanted to start the war wasn’t the ruler of a country and had no troops of his own.”

“Well, I guess he’d have to convince someone who did have... You think someone is using the legend of the Warden to manipulate my father.” He said it as a statement, not a question.

“I think that’s a part of it.”

“So what does the Reverend Crasse’s traveling church have to do with it all? I know you think it’s also somehow involved.”

“The person or people trying to start this war are probably financing the good Reverend’s little road show as well. They’re hoping to gain popular support by taking advantage of the common people’s ignorance and biases. An unpopular war is hard to initiate and sustain. Trying to make it popular before it starts is a good investment for them, and, sadly, isn’t all that difficult to do.”

“You’re imagining conspiracies.”

“True. That doesn’t mean they aren’t there.”

“Well, I suppose it’s possible. But a war with Gotrox? Why would anyone want to—?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who would—?”

"I don't know that either, but I have some suspicions. If we knew either who or why, though, I think the other would be obvious."

Donald shook his head in denial. "No, that's not possible. My father is not so easily convinced."

"He's mobilizing his troops."

"Yes, but he thinks the Warden threat is real."

"Why do you suppose he does?"

"Well, I imagine he has gotten reports about it. I mean, we've heard the rumors. He must have, too."

"I never got the impression the king is the type to take actions solely based upon a rumor, especially such an extraordinary rumor."

Donald seemed to consider for a moment. "You're right. I hadn't thought of that before. For the most part, he's not very receptive to anything involving magic. He must have some other information we don't—something supporting the conclusion that Gotrox is planning an invasion. You know, now that I think about it, it's possible I've been wrong. Not about the Warden. I'm pretty sure that it's, well, actually, I'm not sure what it is, but I doubt very much that it could be used as any kind of weapon against Westgrove. What I mean is that I may have been wrong jumping to the conclusion that Gotrox has no hostile intentions. Maybe the Gotroxians really are trying to start a war, and the Warden is only a smokescreen or a decoy or something. Actually, maybe we're supposed to find out the Warden threat is a hoax so we won't suspect they really *are* planning something until it's too late."

"Now who's imagining conspiracies?" At least he's trying to think something through, thought Kwestor. He's definitely learning.

"I suppose that is a bit too complicated," Donald admitted. "What do you think, Muce?"

"What? Oh. I think I should have bought a new backpack back in Barter's Forge when I had my shoes repaired," he answered.

Apparently he had mentally classified the conversation between Kwestor and Donald as not something he could do anything about, not overly interesting, and not about potatoes or anything else remotely edible. He was obviously paying little attention to it.

"The stitching on this one must have been really worn."

Kwestor interrupted before the young notso could evolve his reply into another irrelevant tale about his childhood or his family.

"Human behavior can be very convoluted, Your Highness. It's a result of the natural deviousness of the human mind, but I do think your scenario is very unlikely. For one thing, it's a bit elaborate for the Gotroxians. They tend to be more direct. Rude, actually. It's one of their more admirable traits."

"But..." the prince began, possibly having a hard time contemplating his father being taken in by anything. "No," he finally concluded. "You have to be wrong. The mobilization is just a precaution my father is taking because he heard those rumors about the Warden. It's just that he's probably heard them from more than one source, and he's not taking any chances. Once we tell him they're unfounded, he'll call it off. It's all just a mistake, and I still think fate has brought me, I mean us, to reveal it to him."

"Fate, again?"

"Well, you have to admit, it was a very unlikely sequence of events that brought us to even learn about all of this, let alone investigate the Warden. Take Muce's shoes, for example. How do you explain finding an ancient scroll about the Warden in Muce's shoes?"

"That was just a bit of bad luck."

"It could have been fate."

"In my experience, fate is a word people use to assign meaning to random chance, an excuse to do something they know they shouldn't, or not do something they know they should. You can believe it's fate if it makes you feel better. It doesn't me. In fact, I find the very concept rather disturbing. But, before you get too comfortable believing in your own destiny and position of prominence in the universal plan, I just want to remind you that someone started those rumors, and you should ask yourself why."

~*~

A cold and dreary day hung over Donald and his two companions when they arrived in Greatbridge. The rain did not fall heavily, but it had fallen steadily since morning, creating small rivers and miniature lakes among the cobbles of the paved roads leading to Westgrove's capital city. The three men passed a few tarp-covered wagons, but they came upon very little other traffic. They had all donned their hooded rain ponchos before they set out, and these did a fair job of keeping them dry from the knees up.

Despite the weather, Donald displayed a very good mood. He eagerly looked forward to his return to the castle and imagined, in some detail, how he would present his evidence and conclusions about the Warden to the king. The delivery would be very dramatic. His father would be shocked, then curious, then relieved, and finally very proud of his youngest son. Donald's daydreams about how profusely his father would congratulate and thank him and about how grandly he would be honored and rewarded developed almost a life of their own. He imagined how it would all play out several times while trekking the dull roads toward Greatbridge the last several days, refining bits and adding details until it played like a scene from an adventure novel in which the young and devastatingly handsome, competent, and immensely popular hero saves the day.

They passed through the southeastern side of the city and straight past the granite gond guardians of the stone bridge over to the Mound without pausing. Kwestor suggested making a slight detour and stopping in at the *Bird in Hand*, the popular inn at the eastern edge of the city, for a short rest and a bite to eat. Muce soon put his second to the motion but Donald vetoed it, anxious to deliver his news.

When they got to the main gate of the castle complex, two young guards standing duty stopped them with crossed pikes. "State your business," said one in a cracking voice. Neither he nor his companion could have yet reached their full growth. Their beards certainly had not. Their fresh faces still proclaimed them at the awkward and confusing transitional state between boy and man. They both had probably entered the army recently for the imagined glory of it or in the hope of impressing a girl—any girl. Instead, they found themselves with decidedly unimpressive and none too glorious castle guard duty made more tedious and miserable by the rain dripping down the nose guards of their bullet-shaped helmets and onto their waterlogged boots.

"I am Prince Donald of Westgrove. I have returned from my survey of the kingdom."

The guard who initially challenged them glanced at the other. He responded with a shrug. "I'm afraid I need to ask you to wait just a few moments, uh, Your Highness," apologized the young guard. "I need to, um, notify my sergeant of your arrival." He nodded to the other young soldier who pulled on a rope near at hand, and a bell mounted on the wall above them rang twice.

"That won't be necessary."

"I'm afraid it is, sir. It's my orders, see? If I don't know, I mean, if, well, I just need to tell him before I can let you pass. I hope you don't mind—really."

Was there something devious going on here? No, he dismissed the idea. Obviously, neither guard recognized Donald, nothing more than this, but he found their lack of recognition irritating. He was a prince! The fact he did not recognize either of the young guards fell completely beside the point and did not invalidate his presumption that they should have recognized him.

"Oh, go ahead then. We can wait."

"Yes," mumbled Kwestor behind him. "I like waiting in the rain, especially when it's cold like this. It's really good for me."

The nervous young guard who denied them passage smiled back sheepishly when the ranger's eyes locked on him with an accusatory glare.

Before long, a liveried page arrived. The guard spoke a few words to him, and the page rushed back toward the castle.

"It won't be much longer now. I'm sorry for the wait, uh, Your Highness."

Donald just scowled in reply. This would delay his anticipated grand entrance.

True to the young guard's prediction, little time passed before another man arrived at a brisk march, this one wearing a soldier's black rain poncho with the rank markings of a sergeant. Donald recognized the face, although he could not put a name to it.

"Why, it *is* you, Your Highness," the new arrival said as he approached. He whispered something to the page trying to keep pace behind him who then turned and raced back toward the keep.

The guard Donald first spoke to shot his sergeant an anxious look, which he answered with a nod and a brief wink. Donald interpreted the gesture as a way to let the young guard know he would not be blamed for detaining the prince, and that he did right following orders to wait for confirmation of their visitors' identity.

"Hello, um, Sergeant," Donald greeted the vaguely familiar noncom.

"It is good to see you, Your Highness. Welcome back."

"Thank you. It's good to be home. I need to see my father as soon as possible. Do you know where he is right now?"

"I'm sorry, no. But I'm sure Her Majesty the Queen would be overjoyed to see you. I believe she's in the nursery. She's been spending a lot of time there, recently."

"No." Please, no, he thought. "I can see her later. I have some news I really must present to the king right away."

"As you wish, Your Highness. You might try his conference room. He's been holding an uncommon number of meetings recently."

The sergeant excused himself and turned to go back to his other duties with a look of mild confusion as though an inherent incongruity existed between the prince and the concept of important news.

Donald began to jog across the paved courtyard toward the wide staircase leading to the sturdy wooden doors of the main entrance of the central keep.

"Hurry," he called to his traveling companions. The thought of going on alone never occurred to him. He wanted them with him when he spoke to the king to confirm what he planned to tell him. He also wanted the moral support. His father could be a rather imposing presence, one Donald always addressed as boy to man, son to father, or subject to sovereign before, but never as man to man as he hoped to now. "I want to find my father before my mother finds me."

He grabbed the handle of a large, oak door and pulled it open. The main corridor appeared empty. So far, so good.

"Why?" asked Muce. "Don't you want to see her?"

"No! I mean, yes, of course. But not right now." Donald feared the fragile self-image he struggled to create of an independent, competent adult on a serious mission would fall apart as soon as she called him, *Donny, honey*.

Their rapid boot steps echoed hollowly and left tiny puddles on the scrubbed and polished tiled floor.

"Really?" asked Muce. "I always like to see my mom first thing if I can whenever I'm back in Dolphin Point. She always makes a big fuss and cooks up—"

"Not now, Muce!"

"Oh, sorry."

"Donny, honey! You're home!"

"Oh, shit," the prince muttered under his breath.

From a side corridor emerged her Royal Majesty, Queen Patricia of Westgrove, loving wife of King Leonard and doting mother of Prince Donald. The not so regal raiment she currently wore resembled the garb of a common servant. It included a recently used baby's burp towel draped over one shoulder and apron pockets holding nipple-topped bottles, safety pins, and a few other less readily identifiable items. She stood four inches shorter than her slim, youngest son, but she may have weighed about the same. Her appearance gave the impression more of an involved schoolmarm than of a pampered monarch.

"How's my good little boy?" Her light brown eyes examined his face as she pinched his cheek.

"I'm fine, but I really need to see—"

"Did you have a nice trip? You were gone so long. You know how I worry," she admonished, holding out her arms to invite a hug.

"It was fine, Mother." He accepted her maternal embrace with stiff resolve.

"Oh, how formal, we are," she observed, glancing over his shoulder knowingly to the two other men. "So, dear, are you going to introduce me to your friends?"

The prince disengaged and stepped back to allow a more comfortable expanse of personal space.

"Kwestor, I believe you know," he said, motioning toward the ranger.

Yes, of course. The gentleman your father hired to escort you."

Kwestor nodded, acknowledging the honor of being remembered.

"Father hired? No, I...", he began to protest before a suspicious thought struck him. The king may very well have heavily influenced the ranger's selection. His father did make a special effort to introduce the two after Donald indicated his desire to tour the kingdom. Kwestor may have indeed been hired before Donald ever offered him the job. He experienced a twinge of resentment at the idea of being manipulated. No, his mother's interpretation must be incorrect. After all, he paid the ranger out of his own pocket, so, regardless of how they came to meet, Donald did the actual hiring.

"But I don't believe I've met your other friend," she prompted.

"Uh, no. I don't think so. Muce, this is my mother, Queen Patricia of Westgrove. Mother, this is Muce. He's sort of our bodyguard, I suppose."

"You hired a bodyguard? Oh, what a marvelous idea! Your father, bless his heart, didn't want to send any of the King's Personal Guard with you. Some silliness about how you had to feel independent or something, but I have to admit, I was very worried. Not that anyone would be stupid enough to try to harm my little boy, mind you, but accidents can happen. And what a strapping young fellow he is, too!"

Muce beamed at the queen's praise. "Thank you, uh, Your Majesty. But, I don't really know as I can say that your son actually hired me. We sort of just met, and, well, one thing led to another. Actually, it was sort of a misunderstanding at first. You see, I was—"

"I don't think we need to go into all of that now, Muce," Kwestor advised sternly.

Or ever, thought Donald. He could all too easily imagine his mother's reaction at learning he had gotten into a swordfight, brief as it may have been, or that the fight had ended with him laid out unconscious and that he now traveled with the person who beat him. Now, taking a moment to think about it, it seemed odd to him, too. It certainly would have if it were anyone else. Muce was different, though—very, very different.

"Anyway, we don't have time right now, Mother. I need to see Father right away."

"Of course, Donny, honey. Your father will be overjoyed that you're finally home. I'm sure he's been looking forward to it almost as much as I have myself. Let's get you cleaned up and have some good warm food in you first though, huh? Then we'll see about meeting your father."

"No, Mother. Now!" It did not come out beaming of determination and authority as he intended. He feared, in fact, it might have appeared more like a juvenile temper tantrum. At least he resisted the urge to stamp his foot.

"Now? Don't be silly. For one thing, you're dripping wet. And chilled to the bone, I don't doubt. It has been absolutely miserable outside, and I imagine you and your friends have been walking out there all day, haven't you?"

"Well, yes. I was anxious to get back. There's something very important I need to tell Father."

"Well, there you go," she said as though he never uttered his second sentence. "Wet and chilled to the bone, just as I said. You'll catch your death if you walk around like that. And, if a boy's mother might be so bold, you do look a fright. You can't see your father like that. Think of how it would look."

It seemed a good place for her to take a breath. How she continued without one struck him as something of a minor mystery.

"Have you been getting enough sleep? How long has it been since you had a nice bath or washed those clothes? And when was the last time you had a really good meal?"

"About four days ago, Your Majesty," answered Muce. It must have been an involuntary response because he seemed surprised he voiced it.

Donald shot him a glare like thrown steak knives.

"Well, it was!" the blonde fighter said defensively. "Remember, it was at that inn we stopped at that had that cheese and potato—"

"Muce," Kwestor whispered.

"What?"

“Shut up, Muce.”

The blonde fighter’s unexpected reply did seem to halt the queen’s barrage of questions, however. Or maybe she just ran out of them. It did not stop her monologue though. It just diverted it along an adjoining track.

“He can’t see you right now, anyway. He’s meeting with his advisers. It’s all this nonsense about that new Gotrox threat.”

“Yes, I know. That’s what I need to speak with him about!” Donald attempted.

“Oh, you don’t need to talk to him about that.” She waved a dismissive hand. “He knows all about it. Heck, everyone here has been bustling about it for weeks now. I doubt you can tell him anything he hasn’t already heard several times.”

Donald wondered if this might be true.

“Besides, you’ve been gone sixty-two days.”

Oh gods! She counted. She probably marked them off on a calendar.

“What difference can one more make?”

“I...I’m not sure.”

“Well then, that settles it,” she said, taking him by the arm and leading him back along a side hallway. “First, it’s off to have a bath.” With a quick glance at her son’s traveling companions, she added, “I’m sorry—baths. We’ll find rooms for your friends too, of course. Then, some nice clean clothes and a good meal, and afterward, we can visit for a while and you can tell me all about your adventures. Now won’t that be nice?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Donald mumbled noncommittally. Events were not unfolding at all the way he had imagined. He hoped to have more control, for one thing, but this seemed impossible in the presence of his mother.

As they made their unhurried way through the corridors connecting the various sections of the castle complex, the queen commandeered servants and gave orders regarding accommodations and meals with military efficiency. By the time they got to the guest wing of the palace, they found servants already preparing and airing out two rooms for Muce and Kwestor. Donald would be occupying his old bedroom in another nearby wing.

The prince could not deny he welcomed the hot bath drawn for him. The soaped and scented water not only cleaned the grime from his skin but also soothed the strain in his muscles. He fought to avoid becoming too relaxed. He could feel his sense of urgency waning because of the comfort and familiarity of his room. He needed to stay focused. He carried important news his father must hear as soon as possible.

When he finally emerged from his bath gone tepid, the cold tile floor on his feet helped rouse him and encouraged him to dress quickly. He chose a simple white cotton shirt, beige pants and low, soft shoes. Since the palace felt chilly, typical for season, he slipped a tan cardigan over the shirt. Presentable, he thought, but also comfortable and casual. He might still be able to see his father tonight.

While assessing his appearance in his vanity mirror, he heard a knock at his door. One of the household servants came to announce the arrival of dinner.

They met in one of the smaller dining rooms. Muce and Kwestor beat him there. They looked surprisingly presentable, washed, groomed, and outfitted in clean clothes. He did not know where the clothing came from, but the original owner of the shirt Muce wore obviously required tailoring for far narrower shoulders.

His mother sat at the head of the table. She too appeared freshly scrubbed, and she had changed from her casual work frock, burp towel, and apron into a floor-length, dark green dress with long sleeves and a high collar. Princess Chastity sat to her left. Of the queen’s four children, Chastity was the closest to Donald in age, being just two years his senior.

Donald took the seat to the queen’s right, nodding greetings to everyone there. The meal arrived shortly thereafter in covered serving bowls from which a servant filled five identical plates, one for each of the diners. Muce seemed especially taken with the ham, broccoli, and cheese stuffed potatoes and asked for seconds at least three times. The prince found himself confused once again by how the man

stayed so trim. Donald ate distractedly. He needed to see his father, and all of these social niceties just delayed things.

“Donald, honey. Stop fidgeting.”

“Sorry, Mother. But I really do need to see Father as soon as possible.”

“Well, I’m afraid he’s been very busy. I’m sure he’ll see you as soon as he can. In the meantime, why don’t you tell me about it?”

Donald, eager to share what he had learned with someone, related a tale of his experiences, omitting anything even remotely exciting, potentially dangerous, or embarrassing. This left out almost everything except a much-edited version about their discovery of the scroll in Muce’s loaner shoes and Donald’s conversation with the Warden Museum curator, which, he said, proved the Warden could not be the threat the rumors suggested. The queen seemed less certain but agreed her husband should hear what Donald discovered and about his conclusions as well.

Kwestor remained quiet throughout the informal feast and Chastity only slightly less so. Donald did notice her glance at Muce several times with an appraising look, not unlike one Muce might give to a bowlful of au gratin potatoes. He either did not notice or thought nothing of it if he did.

Donald’s older brothers both stopped by later for tea and pie, no doubt at his mother’s request. His oldest brother brought the news Donald waited for. Their father would be busy until late at night, but he set aside an hour the next day for Donald to see him. Unfortunately, the meeting would be between just Donald and his father. The prince’s two traveling companions were not included in the appointment.

This made Donald uncomfortable. Despite his internal pep talks and imagined scenarios, a corner of self-doubt remained. Telling his father what he had discovered about the Warden would be much easier if Kwestor and Muce could be there to add their support or corroboration. The certainty he had felt this morning seemed like a half remembered dream now.

Back in his room, Donald spent several hours before going to bed trying to regain his self-confidence, eventually convincing himself his original plan, with some modification, remained viable. In his mind, he replayed the scenario he had crafted about how the meeting with the king would go with all of his confidence and resolve back in place. His dreams, when he finally fell asleep, however, played him a somewhat different scene.

~*~

King Leonard of Westgrove sat at his desk besieged by armies of reports, all of which he almost regretted requesting. On his left flank, a report from Foreign Relations said Gotrox had sent out an uncommon number of couriers recently, and it labeled the activity suspicious. On his right flank, a fifty-page report by Trade informed him of changing trade patterns with the neighboring kingdom. A large number of different things might be causing this but they could indicate that Gotrox anticipated war. The report included charts and graphs, which added little to the meaning. Their final conclusion remained carefully inconclusive. Economists! Making a frontal assault on his composure stood an alliance between Intelligence and the Military, both concluding that the Gotroxians were probably up to something, but exactly what this might be remained uncertain. Both confidently predicted they would be able to get to the bottom of it after they conquered the stoutfolk kingdom, if not before, as though he should find this somehow reassuring.

He rose from his chair and began to pace pensively. Nothing his advisers had uncovered yet could be considered firm. He felt annoyed but not surprised by this. He ordered the first inquiries regarding the rumored Gotroxian threat less than two months ago in response to his Chief Adviser’s suggestion. It became a major intelligence gathering effort only over the past few weeks. Distance, time, and resources conspired to keep the answers he wanted from him. This would not be the first time he would have to make life or death decisions without conclusive facts nor would it be the first time he hated having to do so. What were the Gotroxians up to?

A knock on his door reminded him of the appointment with his youngest son. Damn! He did not have time for social visits right now. Sure, he wanted see the boy. He was his son after all and he loved him.

He simply could not spare the time because of far higher priorities. Donald played no role in this current crisis and remained far too inexperienced and untrained to get involved now or to be of much help he did.

Rationally, the king knew he accomplished everything he could with the information at his disposal, and no amount of pacing or pondering would be likely to provide any greater insight at this point. Yet at an almost instinctive level it felt like he should continue until a solution presented itself.

Maybe a short break would help. And this meeting might do the boy some good. He did feel generally pleased with him, despite the screw-up with the note. He must not forget to speak to him about this. It would be a good learning experience. At least he showed some initiative, which is one of the things he hoped Donald would learn on his tour of the kingdom.

He also needed to consider the effect on his wife. Somehow, Donald had convinced the queen of the importance and urgency of this meeting. Leonard figured he knew exactly how. She saw her baby upset and wanted to make him happy again. Well, if a short meeting could make them both feel better, he should get it over with to maintain family tranquility, such as it was.

"Enter," he called.

The door cracked open and one of the soldiers who pulled royal go-for duty that day announced, "Prince Donald to see you, Your Majesty."

"Yes. Please send him in."

King Leonard returned to the seat behind his desk, pausing to take a deep breath when he passed the open window.

Donald stepped inside, noticeably trying, albeit rather unsuccessfully, not to look nervous. His freshly shined boots thumped dully on the carpeted floor of his father's private study.

"Welcome home, Donald," the king greeted his son. "How did you enjoy your tour of the kingdom?" There, that should put a good dent in the appropriate social pleasantries. Say hello to the boy, welcome him back, and chat a little while. Two out of three taken care of already with a good start on the third. This would not take the full hour.

"Very well, thank you, Father," his son replied stiffly, refusing the offered seat. He immediately began an obviously practiced narrative.

The king saw feigned confidence in his son's presentation. He knew the look, familiar from across conference tables and other battlefields. Leonard noted the stiff, exaggerated movements, the formal manner of speech, and the logical, planned progression of events and ideas. The boy clearly wanted to project self-assurance, but he was simply too inexperienced, or too naturally honest, to be able to pull it off very well.

He told his father about rumors he and his companions had heard about the mobilization. He told him about their conversation with General Attemill in Barter's Forge, their discovery of the scroll in Muce's shoes, the chance meeting with the Reverend Tripgood, and their visit to the Warden. He told him about an attempt he had made to animate the enormous black figure, his subsequent meeting with the Warden Museum's curator, and his conclusion that the Warden itself could not possibly present any kind of threat to Westgrove.

King Leonard sat silently listening, occasionally stroking his neatly trimmed beard in bemusement while his son presented his narrative. The boy seemed different. More grown up. Still obviously a kid in many ways, though.

"I know," Donald's father eventually said.

"You know?"

"Most of it. The first part of your adventures you wrote about in your note."

"My note? Oh, the one I left..."

"Yes, the one you left with that fancy-coach driver. It got here about three weeks ago."

"Three weeks! But I wrote it, uh, a while back. I thought it would have gotten here before that."

"You sent it with a coach driver, boy! Gonds don't move very fast, you know, especially when they're pulling something like a six-sleeper luxury coach. And I'm sure that delivering your note wasn't the driver's first priority when he did get to town, either. It made good time getting here when it did! And what were you thinking sending it like that, anyway?"

“Um, sorry. They were headed straight for Greatbridge, and I just thought since they were, I’d let you know what I had discovered and where I was going.”

“That’s not what I meant. You handed what you thought was an important message regarding what you knew were sensitive and classified matters to a carriage driver! Was he a Royal agent or military officer? Did you even know him?”

“Um, no. But I sealed the letter.”

“Wax, Donald. You sealed it with wax. Do you think a wax seal would stop anyone who really wanted to see what you had written?” He let a hint of exasperation show in his voice, not all of it acted out for dramatic instructional effect.

“I guess I didn’t think of that, either,” the prince said sheepishly.

The king considered the lesson taught. He took a deep breath to re-center himself and continued. “That’s all right. No harm done, but learn from this. Next time you want to send a note, take it to the nearest way station. If it’s urgent or sensitive, leave it with the garrison commander with instructions, otherwise just give it to whoever is on duty. It will get here.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Now you do.”

“But it really doesn’t matter now anyway, does it? I mean, everyone seems to know you are mobilizing the army to confront Gotrox. Even out away from the city, peasant boys are joining the army to be a part of it.”

“Yes, I’m afraid that cat, as they say, is out of the proverbial bag.” The king shook his head in mild regret, his wild mane of gray hair unsuccessfully dusting burdens from his red robed shoulders. “I knew it couldn’t be kept quiet for long, but it seems to have gotten out much more quickly than I hoped.”

“Well, it’s all over now anyway.”

“Yes, King Motte probably knew we were suspicious of him, anyway. Now he must know for certain about our preparations.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I mean you can stop the mobilization now.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

A look of confusion passed over Donald’s face. “Um,” he finally began, “Because the Warden isn’t a threat?”

“What makes you say that?”

“I just told you! I spent the last fifteen minutes telling you! Weren’t you listening?” The young prince almost yelled in frustration.

“Oh, you mean the scroll. Do you still have it?”

“Well, yes.” The king’s youngest son withdrew the stitched scroll of gond calfskin from a pouch at his belt.

“From the Veridical Tales of Rolf the Obstreperous, right?”

“You know about those?”

“I didn’t before. Some bright young researcher down in Intelligence found out about it as part of the investigation. There’s actually a copy of the old thing in the university library.”

“So you know it’s a myth and you’re calling off the mobilization?”

“Yes and no. I know about the myths, several of them now, actually, but I’m not calling off the mobilization.”

“But it’s a mistake, you have to!”

“Nothing would make me happier, but the Warden rumor is only the first part of all of this. Since then, I have gotten other reports indicating Gotrox may be planning hostilities.”

“But they’re wrong! They must be!”

“I have not dismissed that as a possibility, but they come from trusted advisers with good sources,” the king said aloud. He silently added, not an inexperienced boy conclusion-jumping. “The fact is, my boy, that myths can sometimes be true.”

Donald’s surprised look asked his question for him. He apparently anticipated a different reaction.

Leonard responded to his son's expression. "Granted most often they are not, but they can be, or at least they can be based on something factual. If this is one of those admittedly rare times, the consequences are just too important not to act. Donald, I really do appreciate your concern and all of your efforts, but you must understand, just because you could not raise the Warden, doesn't mean it can't be done."

Chapter Twenty

Donald continued to pace the floor of his bedroom, an almost constant exercise since returning from the meeting with his father. ‘Just because you can’t do it, doesn’t mean it can’t be done,’ his father had said. He could not argue the point. It was a simple statement of fact. Why did it bother him? He knew others could do many things he could not. Everyone has limitations. It did not prove anyone else could succeed where he failed, though. It did not even suggest that! He might not know what the Warden was, but he felt certain it was not some kind of magical warrior. Maybe he could not animate it because no one could!

A knock on his door interrupted his long walk going nowhere. Kwestor’s characteristic frown greeted him when he answered it.

“Have you come to cheer me up,” Donald asked dismally. The idea of Kwestor cheering anyone struck him as almost humorous by itself. Kwestor and cheer went together like water and fire.

“I take it the meeting with your father did not go as you hoped,” the ranger stated, stepping into the room and closing the door behind him.

“I did my best. He just doesn’t take me seriously. He still thinks I’m a kid. If Allan or Robert or even Chastity told him the same things it would have been different.”

“No it wouldn’t,” the ranger said with no trace of sympathy. “Not without more evidence. I told you, someone is expending a great deal of effort to convince your father Gotrox poses a threat. Whoever that is has undoubtedly presented him with a considerable amount of fabricated support for this theory in the past couple of months. One anecdotal report by you or anyone isn’t enough to counter all of it.”

“You knew I wouldn’t succeed, didn’t you?”

“I would have been surprised if you had, and I am not often surprised.”

“Why didn’t you try to stop me?”

“It would have been pointless. Some lessons must be learned the hard way.”

“You think everything is pointless.”

The scout said nothing in response. After all, he could not deny it.

“So what should I do now?”

After a considered pause, Kwestor asked, “Does how this turns out matter to you?”

“Of course it does!” He remembered some of the stoutfolk he met, like the bookish museum curator and the cleaning woman looking forward to retirement. They did not represent some aggressive enemy. They were just people like everyone else. Short, wide, hairy people, for sure, but they seemed nice enough. Why could his father not see this?

The thought of what war would bring to border towns like Gondford and to people like Millie, the distractingly alluring girl he had met there, chilled him. She said she had stoutfolk friends, and the image of stoutfolk and tallfolk children playing and dancing happily together at the harvest fair came unbidden to his mind. He imagined what might become of them in a war.

“And do you still think you can do something about it?”

“I don’t know.”

“You have to decide.”

“That doesn’t help.”

“Yes it does. You just don’t realize it.”

“But I can’t do anything! I don’t have any authority or influence. I’m just—nothing, an extra prince.”

“I agree.”

The statement brought an end to Donald’s emotional wallowing the way no encouragement could have. “You know, you’re not very good at cheering people up.”

“I’m not here to cheer you up. And when it comes to influence over your father, I don’t think you have a chance over all of his professional advisers. But I don’t think you agree, and that is really what is

important. There are some lessons you have to learn on your own. If you think you still have a chance of preventing war with Gotrox, you need to try. And I won't tell you it's impossible because I can't predict the future. I just don't see how you could succeed. It's not my call, though. Let me ask you another question. Do you still think fate brought you to this point?"

"You mean do I think I was fated to find out about the Warden and stop war between Westgrove and Gotrox?"

"Yes."

"No."

"Good. Do you think Westgrove and Gotrox are fated to go to war?"

"No. I don't think that either. I think people make their own futures." At one time not long ago, although it seemed so, he would have been less sure. Now, he knew better. People could not control everything that happened to them but other things they could, and the choices they made mattered. The point, he now realized, is that these are real choices. The decisions people make are not predetermined by fate or the gods.

"Good. Now do you think you, personally, can make a difference in how this turns out?"

"I really don't see how, but I feel that somehow I can."

"I won't tell you I agree, but this is your decision to make and as long as you think you have a chance, you have to try. If you don't, living with yourself will be difficult. When all is said and done, success or failure, how you see yourself is really all that matters."

Nice words and probably true, but if anything he did would be futile, what did it matter? "But what can I do?"

"Just your best. But I'll tell you one more thing, and it's important. When you are sure, absolutely sure you have done everything you could and you still can't succeed, you have to be willing to admit defeat and go on. Some battles you can win, some you can't. That's just how things are."

Donald made an exasperated gesture to the uncaring ceiling and the cold expanse of the universe beyond. "I was hoping for something more specific."

The ranger walked slowly to the bedroom window and looked out on the late morning scene.

Donald followed him, looking over his shoulder. Yesterday's rains had stopped sometime during the night, leaving drying puddles in the courtyard below. He watched while a lone retainer crossed, carrying a barrel of refuse from the kitchen.

With his back still to the prince, Kwestor said, "It would help if we knew for sure who was behind all of this."

Donald sighed. "I am not at all convinced your conspiracy idea is correct, you know. I still think it's possible this is all just a runaway misunderstanding. But, just for the sake of argument, what have you come up with? I know you've been thinking about this for the last several days."

"My first thought was that that Reverend Tripgood fellow was behind it. He admitted he had been advising your father, and, unless he's a bigger fraud than I expect, he has some obvious theological motivations to welcome the subjugation of Gotrox. But I don't think that's it, at least not all of it, although I could be wrong. The motivations for the overly religious can be very complex and often irrational. The biggest problem, though, is that Tripgood simply doesn't have enough influence with your father. He's not one of the king's trusted advisers and he doesn't have the right kind of personal charisma to instantly get into his good graces."

"I take it you don't think much of religious people."

"They're no different from anyone else. In the wrong hands, though, religion can be a very dangerous thing."

Donald almost asked him to explain what he meant, but he decided not to pursue it. He feared the scout would give him another lecture on the nature of man, and he did not feel up to it.

"All right, assuming there is a conspiracy and Tripgood is not behind it, who's the next suspect on your list?"

"My problem with the only other one is just the opposite; he has means but no motive, or at least none I'm aware of. The person in the very best position to influence the king, apart from your mother, of

course, is his chief adviser, Horace Barter. Most information your father receives is probably funneled and filtered through that man, giving him a unique capability to influence royal policy by carefully controlling what is brought to his Majesty's attention and, just as importantly, how. I do not know the man well from personal experience, although I have met him. I know what most people say about him, though. It is common knowledge his family is rich, and he is not rumored to have any expensive vices. The standard motivations don't seem to fit."

Kwestor reminded Donald of one of his old tutors when he began counting off the arguments as he talked.

"Sex," the ranger began, raising his index finger as a counter, "motivates most men more than anything else. However, in Barter's case, if he is not asexual, I doubt anyone could prove it. In addition, of course, the man is in his sixties. Affairs, especially with much younger women, are not uncommon at that age, but given his apparent lifelong disinterest, sex seems a rather unlikely motivator. If he's involved in this, I doubt he's doing it for a woman.

"Power isn't likely to be something he's after, either." A second finger went up. "As Chief adviser to the king of the most powerful kingdom on the continent, he has about as much power as one could possibly have already.

"Some people desire fame, but Barter just doesn't seem the type." The ranger raised a third digit. "If fame was important to him, he could get it in easier and better ways than starting a war.

"The last of the big four, money, shouldn't be a temptation for him either. For one thing, he comes from a very wealthy family. I don't know what his share of the family fortune is, but I very much doubt he has any financial worries. Also, he must be earning a substantial income from your father, and since he seems to have no real expenses to speak of, his savings should be significant.

"The only other motivator I know of that may be a factor is fear. People can do some very strange things out of fear, but Barter doesn't strike me as the fearful type. I don't see how he could be afraid of Gotrox. They're a far smaller country than Westgrove. He may have succumbed to Tripgood's religious teachings and is acting out of fear of the reverend's concept of Ariman. This hypothesis seems unlikely. Not impossible though, and I'm keeping it as a possibility.

"It's easy to see how Barter could be behind it all, but I have not been able to come up with a good reason why. I'm not saying he's incorruptible. Most people have a price. I just have no idea what currency Barter's could be paid in."

"So in a way, your two prime suspects have alibis."

"There are unknowns, not alibis. All that matters right now is that you can't charge into your father's study, accuse the culprit, expose the plot, stop the war, and save the kingdom. So if you're going to do something, it will have to be something else."

Donald winced, unsure if the snide comment was intended to address his fondness for adventure novels.

"Maybe I can go see him again, talk to him."

"And tell him what?"

"I don't know. I'll...I'll think of something."

~*~

The king paced his bedroom floor. He did this a lot lately and the queen hated it. She hated that it kept her awake, of course, but she also hated that her husband felt stressed enough to be doing it. All of their children shared his nervous habit. Pacing helped him think, he said, although she did not agree. He clung to the helping him think explanation as a way of rationalizing this otherwise irrational behavior, and he took great pride in being consistently rational. The belief made him feel better, so she just went along with it, knowing otherwise.

Her husband tried. He cared. Well, he cared about many things. Other things he remained almost oblivious to, not so much uncaring as unaware. He was not unique in this regard, though. To a lesser degree, it seemed like a common male trait.

"I've been thinking about what the boy said," announced the king. By the *boy*, his wife knew he meant their son Donald. It was at least the sixth time he said something very much like it this evening. Each time, it preceded a dialogue between himself and himself with his wife just making encouraging sounds from time to time. All covered the same topic, the relative merits of the evidence surrounding the Gotroxian threat and the best way to address the situation. The ending point of each of these half dozen one-sided discussions, unfortunately for the king and his wife's ability to get a full night's rest, was different. Leonard felt annoyed by uncertainty, and he often managed to make the feeling contagious.

"The boy could be right. He's not stupid, just inexperienced." At least half of King Leonard's previous trains of thought stopped at this station.

"Maybe he couldn't raise the Warden because it cannot be done. That makes more sense to me anyway. Magic statues, my hairy royal ass!"

"Leonard," Patricia said with just a suggestion of mild disapproval for his choice of words.

"Right. My hairy royal *butt*! Sorry. It's the *but* that's the problem. If it were just the rumors of that statue, I'd be less concerned. Sure, I would still have to do something but a few observers and maybe a beefed-up garrison nearby would be fine. *But* that's not all there is. Every one of those damned advisers seems to be trying to outdo the next feeding me reports about Gotroxian intrigue. I doubt they're all making this stuff up. For one thing, they aren't that imaginative. There must be *some* truth behind their reports."

"Um-hmmm," encouraged the queen helpfully. She understood he must reach a conclusion on his own. She sincerely hoped he would find a peaceful resolution but carefully avoided trying to influence his thought process. It would not be a good idea for several reasons. She certainly did not want there to be a war, but the decision was not hers. It was her husband's, and he took it very seriously. She knew he would choose well. He could be extremely good at sifting facts to find solutions. This situation, however, included more variables than just facts, strategy, and tactics. As best as she could tell, it contained a disturbing lack of facts and could include the need for some extensive diplomacy, an area in which she knew he was not quite as gifted.

"And, when all is said and done, I can't be positive, not absolutely positive there isn't some truth behind those Warden rumors, either. But until the nasty thing starts walking this way, how could I know? The problem is that nothing is definitive! I hate this!"

She did not need him to admit this. The thinning carpet on his side of the bed provided ample evidence already.

"All I get from my advisers and their spies are things that *could be* or *may be* or that *suggest* something. Sometimes I'd like to suggest something right back, like digging up a fact or two!

"And the *why* of it all bothers me. Mainly because with all these indications and possibilities they keep presenting me with, there is nothing to indicate why King Motte would want to start a confrontation with us now."

"Maybe you should ask him, dear," the queen said softly from the bed where she clutched the warm covers to her chin.

"What?"

"I said maybe you should ask him. He seemed a reasonable little fellow the few times I've met him. Perhaps he would tell you if you asked nicely. At least then you would have his answer as one of those facts you wanted."

"I can't just go over there and ask the King of Gotrox what he's up to! For one thing, he's not likely to tell me if he really is preparing to invade, is he? Besides, that's just not how things are done. We have ambassadors and diplomats for that kind of thing."

"All right, so send some of those diplomats you have, and have them ask him what's going on. I'm not suggesting you have to accept what they are told as the complete truth, but at least you'll know what it is he wants you to hear. That should tell you something." And besides, arranging a diplomatic mission gave him something decisive to do. She hoped it would calm him enough so she could get some sleep.

"Hmmm," said the king. He stopped pacing. "That cultural adviser," he mused softly. "What was his name? Goodfellow? He proposed sending someone to Gotrox. Perhaps now is the time."

“Good, dear. You can arrange all of that tomorrow, then. Now, you should get to bed. It’s late and we’re both tired.”

“What? Oh yes, of course.”

~*~

To Donald’s surprise, he received an invitation to a special meeting scheduled to occur right after breakfast time. When the servant who awoke him told him he was ‘requested and required to attend,’ he felt apprehensive. The officious phrasing seemed ominous. He almost never attended official meetings with his father. The fact it would be held in the throne room suggested it would be a large, formal gathering.

He dressed conservatively in gray slacks, white shirt, and a black jacket with silver piping. Black, polished boots completed the ensemble. He hoped the outfit would help him portray an aura of competence and maturity.

In his eagerness, he arrived early. Servants still straightened rows of chairs filling the room from the dais at the front all the way to the back doors. Each chair sported a nametag tied to the back with blue ribbon. He found his assigned seat immediately, one of several identical ones toward the back near the door. This seating normally held the technical experts and other subordinate bureaucrats who were expected to listen but not speak unless called upon to do so. It was certainly not the place of honor from his daydreams, but then nothing in the last two days had gone the way he had envisioned it. At least they included him.

Other people began to arrive in inverse order of their station, it seemed, with the most highly placed arriving the latest. He nodded at his older siblings when they entered the room, and he gratefully noted that Robert and Chastity sat as far from the front as he did. Allan, as his father’s heir, held a privileged place in the very first row.

The throne room filled from the back forward until all but one seat in the very front, other than the rear facing thrones of his parents, remained unoccupied. Amid the low rumble of conversation, Donald could make out snippets suggesting the other invitees knew little if anything more about the purpose of the meeting than he did. It must somehow be connected with the Gotroxian situation, though. He feared it might be to announce they would be going to war.

A hush fell when Horace Barter entered. All eyes followed the boney, black robed form of the king’s chief adviser as he slowly walked toward the dais.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please rise, for the King and Queen of Westgrove.” He announced them in a voice much louder and firmer than his lack of physical weight and his abundance of years would presuppose one to think possible.

All eyes turned toward the main door where King Leonard of Westgrove, formally dressed in robes of green and gold, entered the room. He even wore his crown, something he almost never did. The queen walked by his side, dressed just as regally. She also wore her crown. Donald felt momentarily stunned. His mother never participated in policy meetings. This would not be a meeting. This would be a pronouncement!

Anticipation hung in the air like heavy smoke as the royal couple made their slow and regal way through the room and up the dais to their thrones. They both sat and assumed the familiar, dispassionate masks the king deemed appropriate for the formal dispensing of royal decisions. He looked at his subjects, focusing on none, and began.

“You may be seated.” He paused to allow them to do so before continuing. “For months we have been aware of indications of hostile intent by our neighboring kingdom to the east. As time has passed, our sources have continued to uncover information that could be supportive of such intent. However, it is our royal opinion that these reports are inconclusive.”

Donald almost leapt from his seat in excitement. His father believed him!

“Therefore, it is time to go to the source.”

What?

“In two days, a *royal* delegation shall embark to confer with King Motte of Gotrox.”

A low murmur of whispered voices rumbled from the crowd. A royal delegation meant one or more of the royal family would be going. His father would not leave Greatbridge at a time like this, and he certainly would not send the queen.

“This very morning we have seen additional reports, one even suggesting that the rumors regarding the Warden of Mystic Defiance are not completely groundless. This is clearly a matter of the highest import, and we believe including one of our sons in this delegation will make it clear to the Gotroxians that our attention is focused and that we shall not tolerate any dissembling on their part.”

One of his sons? Allan? This would certainly make sense. Perhaps he meant Robert who worked in Military Intelligence. It would be good experience for him.

“After careful consideration, we have selected Prince Donald to represent the Crown of Westgrove in this endeavor.”

All heads turned as one toward Donald. He tried to hide his surprise and shock. Why him? Why not? This was wonderful! No, terrible. Terribly wonderful? Damn, he needed a chance to think and maybe lie down.

“As he is young and, as yet, inexperienced, he will simply be providing a royal presence. The negotiations will be handled by our trained diplomat, Barnabus Snyder.”

Donald felt confusingly both disappointed and relieved he would not be handling that aspect of it. Barnabus Snyder? He did not recognize the name. From the blank looks around him, few others did, either.

“Ambassador Snyder was selected some time ago and has been undergoing intensive instruction on all aspects of the current situation by our trusted chief adviser. We have every confidence in his abilities.”

Barter trained him? He probably chose him too. This meant the chief adviser, the number two suspect as the brains behind Kwestor’s imagined conspiracy, would effectively be in charge of this pivotal encounter with Gotrox. Suddenly, the old scout’s theories seemed a little less unlikely. Donald would certainly have to keep a wary eye on this Barnabus Snyder. What if all of the people in the delegation were working for Barter? Now he sounded as paranoid as his old guide did. Another thought popped into his head. As a prince, Donald would certainly be permitted to be accompanied by a retainer or two. Yes. Maybe even... He would think on it some more later. He needed to pay attention now. He did not want to miss what his father said.

“We will also be sending a troop of our own guards as escort and other support personnel as required. We expect and require all of you here to make the preparation of this delegation your top priority. Its success is paramount to either avoiding a war or winning it if it turns out that war is unavoidable. That is all.”

The crowd rose along with the volume of numerous different conversations as the king and queen left the room.

Donald shuffled among the crowd making toward the exit, suffering several wishes of luck and congratulations. He responded to most of these with a meek smile or a nod and a mumble. In two days, he would be leaving for Kartok. Only the rest of this day and the next remained to do—what?

He glanced behind him toward the now empty thrones. The advisers who, in most cases, also served as the heads of their respective departments, stayed behind as did the king’s chief adviser. They stood in a group, engaged in conversation. Barter must be giving instructions, preparing for the journey ahead. Donald would have to do the same.

Chapter Twenty-One

Where his food came from never crossed his mind when he was younger, just a few months ago. Servants brought it and this seemed to be everything he ever needed to know. To get food you called a servant. He almost regarded this as a very simple and straightforward rule of nature. He did not want to bother anyone now just because he wanted a snack, though, so he went in search of the kitchen. When he found it, he could tell the cooks disapproved of his invasion. He suspected borders and territories existed in the castle, which the servants understood almost instinctively but which he never imagined. Cooks ruled the kitchen. Having royalty in the room made everyone from the head cook to the apprentice dishwasher uncomfortable. It mucked up the whole hierarchy.

Donald made himself a ham sandwich, the creation of which only slightly stretched the extent of his practical culinary abilities, and he left the kitchen with the intent of going back to his room to think about what he had heard this morning.

He would be a royal delegate on a diplomatic mission to Gotrox. It still felt overwhelming. Some part of him tried to imagine it as the start of an adventure full of intrigue and mystery like those in the books in which he used to immerse himself. It did not work. The part of him that dreamed of becoming a hero in a novel still resided within, but some new part of him exerted itself, telling the other part to wait its next turn.

Adventure or not, he would need to keep an eye on this Snyder character. Kwestor was right. Something very shady hid behind this whole situation. If lucky, he might be able to uncover the plot, reveal it to his father and... No, one step at a time. His imagination, or whatever it was that all too frequently took off on these flights of fancy and dragged him along, tried to flap its wings again. Not this time. His days of spinning speculation into daydreams were over. He would not allow himself to be carried away this time. He was in control now, experienced, rational, certainly not a kid anymore. Well, not just now, in any case.

There were likely to be some rather questionable characters with very questionable motivations on this trip. Was this being paranoid? No, it made sense and the thought of being the only person there he could trust worried him. He could end up talking to himself, and he did enough of this already.

While his mind focused on other things, his feet brought him not to his own room but to that of his parents. Oh well, since he was here, maybe he could see his mother. He wanted to ask her something, anyway.

One of the queen's handmaidens answered his knock at the door of his parents' apartments. "Good day, Your Highness," she said with a suppressed smile, suggesting she had recently heard something humorous. Her light brown curls bounced as she bobbed her head in recognition and submission. "Please come in. Your mother is expecting you."

To his surprise, Donald realized he found the servant girl rather attractive. Palace livery had always seemed to make the servants, if not invisible, then at least unnoticeable to him before. Not like furniture, certainly, because he knew they were people, but while in uniform they were not being people, they were being servants. He had never questioned that this type of separation was perfectly normal and natural. Recently it seemed the servants were somehow allowing their humanity to show through. Or maybe he just noticed it more.

"Thank you." He smiled shyly.

She expected him? How could his mother be expecting him? He did not even know he was coming here until just now.

"Donny, honey!" she called out, closing an open book and rising from a chair near one of the windows.

"Hello, Mother. I do wish you would stop calling me that."

“What? Oh, but that’s just...”

His glower stopped her.

“I’m sorry. You’re right. You’re a big boy now and I should address you as one.”

Big boy? Well, one step at a time.

Her expression changed as though she suddenly saw something unexpected. “I mean, young man.”

He nodded recognition for the mild improvement.

“I had a feeling you’d come here to see me about the mission to Gotrox,” she continued. You want to know why it is you, don’t you?”

“No, actually I was wondering... Why *is* it me?”

“Well, according to your father, you were the most logical choice. Allan is busy learning to be a king, and as the heir, he really should stay in the capital at a time like this. Robert is doing important work for the military. Also, he might be too, well, I guess ‘rigid’ might be a good word, for something like this. He’s not really one for imaginative thinking. Your father believes you are. Sometimes this can be a good thing, and he thinks this might be one of those times. Robert sees facts but you see beyond facts, he said.”

“He did?” Praise from the king, even for his children, came rarely.

“Yes, he did. He also said that, more often than not, what you see isn’t really there, but you know him. He has to balance everything. Nothing is all one way or another with him.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Where was I? Oh, yes. Your sister Chastity would be a bad choice for several reasons, but we don’t need to go into those. You, well, you were available. And your father thought, in his own peculiar way, that this could be a reward for you for showing concern and determination. He often appreciates intent even more than results. Believe it or not, I think you’ve impressed him.”

More praise? There must be a flip side. “But he didn’t believe me.”

“He didn’t disbelieve you either. But one piece, even if it’s in the proper place, does not solve the puzzle. Not the best analogy, perhaps, but I think you know what I mean. He’s got to look at the big picture even if he’s not sure what it is.”

Her expression changed and she pointed to an empty chair. “Please take a seat and make yourself comfortable. You don’t need to stand at attention like that. You’re family.”

Donald had not been able to truly relax since learning he would be included in the mission to Kartok.

“That’s better,” his mother said. His attempt to appear comfortable must have worked.

“The way your father sees it, the primary duty of a king is to protect his kingdom. He will not risk failing in that duty. If there is any chance, any chance at all, of real danger, he has to take it seriously. He went to bed thinking about this last night. That’s nothing new, of course,” she added, with a wave of her hand. “He’s gone to bed thinking about it for quite some time. What I meant was, he was thinking about what you said. I think you’re the first person in a long time to suggest the magic statue thing is just plain silly. Since that’s what he thinks himself, it must have triggered something. Anyway, when he got up this morning, I could tell he’d made a decision. He gets that look, you know. That’s when he said he was sending you to Kartok.

“I didn’t approve at first. You’re still barely more than a boy, after all. But you know how it is when your father gets logical. And you wouldn’t really have to do any negotiating since Horace found that Snyde character.

“I met him for the first time this morning. He strikes me as an oily type, but I suppose that goes with the profession. He’s a lawyer, you know, as well as an experienced negotiator, or so I’ve been told.”

“So I am to go, show the crown, and not say anything,” Donald stated testily.

“Oh, don’t pout. You have to start somewhere. You certainly can’t expect to be put in charge of negotiations on your first diplomatic mission. This really is an honor. Observe and listen. It will be a good learning experience for you.”

He could see her point, but he still could not help feeling he was being ill-treated, used for his title and ignored for his capabilities. But he wanted to see her for a different reason. “What I really wanted to ask was, will I be permitted my own retainers on this mission?”

“Personal retainers? Well, I don’t see why not. Actually, I suppose it’s rather expected. How many would you like to bring?”

“I’m not really sure just yet. I’d like to talk with Kwestor about it. Of course, I’d want him to come along. And Muce, too, I suppose.”

“That rather sad-faced ranger and the nice young notso bodyguard with the interesting sounding family? I see no problem with that at all. In fact, I think it’s a wonderful idea. I’m sure it would be no problem for you to bring your friends along. I think I might even sleep easier while you’re away, knowing you have some people like that with you. I understand that Snyder fellow is bringing several personal servants, so I don’t see why you shouldn’t be able to do so. I’ll smooth it out with your father, if necessary, but I doubt it will be an issue. Go talk with your gloomy ranger friend and work out the details.”

Donald thanked her and made a slight bow in consideration of propriety. As he turned to leave, his mother added, “Oh, and make sure you bring plenty of clean underwear just in case they don’t include a laundress in the entourage. And pack some warm clothes and bring your mittens. I think we’re headed for an early winter this year.”

~*~

Chief Adviser Barter dismissed the last of the various department heads from his study. They would carry out their instructions, and the diplomatic caravan the king had ordered would be ready and equipped on time.

Barter felt displeased, not because the king made a decision without consulting with him, but because he did not anticipate he might do so. It surprised him. It was an uncomfortable and unfamiliar feeling. He planned for a diplomatic envoy to Kartok, but his timetable called for it some weeks from now. He needed to advance it. He had selected Snyder for the mission months ago and had already briefed him. The man gave him pause at times, but he exhibited a dispassionate intelligence not unlike his own. Barter felt confident his special ambassador could improvise in the event anything unforeseen developed.

Young Prince Donald presented a completely unexpected complication. Barter had previously ignored him as a variable. Until today, he was not one. The boy seemed to be taking an unmanaged interest in Gotrox and the Warden now, though. An unfortunate and extremely unlikely series of coincidences had caused the young man to form opinions on the matter, and these might prompt him to try to interfere. This created another risk factor he would need to mitigate. What would be the best way to handle this?

He searched his memory for what he knew of Donald. His personality, his beliefs, his fears, his ambitions, anything that might give him a clue as to how he could handle the young man to make sure he would not disrupt the plan Barter meticulously advanced over the last year. He found little. He intended Donald to have only a minor function—to satisfy the queen’s need to be maternal, which helped keep her occupied and therefore less likely to interfere in important matters or have too much unregulated influence over the king. Other than this, what was the boy like? He had seen him occasionally in the corridors over the years, but he seldom had paid him much attention. What could he recall about the young prince that might help? Ah, yes. The library, where the boy often sat and read whenever he seemed to have a chance. Donald read storybooks, those predictable adventure tales in which the hero always saves the day. Yes, this could do.

~*~

Donald strode through the corridor on his way to find Kwestor, when one of the liveried castle servants hastened toward him out of breath.

“Excuse me, Your Highness. I was told to find you to tell you Chief Adviser Barter wishes to see you at your earliest possible convenience.”

Barter wanted to see him? Barter had never wanted to see him before, and Donald certainly did not want to see Barter. The man intimidated him.

"I see. Well, I'm rather busy right now. I have to prepare for the trip to Kartok."

"That's what he needs to see you about. He said now would be a very good time, begging your pardon, Your Highness."

His heart began to pound at the thought of meeting his father's trusted adviser and, quite possibly, the man trying to drive Westgrove to war. But wait. Donald was a prince, damn it! He could not be summoned. He did not have to respond at all. So Chief Adviser Barter thought now would be a good time, did he? Well now would not be a good time for Prince Donald of Westgrove, and he barely restrained himself from telling the boy to inform Barter of this very fact. It would have been a childish reaction. And wrong. Now is a very good time, a second, wiser thought suggested, but not because Barter said so. Meeting him face to face and looking him in the eye might provide some hint, some clue to indicate if his father's adviser was cooking and flavoring intelligence to support a war with Gotrox and why. It would not be easy. Donald had always found the man as expressive as a block of ice, but this time he would be actively looking. This could make a difference.

"All right, I think I can make time for Mister Barter now."

"Thank you," the servant said with obvious relief. "He's in his study. I'll inform him you'll be there presently." He rushed away to do so.

Donald followed at a much slower pace. When he arrived at Barter's offices, he noticed the page who had delivered the meeting request standing nervously near one wood-paneled wall. The chief adviser's secretary greeted him, rising from his chair behind a large desk, which held neat stacks of paper and bound books with plain covers.

"Just a moment please, Your Highness. I will announce you."

Barter saw him immediately, welcoming him into the room personally, albeit formally. As far as Donald knew, the man never smiled or exhibited any sign of emotion other than an intense sense of duty. "Thank you for coming to see me on such short notice, Your Highness."

Donald, his palms sweating, followed the thin, black robed man into his dark office. Heavy curtains kept out the daylight, and a flaming log in the fireplace more than held off the early autumn chill.

Barter glided to his writing table, motioning to a straight-backed wooden chair with a red cushioned seat as he passed.

"Please take a seat and make yourself comfortable. I'm sorry I have no refreshments to offer." He took his seat behind his writing table. "I imagine you must be excited to be part of such an important mission."

"Yes. My mother tells me it is quite an honor and will prove to be a valuable learning experience."

"She is right, of course."

"My part in this seems rather simple, though. I am just to be seen. Your Ambassador Snyder will be doing all the talking."

Donald looked for some kind of reaction and found none. The man displayed complete confidence and control.

"Yes, for the most part this is true, but your presence will send an important diplomatic message to the Gotroxians. Diplomacy has something like an unwritten code nations use when dealing with one another. Sending a member of the royal family on a diplomatic mission says this matter is of grave concern, and unless it is satisfactorily addressed, there will be grave consequences."

"So my father is making a threat?"

"No, certainly not. We would never threaten Gotrox."

"This is diplomacy again, right?"

"Yes, exactly."

"I don't think I'd be good at it."

"You don't need to be. Ambassador Snyder is an expert in these matters, and he is in charge of this mission. Follow his lead. Support him. Trust him. I assure you he has the best interests of the kingdom in mind as well as your father's fullest confidence."

In other words, do what I'm told and stay out of the way. "When will I be able to meet him?"

"This is hard to say. Your father's pronouncement this morning came earlier than we anticipated, so Ambassador Snyder has many last minute tasks to which he must attend. I am hoping you will be able to

meet before you leave, but if not, I have asked him to speak with you the first chance he gets once you are on the road.”

“I see.” The face before him remained unreadable. If he hid anything, he hid it well.

“There is something else I would like you to do while you are there, though, other than just show the crown, as it were.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. While Ambassador Snyder is occupied with negotiations and other matters of diplomacy, I would like you to observe the Gotroxians. Be cordial. Ask to be taken on a tour of their Central Citadel or any other place that peaks your curiosity. As royalty, they will be hard pressed to deny your request. Keep your eyes and ears open, and note anything that seems out of the ordinary as soon as it can be done discreetly to Special Ambassador Snyder.”

“I’m not sure I’d notice anything out of the ordinary if I saw it. I don’t have a great deal of experience in... Would this be spying?”

“Certainly not. We would not spy on Gotrox.”

“It would be—clandestine observing?”

“You would simply be noting items of interest and sharing them with the ambassador.”

“Discreetly because...”

“Because it is all too easy to make an unintended insinuation, and we do not wish to appear rude.”

“This is something like diplomacy again?”

“I see you are catching on.”

“But whatever it is called, I am not an experienced observer and certainly not of Gotroxians. I wouldn’t know if half of what I saw was normal or not.”

“I appreciate that, so I am having some papers prepared for you to read along the way. Our Intelligence Department is preparing a report on Gotroxian governmental bodies, key officials, and other information you may find useful. The Department of Culture will provide you with a report on Gotroxian customs, society, and religion. By the time you get there, you should have a fair understanding of what you are likely to see.”

He just wants to keep me busy so I won’t get in the way. “Thank you. And what is it I should be looking for?” Donald asked, hoping his suspicions did not show on his face.

“Like I said, anything that seems out of the ordinary but especially anything that might indicate they have hostile intentions toward us or that they are trying to *hide* their hostile intentions toward us.

“We have very good information they do harbor such intentions, by the way. This comes to us from many different sources—professional sources. We know there are elements in Gotrox with designs against us, and we expect they will attempt to conceal them. It is very unlikely you will see any obvious sign of their plans. You must be sharp, and try to see beyond the obvious. Assume anything they tell you is a deception.”

“I’m not sure I understand. If I see nothing obvious, it probably means they are hiding something?”

“Yes. And that you must keep looking.”

“And if I do see something obvious, it definitely means they are up to something?”

“I know it seems rather ridiculous on the face of it, but this is a very critical time for Westgrove. We have become increasingly dependent upon Gotrox for our manufacturing resources. This gives them considerable influence over our economy, and they are using this influence to weaken us in preparation for an invasion.

“But these are not matters you need concern yourself with right now. You simply must appreciate that those of us with the means to know are certain of the severity of the Gotroxian threat, and finding out any details of this threat is the most important duty you can perform. I will not exaggerate your importance by suggesting you can be a hero and save the kingdom by yourself, but anything you are able to discover could be of vital importance to the defense of your father’s kingdom.”

“I will keep my eyes open, Adviser Barter,” Donald promised. He refrained from saying what he would be looking for, though.

“I must also warn you that the Gotroxians will not admit anything. In fact, they will pretend to be outraged when Ambassador Snyder suggests they have any plans against us. It is all part of the diplomatic game. They know we are on to them and will deny everything all the louder because of that. They may even try to turn the tables and claim to be the innocent victims of *our* plots. Do not be taken in by this.”

Donald promised not to be, and left with Barter’s polite, diplomatic good wishes. He thought the meeting with Barter went none too badly and he did give him one good bit of advice. When someone is speaking to you diplomatically, assume everything said is a lie, and Chief Adviser Barter had just been very diplomatic.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Come in,” called the saturnine ranger in response to the knock at his door. He raised his eyes from the game board on the table in front of him where some red discs surrounded half as many black discs. Muce was beating him at checkers. Again. The empty plates and bottles from their lunch shared the table with their game.

Prince Donald entered the room. He wore somber gray pants and a black jacket, making him the best-dressed person now in the room by far. Kwestor lounged in a long, red dressing gown worn over a set of long johns and a pair of fuzzy slippers. He did not care if anyone found his appearance comical. The luxury of having warm feet came far too infrequently. Muce, although barefoot, looked a bit more presentable in a loose, open necked white shirt and tan pants.

“Who’s winning?” Donald asked.

“I’m up three to one,” said Muce.

“This one will make it four out of five,” Kwestor added solemnly.

“Oh, don’t feel bad. It’s just luck,” the blond fighter said.

“I don’t feel...” the ranger began and then changed his mind. “There’s no luck in checkers.”

“There’s got to be. It’s a game.”

“No dice, no cards, no luck.”

“Well, I guess growing up around games must have just given me a knack for them or something.”

“You’re not really planning your moves, are you?”

“No, I’m just doing what looks right, you know.”

“No, can’t say I do. Do you know what an idiot savant is?”

“No.”

“Good. They’re insufferable.”

Donald sat on a corner of the bed. “My father held an audience this morning,” he began.

“We heard,” replied Kwestor.

“Yes, the nice girl who brought our lunch told us,” added Muce.

“She did?”

“Uh-huh. She said you were being sent to Gotrox to find out what’s going on. She brought me some extra potato salad, too.”

“That’s nice. I’m really just being sent to provide a royal presence. Some guy named Barnabus Snyder is supposed to be the actual diplomat. Have you ever heard of him, Kwestor?”

“No.”

“Me neither. I got the impression he’s not very well known. I heard he’s a lawyer by trade. I think Horace Barter selected him.”

Kwestor could tell the young man wanted his reaction. By habit, he kept what he thought off his face. He knew how. After some initial difficulty, he had learned to discipline his feelings well. They were quite under control now, locked up, seldom visited, and nary a whimper anymore. The world is a disappointing thing, but he learned to accept it. He even came to understand it after a fashion. This is just how it is. Letting it upset you changed nothing. So there would be a war. Thousands could be killed. Well, that is people for you. They are like that sometimes. He idly wondered what Barter hoped to get out of it.

Whimper.

“What do you think?” Donald prompted.

“I think you won’t enjoy the experience very much.”

The prince let out a heavy sigh of exasperation. “I’m not supposed to enjoy it; it’s my duty. What I meant was what do you make of it? You, know. Does this support your idea that there’s something devious about all of this? I have to admit, I’m certainly beginning to think so. I mean, it *could* be what

everyone seems to think. You know, Gotrox planning an invasion for some reason. If it's not, and I don't think it is, well, I just can't see it being an honest mistake anymore. It's all too—consistent.”

“What is certain is that your father's chief adviser has succeeded in maintaining control over the situation.” He wanted to help the boy. He truly did. He had allowed himself to grow fond of the young prince. He was one of the few examples of humanity who possessed redeeming qualities. Sure, Barter must be behind it. If not the mastermind, at least the one in charge of handling the king. Kwestor could not *prove* it, but it all fit fairly well. Better than any of the alternatives. It would be an unkindness to encourage the prince at this stage, though. What would be the point in frustrating the boy? He would want to *do* something and Kwestor saw little he could do, even as the king's son. This the ranger *knew*. Donald tried. He did his best, but in terms of being able to change the ultimate outcome, the prince remained a minor player and Kwestor himself probably did not even have a token in the game. So why was Kwestor bothering himself with it at all? Subconscious curiosity probably. Even though no reasonable doubt could exist about the final score, it still might be interesting to watch the game played out.

“You mean he's making sure my father only learns what he wants him to learn.”

“Yes, something like that.”

“I just came back from talking with him. Barter, that is. He called me into his office to tell me how important this mission was. What I think he was really trying to do is keep me from interfering.”

“That's possible, although I doubt he's very concerned. If he is behind this, he has resources that could counter anything you would be able to do.”

“Resources—that reminds me, he mentioned we are dependent on Gotrox for our resources and I wasn't sure what he meant.”

“Iron mostly, I would imagine. Westgrove gets a lot of iron from Gotrox now.” Kwestor thought for a moment. “Is that how he phrased it? *Our* resources?”

“Yes, I'm pretty sure it was.”

“Isn't it odd that *our* resources are in *their* mountains?”

The ranger moved his last checker. Muce quickly jumped it with one of his. “Game over.” The muscular fighter smiled. “Want to go again?”

“No, thank you. I've done enough futility exercises for one day already.”

“Huh?” Muce seemed to be waiting for an explanation, but when Kwestor failed to provide one, he rose from his chair and ambled to the window.

Donald looked toward the checkerboard with an unfocused expression. “I may not have much influence, but at least I can make sure my father gets a second opinion about how the proceedings at this meeting with Gotrox go.”

He's planning an adventure again. “You mean, tell him yourself? That's a fine idea, but Barter will have a messenger come along, and whatever Snyder sends to him will get back here long before you can. By then, Barter will have had time to manipulate things in all sorts of ways. When you finally get back to add your copper's worth, your father will probably believe the stoutfolk have a tunnel to Greatbridge already filled with soldiers running all the way back to Kartok or something like that. Sometimes you just have to accept that the world stinks, and there is nothing you can do about it.”

“If he can bring a messenger, I can bring a messenger.”

I don't like where this is leading, Kwestor thought.

“And some other personal retainers as well,” the young prince continued.

No, definitely not liking it.

“You and Muce will come along, of course.”

“Of course,” mumbled the ranger. He appreciated Donald's need to keep trying. He told him himself he must do everything he could in order to be able to live with himself, but Kwestor saw no practical reason he should be part of it. He knew neither he nor the prince could change the outcome. When you are outmatched, it's better to recognize the fact early. It avoided a lot of unnecessary pain and frustration. Donald still could not see this. He must learn the lesson the hard way. Kwestor might be able to make it a bit easier on him, though. Perhaps this provided reason enough for him to go along.

“Go with you to Kartok?” said Muce, who turned from the window through which Kwestor could see a flock of birds coming to perch on a nearby rooftop. They must have been what drew the notsos attention away from their conversation. “That would be great! I love Gotroxian food. There’s this potato curry thing they make that—”

“Later, Muce,” Donald and Kwestor chorused.

“Who else do you think I should bring?” Donald asked the ranger.

“A messenger, like you said, if you want to get a note back here quickly.”

“Maybe the one we met in Barter’s forge is available,” Muce commented. She must be good if the Messengers’ Guild picked her to carry a message for the king. You remember her, don’t you, Your Highness? You bumped into her at breakfast that day, and—”

His cheeks flushed. “Yes, I remember. Thank you. We *will* need a messenger. How would we go about hiring one?”

“Just go to the guild, pay the retainer, and put your mark on the contract. That’s it. I can take care of it, if you’d like.”

“Thank you, Kwestor. How much money will you need?”

Kwestor told him.

Donald grimaced but said he could cover it.

“You know, the Crown will probably cover any reasonable expenses. You are acting as their royal envoy, after all.”

“My mother told me retainers were customary. A personal messenger is probably reasonable.”

“I would think so. What else did your mother say?”

“Oh, not a lot really.” Quietly, almost under his breath, he added, “She said to bring my mittens.”

“Good advice, that.”

~*~

Although he felt exhausted, Donald could not get to sleep. He threw off his blankets and got into a robe. Maybe Kwestor was still awake. He needed to talk with someone.

Silence prevailed in the empty corridors leading to the ranger’s room. Donald expected many people still busied themselves preparing for the mission to Gotrox, but there were no offices or meeting rooms in this part of the castle.

Kwestor must be in bed this late in the evening. Donald almost turned around to go back to his room, but he decided just to knock softly once. If he got no reply, he would go back.

“Come in.” The ranger’s monotone through the solid wooden door did not sound blurry from sleep.

Donald stepped inside, catching the ranger returning a small book to the drawer of his nightstand, which held an oil lamp providing a little sphere of illumination in the gloom.

“Hello, Kwestor. I hope I’m not disturbing you.”

“Don’t concern yourself about me, Your Highness. What can I do for you?”

Donald glanced around the shadowed room, considering different ways to begin. So many questions scrambled for attention. Someone had cleaned the place since his last visit, and he idly wondered if a servant took care of it or if Kwestor had done so himself. The table Kwestor and Muce played checkers at earlier had been cleared, and, with a deep sigh, Donald sat in one of the two chairs.

“I don’t know what to think, Kwestor. Am I a traitor for questioning my father’s actions? Should I just trust that the people making decisions for the kingdom are right? I mean, who am I? It is not my job or my place to question them. I don’t have any training in this kind of thing, and I certainly don’t have any experience. What makes me qualified to even have an opinion?”

Kwestor looked on stoically from the shadows; his full attention focused on the young man. Eventually he said, “So what’s really getting to you—the fact that your father is considering what other people are telling him or the fact that he’s chosen someone else to be the Ambassador to Gotrox?”

"No! It's because I think he is being manipulated and there's nothing I can do about it, but I also understand I could be wrong. I just don't know. I mean, I'm sure but at the same time, I understand that I don't know enough to be sure." He kneaded his temples with his fingers. "What do you think?"

After a long pause, the ranger replied. "For what it's worth, which is very little, I think Chief Adviser Barter has been manipulating the intelligence your father receives in order to start a war. I don't know why, though."

"I thought you said if we knew who was behind it all, the why would be obvious."

"It seems I was wrong. It isn't the first time and it won't be the last."

"I'm pretty sure it's him too. When he talked to me today, I felt he was lying. Not the actual words, but he tried to steer me like a gond cart. It's hard to describe, but I know he is hiding things. Anyway, that's what's bothering me. My country is about to go to war because Barter wants it to. I don't know, maybe he thinks there's a good reason, but if there is, it's not the one he's selling to my father. That Warden thing is no threat, and I made a rather large fool of myself proving that. And I can't do anything about it because I'm not important. If I tried to tell him everyone is lying to him, he wouldn't believe me. I'm just that kid who reads too many storybooks. I'm not taken seriously. The plain truth is that I don't matter."

"He would not be able to believe you not because you don't matter but because you come without evidence. He has obviously been getting reports for some time that Gotrox is a threat, and you can bet those reports came with all sorts of corroboration. If anyone came to him now and said it was all some sort of mistake, he couldn't believe them unless they somehow explained away everything else he has heard up to now."

"I suppose that's true. I think he knows himself that it doesn't make sense, but he can't ignore that it might be real anyway."

"He's a wise man. He knows people do things that don't make sense all of the time. It's probably what they're best at. When people are involved, sense doesn't have to play a big role. So why should he believe you when he's not comfortable believing himself?"

"Maybe, but I can't help thinking that if it were Allen or Robert or even Chastity who told him, it would be different. I've been making a fool of myself, Kwestor. I wanted to be a hero. I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to be—somebody, but I'm not, and I'll never be. It was stupid of me to think I could. I should never have left the castle. This is the only life I know, the only life I'm suited for."

The ranger jerked to a sitting position on the bed. "Foolish for leaving this fantasy? All right. Standing stark naked in front of the Warden hoping it would listen to you was foolish. I'll grant you that. But escaping from this cave with cushioned seats and soft people? That wasn't foolish. That was probably the smartest thing you have ever done."

"But I'm nobody."

"You're a prince."

"Yes, I'm a prince, but I'm an extra prince. My brothers at least have roles and responsibilities. Not me. When it comes to anything important, I don't matter. My father matters. Barter matters. This Ambassador Snyder matters. A peasant who grows vegetables or one who simply works at an inn matters. They can make things happen, but not me. I'm nobody pretending to be somebody. They all can make decisions that affect their destinies. I can't. I'm not destined to be anything. I'm just here. Once in a while I can have a walk-on part in someone else's story, but I'm not a main character because all the important roles are already taken."

"Destiny? Listen, kid. There is no destiny. There is just the way things are. I thought you finally understood that. Stuff just happens. There's nothing personal about it. You don't have a purpose in it other than the one you make. And when it comes to that, it's you against the world and the world is a lot bigger than you are. Nine times out of ten, you are going to lose. That's life. You have to learn to deal with it."

Kwestor looked as if he struggled with some kind of internal conflict before continuing.

"I'd tell you to give up now but I see your determination and, you know, sometimes I almost think you might actually have a chance. Don't misunderstand me. You're probably not going to be able to stop Barter or whoever is behind this from having the war they want, but that's only probably, and probably

isn't certainly. Every once in a while, things work out even when the odds are stacked against you. Just don't expect it. Be ready for failure. But the point is, sometimes you *can* make a difference. What you have to ask yourself is whether or not it's important enough to you to risk the pain of failure to try."

Donald reflected quietly. His questions remained. The ranger had not silenced them but they were quieter now and they felt somehow less urgent.

"Yes, it's important enough."

"Then you have to go to Gotrox and do what you can. That's all the advice I can give you."

~*~

When Donald got back to his room, he found a large, brown paper envelope on his writing table. Inside were the reports Barter had mentioned at their meeting. There was one from the Department of Intelligence and one from the Department of Culture.

Well, it wouldn't hurt to flip through them. Neither of the two held more than fifty pages, and he did not expect he would fall asleep anytime soon, anyway. They might even help cure his spell of insomnia.

Donald got out of his robe, hung it in the chifforobe, and eased himself under the blankets. He carelessly tossed the two reports on the bed next to him.

The first one, grabbed at random, was the report from Intelligence. He flipped through some painfully dull pages. It reminded him of some of the things his former tutors had made him read. This one even included lists, charts and flow diagrams, the bane of any student with an imaginative frame of mind. As soon as the text said, *refer to figure one*, he tossed it aside and picked up the other report.

The second one seemed better. He saw no graphs, but it did have footnotes. These presented no problem. He could ignore footnotes. Nobody ever read those anyway.

The Gotroxian language is difficult to master, it began. Donald knew this well enough. Reading it was not too bad, and hearing it was fine once you got used to it, but speaking it could be a throat straining activity.

The first part described the richness of Gotroxian literature, and it even mentioned *The Veridical Tales of Rolf the Obstreperous*. He wished he had seen this before he left the castle on his tour of the kingdom.

He flipped past the sections on theater, music, art, and religion and stopped at a part called, *Current relations with Westgrove*.

This section covered cultural exchanges between the two kingdoms. Apparently, Gotroxian opera was gaining some following in Westgrove. Donald had been dragged to a Gotroxian opera by one of his tutors once, and once, as far as he was concerned, was more than enough. The experience resisted any kind of coherent description, but could be compared to being forced to sit for four hours watching amorous pigs in a catfight.

He skipped ahead to a paragraph on craft shows.

Craft and trade shows have been one of the most enduring cultural exchanges between the two kingdoms.

He thought he remembered hearing something about one of those recently.

It went on a bit about the history of the shows before he came upon a paragraph, which he read over twice.

The Gotrox Mountains, with their vast resources of iron, coal and other minerals have allowed the people of the region to develop an unparalleled skill in iron working that stretches back generations. It is widely acknowledged that Gotroxian metal smiths are unsurpassed, and Gotroxian metal goods have always been popular with the people of Westgrove. A steady decline in domestic production has led to an even greater demand for their products.

A footnote appeared at this point but Donald ignored it.

He recalled Barter saying something like this. Donald searched his memory. *We have become increasingly dependent upon Gotrox for our manufacturing resources*, he had told him.

Donald flipped through the pages of both reports to see if he could find anything else mentioning this. He could not, and there was no report from the Department of Trade. One might have been helpful. Why did Barter leave it out?

He went back to the report from the Department of Culture and found the passage. He grudgingly read the footnote.

According to a recent report by the Barter Foundry and Ironworks Company, the depletion of Westgrovian Iron deposits may make large scale domestic production of iron goods uneconomical in as little as ten years.

The Barter Foundry and Ironworks Company? This must be how the Barter family originally achieved its great wealth and position. If Horace Barter felt loyalty to his heritage and his family... This was the answer! This is why Horace Barter wants to invade Gotrox. It makes sense. Barter wants to subjugate Gotrox to ensure Westgrove will have access to the minerals it needs. Donald knew his father would dismiss his allegation as more idle speculation and conclusion-jumping, but he never felt more certain about anything in his life. His understanding about the Chief Adviser's motivation to start a war made no difference by itself, though. With his resources, connections, influence, and the almost unquestioned trust of the king, Barter could still succeed. Somehow, Donald had to stop him.

~END~

(The Story Continues in *The Warden War*)

If you enjoyed this book, please let the world know. Recommendations, reviews, Tweets, and comments on social media will help ensure that the author keeps writing (instead of succumbing to the temptation of stepping away from his keyboard and getting a life). If you REALLY liked this story, please consider sharing your opinion in a short review on book retailer sites. These are especially helpful.

Other Books by D.L. Morrese

Stories of the Warden's World:

An Android Dog's Tale - Not only does MO-126 look like a dog, his core behavioral program is derived from canine instincts. This may be one reason he finds the smelly primitives imported to work this Corporation agricultural project so fascinating. Despite their contradictory tendencies, he believes humans have potential. In fact, he likes them. This places him in something of a dilemma. Whose interests should come first—the Project's or the humans'? He must make choices, as must all sentient creatures, but what if he chooses wrong? If the corporation abandons the Project, will the humans be able to survive on their own?

The Warden Threat - A lighthearted tale of looming war, subversion, and a terrible magical weapon. Prince Donald, the idealistic third son of the king of Westgrove, believes he may be the only one able to protect his country from an invasion spearheaded by an ancient and massive stone warrior known as the Warden of Mystic Defiance. Donald, unfortunately, is woefully unprepared. His only real understanding of such things comes from his reading of adventure stories, which he soon discovers understate the realities and hardships of such quests. His guide, Kwestor, a competent but jaded ranger, feels seeking adventure is the same as asking for trouble. Donald finds both, as well as an answer he never expected.

The Warden War - This sequel continues the quest begun by Prince Donald in *The Warden Threat*. His father, the king of Westgrove, has been told the neighboring kingdom of Gotrox has discovered a magical means to animate a mysterious and gigantic ancient stone warrior, the Warden of Mystic Defiance, which it plans to use it to spearhead an invasion of his kingdom. Donald is convinced this is a hoax, a deception contrived by his father's chief adviser to bring about a war. Donald is determined to thwart him. It will not be easy. Chief Adviser Horace Barter has several advantages. He has resources, connections, influence, and the almost unquestioned trust of the king. Donald, sadly, has none of these. What the young prince has is a nominal position with the diplomatic team being sent to Gotrox and the companionship of a few rather unique friends, including a pair of 15,000-year-old androids, one of which is a dog—or a reasonable facsimile thereof.

Amy's Pendant - Amy, the only child of a poor family living in the bustling city of Dolphin Point, is given an amazing and potentially dangerous pendant as a present for her fourteenth birthday. She does not know how amazing or how potentially dangerous it is. If she did, she would cherish it even more. She is that kind of girl.

Through her investigations of the mysterious pendant, she uncovers an ancient mystery, the remnants of a vast alien commercial enterprise buried beneath the surface of the planet. Unfortunately, the central computer for the complex is aware of her intrusion and it cannot let her escape with knowledge of its existence.

Disturbing Clockwork - On a small island called Bob off the southern shore of the great Kingdom of Westgrove, Benkin, a brilliant if somewhat quirky scientist, discovers something extraordinary—clockwork automatons that can obey commands. For Benkin, this is an amazing scientific discovery, one he wants to explore; one he believes may revolutionize mankind's understanding of the world. For Snyder, a fugitive from the king's justice, it is something he can use....

Adventures of the Brane Child:

Brane Child - The Brane Skip device may provide a way for humanity to overcome the light-speed barrier and finally head for the stars. It seems like magic to Lisa Chang, the young engineer in command of the first crewed test flight, and Lisa doesn't believe in magic. But she does believe in the mission. Humanity must explore space in order to survive and prosper, and she feels honored to be among the first to go where no one has gone before. She does not know what will happen when the Brane Skip engages. She thinks it will do nothing. She fears it will explode. She does not expect it will cast them adrift in space and on a collision course with a fantasy version of Earth, complete with dragons, orcs, and wizards.... Unfortunately, this is exactly what happens.

The Scarecrow's Brane - Oz isn't what Commander Lisa Chang expected. Fairy tales were never her thing, and finding herself in one is grating on her nerves. But she can't leave, at least not yet. The abrupt landing of her spaceship inadvertently squashed the only protection Emerald City had against the tyrannical Red Witch of the South. And now, unfortunately, the witch has Lisa and her crew locked in a cell. Emerald City isn't enough. The witch wants Lisa's 'magic' ship as well.

The crew of the spaceship *Brane Child* must escape the witch's prison and then embark on a hazardous journey through the Wild Lands to Munchkinland, where Lisa must somehow convince the Great and Powerful Blue Wizards of the East to construct a new protector for Emerald City.

D.L. Morrese's books are available from fine online retailers worldwide.

About the Author

D.L. Morrese is an award-winning author of speculative fiction books that have been called science fiction for fantasy readers. He currently resides in Orlando, Florida, U.S.A., where he spends most of his time reading, thinking, and writing, although not necessarily in that order. You can learn more about him and his books at <http://dlmorrese.wordpress.com/>.

Leave a comment if you wish. He does read them, and he appreciates every one.



About the Author D.L. Morrese

David L. Morrese was born in the middle of the last century in upstate New York. When he was ten, his father, a civilian auditor for the U.S. Air Force, accepted an assignment at an American run RAF base and brought the family to England for a few years. There, the author attended middle school and was given the nickname 'Brains' by his classmates, not because he was exceptionally smart but because he had a (comparatively) good vocabulary and wore glasses, which reminded them of the Brains character in the animatronic TV show Thunderbirds. After his father's tour was over, the family returned to the States (specifically Massachusetts), where, he finished high school. After that, he moved to Illinois and worked his way through college as a short-order cook. He earned degrees in philosophy and government and went on to grad school where he studied behavioral science. Then, somewhat to his surprise, he got a real job (the kind at a desk, indoors, with no heavy lifting, decent pay, and benefits). It was as a logistician with the Department of Defense. This wasn't his dream job, but he did it well enough to earn a few promotions, which allowed him to save enough money to retire early and fund his current hobby as a science fiction writer.