

A Worthless Wizard . . .

Ernie hunched over his horse, leaning forward, staff under his arm, riding for all he was worth. But the wizard wasn't a very good rider, so Ben and Jess caught up quickly. Ernie gave them both a quick wide-eyed glance and said, "There wasn't a rumble, was there?"

"There was," Ben said.

"Faster," Ernie muttered, and gave his horse another kick.

"What is it, wizard?" Jess shouted. "In the king's name, you tell us what is coming!"

"It might be—possibly—perhaps—" Another rumble came from behind them, louder. "That is to say, almost certainly," Ernie said, hastily, "a bikalis."

"What's a bikalis?" Jess yelled over the beat of the horses' hooves.

"Can we outrun it?" Ben asked.

"The bikalis is a terrible creature. Its blood burns like acid, its spittle is deadly poison, and its scream strikes utter terror in the heart of every man and beast!" Ernie sounded utterly terrified already. His white-knuckled grip clung to the reins of his horse. "It's never been outrun before, but I'm trying for a first."

There came another rumble, now clearly a distant bestial roar, closer.

"It's no use," Jess said. "The thing is gaining fast. It'll be here in a few minutes. We'll have to stand and fight."

"Has that ever turned out well? I distinctly advise against that unless you're immortal or have a full dozen wizards to aid you in battle," Ernie said shrilly. "But if you would string out behind me so the bikalis slows to eat both of you first I'd be much obliged!"



The Stuttering Bard of York

R. Purdy



Wild Jot Press

THE STUTTERING BARD OF YORK

This novel is a work of fiction. All characters in this book are fictitious or used fictitiously.

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For Mom and Dad.

Their sacrifices made it possible.

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Chapter One

Inauspicious Inauguration

The bird pooped on him when he was out plowing the north field. His Ma always told him to make the best of a situation, and to remember it could be worse. So Ben laughed.

“It could be worse,” he told his plow horse, Ned. “We could be attacked by Goblins and the farm burned down.”

Ben wouldn't have said that, and he wouldn't have laughed, if he had known. The villagers of York were a superstitious lot, and just about anyone could have told him having your adventure inaugurated with bird poop was a very bad omen. But Ben didn't know that. And he didn't know he was about to begin an adventure. So he laughed, and wiped the poop off his forehead with his sleeve because he had forgotten his handkerchief, as usual.

Later, when he reflected on all this, he would wonder if the adventure was all his fault. At the moment the bird pooped on him he had been daydreaming about adventure, even though his father had warned him to stop. “Adventure is highly over-rated,” his Da had said. “It's like investing. You spend a lot of time and money, and the returns aren't worth it. Even worse, the adventure jumps out on you like some monster from under the bed, and then you find out you got the wrong adventure.”

But Ben thought it would be exciting to venture into the nearby Shiddow Mountains and fight goblins—maybe. He could be a warrior-bard, he thought. He wasn't entirely sure what being a bard meant, but he liked to sing. From what he read it seemed being a bard was singing, telling stories, and seeing amazing things while traveling. He thought he might like that, but he didn't tell anyone. He knew if Stuttering Ben said he wanted to be a bard people wouldn't stop laughing for a week. So he told only Ned the plow horse, who was the audience for most of his songs anyhow.

“Spring wind on the air, oh spring wind on the air,” he sang, and then

couldn't think of what to sing next, so he just sang that bit over again, louder, and a little off-key.

Ned didn't mind.

A new line came to him and Ben was about to bellow the stanza when he saw the smoke. The dark pillar climbed from the horizon, boiling upward through the clear sky.

"Whoa, Ned," he croaked. "As the king lives . . ."

The smoke came from somewhere beyond the rim of the stone field wall. From . . . from the direction of the house. Ben felt his stomach do a very odd flip.

"Not to worry, Ned." He tried to laugh, but only croaked again. "Not a goblin raid. It's just the smoke-house. Da probably added more chips to the fire for the curing meat. It's acting up, like it did last week."

But then he knew it wasn't. He wished he hadn't said anything about goblin raiding.

"Chimney fire," he muttered.

No small chimney fire made that much smoke. A house fire.

"Can't be. It's just the barn."

He left the plow, starting across the field. Then he ran.



Fire. Ben saw it as soon as he came over the rise. Flames shot out of the windows, wild and hungry, black smoke frothing up from the roof. The beautiful little house his own Da had built.

"Ma! Da!" he shouted, and ran faster.

He cleared the wooden gate in one leap and crossed the yard. Only then did he see the dead goblin lying in the middle of the rutted wagon path.

Goblins are short little things, about half as tall as a man, sometimes a little taller, and very strong. They're blackish, hairy brutes, commonly with a massive bulbous nose and large crooked teeth that stick out from their mouths at every angle. They can fight with their long pointed claws, but they often carry spiked clubs or whatever sharpened metal things the fiendish goblin smiths hammer out. The vile creatures live up in the Shiddow Mountains, in dark, dank caves. They love gold and other shiny things, and fire, and eat only raw meat. They cackle, shriek and screech when excited—which is usually when plundering and killing humans.

Ben had never seen a goblin before, only imagined them, so when he saw the lumpish rounded shape sprawled on the road he nearly screamed—and almost swallowed his tongue in his fright, making the scream come out more a gurgle.

Once he realized the goblin was indeed quite dead—with a long feathered arrow planted between its beady eyes—his fear subsided a little. But only a

little. Where there was one goblin there were always more, and though one of his father's arrows had killed this goblin, there was no sign of his father.

"Da! Ma! Where are you?"

He snatched up the wood ax from where it rested, embedded in the splitting stump. Teeth bared in what he hoped looked like a ferocious grimace, he raced round the burning house, frantic enough to attack even the greatest goblin warrior living if it happened to appear around the next corner with his parents.

The greatest goblin living didn't appear. Neither did his Ma or Da. Nobody living appeared anywhere, though he found two more dead goblins on the far side of the house, each with a well-placed arrow that said his father had struck again.

"Come out! Come out! It's me, Ben!" He whirled round, his eyes darting, searching. His father was quite lame, and his mother had never been one for much running. He knew they both had to be nearby.

They had to be in the house.

"I'm coming!" he shouted, racing around to the front of the house.

He smashed through the door, splintering it to pieces, stumbling inside. Smoke darkened the room and filled his nostrils, stinging his throat. Peering through the smoke and flames he could just make out the overturned kitchen table and many broken chairs.

"Da! Ma! I know you're in here, somewhere!" He squinted, preparing to charge madly through the house. Then a burning chunk of ceiling crashed down on his head, knocking him cross-eyed and sending hot coals down the back of his shirt.

He yelped, staggering backward out of the house. Dropping the ax, he danced around shouting and shaking his shirt. As soon as the last burning embers were dislodged he turned back to enter the house again. Halfway to the door, the entire structure caved in with a groan and a roaring crash. Sparks swirled everywhere and a blast of hot air struck Ben in the face, making his eyes water.

Where the house had once stood there remained only a burning heap of ruins.

"But . . ." He reached out a hand. "But . . . I was going back!" he shouted.

"What for?" a voice said. "Weren't no point in going back, less you wanted to be burned up."

"What?" He turned, staring stupidly at his father, wondering if the blow to his head had addled his senses. His parents, having come from hiding in the bramble across the road, appeared sooty and disheveled but otherwise unharmed.

"Not dead?" he finally said.

"Nope." Abern drew his scrawny self up proudly, sticking out his hairy chin. "I look dead to you, boy? Take more than some filthy goblins to kill me."

“But . . . but . . . The house—”

“Not a concern. Everything is under control.” Abern leaned on his bow and raised his free hand in a grand gesture. “No need for panic, no need for alarm. Your old Da can handle anything.”

“The house—” Ben stuttered again.

“Yeah, well . . . I did burn down the house.” Abern looked a bit reflective as he turned his gaze to the smoldering ruins.

“You . . . you . . . Burned down—”

“Tactical maneuver, see.” Abern fingered his bow, a gleam coming into his eyes. “I saw the goblins coming, so I burned down the house. A most cunning distraction so we could get away. Besides,” he finished, “I figured if it were going to be burned down in any case, I ought to get the satisfaction instead of them. Nothing quite so fun as watching a house burn down.”

“But . . . but . . . that was our house,” Ben managed.

“Yeah . . . yeah. True.” Abern frowned. “You questioning me, boy? Think your Da don’t know best? It was either the goblins burning the house down, or me. Who should it be burning down this house besides the master of the house? It were the goblins or me, and I chose me!”

“I . . . liked our house.”

“You can build us a new one short enough.” Abern said absently, looking around. “Where Ned gone off to? I thought you were working him in the field.”

“I am. Was. I saw the smoke—”

“And you left the horse in the field to get ate by passing goblins? Your common sense desert you entirely today? First you go carrying on because you can’t go back into a burning house, then you leave our only dear horse out in the field when goblins might decide to eat him. We can build a house, we can’t build a horse!”

“But—”

“Fetch Ned quick like. We’re going to have a council of war to devise our revenge on these goblins. It’s part of the grand old traditions.”

“Right.” He wanted to ask him what a council of war was, but instead he hurried back to the field, his mind whirling.

“Sorry, Ned,” he said, breathing hard as he removed the harness. “Wish we could keep plowing, but Da says we’re holding a council of war, or something like that. House has been burned down, too, but at least you still have your barn.”

Ned seemed untroubled by the news and agreeably followed Ben.

“Good to see you all here. Glad you’re still in one piece, Ned.” Abern cleared his throat importantly and motioned for them to collect in a circle. “Now see here everyone, and pay close attention. We’re holding a council of war to decide how we’re going to pay those goblins back for burning down our house.”

"But," Ben interjected, "I thought you burned the house down."

"You going to interrupt all the time? I did because they were gonna, and that's just as good as them doing it, got it? So those goblins did it, and we're gonna to make them pay. Keep that straight."

"Oh." Ben looked at his mother. Jemima Transom was nearly as stout as her husband was scrawny, and calm as Abern excitable. Ben usually understood his mother's explanations better than whatever his father offered, but now she said nothing, studying the ruins of their house as if they held the answer to their present circumstance.

"How we going to make them pay?" Ben finally asked.

"Hang them goblins up by their nose hairs." Abern rubbed his hands together in gleeful anticipation. "King's name, we'll choke them on their own nose hairs. That'll teach them to mess with old Abern."

"No," Jemima said, finally breaking her silence.

"No what?" Abern stopped rubbing his hands together. "You going to tell me it isn't cleanly, or something? You're always saying I'm doing uncleanly things."

Jemima shook her head. "There are many goblins and only the three of us. If we're going to fight the goblins we need help."

"We don't need help." Abern jutted out his chin. "We can beat thousands and thousands of goblins. We just got to fight tactically. Sneaking, and ambushing, and stuff like that. Everybody knows you always win when—"

"That's not how it went in the last war, and you know that, Abern. If we're going to attack those goblins, we need—"

"We don't need nobody," Abern insisted vehemently. "We here in this family are survivalists! We take care of ourselves and don't need anyone poking in our business."

"I won't have my Ben wasting the flower of his youth because you're too proud and ornery, Abern Transom." Jemima waved a firm finger under his nose. "Survivalist, or socialist, or whatever your religion, sometimes everyone needs help. We aren't starting a war with the goblins by ourselves."

"Next you'll be saying we need the capitalists in on this venture, too," Abern grumbled. "Since when has warfare become an inclusive activity? It weren't that way when I was young. I say we can start a war by ourselves. I say we put this to a vote. All in favor of an immediate assault on the goblin strongholds raise your hand and say 'Aye.'"

Abern's hand shot up. "Aye!"

"But why—" Ben said.

"Right, then," Abern continued without a pause. "Now that we've decided on a course of action—"

"We're not going anywhere without an army," Jemima repeated. "Ben—"

"Ben ain't got no flour of youth." Abern glared. "Us men are made of meat and salt and all sorts of hardy good-tasting stuff. And we're going to nip on

up to the Shiddow Mountains quick-like and smack up these nasty goblins. Setting wickedness to right, we'll come back and build a new house. It's all going to be simple as that because I'm getting too old for complications."

"And how are you going to do that?" Jemima rested her hands on her hips. "We lost all our food when the house burned up. You planning to kill all the goblins without eating lunch? And what about a clean pair of socks?"

"Lunch." Abern sat on the edge of the stone wall that bordered the field. "Don't have any lunch. Take a woman to remember something important like that." Abern looked glum. "I could do without the socks, but I'm hungry for lunch already and we haven't even had our second battle. We should have thought to pull dinner out with us, when we escaped the goblins . . ."

"But we didn't," Jemima said, reasonably. "And we need a good number of armed men to take care of the goblins properly, anyhow."

"So what are you suggesting this council of war do?" Abern rested his bow across his knees.

"We go into town and—"

"No." Abern turned his head away. "I'm not going into town where that fool Andro-piddle—"

"Androbobel," Jemima corrected. "And he's a learned professor."

"Don't care what he calls himself." Abern folded his arms petulantly. "I told him the next time I saw his smart mouth I was shooting one of my arrows up his back end, and I meant it. I don't intend to go to York and have him telling me how I ought to have fought the goblins. Likely as not he'll go telling me I shouldn't have burned down my house."

"We need—" Jemima persisted.

"Nope." Abern shook his head. "You want your great big army, you send Ben. There ain't no retreat for me. I'm a patriotic defender of this farm. If those gibbering goblins come back, I'll give them something to gibber about."

Jemima seemed about to say something, then stopped. Ben thought she was remembering when Adrobobel first came to York, claiming to be a professor and learned man from a great university in the neighboring country. He had proclaimed his mission consisted in the humane and sublime task of bringing enlightenment and social advancement to the masses. Ben had no idea what the professor went on about, but his Da had taken an immediate dislike to Adrobobel and his "airy words," and the relationship had only become worse since. The last time into town ended in a nasty fight where the accusation of "narrow-minded impediment to knowledge and social inclusiveness" was hurled from one side, and "pea-brained babble-talker," on the other.

After a few minutes, Jemima nodded. "Yes," she said. "It's best if Ben goes alone."

"Me?" Ben squeaked, his voice reaching an unnatural octave. "Alone?"

"You heard your Da. He's not coming, and he's probably right not to,

given how he and Androbobel can't be civil."

"Can't you come with me?"

"Best if I stay with your Da. Make sure he don't go off and get ideas." Jemima eyed Abern, who was muttering dire predictions should Andro-piddle or any goblin cross him again.

"But—but—but—"

"You've said enough buts for today, Ben dear. Now listen and do as you're told," Jemima reached up and straightened Ben's collar with finality. "You've gone and grown up on me, and now it's time you go and act like a grown man."

"But—but—but, will you be safe?"

"Safe? Ha! Those goblins better worry about themselves if they come back," Abern barked. "You think you're father can't handle them? You think your Da can't keep your Ma safe?"

"No," Ben said quickly. "It's just—"

"Ben, think of this as a little adventure. You've always wanted to go on an adventure, right?" Jemima laid a hand on Ben's arm. "Pay no attention to your Da. The goblins have just got him a little excited. Just go to York and tell the mayor what has happened. He'll know what you need to do. Follow the mayor's instruction, and you'll do fine."

"Yes, Ma."

"But don't listen to that intellectual tramp," Abern broke in. "You can't trust that big-worded fool. He's up to no good."

Pursing her lips, Jemima finally nodded. "Best if you kept away from the professor, Ben dear. Less said to him the better. The man seems very wise and all, but he does have some strange ideas, and I don't think he's taken to you."

"Can't abide all those social experiments," Abern said darkly. "You get all these foreign intellectual types coming over here thinking they know best. Ruining the fabric of decent society—and good clothing too, I expect. Spreading all sorts of foolishness, like telling me my Ma don't know how to cook food right. It isn't right, I tell you."

"No, Pa," Ben agreed quickly.

"No, sir," Abern said, warming up to his subject. "Don't trust them. Never know where all this talk of setting up a demo-thing-a-jiggy might lead. Sing the national anthem all the way, I say." He twanged the string of his bow as if he thought to bring some musical accompaniment to the threatened national anthem. "Sing the national anthem, boy, and shove a sharpened arrow up their—"

"Unfortunately," Jemima broke in, "We're in a difficult spot, so we must be polite."

"Hmph. Polite." Abern twanged his bowstring a few more times, meaningfully. "If that Andro-babble fellow starts spouting off strange

sounding words you just—”

“Ignore him,” Ma finished.

“Defend our heritage from foreign encroachment! Oh Tarn, Tarn, land of the good and the brave!” Abern sang loudly, and off key. “Where justice reigns with beauty over the bold and the brave!”

“Never mind your father,” Ma said briskly. “You know how he gets on.”

“Yeah,” Ben said. He had never seen his Da quite like this. After the last argument with Androbobel—almost, but not quite.

“The goblin attack upset him a bit. You just hurry along to town, Ben, and do whatever they say. Oh . . . and you just might mention to the mayor that it'd be better if Androbobel doesn't come on out today, understand?”

“Right,” Ben said, glancing toward his father. “Ma, Ned—”

“You take him with you. We won't be needing him until you get back, and Ned might be useful to you.”

“Maybe,” He agreed, but he thought that all he cared about was not traveling to York alone when goblins were on the loose.

“Go along now.” She reached up to pat him on the shoulder and gave him a gentle shove.

“Come on, Ned.”

Reluctantly, Ben started to walk away. He looked back often, but he always saw the same thing—his mother smiling beatifically after him and his father singing the national anthem at the top of his lungs.



Chapter Two

A Warning of Sorts

Dressed in the simple clothes of a farmer, Bennelzor Transom didn't cut a dashing figure. He was perhaps just a little tall if one looked at him right, but his chin wasn't jutting, or chiseled. It was a very average, decent chin, a bit of thin hair sprouting there which Ben hoped might turn into a luxurious beard. The people in the nearby village of York said there was no hope of marriage for a man who sang to his horse—and couldn't talk sense to another man, much less stutter a sentence to a woman of marriageable quality. Ben wasn't sure what they meant when they whispered those words over-loud as he passed on the street, or why the young women tittered so loudly, but he didn't wonder about it much. York was his village, and he liked it as that.

The village of York, nestled in a small clearing amid the forest that borders the Shiddow Mountains, is one of the most remote towns in the kingdom of Tarn. Being close to the Shiddow Mountains, the citizens of York constantly face the threat of goblin raids. Not being very brave or warlike, this means they mostly know how to ring the alarm bell vigorously and get very scared whenever someone thinks there might be danger. But, in spite of this chance of excitement, on a common day the streets of York are a quiet place where dogs, chickens, and pigs wander around in search of something good to eat. Often the only sound heard when walking down the main street is the clang of Cendric the blacksmith working at his forge.

Ben started down the narrow rutted trail toward York with a heavy heart. There would be questions and he would stutter. So he walked at a slow pace, Ned plodding dutifully behind.

The winding path went over the hills and through the forest. In some places massive boulders and old wizened trees rose up close, nearly crowding out the road. Then at other places the land opened up in a small clearing of

tall fresh grass and flowers. But mostly there were trees. The thick forest that spread from the Shiddow Mountains was full of cool shadows, and the rich smell of rotting wood.

And strange dangerous things.

The path to York ran six winding miles. About halfway between the Transom farm and York there bubbled a small stream called Bannard Brook. As Ben splashed through the cold water, he recalled that the brook was named after some old man Bannard who, it was said, had perished when a giant goblin bit off his head. This started Ben thinking about the goblins again. He glanced up nervously and saw the forest thick and dark on the far bank of the stream. He suppressed a shiver.

"Could be goblins hiding there, Ned," he said.

Ned snorted. It was hard to tell whether he agreed, or not.

"If they came to the farm, they could be here." Ben stood at the edge of the trees, peering ahead. His boots were soaked, and he didn't feel very brave with water between his toes.

"How fitting if I met my end by Bannard's Brook," he muttered through clenched teeth. "The king preserve us—there could be goblins everywhere."

He was very glad he had happened to take the ax along when he left the farm. It didn't make him feel brave but . . . it was something. Gripping the haft tightly, he ventured beneath the overhanging bows.

Once Ben started thinking of goblins he couldn't stop. Maybe a mile further on he paused a moment and said, as if continuing some thought, "If the goblins attacked our farm, they might have attacked York."

The forest said nothing back.

"And if they attacked York, they might have destroyed the entire village. There might be no help for miles around!"

Ned snuffled at the ground, searching for something to eat among the pine needles.

"No. I'm sure York is fine." He gave Ned a quavering smile. Then he said, "We'd better hurry."

York was fine, he thought again.

Still, he increased his pace. York was fine, but it couldn't hurt to hurry. A few steps later it became a run. Soon he raced as fast as his legs would carry him, terrified he would come over the last rise and see only smoking remains where York had once stood.

He arrived in town breathless and disheveled, sweating, and covered with black soot, ax in hand. Josline, the short, fat, wife of Bib the tanner was the first to spot him. She was standing on a stool in her back yard, hanging out laundry to dry when she saw Ben come gasping down the road with Ned galloping after him.

"The king preserve us!" she shrieked, "Stuttering Ben has finally lost it! He's murdered his family and is running into town with an ax to kill us all!"

Save me! Somebody save me!” Any further exclamations or warnings were lost as she toppled over backward and fell into her wet laundry basket.

Doors banged open all down the street, men running from every shop, women from every house. Even the four bums, Terry, Buddle, Donn, and Loi came out from the tavern, peering and blinking in the daylight. The villagers took one look at Ben and scrambled back indoors to fetch a poker, shovel, or even a broom. By this time Ben had reached the center of the village and stood in the middle of the street, wheezing. He saw the people gathering, looking very grim, and perhaps a little determined. Sucking in another breath of air, he managed to burst out “Goblins!”

It was a fairly clear gasp considering how fast Ben had run, but the men and women stared at him a minute before some small lady off in the back squeaked, “Goblins!”

“Goblins!” Josline screamed. She had finally hauled herself out of the laundry basket and was climbing over the rickety picket fence. “I knew it! I told you! Save the children! Goblins are coming! The king preserve us, Ben has brought goblins to town!”

The fence collapsed under Josline with a crash and in the general commotion people ran around yelling, “Goblins! Save us!” and, “Goblins are attacking! Goblins have attacked the Transom farm!”

Finally someone shouted, “Sound the alarm. Someone sound the alarm!”

It was a mad rush for the bell tower. The bums—who had been keeping back in case there actually was a fight—made it to the far end of the street first. All four of them took hold of the rope and began heaving. Terry, Bubble, Donn, and Loi avoided any work in normal circumstances, but now all four of them heaved at the rope with surprising vigor. Up and down they went, filling the town with a *wang-wang-wang-wang* that quickly made Ben feel like his head was ringing.

The racket did little except summon the mayor and Androbobel, the two men coming from the mayor's basement where they had been counting the mayor's lucre.

Before Ben had time to stop thinking about how the bell made his head ring, the villagers crowded around, everyone talking at once.

“How many goblins?”

“Are they coming right behind you?”

“Where is your dear mother?”

“Where is Jemima?”

“Where is your father? Did old Abe send you?”

The shouting faces pressed close, demanding answers. Ben opened his mouth to answer first one question, then another. “I—No. They—the Goblins. It—We—they. The fire—it—” He began stuttering quite badly, and knew it because he could see the spit flying, great big flecks, as he tried to make the words come out of his mouth.

"You're not going to get anything out of him now," Fannie, the pretty miller's daughter shouted. "He's lost his brain again."

"Oh, maybe just his mouth," Cendric said, more charitably. The blacksmith, though not wide as he was tall, was certainly wider than any person had a right to expect. With his massive size and bushy black beard, frayed and ratty from where forge sparks had burned through, Cendric tended to a slightly maniacal appearance that did his gentle disposition an injustice.

"Citizens, people!" Androbobel called out in his crisp voice. "This is a crisis which concerns us all. Please calm yourselves and let those in authority—those wiser and more capable—handle this national tragedy."

"Here, let me at him." Drasel, the mayor's wife, elbowed her way to the center of the crowd. She was a bony woman, with long fingers that looked quick to pinch.

"Now listen, Ben." She pointed one narrow finger at him. "You just nod or shake your head. Hear? I'll ask the questions. The goblins attacked, that's right?"

Ben nodded.

Drasel looked at his burned and soot stained garments. "And they burned your house and . . . and . . . killed your parents!"

Ben nodded, then shook his head.

"The savages!" Cendric said.

The words went round the crowd.

"Utter savages!"

But Drasel said, "How can you nod and shake your head? Either the goblins did or they didn't."

"Farm's gone," Ben managed to say, stuttering over the first word so it sounded like, "Garm."

Someone gasped, but Ben managed to continue, "Ma and Da sent me for help." He thought about mentioning that his Da had actually been the one to burn down the house, but he didn't think he could explain it, and anyhow, the goblins would have burned down the house—like his Da said—so it was good enough.

"Not dead!" Cendric shouted.

"Someone should do something about the goblins," a voice called out. "Destroying farms and trying to kill such nice people as the Transoms—it's a disgrace."

"Indeed," Androbobel echoed, finally managing to work himself to the front of the crowd, the mayor right behind him. "This is a disgrace."

The professor was a thin man with an equally thin mustache which hung down around his mouth and appeared well oiled. The man wore a finely embroidered purple robe which put him at stark odds with the rough pants and shirts of the York men. A gold rimmed eye-piece perched precariously on

the professors narrow cheek as he stared at Ben.

“What do you say, professor?” The mayor panted. He was a short and fat man, with a balding top. “What does this situation call for?”

“Ah. It is the duty of an enlightened state to care for its citizens. In this moment of weakness I see a opportunity to take care of a certain problem.” Androbobel elbowed the mayor. “We must take advantage of this situation.”

“Aye,” Cendric said, missing the sly undertone. “We should do something.”

The talk quieted then.

“Do something . . .” The mayor repeated, rubbing his stomach where Androbobel had elbowed him and eying the professor quizzically. “About what?” he finally said, cautiously.

“The goblins.” Cendric jerked a meaty thumb toward the looming Shiddow Mountains.

“The goblins,” the professor agreed, quickly.

“The goblins.” The mayor gave a small laugh. “And exactly what do you think we—”

“With the power of the masses nothing is impossible,” Androbobel intoned. “We shall harness this power to work great good.”

“A bad thing has happened to Ben,” Cendric continued. “We should help him.”

“Help him?” Drasel said. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“Help him,” the professor said, a strange smile spreading across his lips.

“Oh, help him,” the mayor said loudly. “Of course! Exactly what I was thinking! We must help Ben deal with the terrible tragedy brought about by the goblin attack. In such trials like this the village of York is brought together in unanimity and determination. We condemn such evils as this in the strongest possible terms. In fact, we'll have a town council over this.”

“An excellent idea!” Several people chorused. “I knew we elected you mayor for a reason, Horace!”

“Exactly,” the mayor said, trying to sound determined and full of leadership. “Everyone to the tavern. We'll sort all of this out over a few drinks. Ben will know the meaning of help by the time we're finished.”



Chapter Three

Social Help

Right, right," the mayor said, waddling to the front of the room. "Everyone find a seat. Thank you for coming to this vital and very important meeting. Some of you might not realize how important this meeting is, but, I assure you, it is desperately important."

"What are we meeting for, anyhow?" Buddle said. The bum was already moving around the tavern, looking for any untended drink he might swipe. "I forgets already."

"The goblins," Cendric said.

"Helping Ben," the mayor said quickly. "As citizens of York it is our duty to help our dear Ben."

"Yes," Androbobel added. "Remember, dear citizens, we all must raise our children, and all our children must be raised to understand their social duty, and to recognize that we all must live and sacrifice ourselves for the greater social good! Together, we can make the world a better place!"

"And deal with the goblins," Cendric added in his deep voice.

"Maybe. That later," the mayor said. He was watching Androbobel. "That's for a different meeting. First we deal with the easier matter of business—helping Ben."

"It's true," Drasel added. "He has all sorts of things he needs help with, now. He has his horse, and the farm and—"

"Yes, yes." The mayor waved his wife to silence. "To begin this meeting properly we must begin at the beginning. Silence, everyone! Quiet down, this meeting must come to order. Ben, would you tell us how this all began?"

"Um." He looked around at the packed tavern, and all the eyes staring at him. "The goblins came."

"Where were you, Ben?" The mayor leaned forward. "Did you see the goblins coming? Were they ugly and evil? How many were there? Were they

heavily armed?"

"I—I don't know. I was going—I mean coming—I at that time I was in the plow—I mean in the field working the plow."

"Then how do you know it was goblins?" The mayor peered at him suspiciously. "How do you know your mother didn't trip carrying a bucket of ashes from the fire and a single spark floated up and landed on the roof of your house, causing the fire?"

"I saw dead goblins," Ben said, and wondered how his Da had burned down the house.

"Ah," the mayor nodded vigorously and the crowd gasped. "Yes, yes. Most certainly goblins, then. Er . . . how many?"

"Three dead," Ben said. Life had become a dream, he thought. He couldn't really be standing in the tavern of York, answering the mayor's questions about goblins. Any minute he would wake and find that life was normal and unchanged.

Except, he didn't.

"Well, that's good, I suppose." The mayor gave a small laugh and rubbed at the bald spot atop his head. "But I meant how many alive."

"Alive?"

"On the rampage. Still loose. A threat."

"I don't know." Ben looked around at all the faces staring at him. He wanted to get out. He wanted to go home. But there was no home. "The goblins were gone when I arrived. The house was burning down."

"Terrible," the professor murmured.

"Ah. Ah, I see." The mayor pulled his pipe out of his pocket and began stuffing it with tobacco. "So, you've no idea if these goblins are heavily armed. You don't know if there are thousands of them, armed with all sorts of weapons of terror, ready to spring out on this defenseless town and slaughter us all?"

Everyone leaned across their tables in breathless waiting.

"Um," Ben said.

"Tell us! Tell us!" Drasel screeched. "Are we doomed?"

"I don't think so." Ben felt his stuttering coming on again. "I—I—I did—didn't see any on the way to York. They must have left. Maybe."

A sigh went round the room, like a great gust of wind. The mayor visibly brightened.

"Well, I guess those creatures looted enough. Good. That means we can get down to the business at hand."

"Which is what?" Buddle said. He had filched a mug of beer and was now sitting on the floor near the hearth. "Since the goblins are gone, aren't we done? Seems like this is an occasion for celebration at our survival. An occasion that would warrant free drinks on the house."

"Yes, I mean, no, not at the moment," the mayor said. He was enjoying

the present attention too much. "We still haven't dealt with Ben."

"That's right." Josline stood, hauling her scrawny husband up with her. "He could be cursed."

The babble of other voices stopped.

"What?" Cendric said, voicing what Ben was thinking, but couldn't manage to say.

"He could be marked. Me and Bib see it." Josline gave her husband a shake, then pointed a fat quivering finger at Ben. "Why of all the farms in Tarn did the goblins go after the Transom farm? There are probably hundreds of farms in this great kingdom and the goblins choose the Transom farm. Says something, doesn't it? And Ben has always been . . . strange. The goblins, they come back for those who escape."

"It could be a bad omen." The mayor chewed importantly on the stem of his pipe.

"What nonsense," Cendric's voice boomed out.

"Indeed," Androbobel said. "Intelligent men never fear such foolishness. Advanced civilization can match this threat."

"Quite right," the mayor said quickly. "Superstition. The lot of the uneducated. Still, on the chance, it would be prudent if we—"

"And even if it were true, we'd defend Ben," Cendric added.

"Anyone is welcome in York so long as they don't bring trouble," the mayor muttered around his pipe stem. "But we must be prudent. It's the job of elected officials."

"He'll bring the goblins down on us, sure as my daughter is beautiful!" Josline's voice went shrill.

There was a babble of agreement, mothers reaching for their children and fathers looking stern and concerned. The mayor chewed all the harder on his pipe stem, and Cendric thought hard, his sooty brow furrowed.

Ben took a deep breath and opened his mouth. "I—" he said, and then had to correct himself. "We could—" Then he knew that wasn't right so he started over. "We should do—" He almost didn't get the last word out, but with a great effort he managed to shout "SOMETHING!"

That made everyone silent.

"About what?" Cendric finally asked.

"The goblins," Ben managed to stutter. "I was—they told—I was sent to bring help."

"Er—yes," the mayor said, having promptly bit off the stem of the pipe when he heard the murmur of approval from the crowd.

"Exactly." The professor drew himself up to his full narrow height, throwing out his chest. "It is on such occasions as these that we see the wonder and brilliance of the great social contract."

"What kind?" asked the mayor, rubbing his nose.

"It's the way of the great social contract. Ben's mother and dear . . . dear .

. . . father are in trouble. We help him with his farm and family, and he helps us with the goblins.”

“I’ve heard the goblin raiding has been growing worse.” Cendric scratched at his head, giving the professor an uncertain glance. “But how is Ben going to help with that?”

“Much worse,” Josline said. “Who knows when they’ll decide to attack York? Something must be done!”

“How true!” Androbobel exclaimed. “We must appeal to our common nature! We must look upward and never falter! In unity there is victory, in division, defeat!” The professor finished by pounding on the table. Several people clapped in approval.

“Er . . . Yes.” The mayor cleared his throat. “I was thinking exactly the same thing. In fact, I’ve been thinking the same thing for months now. And I know the right person for this job.”

“Who?” Buddle hiccuped, setting down his mug. “It’s ain’t me, so it must be Ben. Or else the mayor.”

“Ben! Exactly!” The mayor shouted. “Ben can solve this problem. He is the perfect man for the job.”

“The wonders of common intelligence,” Androbobel extolled. “When we put our heads together we can all think the same thoughts!”

Cendric scratched at his head. “How? What can Ben do?”

The crowd rumbled its agreement, many people shaking their heads.

“Ben couldn’t find his way out of town.”

“Ben couldn’t even ask anyone for help if he saw them.”

“He’d go the the goblins by mistake and bring them to York.”

“No, no,” the mayor said. “Ben can . . . he can . . . Ben must take this matter to the king!”

“Exactly!” Drasel stood. “Ben must go to the king and bring back a great army to save us!”

“Done?” Ben stuttered, when really what he meant to say was, “What, me? I can’t! Send someone else!”

“To the king,” a few people cried out. “Complain about what the goblins have done. Tell him to fix this problem.”

“The king?” he finally managed to stutter. “Why—how would the king listen to me? I couldn’t speak to a king.”

“Young man, you are the one to speak to the king.” Androbobel drew near, resting a hand on Ben’s shoulder. “You are the one touched by this tragedy. Only you have the right for this great duty! Only you have the honor! In fact, you must. It is part of the great social contract. We take care of your dear parents and you go tell the king what has happened.”

The mayor nodded sagely. “It’s what you must do, Ben. To the king. Bring an army from the king to deliver us from this terrible goblin threat!”

“The king must save us!” The call went round the room, followed by, “Ben

must go to the king! Send Ben to the king!”

“But—what—I . . . my parents,” Ben said.

“Your parents?” The mayor looked at him blankly.

“I was supposed to come and get people,” Ben managed. “So we can destroy the goblins.”

The professor quickly intervened. “Exactly. The young man has said it. You must hurry to the king because once the wrath of the goblins is aroused, we won’t be able to hold out for long. You must bring your eye-witness account to the king so he will be moved by tender emotions and come to our aid. You must fetch the army of the king, Ben. Just like your parents told you. And never fear. Let not a concern touch your empty and innocent mind. We shall defend them with our very lives. In the hands of the masses they are as safe as if a kitten were defending them. Soon as you leave to bring help from the king we will muster the entire village, lay careful plans, and . . . do what must be done!”

The mayor paled slightly at the mention of wrath of the goblins, but then hurriedly bobbed his head saying, “Right, right. Exactly as the professor says. I don’t know where we’d be without the intelligentsia.”

“But . . .” Ben didn’t know what to say, so he finally said, “don’t forget to bring lunch when you go. Ma and Da will be hungry.”

Then he stood. He wasn’t sure which was more terrifying—hunting goblins or going to the king. A king would ask him questions and make him speak in front of many people, and he would surely stutter worse than ever. Goblins wouldn’t ask any questions, and wouldn’t make him speak. Of course, goblins would either eat him, or make him a slave working in some foul mine up in the Shiddow Mountains. It wasn’t a good choice between the two, but he couldn’t think of a good answer, or anything else to do. It all didn’t seem right, but his Ma had said to do exactly as the mayor had said, and an army had something to do with it. Though she hadn’t mentioned the king, it didn’t seem like a bad idea now that he thought about it. Especially if he could get back before dark.

“Oh, go!” Drasel snapped “What else can you do? Or do you expect to march out and fight the goblins yourself?”

Cendric scratched his head again. “This is getting all confusing. I thought we were going to help Ben.”

“Right. Didn’t you hear the professor? We’re going to help Ben.” The mayor hitched his pants up his fat stomach. “And I’m sure the professor will let you lead the charge when we go, Cendric. But we must first deal with Ben. His plight has so moved my tender heart that we’re going to send him on his way, proper like. Now see here, people. We’ve got to decide what’s to be done about Ben and his problem, and stuff. Gather round because this is important.”

The townspeople crowded forward.

“So,” the mayor said. “What've you got?”

“Got?” Ben tried to edge back for the pack of bodies.

“What did the Goblins leave? Much anything of value?”

“Me,” Ben said.

“No.” Drasel shook her head. “Important things.”

“Well, there is Ned.” Ben thought for a moment. “There is the ax I brought with me. The plow is still back in the field . . . I guess the goblins left most everything they didn't eat. Only the house was lost and everything in it.”

“Your mother's best silverware?” Drasel said.

“Gone.”

Her face fell.

“How are we going to help Ben?” Cendric asked.

“Simple.” The mayor looked around, taking in the entire crowd. “Haven't you heard all the professor's talk about community? He's been telling me all about community service. We're all going to take care of Ben's stuff while he's gone. We must show the rest of Tarn that York takes care of its own, even Stuttering Ben.”

“That's right,” everyone said, quite pleased with themselves.

The mayor stood silent a moment while Androbobel whispered in his ear.

“See,” the mayor finally said. “This is how we're going to do it. I happen to know Cal is kind enough to look after your plow for you without any charge. He'll even use it while your gone to make sure it stays in working condition.”

“That's right,” Cal said. “Good thinking, mayor.”

“Just remember how good I think next time we're electing,” the mayor said. “Now your ax, Ben . . . I'm sure old Jorg the carpenter will make sure it stays clean and sharp while you're gone. Then there is the farm . . .” The mayor trailed off as Androbobel whispered to him again. “. . . I think I can watch over that for you, Ben. It'll be hard,” the mayor sighed. “But I'll make sure it doesn't go to waste.”

“Er . . . thanks,” Ben said. He still didn't understand what all the talk was about.

“Then there is your horse,” the mayor said.

“Ned goes with me.” Ben looked up. “I'm not leaving him behind. He would get lonely.”

“Lonely?” The mayor rested a hand on his shoulder. “Ben, it's a horse. Why would a horse get lonely?”

Ben thought about saying that he would get lonely without Ned to talk to and keep him company. But he didn't say it. He didn't say anything.

“Ben, Ben, Ben. You've got to think of what's best. What is really best for Ned? Do you really think he'll want to travel? His hooves will get sore. Think about what is best for Ned. He should stay.”

“But . . .”

“Do you want Ned to be unhappy?”

“No.” Ben looked glumly at his boots. “But nobody needs to take care of anything. My Da . . .”

“Of course,” Androbobel said smoothly. “Soon as we rescue your dear father he will have everything returned. This is all just a temporary redistribution of the wealth.”

“But . . . Ned. I’m not—”

“I’ll take him.” Danwise the miller stepped forward. “I’ll take him for three dozen eggs.”

“I’m not selling Ned!” Ben folded his arms across his chest.

“It isn’t really a sale,” the professor added. “Think of it as a trade. You’ll need supplies while on your journey, and what do you have to get supplies with? Nothing. But if you have three dozen eggs instead of Ned you can use them to purchase anything you need. Once you come back from your journey, you can trade to get your horse back.”

“But . . .” Ben looked around, feeling trapped. It didn’t make sense, but everyone seemed to agree it was best and Ma had told him to do as he was told.

“Look here,” Danwise said impatiently, “I just sold a batch of flour for three dozen eggs. That ought to cover your horse.”

“Three dozen eggs?” Cendric rose to his feet. “Why, that horse ought to be worth three grown hogs.”

“It’s not like you think, Cendric.” Androbobel turned to the massive smith. “It’s an investment for Ben. Why, Danwise is downright foolish to be making such a good offer. Those three dozen eggs could hatch and Ben will have three dozen chickens. Why, if he kept going he could have as many eggs and chickens as he wanted. In no time at all he’ll have more chickens and eggs than any man could count. And all of that just for one horse! Why, it’s such a good deal I think I might just tell Danwise to take it back.”

Cendric blinked then returned to his seat, grumbling, “I still think hogs are better. They got more meat on them.”

“It just goes to show,” Androbobel said, “that if ever you wonder, it was always the egg that came first.”

“Well . . . Ned don’t like traveling, that’s true,” Ben said slowly. “Ma said I should do as I’m told, and so long as I get Ned back . . . then I guess it’s okay.”

“Glad that’s all settled.” The mayor slapped Ben heartily on the back. “You’ll be wanting to get on the road soon, I expect.”

“Especially in case the goblins are still after you,” Josline said. “Watch your back and don’t sleep in any dark shadows while on your journey. If you see them coming for you, scream real loud.”

“It still don’t make sense,” Ben finally said. “I’d have thought—”

“But you don’t think,” Androbobel interjected, “so let me explain. It’s for the good of the community. Boy, always remember that everything should be

done for the good of the community. Anytime you don't understand why you're doing something, just remember that it is for the good of the community! You need to think in terms of sacrifice, the betterment of humanity, and unselfish giving."

"Like the good professor says," the mayor said. "It's for the best. Trust me. A person needs to trust his elected officials."

"Well, Ma did say . . . but Da—you're going to go and—"

"As soon as we're ready!"

"Okay . . . but I—I don't know where to go," Ben finally said, and he was so miserable he forgot that everyone was staring at him, so he didn't even stutter.

"Good, good," the mayor said. "Ben is going!"

"Stuttering Ben is going to the king," said Drasel his wife. "Hear that, people?"

"Just follow the bigger roads and you'll get there." The mayor hitched up his pants again. "It's in the opposite direction of the Shiddow Mountains, so I've heard."

"Will I get there soon? I don't want to leave my Ma and Da—"

"Er . . ." The mayor rubbed at his head. "I can't say I exactly know, but I'm certain—"

"You'll not get there today," Androbobel said, patting Ben's arm. "But a man of your intelligence should have no trouble. If you hurry it won't take long at all, in the big scheme of things."

"But . . . But . . . Aren't we going to help him on his way?" Cendric said. "It's a journey, and he's sure to get hungry and—"

"That's true!" There was a chorus of agreement to that.

"Thinking the same thing!" the mayor shouted. "I always say we should drown away every thought in feasting and drinking!"

"A feast for the departure of Ben!" Jak the tavern keeper shouted. Everyone cheered in agreement to that, the drunk bums loudest.

Next thing Ben realized he was on a stool with a plate of food shoved in front of his face.

"That's it, boy," the mayor said, heartily. "Eat up good for the journey!"

"Um." Looking at the plate of food reminded Ben of his Da. "When you go to fight the goblins with my Da . . . the professor . . . er . . . shouldn't come. Ma said—well—"

"Right, right." The mayor looked away quickly, and cleared his throat. "We won't need Androbobel when we go out there."

"And something for the road," Elsie the maid placed a cloth wrapped bundle beside him.

There was much talking, and back-slapping. His back was slapped so many times, and so many different pieces of advice were shouted at him, that Ben couldn't keep any of it straight. Don't get turned around, they said. Walk

in a straight line. Don't talk. Speak when spoken too. Avoid those in authority, but make sure he delivered his message to the king. They would all help him if—that is to say *when*—he came back.

Head all awlirl, Ben staggered as much as walked out of the tavern. He knew he was going somewhere, but which direction and where he wasn't quite sure. It was away from home, he was certain, because home was destroyed.

He started off down the road, the cloth bundle containing food and his three dozen eggs clutched in hand.

“Whoa, wait up there young Ben.”

The words broke through the fog that surrounded Ben's thoughts. He turned to see Cendric coming out from his smithy. The man was carrying a heavy long handled hammer.

“A little hasty, this leaving.”

“I . . . It's all been a little fast. The goblins . . . I . . .” He looked at Cendric, then toward the tavern, where the villagers of York were still clustered, watching him. “But there isn't much point in staying, is there?”

“I suppose.” Cendric looked down, his voice gruff. “I don't know. Seems a sorry thing all around. The king ought to do something about the goblins, mind you, but I'm just not sure if you're the one to tell him.”

“Well, I was the one who saw, like the professor said. I suppose that means I'm the one who has to tell. Anyhow, Ma said to do whatever the mayor told me. So . . . you tell Ma and Da I'm all right and I'll be back tomorrow.”

“Ben . . . I don't know. I've never been to the capital, but it seems last I heard it'd take you a little longer than a day to make it there. Mind you, I'm sure you can get there, but . . .”

Cendric was thoughtful a moment, then shook his head. “Anyhow, you need something in case the goblins find you on the road.” The blacksmith pressed the hammer into Ben's hand. “Now take care of yourself, hear?” Cendric squeezed his shoulder. “Some of that advice back there was good, and some not so. I'm sure you know which is which. Don't speak unless you must. It'll cause less trouble. Understand?”

Ben nodded dumbly.

“Good. You'll do just fine. You're a good strong boy. Honest. Smart. Just . . . just remember the world out there isn't quite like it is around here in York. Strange people out there, Ben. Understand?”

“Maybe. I . . .” He tried to find his tongue so he could ask the question he desperately wanted answered. At last he managed, “But Master Cendric, how will I know where to go? How will I know when I'm close? I can't walk on straight forever, can I?”

“Well.” Cendric reached up with a thick finger and scratched at his chin through the frayed tangle of his beard. “Seems every time you come to a

village you should ask them where to find the capital of Tarn. That's the city where the king lives. Once you reach a village where someone knows of the place you'll be sure you're getting close. Once you get to the city, ask people where the king lives. I've always heard it was in some castle, and I expect it should be pretty easy to find. The city can't be too big. After you come to this castle ask someone real polite like to see the king. Ah . . . and try to talk normal. That should do it, I think."

"I'll try, Master Cendric."

"That you will. You show them."

"I will. I hope."

"Your Ma and Da will be proud."

Feeling small and confused, Ben turned away and started down the narrow dusty road. As he walked past the last building of York he looked ahead and realized he was going where he had never gone before.



Chapter Four

A Stuttering Bard

The daze only began to leave Ben's mind two hours after York disappeared among the trees in the distance behind him. About that time he decided he was sorry he had sold Ned. Or traded him. Or whatever had happened so that now he had three dozen eggs instead of Ned. It wasn't that he wanted to ride Ned—Ned was just good company. Walking alone in the silence was even more lonely and sad than he had imagined.

After thinking awhile he still couldn't remember exactly how he had come around to selling Ned. It was very strange. He simply remembered having the three dozen eggs, and everyone slapping him on the back and congratulating him for his bravery.

"How stupid could I be?" Ben fumed. "I can't talk to three dozen eggs—at least, not very well." He peeked inside his bundle. "They don't have ears. Though, when they become chickens I suppose they will. But that doesn't help. I have to carry these eggs while Ned would have walked. And then, I might trip and fall and break all the eggs."

He was about to turn around and march back to York demanding Ned's return when he remembered his mother's words. He was supposed to do exactly as the mayor said—and going back now would only make everything take longer. Then he began thinking about the journey ahead. Ned was too old to walk all day. But, he thought, he didn't have to travel all day. No . . . there still were the goblins. Ned wasn't a savage creature that could fight off the goblins or a fast animal that could race away and escape.

"Why," Ben said, "if goblins came Ned would end up in a stew pot faster than he could even think of what to do. That's no way to treat a faithful horse. At least in York he has a nice place to stay. The professor is right. I'll just get him back when I return. Then I can tell him all about my adventures and sing him all my new songs."

With that thought Ben felt a little better, but only a little. It was still lonely walking all by himself.

The road beyond York didn't seem much different from the road before York. The rutted dirt track wound on and on through the forested hills, never seeming to keep straight for very long. The Shiddow Mountains remained always behind him, looming high, with always more road ahead. It was all rather boring road, he thought, and it on no account made him sorry he hadn't bothered to go adventuring sooner.

The silence and aloneness felt peculiar. At home there was always someone around—if not Ned then his Ma or Da. Alone was different . . . lonely.

The thought of goblins leaping out from the surrounding trees was frightening, but with the heavy hammer of Cendric's in his hand he felt a little safer. And, in any case, he was soon too tired to do much worrying. The burns on his back, where the coals had fallen down his shirt inside the burning house, were beginning to throb. Everyone slapping him on the back hadn't helped. His head ached where the piece of ceiling had struck him, and any time he thought of his Ma and Da he began to feel twice as miserable. By evening he felt that dying was preferable to carrying on any longer, and if any goblin so much as peeked out at him he would show the wretched creature exactly what he thought of their kind.

In this frame of mind Ben searched for a suitable place to stop for the night. When he came upon an old wizened tree whose bowed branches stooped low to the ground he decided it was good enough. He saw no stones jutting up from the ground, and a nice layer of old dead leaves covered the earth. Carefully setting his bundle of food and eggs aside, he put the large hammer beside him and lay down.

Quite exhausted, he soon fell asleep.

The spring night settled in with a chill and he slept restlessly, tossing and moaning. He woke just before dawn to the twitter and warbling of the early morning forest birds. Their sweet echoing calls drifted pleasantly on the crisp air. Ben found himself feeling much better, except his fingers were stiff from cold.

"The king's good name," he grumbled, crossing his arms and sticking his hands into his armpits. "I haven't prepared for this at all. Sleeping under the stars without so much as a blanket. A fine way to catch cold."

He looked around, studying his surroundings and recalling all that had happened the previous day. "But I didn't intend to go adventuring, so it's not entirely my fault. It was rather sudden." Then he sighed. It seemed more responsible than crying, which was what he felt like doing. "Not much to do but make the best of it. Pa always says that."

Rather than think about his father, he opened the bundle and saw Elsie had given him two nice crusty brown loaves of bread and a large hunk of

cheese. He ate some bread and a bit of cheese in a quick breakfast. Then he started on his way again, bundle in one hand and hammer over his shoulder.

The morning turned out sunny and cool—a pleasant spring day. Ben made good progress on the road. About the middle of the morning he came to a small village. The place was a little larger than York, the streets lined with stone buildings topped by thatch roofs. The village seemed deserted at first, but then he saw a stout man sitting on the front steps of a house a few buildings down the street.

Mindful of Cendric's admonishment, Ben walked up and said, "Which direction to the capital of Tarn?" It was seven words long, but he couldn't think of how to make the question any shorter. At least he stuttered only a little over the word capital.

"What's that?" The man seemed to have been dozing. He looked up sleepily, blinking.

"The capital of Tarn. Where the king lives." Ben took a slow breath. His brow was beginning to feel a little damp from the effort of speaking in slow clear words. The man's quizzical expression wasn't helping.

"Oh, that place. It's somewhere." The stout man rubbed his nose, thoughtfully. "It must exist, because we do have a king, last I heard. Also, the tax collector says he comes from there. Why would you want to go there?"

"To see the king. To ask him to take care of the goblin trouble."

"Good luck, then." The man yawned. "I'm sure that place isn't too hard to find. When you get there would you mind telling the king his latest tax is pinching us a bit hard and could he get a more sociable tax collector? The last collector that came through was crabby as my mother-in-law before she died."

"I'll keep it in mind." He didn't think you told those sort of things to the king, but he wasn't sure, so he said nothing.

Ben left the man and walked on through the village. Remembering Cendric's warning, he wasn't particularly surprised nobody could tell him where to find the capital of Tarn. If no one in York knew where the capital of Tarn was, he doubted anyone in the next town would either. But sometime soon, he was sure, he would leave the remote regions and come to someplace important where people knew the location of places like the capital of Tarn. Then he would go to the king and come home again before the week was out. It wouldn't be so bad of an adventure after all—but still, he would be glad when it was over.

Outside the village there ran a fresh burbling brook which foamed white as it passed under the bridge. Ben stopped there for a drink and decided to eat an early lunch. A short time later he started on his way again.

Beyond the village the road grew stony and rough. It became hard going, but he kept trudging along, one footstep following the last. It was quiet in the afternoon shadows of the forest and, he found, very boring. Nothing he had

heard about traveling, or adventures, had made him think it could ever become this dull. He tried to keep himself interested in what he would discover around the next bend in the road—but what he discovered was always just more forest and more road. Nothing more exciting, and there wasn't anyone to talk with, not even Ned. He was beginning to think that talking to someone who made him stutter would be a pleasant change from the monotony.

“An adventure is not so exciting as the stories made out,” he said aloud to the empty trees. “The stories never mention that one walks and walks, and after awhile walking along is quite boring. Then, after it has been boring too long, it's still just more walking. And still boring.”

“But,” he said, “I seem to be on an adventure, whether I want to or not. I suppose I should make the most of it—however one does that.”

He thought about singing one of his old songs, but the dampening silence of the forest didn't put him in the mood. Instead, he tried to count dead trees.

The sun had set and evening shadows begun to lengthen when Ben came out of the forest and saw a valley below him. He stared at the glowing pricks of light that winked at him out of the deepening darkness below, wondering what they were. He saw enough lights to fill both his hands like little fireflies. Then he realized with some astonishment that what he saw below was a town.

“A real town. Ma always said I would have to see a town to know how it was different from a village like York. They certainly are bigger than villages.” Then, after some thinking he added, “They'll surely have good food.” Bread and cheese for breakfast and lunch was fine, but he hoped for something better before bed. Warm and savory was best.

He followed the road down toward the glowing lights. His mouth began to water as he thought about all the different delicious foods that might await. As he approached the town he began considering the fact that he would have to pay for his meal. That thought was followed by the thought that he would have to pay for other meals while he was on this adventure.

“Well,” he said. “I'm going out into the world and having an adventure, whether I like it or not. A man must pay his way and how am I going to do that? I always wanted to be a bard. Now that I'm away from York I can be one, for a little while. Nobody back home has to know. I could earn my room and meal with some songs.” It sounded like a good idea.

Ben stopped at the edge of the town. Ahead the dark shape of buildings rose against the night sky, the glowing windows shining out at him like eyes.

“Paying my way as a bard—It's frugal. Ma always approved of being frugal. But I must think of a name for myself. All the bards I've ever read about had more of a name than just Bannelzor.”

At that moment he wished Ned was around. The old horse was always a

source of inspiration. He stared down the empty street. In the darkness the lighted windows spilled checkered patterns of light across the road, making the houses seem warm and inviting. It made it hard to think about being a bard.

“Ben . . . Ben the what? Ben the brave. No, that's stupid. Ben the wise? That won't work.” He started walking down the street, muttering different names to himself as he kept an eye out for an inn. He was ready for the nice comfortable feel of a bed—if only he could think up a proper name for his bard self!

Then he saw the wooden sign swinging in front of the large two story building ahead. “Ben—Ben—Ben—the stuttering bard of York! Yes, that's what I'll call myself.”

He hurried toward the open door, repeating under his breath, “Greetings, I'm Ben, the stuttering bard of York. For a room and a hot meal I'll entertain your guests.”

By the time he reached the entrance to the inn he had repeated his lines about ten times. He felt confident. Stepping through the doorway he spread his arms wide and said, a little too loudly, “Greetings!”

A bartender and five people sat around the room. They looked up sharply, staring at him.

“Er. Greetings, I'm Ben, the stuttering bard of York. For a broom and a hot steal I'll ingrain your guests.”

He stood a second. That hadn't sounded quite right.

“I mean, I meant, that is—” He took a deep breath and pulled himself up straight. Better to just let it go, he thought. They'll understand.

“So,” he said. “What do you think?”

“You're a bard?” The bartender leaned on the counter, staring across the mostly empty room. The man had a large bushy mustache that hid his mouth. “And you're offering to entertain my guests for a meal and a room?”

“That's right,” Ben said, feeling exceedingly pleased. Being a bard wasn't so hard after all.

“I'm not inclined to that sort of thing,” the man said slowly. “But I've some free rooms, and business has been a little slow. How about you give me an idea of what you can do?”

“Certainly. I've a large selection of songs that I've created myself.” He walked up to stand in front of the bar, his bundle under his arm, hammer over his shoulder. “I think a good song for tonight is one I've titled, *Round The Evening Fire*.”

“Okay.” The bartender folded his hands atop the counter.

“It—it goes like—like this.” Ben licked his lips. The burst of confidence which had propelled him into the middle of the room seemed suddenly to desert him. The eyes of the watching men bored into him. He felt hot in his head, and cold in his stomach—all at once. The silence hung, waiting louder

than a shout.

He squeezed his eyes shut. *Come on, Ben. You know this song. You sang it all last winter. It starts, The warm hearth glows . . .*

He opened his mouth, but all that came out was “Th-th-th-th-th.”

He was sweating now, hard, as if he had just hauled ten rocks out of the field, but nothing more would come.

“That don't sound much like singing,” one of the men commented.

“Maybe he's just warming up,” another offered.

“THE!” Ben shouted, finally getting the word out, and making everyone jump. “The!” But it came out so hard he forgot what followed. “It—a—yes, the hearth.”

He stopped, looking at the men. They stared back, their faces blank.

“Ah. That—well,” he coughed, then waved a hand weakly. “Sometimes . . . maybe if I just go where you can't see me, then maybe I can sing for you. I'm sure you understand. I'll step outside and you can listen from in here.”

“Yeah,” the bartender said slowly, coming out from behind the counter. “Yeah, maybe we can try that.”

Ben hurried toward the door. “I—see—it, I—sometimes just—”

He stepped outside and drew a deep breath of air. How he burned! How he was sweating! But maybe now he could really show them. Now, in the darkness, he could show them what the Stuttering Bard of York—then he heard the door slam and the bolt drop into place with a clatter.

“That isn't needed.” Ben turned around. “So long as I'm in the darkness where you can't see me—”

“Yah, begone!” the man shouted. “Where I can't see you! Go, you freak! I don't know what you've got, but take whatever devilry has you and get! You'll spread a plague of it. I can feel it creeping over me already! Go!”

Ben stared at the door. After several minutes he said to nobody in particular, “How stupid of me. I forgot what Master Cendric said.”

“You try to lay a curse on us and I'll have the town after you!” the bartender bellowed. “A wizard might have cursed you, but that don't mean we'll take your kind coming and—”

That was all Ben heard before he walked away.

He left the town as quickly as he could, in case the bartender decided to send people after him anyhow. He hurried away through the darkness, trying to be careful not to break the eggs while he silently called himself three different kinds of stupid. Why had he forgotten Master Cendric's words so quickly? His mouth brought nothing but trouble. If he didn't remember Master Cendric's advice in the future he would end up killed for his effort.

So much for being a bard! Keep silent and maybe you'll make it to this capital place and reach the king.

Beyond the town he found a leafy bush and curled under it for another night in the cold—without supper.



Chapter Five

Monetary Issues

I shall catch cold, and then I shall die, and that will be the end of all of this terribleness.” Ben told this to the morning birds. They were singing, and he was blowing on his frozen fingers.

“Also, I’m sick of eating nothing but bread and cheese.”

He considered eating some of his eggs, but since his failure as a bard he thought he would have to use the eggs to buy his way in the future, and for that reason it was a bad idea to eat them. Besides, all of professor Androbobel’s talk about more chickens and eggs than a man could count sounded good. They would need something to start the farm back up. So there was nothing to do but eat more of his dwindling supply of bread and cheese and start on his way once more.

A brisk wind picked up early in the morning and low clouds scudded cheerily across the sky. The trail ahead remained flat and grew less rough than it had been the day before. Ben covered the miles at a good speed. His spirit lifted sufficiently that he began to wonder if he might reach the capital of Tarn by evening. Then, he thought, he would explain to the king that the goblins must be driven away. Perhaps the king would reward him handsomely for the news and with the reward he could settle down and farm the rest of his days. It seemed the right end to an adventure.

Ben walked into the next town while the sun shone directly overhead. He was whistling to himself, one of his older tunes, but he was trying to think of more words for his newest song. Engrossed in his thoughts, he almost forgot he was supposed to stop and ask about the capital of Tarn.

“The king preserve me!” He halted in the middle of the street. “If I forget everything Master Cendric told me, I’ll never finish this adventure. Maybe I should make all of his advice into a song.”

He looked around and saw a hunched shape on the other side of a nearby

fence. The shape was hoeing through a small garden. Ben walked over and saw the shape was a rather tubby and balding man, who puffed fit to put out a fire as he worked, quite red in the face.

“Excuse me,” Ben said. “Do you know where the capital of Tarn is?”

“Fires of destruction! The king preserve us!” The tubby man sprang upright, holding his hoe in the air as if he thought to bludgeon something. Then he saw Ben.

“Ah, young man! You startled me. I thought you were a goblin.”

“They’re here?” Ben looked around quickly, his grip tightening on Cendric’s big hammer.

“Are they?” The man turned around quickly, then relaxed as he saw nothing. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen one, yet. There could be. They could be anywhere. I think there is one living in the wall of my house. The wife says it’s just a rat. But why would a rat want to live in my house? I think about these things, see. It must be a goblin waiting to spring out and get me when I least expect it.”

The man lowered his hoe to the ground and leaned on it. Fishing into the large front pocket of his apron he pulled out a grimy handkerchief that might have once been white and began to mop his brow with it. “With all the news of more goblin raids coming ever further from the Shiddow Mountains one can’t be too careful.”

“No,” Ben agreed, then remembered why he was here. “Do you know where the capital of Tarn is?” He found he could say all the words without stuttering if he said them very fast.

“Excuse me?”

“The city where the king lives.”

“Oh, you mean Galdoron.” The man pocketed his handkerchief.

“Galdoron? Is that the capital of Tarn?”

“Last I knew, young man.”

“Galdoron.” Ben repeated the word, trying to commit the name to memory. It sounded like a majestic name for a majestic place. “Where—where—where is it?”

“That way.” The man pointed in the direction Ben was already headed.

“Could—is it—I mean I—I reach it by tonight?” Ben peered down the house-lined street, wishing he could see Galdoron glimmering off in the distance.

“No, not tonight. If you walk steady you should reach a town called Middledown by tonight. Galdoron is some distance away, I gather. The tax collector that comes from there is always crabby.”

“Like your mother-in-law?”

“Yeah. You know him?”

“Heard about him.”

Ben thanked the man and moved on, almost skipping as he left the

village. He guessed that moving at his pace he should reach this Galdoron in a day or two. It was hard to not wonder what kind of gifts the king would give him for his service of bringing the news. Ma and Da would be so happy when he came back laden with gifts. Then they could start the new farm with all the best equipment.

But by evening Ben was no longer thinking about gifts from the king. The scudding clouds of morning had given way in the afternoon to dark towering formations that flickered with lightning. Thunder rumbled and rain was beginning to patter down as he passed a sign proclaiming the town he entered as Middledown. All he wanted was a good inn where he could eat a hot meal and crawl into a bed safely out of what looked to be a night full of drenching rain. Ahead, he saw a bright and clean inn—exactly the place he sought.

“A bed and a meal,” he said shortly as he stepped inside—this time remembering Cendric's advice. The common room of the inn was warmly lit by a roaring fire in the hearth, and several oil lamps hung from the rafters. The delicious smell of warm bread and roasting meat filled the air.

“A bed and a meal we have for travelers,” the grizzled man behind the counter said. “But it'll cost you a copper. Breakfast tomorrow is more.”

“Copper? I don't have any copper.” Ben stopped in front of the counter, resting the head of his hammer on the floor, and setting his bundle on the counter top. “I have something better.”

The man gave him a narrow look, then peered at the bundle. “And what's that?” he said.

“Eggs.” Ben carefully untied the bundle, pulling the cloth back to reveal the many smooth brown shapes of his three dozen eggs. “This was the trade for my horse.” He spoke fast, in a hurry to finish before he started stuttering. “See, the eggs can hatch into chickens, and out of the chickens you can get eggs and more chickens. Then, before you know it, you've more eggs and chickens than a man can count! How many for a meal and a bed? Three?”

“Are they magical?” The man blinked.

“No.” Ben took one between thumb and finger, holding it up. “They're wonder—wonder—good. Delicious.”

“You want a meal and a bed for three eggs?” The man pointed at the pile.

“Maybe that is too little.” Ben plucked at the hair on his chin. “I could give you six. But no more. This is everything I got for my good horse Ned. He was a good horse and I don't think one meal and a bed is worth any more than—”

“Eggs!” the innkeeper roared, slamming his fists down on the table. “You stupid little pea brain! What kind of soggy cabbage head are you making me out to be? How dare you suggest bartering a room and meal for eggs! By the name of the king—Eggs! I've never heard of it. Give me good copper or get out! Out!”

“The same!” Ben spluttered and stuttered, equal parts outraged and confused. “I’d never give one of my eggs to a greedy thief like you! Take your copper and let it rot with you! Who needs worthless silver and copper anyhow! It can’t grow into anything!”

He gathered up his bundle and hammer and stormed out of the inn—straight into the pouring rain.

It was pitch dark. Within two strides he became completely soaked. But there was no going back. Angry, and now also miserable beyond words because he would be spending another night outside—and this time in the pouring rain—he trudged away. Getting out of rotten Middledown was his only thought. He leaned forward against the lashing rain, taking one step after another, sinking up to his ankles in mud.

Somewhere, sometime, he left Middledown behind. But he didn’t stop walking. There was no point in stopping. He had no place to stay for the night, and little to eat. It was hard to imagine a worse situation.

I might as well keep on walking for the rest of the night, he thought. He was about to follow it with another self-pitying thought, but something hit him in the side, hard, and he went down. He landed on his back, sinking into the mud, clutching his bundle of eggs.

“Who are you?” a voice demanded over him. “And what are you doing sneaking up on my camp?”

“I’m a bard,” he blurted out, forgetting in his surprise that he had given up being one. “I wasn’t sneaking up on anyone. I was just walking.”

“At night, in the middle of a drenching rain storm? I find that hard to believe.”

“No, I was. I am!” The rain was in his eyes, making him squint, unable to see. He wished he could make out who stood over him.

“You knave.” The voice came nearer and he felt a boot on his chest, pressing him down. “Why were you hunting me?”

Blinking through the spattering raindrops he could make out the point of a sword hovering near his throat, looking quite sharp. Following the length of the blade, his eyes went up to the other end. He expected to see a hairy and over-muscled man, but instead it was held by the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. But then, as she was wearing a cloak and it was dark, he couldn’t see very much. For sure she had a nice nose, and strong proud lips—that was all he could see beyond the cowl of her cloak.

He opened his mouth to explain quite reasonably to the beautiful lady that he meant no harm to her or anyone in the world except goblins and that he was on his way to see the king and was out walking in the rain only because a greedy innkeeper wouldn’t accept eggs as payment. It was a very reasonable explanation that he had all figured out in his mind, but as he looked at her and tried to say it, nothing came out but a lot of stuttering.

It was hopeless. Ben stopped and tried again three times, but each time

his stuttering only grew worse. She was quite pretty, and he was reduced to the flying spit stage of incoherence. In the back of his mind—while he was trying to get his mouth working properly—he wondered what her name was, and thought it would be terribly embarrassing to be killed simply because he couldn't explain himself, and yet at the same time it might be the most merciful end to the whole ordeal. Embarrassing didn't seem extreme enough to describe the situation.

“He's addled,” he heard her mutter, and he stopped stuttering. He hoped addled meant she wouldn't kill him. “I should have guessed. Who else would be out in weather like this? The poor man. No doubt some cruel townspeople chased him away.”

She sighed, and took her boot off his chest. The sword disappeared from his throat and Ben heard it slide back into its sheath. “Come with me. I, at least, don't care to stand about in this weather. I suppose you must share my fire tonight.”

Ben scrambled up out of the mud, grabbed his hammer from where it had fallen, and hurried after her. She moved like a shadow through the night, cloak enveloping her form. She, Ben thought, was truly on an adventure. He followed her up the bank beside the road. They pushed through a screen of bushes. Then Ben saw a fire ahead, with a tarpaulin strung beside it, stretched between four trees, expertly rigged with ropes.

Once under the shelter the lady unfastened her cloak and swung it off her shoulders. Shaking out the water, she spread the garment over her saddlebags to dry. She glanced at Ben as she went to sit beside the fire. He saw her shake her head and give an almost silent sigh.

Ben knew he looked a sight, sopping wet and covered with mud, but his thoughts were fixed on the fire. It would be good, he thought, to be warm and dry again.

“Come, sit.” The lady pantomimed. “It's all right. I won't hurt you.”

Feeling shy and awkward—not to mention stupid—Ben came and sat as far away from her as he could and still be under the tarpaulin. He carefully set his bundle and hammer beside him. Pushing his wet hair out of his face, he wrung as much water as he could out of his sleeves and then held his hands up in front of the fire.

There was silence then as nobody said, or did, anything. The lady watched him quite openly, as if she were trying to figure him out. Ben watched her back, though he did it on the sly and tried to pretend he was studying the fire.

The lady looked young, probably a year or two younger than himself, he thought. She was even more pretty than he had imagined. Her hair was curly and black, tied back and falling in a dark cascade to well past her shoulders. Her eyes as they watched him were a striking clear green, and her high cheekbones went down to a sharp chin. Her face was pale, and much cleaner

than any Ben had seen in some time, her hands curiously slim and seeming almost delicate, though she had handled the sword well, he remembered. She wore a white shirt with billowing sleeves, and a rich deep green sleeveless jacket over it. Her pants were pure black and so smooth Ben couldn't imagine how much they had cost. The boots she wore were of the finest leather, turned down at the top, and pointed at the toes. He didn't need to see the sword at her waist, her deep green cloak, riding gear, or her sleek long-legged horse—which stood out in the rain cropping at the grass—to know he had stumbled across someone quite wealthy. He wondered if she was a merchant's daughter, because he had always heard they were very rich.

The lady said nothing and after awhile she seemed to drop into thought, fiddling with the handle of a dagger sticking out of her boot. Ben said nothing either, getting dryer and more annoyed at himself for how he had acted in the rain. In the stories the men were supposed to find the helpless and needy women out in the rain and rescue them. Instead he had been found wandering about with no idea where he was going. Worse, he had been knocked down and found in the mud. It was embarrassing. He couldn't even live out an adventure right. He was messing it up already. Worse, he knew it all made him look rather badly. Oddly, he found himself caring more what the lady thought than everyone in York. He wanted to explain, but every time he looked at her face he knew anything that came out of his mouth would be babble. He kept mustering himself up, only to lose nerve at the last moment and deflate completely. What could he say? Then he remembered Cendric's advice.

As few words as possible.

But how could he correct this beautiful lady's understanding with only a few words? Somehow, it had become important to him that she know he wasn't some pitiable brain-addled man wandering through the night rainstorm because he didn't know any better. By the time he was completely dry, Ben had put together an answer. More importantly, it was a short answer.

Taking a breath, he focused his thoughts and slowly and carefully said, "I'm not addled."

"It can talk!" She gasped, and looked up. "I mean, you can talk. I wondered, but—you can talk?"

"Sometimes," he managed to say after a lengthy pause, and thought it a very good answer.

She was looking at him quizzically again. "Then who, and what, are you?"

He frowned, thinking hard as he stared at the fire. He found it easier to think about what he was going to say when he wasn't looking at her. All the answers he could think of for that question were long. He didn't think he could say that he was Bennelzor Transom, his house had been destroyed by

goblins and he was going to the city Galdoron to speak with the king about the goblin raiding—not all of that and still not stutter. He thought for some time, until he realized the answer to who, and what, he was could be given in one word.

“Ben,” he said, feeling brilliant. He was surprised to find out how little he could say and still make perfect sense.

She gave him a puzzled frown. Looking at his rough plain gray shirt and coarse brown pants all covered with dried mud she said, “A peasant of some type. But I remember you said—I think when you made all those noises out there you first said you were a bard.”

“Well, no. I mean, yes. I—that is, I’m trying to be bard.” He clamped his mouth such, realizing he had begun to stutter wildly again.

“You’re sure you’re not addled?”

“No.” He frowned at the fire, realizing that might be misunderstood, but not daring to clarify. Instead he mustered himself up to say, “I only can’t speak, sometimes.” He wanted to say that he could speak fine when he was out in the field with Ned, but he knew that wouldn’t come out right.

The lady stared at him intently for a long time, then suddenly straightened. “I’ll take your word for it. You’re the strangest man I’ve ever met, and I’ve never heard of such a thing . . . but I did leave to go on an adventure. The Shiddow Mountains are still some distance, but maybe the beginning of my adventure has come to me.”

Ben was still trying to figure out what she meant when the lady smiled and said, “Well, my name is Jess.” The smile made him feel giddy in his stomach and like he would start stuttering again, so he only nodded in reply.

“I am curious what you’re doing out on a night like this,” Jess continued, “but I suppose you need something to eat first.”

She started to rise, turning toward her saddlebags, but Ben quickly babbled, “Don’t worry, I have stuff. I can share.” She looked at him, and in case she hadn’t understood he untied his bundle.

He almost gave a cry of dismay when he saw what his bundle contained. The bread was soggy mush and the cheese had crumble completely to pieces. Rising up from the sodden mess was his heap of three dozen eggs. That was all he had left.

“It doesn’t look like your supplies survived the rain very well,” Jess said kindly. “Let me get some of my food. Don’t worry—I have plenty.”

“Yes,” Ben said, feeling stupid, and miserable again because of it. “At least none of my eggs broke when you knocked me down.”

“Here.” She returned from her saddlebags, bringing some bread, butter, and salted meat, along with a flask of water. “Why do you have so many eggs, anyhow?”

“They’re payment for Ned. He was—is—my horse.”

“Eggs?” Jess stood over him, looking between his face and the pile of

eggs. "You sold a horse for a pile of eggs?"

"They'll make more eggs and chickens than a man can count." He found he could talk without stuttering if he talked with his mouth full of food. "Three dozen eggs."

"You must be joking." Jess stooped and took one egg, fingering it in the firelight as if she had expected to find something spectacular under closer examination. "What in the king's name possessed you to do that?"

"I don't know," he admitted, feeling his ears grow hot. "It was confusing. I was too busy thinking about my Ma and Da. I should have asked for more eggs. Maybe six dozen. No, this is Ned. You're right—I should have asked for ten dozen eggs! But . . . I don't know how I would have carried that many eggs. Besides, it doesn't matter so long as I get Ned back when I return the eggs. So I must make sure I return the eggs, because Ned is my friend and—"

"Wait. You really sold your horse for eggs? No money?"

"Money?" he said, stuffing the rest of the bread and salt meat into his mouth.

"Gold. Likes this?" Jess reached into her pouch and pulled out a coin.

"Oh, no." Ben's face brightened. "Not something worthless like that."

"Worthless?" For the second time that evening Jess gaped at him.

"If a chicken sat on that it'd never hatch into anything. Gold doesn't do anything. My eggs will."

"What are you talking about? If your horse was worth anything, you should have sold him for something valuable, like gold."

"Valuable? But gold is worthless," Ben said indignantly. "Everyone in York knows that. You can't eat gold, you can't plant it, and you can't even make anything useful with it. Only Kitti the old merchant's wife takes that stuff—and she only wears it on herself."

"You don't use money? Then how do you get anything in York?"

"Buy it, just like anybody. Sometimes it's some milk for some grain, maybe some eggs for cheese, or wine for a set of clothes. No one in York is so stupid as to take gold."

"But gold is beautiful. Look at its color—" Jess flashed the coin through the firelight.

"So what? Crack open an egg and it looks a little like that inside. And I can eat the egg, not the gold."

"Okay . . ." Jess said through gritted teeth. "Maybe nobody in this far-off York has any use for gold. But I'm sure your horse was worth more than thirty-six eggs."

"Well, it's an investment in the future," Ben said defensively. "But . . . you're right. When Tomme the cobbler sold his old horse he got three full-grown sows for it. I bet Cendric was right—the miller was acting the cheat on me."

"Right," Jess said, and returned to her seat by the fire, seeming satisfied.

The food had been good. Ben was a little sorry there wasn't more, but he satisfied himself with drinking up the flask of water.

"You still haven't told me why you were out walking in the rain," Jess said.

"Oh—that." Ben looked away so he wouldn't stutter. "Because I was thrown out of an inn. Apparently everyone in these parts thinks gold is valuable, like you. But I didn't know that before. The innkeeper wouldn't take some of my eggs."

"York must be a very distant village, because I've never heard of York. Why are you traveling so far from home?"

"I'm traveling to Galdoron to speak with the king. I expect I'll be there in two days. Then—"

"What?" Her mouth worked silently for a bit and Ben wondered if she had trouble with stuttering like him. It would mean they had something in common. "It's a week from here by horse," she finally managed. "And you think you're just going to speak with the king?"

"Yes. About the goblin problem. They destroyed my Da's farm. They burned down our house. The king must come with an army and destroy the Goblin threat."

"That's terrible. I'm sorry." Her voice was quiet. "You've nothing left?"

"I've three dozen eggs."

Her face scrunched in an odd expression Ben couldn't understand. "That's sad," she finally said.

"I also have the hammer Master Cendric lent me."

She said nothing.

He thought a moment, then said, "How can you be sure it's a week to Galdoron? That sounds very far."

"Far enough, I suppose."

"But—but—but—maybe your mistaken. Wouldn't the world come to an end before I traveled that far? Like—maybe—maybe—just drop off like a cliff?"

"No, it wouldn't. And I'm not mistaken."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because I come from there, you fool!" Jess threw up her hands. "And you're not going to speak to the king, he doesn't have time for people like you."

"How do you know?" Ben demanded. "He is the king of Tarn, ruler of all these lands."

"And I'm his daughter, her highness Mol'Jessel, light of the kingdom!" Jess shouted.

Ben stared at her. A princess? She was very beautiful, but . . . "Then why are you wearing pants?"

She groaned, resting her head in her hands, curly hair falling around her

face. "Of all the people I could meet . . . I'm wearing pants because I don't want to go around naked."

Ben blushed worse than ever before in his life, his face growing so hot he thought he would explode. He dared not open his mouth, sure he would swallow his tongue.

In the sudden silence Jess looked up and saw his face. There was a brief look of surprise in her eyes, then she laughed. He liked her clear light laugh, even though she was laughing at him.

"Oh my!" Jess covered her mouth, rocking back, still laughing. Her anger and irritation had vanished. "It's impossible to use a sword or ride a horse properly in a court dress, that's why I'm wearing pants. Okay? One doesn't go on an adventure wearing a dress. And I'm sorry I called you a fool and said my father wouldn't have time for someone like you. Except, the latter is true. My father doesn't seem to have time for anyone anymore . . ." she trailed off, her face suddenly serious.

He felt that he had been stupid, but couldn't quite understand why, or how. It seemed all was forgiven. Still, he said, only stuttering a little, "I thought you were maybe a merchant's daughter. I heard once that they were always rich. What is a princess like you doing out here? Shouldn't you be in Galdoron?"

Jess sighed. She held her hands up in front of the fire again. "I left. For adventure. To actually accomplish something!" Her voice became fierce. "Listen, there is no point in you going to speak to the king. Even if he granted you an audience, nothing would be done. Others have come before you. We already know about the growing goblin troubles. People have come before, bringing warnings and pleas, but there is always something going on in the court. Doing anything is always delayed. So I decided to deal with the goblin problem myself. But not soon enough to save your family."

"Well. My Da and Ma . . . we'll be all right. And maybe he'll finally listen to me," Ben said brightly. "After all, I must do something about the goblins. He'll understand that."

She looked at him for a long moment, then turned her gaze back to the fire. "Maybe," she said after a stretch of silence.



Chapter Six

Warrior Princess and Pacifist Wizard

You've a nice horse," Ben said.

Morning had come gray and dim, fog hanging thick over the world. They had just finished breakfast and now the camp gear was packed, the fire put out, the tarp folded up. Whatever little ease Ben had found the night before had vanished with the morning. Jess was every bit as pretty as the night before and every time he opened his mouth to talk stuttering came out. His comment about the horse was the first he managed to get out, intelligibly.

"Yes, he is." She looked over from where she was loading the saddle bags. "His name is Mankiller."

"Oh." Ben, who had been reaching out to pet the horse's sleek nose, snatched his hand away and took a step back. "He looks nice enough."

She smiled. "He is nice enough—to anyone who is nice to me. But to anyone else—"

"Yes, I suppose he is a good horse. That would be a good horse."

Mankiller pawed the ground and flicked his ears at Ben. Sleek, silvery in color, with long slender legs, he looked like a horse that could run. He looked like a proud horse that would countenance no fools. There were some things his father told him it was better to stay away from, and Ben thought this was one of them.

"I think I like Ned better." Ben kept his hands behind his back. "Ned never went very fast, but he listened very good. He wouldn't hurt anybody."

"Mankiller is fast, fearless, and knows how to fight. I wouldn't have anyone else with me in battle."

"Ah. I'm sure he does it very well." Ben handed her the tarp, which he had folded up earlier. "It was very kind of you to offer me supper last night, and a place out of the rain. I . . . uh . . . thank you." He thought maybe he

should bow since she was a princess, but he was afraid he might do it wrong, so he didn't.

"You're welcome." She took the tarp, rolling it up and tying it behind her saddlebags.

"Since you're going to the Shiddow Mountains you might stop in at York. If—if—if it's not too much trouble you could tell them all I'm doing all right. Tell my Ma and Da I'm okay. They—you—they might be worried since I've been gone several days. You can tell them that since Galdoron is so far away I might not be back as soon as I thought, but I will build the house when I get back."

"I'm not going to the Shiddow Mountains yet," she said.

"Oh. Where are you going?"

"With you," she said, shortly.

"Me?" He stuttered again.

"For a little while." Then she muttered something Ben didn't understand.

"What?" he said.

"Never mind. Let's get moving. The day isn't waiting around for us."

They started off down the muddy road, Jess riding and Ben walking beside Mankiller—keeping a good distance between himself and the horse's mouth. The early morning fog dissipated and the sun shone down on a world washed clean by the rain. They left the forest and brush behind and came to cultivated land, passing by fields tilled for the spring planting. The land lay mostly flat here, with stone walls rising on either side of the road, hedging away the fields.

With a good meal in his belly, and the sun shining above, Ben felt happy. He wasn't alone any longer and things weren't boring. He had the urge to start singing one of his old songs, or work on his latest of *Spring Under The Mountains*. Then he thought about what Master Cendric had said and decided it was better if he kept silent. He didn't know what princesses listened to, but he was sure the bards in a king's court could sing much better than him.

As the morning waned late toward midday they approached a village. The stone houses with their thatched roofs and smoking chimneys—once spaced out along the road—began to appear closer together. The longer they followed the road the closer together the houses became until there was only a narrow alley between each building. They continued along the main road, the path rising slightly. Ahead, the land sloped down to a river that wound its way through the town, the ribbon of water disappearing off into the distance.

"The king's good name." Ben stopped walking and stared. "Does someone live in each of those houses?"

"It's called Bonnaville," Jess said, reining in her horse. "The place takes river trade. Lumber shipments come down from near the Shiddow Mountains and grain barges travel all along the river, right down to the ocean."

The houses seemed to have sprouted up everywhere, clustered around the river banks and spreading out across the flat land on the far side of the river. The main road ran down to a stone bridge that crossed the river, the path vanishing among the buildings beyond. The bridge was wide enough for two carts to pass over side-by-side.

“Is Galdoron this big?” he said.

“Bigger.” She looked at him curiously.

“There are so many people. They must get confused about who lives in which house. Just think, you get lost and try to go live in the wrong house.” He laughed at the idea. “H-Hey, look at those people down on the bridge! What are they doing? Is that something people in towns do?”

The traffic on the bridge had vanished as if conjured away. On the far side of the bridge there remained only five large men. The men strode across the bridge, moving fast. Four of them carried clubs and the leader gripped an unsheathed sword. The road, once bustling with traffic, was now empty except for the approaching armed men, Ben, Jess, and some figure dressed in ragged clothes and leaning on a staff. The stooped figure shuffled along in the middle of the bridge, directly in the path of the men.

“Looks like trouble,” Jess muttered. Her hand drifted to her sword.

“Hey!” Ben said, louder. “They—they’re attacking that—that—that old lady in the middle of the bridge! Filthy louts!”

Shouting, Ben charged down the road.

“Stop!” Jess called after him. “There are five of them! You can’t fight them alone!”

“Leave that little lady alone!” Ben bellowed.

The men ignored him, or else they were too busy beating the defenseless figure to hear him. Two of the men struck the stooped figure, gleefully snarling ugly words. The sight made Ben run all the faster.

“S—s—stop! You r—rogues!”

Ben caught the first man by the neck and tossed him over the side of the bridge. The next man turned to face him, teeth bared, but Ben tackled him, knocking the bandit back into the bridge rail. The collision sent the bandit toppling over backward into the water below.

Shouting threats, the two remaining club-wielding bandits charged. Ben caught the first club as it swung for his head and wrenched the weapon away. “Babbling bully!” he yelled, and kicked the man over the stone railing, the bandit following the previous two in the long dive to the water below.

Something smashed hard into his back and Ben remembered the fourth bandit. He whirled around, the club in his hand striking the man across the chest. The bandit toppled backward, landing in the mud. Squealing, the man made it back to his feet, gave one look at Ben, and ran.

“Yeah, and wait until I tell your mother!” Ben bellowed. “She’ll give you more than that! She’ll—” Then he realized the swordsman was still standing

a few feet in front of him, blade drawn.

The man looked at Ben, then glanced beyond him. “Mangy interfering runt!” he snarled. “You think this is the end?” Then he ran.

Jess galloped up, sword drawn. She reined Mankiller in, glancing toward the two retreating men, then back at Ben. “You idiot! Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

“The indecency of attacking an old woman!” he stuttered. “We never see such things in York.”

“That one hit you with a club, I saw. Are you hurt badly?”

“No. The man had no strength in his wrists. It didn't even hurt as much the last time Manny the old bull back home smashed me into the fence. We broke the fence. That hurt, a bit.” He tossed the cudgel into the mud with disgust, still glaring after the rapidly retreating men.

“What's that supposed to mean?” Jess nudged Mankiller over. “Are you hurt or not? I'd have thought you'd take a broken bone from the blow . . . I guess you don't look hurt. Next time give me a chance to use my sword. You can't throw people around like that and expect to not get hurt.”

“Sorry,” Ben said meekly. “I didn't think. I saw them attacking the poor old lady and I—Oh—Pardon!”

Turning, Ben saw he had been mistaken. The cloaked and hunched shape was not an old lady, but rather an elderly man, leaning on a gnarled staff, draped in a large, frayed, travel-stained gray cloak. The old man appeared hunched because of the massive shapeless sack slung over his back—under it he was tall and gangly with long poking elbows and a long nose to match.

“Thank you, thank you both.” The old man was breathless and pale. “A tight spot, no doubt. I don't know what I would've done. I was trying to prepare myself to blast them, but I wasn't sure I could bring myself to do it. Blasting is so . . . you know. So much nicer of you to chase them off.”

“Blast them?” Ben and Jess said at the same time.

“Yes. A discharge of great power. To char and singe. Generally used to cause death and other such unpleasantness.” The man straightened slightly, pushing back the brim of his pointed floppy hat that was starting to fall over his eyes. “I, ah, I'm a wizard.”

“Really? I'm Ben,” Ben said. Now that the old man stood a little taller the front of his cloak hung open slightly, and Ben saw a large sword with a gold covered hilt belted at the wizard's waist.

“A fine provincial name, fitting for the servant of someone great.” The wizard's gaze was fixed on Jess, seated atop Mankiller. “Where are you headed, mistress?”

“Galdoron,” Ben said, before Jess could respond.

“Ah. Mind if I travel with you for awhile? Just a little while. If any of those troublemakers come back it'd be nice if someone was around to lend me a

hand.”

“Certainly,” Ben said, again before Jess had a chance to respond. “Those thugs come back and I’ll teach them a lesson they won’t soon forget.”

“Ben . . .” Jess sighed. “All right. Come on, we should get moving.”

“Wait, wait! Where are my eggs?” Ben looked around, suddenly panicked. “And Master Cendric’s hammer? I can’t leave that behind. I must return it.”

“They’re at the foot of the bridge. Where you dropped them,” Jess said, dryly. “The eggs I wouldn’t worry about, but in the future you might consider taking the hammer into battle.”

Ben hurried back to pick up his supplies—checking the eggs to make sure they weren’t broken—and then they were on their way again. They passed through the rest of Bonnville without further incident. The crowds of people stared at Ben and the ragged old wizard trudging through the mud, Jess riding high on her horse, the black ringlets of her hair tied back. They made a strange company, but no one in the crowds said anything.

They left Bonnville behind and passed through more empty fields. By late afternoon the road began to dry out. It was pleasant to no longer feel the mud clinging with every step, but the path grew steep and rough as they entered hill country again. They traveled on, the flat fields giving way to scrub, and then trees. When they stopped and set camp that night they were deep in thick forest.

Jess unloaded and cared for Mankiller while Ben took the tinderbox she gave him and started a fire.

“Ah. Excellent. Most excellent.” The wizard gave a satisfied sigh, dropped his large sack beside the fire, and eased himself down next to it. “Good to get the weight off one’s feet and some heat in the old bones.”

“So. You’re a wizard?” Jess came up to the fire, carrying her saddle and gear.

“Yes. Indeed. I’ve been one for some time.” The wizard’s voice sounded dry with age, but still seemed sprightly for one who looked so old. “My dear mother, she made sure I applied myself. Top grades, or I would hear from her.”

“I don’t like wizards.” Jess said, voice flat.

“Er. Really? Are you sure? I mean, why not, young warrior lady?” The wizard rested his staff across his lap and looked up at Jess, his gaze traveling over her face to rest on the bow and quiver of arrows dangling from her arms, along with the rest of her supplies. “I’m polite. Sociable. I remember my manners.”

“Do you? My father has a wizard adviser called Rimmah. I don’t like him. Know any wizard by that name?”

The old wizard blinked his watery blue eyes a few times. “Ah,” he said, rubbing at his narrow nose. “The princess. I knew your face seemed familiar. It’s been years since the last time I saw you, and you were much smaller.

Yes, Rimmah. He is a bad wizard. Evil, I suppose some might say. Not exactly wise of your father to take him on, but Rimmah does have quite a bit of skill.”

“And plenty of cunning, and a cold heart.” Jess dropped her saddle and supplies near the fire. “Who are you? What are you doing here? Did Rimmah send you? What is your name?”

“Er . . . no. Rimmah most certainly did not send me.”

“Then what are you doing here?” Jess demanded. “Wizards don't just walk around in the mud and let themselves be attacked by thugs for no reason.”

“My name is Hadagrath, wizard of the third order. Well, I was of the third order until the Council recently expelled me.”

“Expelled?” Jess sat slowly, her eyes never leaving the wizard.

“Yes.”

“Hadagrath?” Ben said.

“Please, call me Ernie.”

“Why?” Ben said.

“I once had a dog named Ernie,” Hadagrath said vaguely. “He was a good dog. Besides, it sounds more modern, don't you think? One must appear modern and up with events. It impresses the young people, and the rulers. Helps business.”

“Why were you expelled?” Jess insisted.

“Ah. Well. The council discovered I'm a bit of a pacifist.”

“Pacifist?” Jess peered at him.

“I'm not a pacifist really. I just can't stand all the horribleness of fighting. I wasn't good for the image of the order, you know, so they kicked me out.”

“That's too bad,” Ben said. He could understand being kicked out and not wanted.

“A bit, I suppose. But it does give me more time to enjoy jam pastries, and devote myself to my sewing.” Ernie open the neck of his voluminous sack and rummaged around a bit until he pulled out a small pair of spectacles which he put on.

“Where are you going?” Jess said. “What are you doing?”

“Wandering about. I did lose a good place to stay when the Council kicked me out. If I find a nice comfortable location I shall probably settle down.” Ernie pushed back up his floppy pointed hat, which was again falling down over his eyes. “I'm not doing much of anything right now, except trying to avoid trouble.”

“There seems to be plenty of that lately,” Ben commented.

“Yes. Which means it's a good thing for me to travel with the two of you for a while. Between the two of you I should be safe. And fed, I hope.” He looked up at Jess again. “My eyes did tell me right that you're well stocked in food?”

Jess rolled her eyes, and reached over to open one of the packages.



Chapter Seven

Trouble

What were you before the goblins came, Ben?" Jess spoke, her voice coming from up and slightly behind him as she road on Mankiller. "You're clearly a peasant, but what did you do?"

"I was a farmer," he said simply.

"That's all?"

"Yes."

"You handled those thugs quite well yesterday. You sent those men over the side of the bridge like it was easy. That took a lot of strength."

"Did it? Master Cendric said I should be a smith. I never quite understood what he meant by that. He wanted me to be his apprentice. One winter I tried it, but I didn't like it." Ben found he could talk without much stuttering when Jess rode behind him. When she was out of sight he couldn't see her face, or her eyes. He could talk with a disembodied voice behind him.

"It was too hard?"

"What?"

"The smithing."

"No. I didn't like all of the clanging, and how dark it was in the smithy, or all the hot metal-tasting air that went up my nose. I want to be out where the sun is shining."

"Didn't you ever wish you could be more than a farmer?"

"No." He didn't say any more for a short while. He was still thinking about working at the forge with Master Cendric. The big smith was the only real friend he had, besides Ned. He remembered how the hot forge would make the boogers dry up in his nose and how it felt funny so he would stop to pick his nose and Master Cendric would tell him he couldn't do that because the metal needed to be beaten while it was still hot. After days of that he had decided he didn't want any job where he couldn't stop to pick his nose when

it was needed.

“Nothing? Not famous, maybe, or wealthy?”

Ben shook his head, coming back to the present. “No. I mean . . . Well, yes. There was one thing. I—I—I—” he had never told a person his secret desire before, except when he had blurted it to Jess on the rainy night of their meeting, which she seemed to have forgotten. But this time he found that he wanted to tell her, even though it felt hard, and almost scary. He wanted someone to know. “I—I thought I might become a bard.”

“Yes . . . I remember now. You did say that before. A bard? Really?”

“Well . . . I thought so. You don't think so?”

“Oh . . . I don't know. Bards come in all types, I suppose. But why? Bards aren't rich. And they're not famous. At least, most aren't, and those that are usually aren't until after they're dead.”

“I like to sing and tell stories. Ned would always listen, see. I wanted people to hear . . . I thought they'd like it. But . . . I even came up with a name for myself,” he said, brightly. “The Stuttering Bard of York. It's different. Don't you think?”

She looked down at him, an odd expression on her face. “That . . . that's sad.”

“Why?”

“Never mind,” she said, quickly. “Tell me about farming.”

“Well, there is a lot one could say. Something is always happening. Springtime there is planting, fall there is harvesting, and summer the garden must always be kept. The winter is slowest, but there is always something to do by the fire. I like being outside, in the sun and the wind. Seeing the sun shine. I like the rain, too, being in it sometimes even, if it isn't too cold. It's quiet out, just me and the world. And Ned. There is no one to stare. I can sing or tell stories, or just work and think.”

He trailed off, feeling a lump forming in his throat. Talking about it made him think of the past, and remember that the farm was gone. How were Ma and Da? Were they okay? So much had happened in the days since the goblins had come that he thought about it little. He didn't want to cry now.

Jess was silent a long time, and there was only the clip-clop of Mankiller's hooves on the hard packed earth. Finally, she gave a wistful little sigh and said, “That sounds so much better than the court life.”

“What?” Ben said.

“Nothing was being done. You can't imagine what—what pompous stupidity goes on there. It's boring, stuffy, and my mother was beginning to talk about planning a marriage for me with this babbling fool of a prince. That helped me finally decide to leave.”

“Babbling fool like me?” Ben looked up at her.

“No, I—” Jess stopped, as if just realizing what she had said. “No, you're nothing like him.” She stared ahead for a long moment. “He was never so

plain and honest. Proud vanity was his skill, and selfishness his nature.”

“Well, if he was a prince he must have been smart.”

“It depends on what one calls smart,” Jess muttered. Then she said, “Look! I can see a village ahead. That should be a good place to purchase supplies.”

“We need supplies?” Ben looked at the saddlebags behind Jess. They did seem much emptier.

“I packed for one, and we've been feeding three,” Jess said, pointedly not looking at Ernie.

“That's true.” Ben looked back at Ernie. The old wizard was trudging along, leaning on his staff, bent under the weight of his sack. “Sure you don't want me to carry that for you, Ernie?”

“This is the third time you've asked me, young man, and for the third time I say no.”

“It looks heavy. I could take a turn.”

“I tell you, this sack holds my most valuable possession. I won't trust it to the care of another soul.”

“Your most valuable possession?”

“My grand sewing project. The quilt I'm working on.” Ernie pushed back the brim of his hat with the top of his staff, staring at Ben with his bright blue eyes. “It's going to be my masterpiece! The pinnacle of my work. It's going to win the annual Quilter's Guild Championship. I'll be the star. Everyone will worship me, and my own guild will be so amazed that their own Ernie has won the championship. So, you see, it's a bit of a load to carry, but I'm used to it. Don't worry about me. Just protect me from any knaves and foul creatures. Make sure they don't touch my quilt and I'll thank you kindly.”

“Here we are.” Jess reined in Mankiller and looked around the village. “How odd. This place seems deserted.”

“Maybe everyone is in for lunch,” Ben said. The main street was deserted. The houses stood silent, and there wasn't even a dog or chicken to be seen wandering around in the dusty lane.

“Not everyone eats lunch at the same time.” Jess shook her head.

“Maybe something frightened them,” Ernie said.

“Like what?” Ben said.

“Something really scary,” Ernie said. “Can't you imagine it?”

“Stop being silly,” Jess said. “I'm sure it's all explained by something simple.”

“Goblins are simple,” Ernie said.

“We'll find someone shortly,” Jess said, ignoring the wizard. “I see smoke coming from some of those chimneys. Someone must be in that house.”

“Perhaps. Or maybe someone was in that house a little while ago, and is now gone. Perhaps devoured. In fact, I don't like the feel in the air. You feel

it? You both do know how to fight real good, don't you?"

"You're a pacifist, why should you care?" Jess snapped.

"Only a little bit," Ernie said. "And I'd like to be a live one."

"If anything were wrong I'm sure we'd hear plenty of screaming," Ben said reasonably. That, at least, was how things seemed to work in York. "I'm sure it's nothing. Let's just check over at the forge down the street. I'm sure the smith can tell us where we can buy some food."

"Good idea." Jess urged Mankiller to a walk and they headed across the street to the low stone building.

"Be careful," Ernie whispered. "This reminds me of a story I read once. 'Backwoods Dismemberment' it was called. These people came into this deserted town and then one by one they came to these gruesome ends. It was just like this except—"

"The way into the smithy is out back," Ben said, and started around the building.

Around the corner Ben stopped abruptly and Jess almost ran him over with Mankiller. She reined the horse in sharply. "What—" she said, but then she saw the goblin too.

The creature was bowlegged and filthy, wearing various bits of animal skins and not much else over its black hairy body. The goblin's attention was fixed on the smith sprawled across the ground. The filthy beast grunted and gurgled as it hauled the limp man across the hard-packed earth.

The goblin might not have noticed them except Ben carefully set down his eggs where they wouldn't get damaged and shouted, "Goblin!"

The goblin looked up, spit flying from its wide, gaping mouth. Its beady black eyes narrowed on seeing them, and it leaped toward them with a shriek, snatching up its misshapen club from the ground.

"A goblin!" Ernie cried, stepping backward. "Stop it! Someone save us all!"

Jess recovered first, pawing wildly for her bow and arrow. Then Ben stepped forward and swung his hammer, hurtling it with a shout at the charging, flailing, goblin. The hammer struck the goblin across its fat nose with a loud crunch. The creature toppled backward and lay quite still.

"Oh, dear." Ernie dropped his sack and covered his mouth, going white in the face. "How awful! I think I'm going to be sick."

"It's a rather nasty mess," Ben agreed, staring at the unmoving goblin for a long minute before gingerly retrieving his hammer. "Stinks worse than chicken butchering back on the farm."

"Why? Why?" Jess clutched her bow. "I've trained for years and I go on an adventure to fight the goblins and the first one I meet is killed by a peasant wielding a hammer! It isn't fair!"

"And he did a good job of it, too." Ernie looked away, fanning his face with his large floppy hat.

"I'm sorry," Ben said. "It was coming at us, and I—"

"I know." Jess sighed, shoving the bow back into its leather case. "Just leave the next one for me. I'm not helpless."

"Well, I expect the next one will come soon enough," Ernie said, and sounded miserable at the prospect.

"Where?" Ben spun around, holding the hammer up.

"What are you talking about?" Jess said. "The only goblin here is dead."

"Goblins always travel in groups," Ernie settled the hat back on his head. "If one is here, there will be more around."

Jess frowned, pulling out her bow again. "Then why didn't we see them when we came into the town?"

"Probably because this one was a scout."

"Goblins don't scout." Jess snorted.

"They might if they were ordered by someone else." Ernie picked up his massive sack, bending under the weight. "This village is far from the Shiddow Mountains, Princess. For goblins to appear here they must be sent. Sent by someone, after someone or something, and this particular goblin was surely a scout looking. The main group of goblins is probably waiting somewhere nearby."

"They were looking for this smith?" Ben stared at the prostrate man. The blacksmith was big, but he had a very plain face, and there was nothing unusual in his appearance. A hero, or someone of importance, would have a more radiant expression, Ben thought. Or at the very least look important.

"No. I don't think so." Ernie leaned on his staff, staring with a meditative expression at the goblin and man. "I expect the goblin got distracted and was planning to drag that poor man off for a meal."

"Look," Jess said impatiently. "It was one stupid goblin that somehow got lost and wandered this far from the Shiddow Mountains. It thought to find a good meal and so came into this town and was going to take away this dead man for a meal when we showed up. If there were more goblins they'd be dancing around this village making trouble. They aren't, so we should go tell people they can come out of hiding. We need to buy some food and get moving."

"The man isn't dead." Ben stooped over the smith. "He's still breathing. He must have fainted when the goblin arrived."

"Seeing a goblin is enough to give anyone a faint," Ernie said, taking a better grip on his staff. "But I agree with the princess. We'd best be moving along before any more goblins show themselves."

Jess, still disgusted that the fight with the goblin had ended so abruptly, climbed down from her horse and walked over to look at the dead creature, and then at the unconscious smith. "Well, come on," she said. "We'd better find someone."

They went round to the front of the house and Jess knocked on the door. There was no answer.

"Maybe someone needs to knock louder," Ben said. He balled up his fist and pounded on the solid oak door. The thud of his blows echoed through the house.

"Goblins!" The scream came from above them, drifting muffled from up near the roof. "The goblins are coming for us!"

"The king's name." Jess peered up. "I do believe they've gone and hid in the loft."

"We're not goblins!" Ben shouted. "Come down!" He stood beside Jess, staring up. It must be a small loft, he thought. A very stuffy and hot place to hide from goblins.

"Terrible goblins!" the voice shrieked.

"There was only one and we killed it!" Ben said. "You can come out now!"

"My poor husband! Dead, dead!"

"No, he isn't! He only fainted! Come down and take care of him!"

"Goblins that sound like people! Even worse!" the unseen lady wailed.

"Oh, leave them," Jess said. "We're wasting time. We can't spend all day trying to convince everyone that it's safe to come out. We'll have to buy our food someplace else. Come on, let's go."

"I suppose." Ben took one last look at the door, then picked up his hammer and bundle of eggs. "This place is different from York. I don't even see a warning bell we could ring. But then, we shouldn't ring it because the goblin is dead," he mused.

"Come, come. Let's move. A good distance from here before dark and all that," Ernie said, trying to edge Ben forward.

The threesome walked through the village. Ben peered around for any sign that people would start to come out of hiding. Ernie fidgeted. Jess grumbled to herself.

"Why am I traveling with these people? I'm supposed to be going the other direction. There won't be any more goblins this way. The one goblin we'll see this far from the Shiddow Mountains and I don't even kill it. I should be heading toward the Shiddow Mountains where a lot more than one goblin terrorizes the inhabitants."

"Ah. The open road again." Ernie spoke with evident relief once the houses of the village were only tiny squares in the distance behind them. "The empty road where not a trouble awaits and—" Whatever else he said was lost in several shrill howls and many shrieks that came from the nearby forest.

The crash of broken branches gave way to more shrieks as goblins appeared out of the distant trees—twenty-five goblins, all of them carrying various clubs and sharpened metal things. They ran across the field, quite fast, heading for the road.

"We can't fight them. Everyone run!" Ben shouted. "I'll hold them off!"

"I can't run fast enough!" Ernie wailed. "Not with my quilt!"

“We’re not running!” Jess yelled. “Everyone together! We stand and fight.” She swung down from Mankiller and took her stand beside Ben, drawing her sword.

“You two can’t fight that many! I’ll run!” Ernie whirled around and began to stagger across the field on the opposite side of the road.

“We can if we all fight! Blast them, you worthless wizard!” Jess shouted.

“And destroy my innocence?” Ernie squeaked. “I couldn’t!”

“Here they come!” Ben called.

The goblins came on very fast, turfs of grass flying up under their wide clawed feet. Ben had a terrible sinking feeling in his stomach that told him Ernie was right—they couldn’t fight so many goblins. It would be a terrible thing to be torn to pieces by these howling beasts, he thought, and his quivering knees agreed. Still, it would be a pity to go down without a fight. And, after all, the goblins had destroyed the farm. So—as the first small goblin raced on ahead of the others and came hurtling toward Jess with its two crooked daggers—Ben stepped forward and met it, swinging his hammer down with all his might.

The hammer struck the goblin straight atop its head with a loud crack and the little black creature’s shriek became a gurgle as it crumpled like a pile of wet laundry.

“That was mine!” Jess said.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, suddenly remembering. “I—There are plenty more.”

Then he saw a very big goblin break free of the pack and come for Jess, waving a wickedly curved ax. Without even thinking, Ben let fly, hurling the hammer. His shot caught the slobbering brute right in the throat. The massive goblin gave a small squeak and fell flat on its face.

“You stupid farmer! You nitwit! Why’d you do that?”

He turned to see Ernie standing on the edge of the road, dancing back and forth.

“Why didn’t you hang on to that hammer! Now the goblins are coming and what do you have? Tell me that! Tell me, are you going to spank them? Or perhaps play a game of slap and tickle? The incompetence of this modern generation! Don’t you young people even know how to fight?” The wizard grew purple in the face as his tirade lengthened, beard bristling.

Ben looked down at his empty hands.

“Incompetence! Ignorance! Don’t just stand there,” Ernie shook his staff. “Do something! Oh, we’re done for! I’m finished!”

Ben acted faster than he thought, grabbing the bow from its scabbard beside Jess’s saddle and snatching down the quiver of arrows. He had enough time to pull back the string and aim his first shot, and then the full goblin charge was on them.

“Look out! Fight! Fight them!” Ernie dashed further back, still waving his staff and dancing frantically in place.

"You fight!" Jess shouted, her sword clashing against goblin steel. "Blast them!"

"I can't! It's horrible. Nasty!"

"Blast them, you worthless wizard! Blast them!"

Jess was very good, Ben thought. With two quick swings she chopped down the pair of leading goblins and then blocked the incoming strike from the next. An excellent fighter, but she couldn't take them all.

"Blast them, Ernie!" Ben said, adding his voice to Jess's shout, and firing his arrows as best he could.

"I can't, I can't! Oh—maybe I could try—no, I can't watch!" Ernie wrung his hands on his staff, watching the battle. "We're doomed! I'm sorry for all the bad things I've done!"

It was a desperate fight. The goblins came, snarling and howling, their weapons flailing. Jess cut them down, hewing open their black bodies. Those that slipped past her sword Ben shot with arrows. The goblins were a fearsome wave. They pressed forward and would have overwhelmed Jess and Ben, if not for Mankiller. The horse was a whirling storm of hooves and teeth. Every time a goblin came near the horse the little black creature went flying, dashed and bloodied by an iron shod hoof. Not one of the raging goblins could get past Mankiller.

The goblins fell, one atop another, dead and bleeding. Jess gasped for breath as her sword staved off several more wild goblin blows.

"I'm out of arrows!" Ben shouted, now very alarmed. "What do I do?"

"Grab something and fight them!" Jess said through her clenched teeth. "I can't fight alone!"

"Right! Something!" He snatched up a misshapen club from a dead goblin's hand and leaped forward with a yell.

The last of the goblins turned and ran, yowling and babbling, back toward the forest.

"The king preserve us!" Jess panted for breath. She rested the point of her sword on the ground, leaning on the hilt. "We won!"

"Did I scare them?" Ben lowered his club.

"No. They're like bullies. They just don't like losing and they saw they had lost."

"I used up all your arrows. I didn't mean too. I guess I got carried away shooting. There were just so many goblins and I kept shooting and then I looked down and the quiver was empty."

"Never mind that," Jess said. "We're alive. Good job, Mankiller. Do it again and I'll start calling you Goblinkiller."

"A near thing," Ernie said weakly from behind them. "A good bit nearer than I ever want to see it again."

"You." Jess turned around and stalked toward the wizard, her sword pointed at his face. It was a threatening gesture, Ben thought, especially with

all the black goblin blood smeared along the blade.

“What kind of worthless third order wizard are you?”

“Me?” Ernie drew himself up. “None at all. I’m a very good wizard. I passed all the tests with high marks.”

“You’re an incompetent bag of luggage! Will you ever be of any help? You don’t carry your weight!” She brandished the sword at him, her eyes blazing. “What third order wizard doesn’t know how to defend himself! What wizard would allow his companions to be dismembered by a horde of goblins right before his very eyes!”

“I know how,” Ernie mumbled, his gaze dropping to the scattered heap of dead goblins and growing a little pale again. “I just . . . don’t like to.”

“Don’t like to!” Jess started sputtering, trembling all over. Ben began to fear for Ernie’s head and wondered if he should say something, but he couldn’t think of what. Then, suddenly, she stopped and lowered the sword. She gave Ernie a peculiar, sharp look.

“You were right,” she said. “There were more goblins. That was a bit of good thinking for someone who has shown himself otherwise useless. How do you know so much about goblins?”

“Well.” Ernie straightened his hat and adjusted his cloak. “Do you think one can become a third order wizard and know nothing?”

Jess snorted loudly, but said nothing to that. She was still looking at Ernie with a very thoughtful expression. “Then,” she said, “if those goblins were sent after someone, and they came out after us—”

“Hey—” Ben looked at Ernie, then Jess. “That—that means they’re after one of us.”

“Yes.” Jess looked over her shoulder at the forest where the surviving goblins had disappeared. “But which one of us?”



Chapter Eight

Wizard Suggestions

It was night. Darkness set in close around the camp. They were in the middle of a heavily overgrown forest. The trees seem especially close tonight, Ben thought.

“Tell me again,” Jess said, breaking the silence. “Who, exactly, can command goblins?”

“Oh, I suppose anyone could,” Ernie said.

The goblin attack earlier had left both Ben and Jess jumpy. The night felt full of ominous threats. Ben wished Jess would stop asking questions about goblins. He preferred to forget about them entirely while in the dark forest. The princess seemed to deal with her unease by constantly bringing up the subject.

“Anyone?” Jess said.

“Well, they would have to bring the goblins into submission first,” Ernie said. “And they would have to travel with the goblins, unless it was a wizard who commanded them.”

“A wizard?”

“A powerful wizard.”

“And what could such a wizard do?”

“Oh . . . command the goblins from a great distance. And such things like that.”

Jess sank back and stared moodily at the fire. Ernie spread out his massive unfinished quilt on his lap and began hunting around for a needle and some thread.

A twig snapped somewhere in the darkness. Ben almost bit off his tongue leaping to his feet, hammer clutched in his hands. Jess was on her feet, sword flashing in the firelight.

“Just a bit of wind,” Ernie said calmly, threading a needle.

"A bit of wind." Jess rammed her sword back into its scabbard. "We were attacked by goblins this afternoon. These woods could be crawling with them, sent by some foul . . . thing. Hunting one of us! Danger lurks on every side. We're not safe, and—and—you just sit there!"

"I'm hungry," Ernie said. "There wasn't much supper tonight."

"That's because we never bought any more food." Jess dropped back into her sitting position and gave Ernie a tired glare. "Because of the goblins, remember? Be happy you got any."

"We could eat some of that young man's eggs." Ernie lowered his quilt to look at Ben. "He has plenty. I'm sure they're delicious."

"No." Ben reached a protective hand to his bundle. "We're not eating them."

"Not?" Jess looked at him curiously. "What do you intend to do with them?"

"I . . . don't know. I guess I think I'd sell them back for Ned. I think I must, if I want Ned back. But even if I don't—but I will, I mean, somehow I'll get Ned back when this is all over—" He fumbled for words. "The eggs—They're—valuable. If I don't buy Ned back with them I must use them to make more chickens and eggs than any man can count. If we eat them now it'll be a waste."

Jess started to smile, then shook her head. "Whatever. I'm sure we'll come to another town tomorrow. Ernie can last that long."

"If I must." Ernie gave a loud sigh and continued to work his needle and thread through another square of cloth. It was an amazing quilt. Already huge, the patchwork of cloth was big enough for at least two beds. If the assortment of material was any indication, Ernie added whatever he fancied as the quilt expanded, piece after piece.

Ben watched Ernie work, wondering how the wizard could call the quilt his masterpiece. The quilt was very odd, and strangely fascinating, but he thought he had seen his own dear mother do better work. He became so caught up in watching Ernie that he didn't notice Jess coming from the other side of the fire until she sat down next to him. He started, then turned quite red to find her so near. A bunch of stuttering welled up in his throat. Then Jess leaned close and whispered, "I don't trust the wizard."

"W—w—What?" he said, quite loudly.

"Shhh!" She hissed out of the side of her mouth. She needn't have worried—Ernie's sewing held his complete concentration, tongue touching his upper lip as he worked in the firelight.

"Why?" Ben said in a hoarse whisper.

"Well—think about it. He obviously knows all sorts of things he isn't letting on. There is too much he isn't telling us. He's given no good reason for traveling with us. And he acts decidedly odd. What is a third order wizard doing, bumbling around the countryside?"

“He seems nice enough.” Ben looked at Ernie.

The wizard appeared quite harmless, his lanky white hair framing a thin sagging face with a droopy mustache and a beard that trailed away to a point. His half-moon spectacles—which he polished often—had slid down to the end of his narrow nose, which caused him to lean back in order to see his work.

“Looks can be deceiving.” Jess narrowed her eyes. “I find it hard to believe a wizard would be kicked out of the third order for pacifism.”

“Maybe it's true,” Ben said quietly. “He didn't blast the goblins, even when they had almost overwhelmed us.”

“Maybe that was because he wanted us to be overwhelmed.”

Ben looked at her, puzzled.

“Must you be so thick?” Exasperation tinged her voice. “What if he is the one calling the goblins?”

“Ernie? He wouldn't hurt a rabbit.”

“Wizards can be tricky, wheedling little things. I know. Rimmah was always like that in court—I couldn't stand him. Watch this Ernie, Ben. Even if he isn't calling the goblins, he certainly has his own plans.”

“I'll try,” Ben said, doubtfully. “If he is scheming I probably won't figure it out—”

There came another rustle from nearby and both Ben and Jess leaped to their feet.

“Hm?” Ernie looked up from his sewing. “What?”

“A noise—” Ben said.

“Ah. A night breeze.” Ernie lowered his needle, looking at the two of them. “I notice . . . er, are you both scared of the dark? You seem quite jumpy tonight.”

“Never!” Jess said, fiercely.

“Actually, I was when I was little,” Ben said. “It all started when I was about three and I could hear the rats scurrying around in the dark. I thought —”

“What we are concerned about are goblins out in the darkness,” Jess snapped at Ernie. “Goblins that certainly had you terrified earlier today. Don't you think you should be worried about having your throat slit in the middle of the night? Or would you like to find yourself in some foul cooking pot?”

“Hm.” Ernie took off his spectacles and polished them again, blinking in the firelight. “That's true. Our preservation is a concern—which reminds me. That young man ought to learn how to use a sword.”

“Me?” Ben said, quite surprised.

“Him?” Jess looked equally surprised by the idea. “And who is going to train him. You?”

“No. Not me.” Ernie put his glasses back on. “You.”

“Me?” Her voice rose an octave.

“No, no,” Ben said quickly. “It’s better if I don’t learn. Any time I use anything sharp I end up cutting myself. I’d be a danger to myself, and to—and to—”

“Wait. Just wait.” Jess held up her hands. The suspicious light had returned to her eyes. “Why should I teach him? He’s a bumbling farmer, not some trained warrior. Are you trying to get me to accidentally kill him?”

“Goodness, no. That’s not part of training. He needs to be taught how to use a sword so he can be of greater help—if we should ever be assaulted again. His current habit of throwing away that hammer at the most inopportune time is completely unacceptable,” Ernie said, a bit peevishly. “And I think you’ll find him a faster learner than you suspect. Consider how much more useful he would be in battle.”

“You shouldn’t be talking about someone else’s lack of helpfulness,” Jess muttered. But a thoughtful look had come to her face. After a few minutes she said, “Well, just say maybe I would agree to teach him. How could I? I’m the only one who has a sword.”

“A princess shouldn’t waste her time teaching me. It’s all just a bunch of bother. I’d rather learn how to play the harp, or the flute. That’s what bards should know.” Ben shifted on his feet, scuffing the ground. He didn’t like this idea of Jess teaching him. It would, one way or another, be terribly embarrassing, and he thought ending up devoured by goblins might be a kinder fate.

“Oh, he can have my sword.” Ernie struggled to his feet and reached within the folds of his tattered and patched cloak to unbuckle and hold out the sword Ben had seen earlier. “I don’t use it anyhow.”

Jess gasped. The scabbard was worked with gold and the belt also, glittering in the firelight. After a bit of hesitation Ben took it from Ernie’s hand and drew the blade. It was a broad, smooth, blade that flashed and glimmered in the firelight. The hilt guard was also covered with gold and set in the center was a red sapphire. Ben held the sword up, examining it, not quite sure what to think.

“How—How—” Jess struggled to speak. “How did you get a sword like that?” She took a step forward, lifting up a hand as if she wanted to touch the blade.

“It’s called Goblin Terror.” Ernie returned to his seat beside the fire. “I picked it up some time ago. When you’re a wizard of the third order those type of things are supposed to come in handy, but I never cared to use it. Ben’s a strong young fellow and I’m sure he can put it to good use.”

“It must be powerfully magical.” Jess ran her hand across the hilt guard.

“It will strike terror into the heart of any goblin when drawn. And it’s generally a good weapon to have around when fighting any foul and fell beasts,” Ernie added.

“Certainly better than my sword.” Jess drew her own weapon and looked at it. Her sword has a silver hilt with worked designs. The blade was narrower than Goblin Terror, and lighter.

“You can have it.” Ben lowered the sword and slid it back into the sheath. “You know how to fight with a sword, and you’re a princess. It belongs to someone like you.”

“I . . . that’s very nice of you.” She looked at him, and Ben started to feel embarrassed again, heat creeping into his face. She hesitated a moment, looking at the sword and chewing her lip. Then she reached out with one hand and grasped the hilt, drawing the blade.

“Ug.” She held the sword up, and made a face. “It’s too heavy. Maybe you could swing that around, but I’d wear myself out before I won a single fight.”

Jess slid the sword back into its sheath and shook her head, black curls flashing. “No,” she said firmly. “You keep it. Teaching you will give me something to do, and maybe you’ll actually learn something.”

“Well . . . er . . . ah . . . are you sure?” Ben held the sword, looking at her, feeling a touch of dread deep in the pit of his stomach. This felt like something his Ma or Da had always warned him to never do, but the only one of those commands he could remember was the one to never play with fire. Best as he could remember they had never said anything about practicing sword fighting with a very beautiful princess. He was sure if they hadn’t told him this was a bad idea, the lack must have simply been an oversight.

“The wizard is right. If we’re attacked again we’ll need every bit of fighting ability we can muster, and obviously *he* isn’t going to use that sword.”

“But I don’t, I mean what if—that is, you could get hurt.”

“If I stub my toe, maybe.” Jess brushed back her hair and stepped a few paces away. “You don’t really think you’re that good, do you?”

“That bad,” he said, starting to feel truly miserable. “What if I tripped and accidentally impaled you on the end of this thing?”

“Oh, for the king’s name!”

“It could happen.”

“Even I don’t think you’re that bad. Come, I’ll just start you on the basic moves. We’ll stop as soon as you get tired.”

Ben wanted to say that he normally wasn’t very clumsy at all but somehow when she was around he fumbled with the simplest things and tripped over his own feet—but he decided not to say that. Instead he swallowed very hard, pushed the idea of Jess impaled on the end of Goblin Terror out of his mind, and tried to listen to her instruction without thinking about how lovely her eyes looked.

They trained for a long time. Jess had said they would continue until he was tired, but he didn’t find the exercises very tiring. It was easier than working at Master Cendric’s forge and not that much harder than threshing

grain, which he did all day during the harvest season. There was a nice rhythm to the crash and ring of their blades meeting, and he could have gone on until morning except after a few hours Jess stepped back and motioned for him to stop.

“Enough,” she gasped, wiping at her forehead with the back of her sleeve. “I’m tired now. The king’s blood—you’re strong as an ox and have the endurance of a mule.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, lowering the sword.

“Not a thing to be sorry about. Puts me a bit in my place I suppose,” she said, and gave a soft laugh. “I should have guessed. Just because you’ve no training doesn’t mean you’re weak. Anyhow, I hope *he* is happy.” She cast a glance at Ernie, but the wizard was sound asleep beneath the mound of his quilt, the hat fallen down over his eyes, snoring loudly.



Chapter Nine

Food Fight

It's taking a lot longer to reach Galdoron than I expected," Ben said. "I don't think this is what my Ma meant when she said I should go get help. Maybe she didn't realize it was so far to Galdoron. I hope they're okay. I wonder if Da went off to fight the goblins without me."

"I . . . I won't be going with you all the way to Galdoron," Jess said. She had been quiet most of the morning as they traveled along and seemed withdrawn into her own thoughts. Ben had begun to wonder why.

"Oh," he said, and couldn't help feeling a deep pang of disappointment. "It was nice of you to come along for so much of the journey. But of course you're a princess and there are important things you must do." He paused for a bit, thinking, and then added, "I don't know why you've traveled with me at all. Princesses don't go with farmers—at least, not as I heard in the stories."

"Because . . ." she mumbled. Then, louder, "See, I left the court to go fight the goblins myself. Don't think I'm abandoning you. It's just nobody in the court was doing a thing about all the reports that came in. So I decided—I thought I would go and fight them myself. I thought maybe I would raise a band of adventurers and we would defeat the goblins. Maybe that was a foolish idea but—"

"I'd follow you," Ben said. "But I must deliver the message to the king. The people of York are depending on me and I must not let them down. And my Ma and Da . . . they need me. But if they didn't, I'd follow you. Then I could be the bard that makes songs of all your victories."

He was sorry he had said that last bit as soon as it was out of his mouth. How could the Stuttering Bard of York make such a claim? This was princess Mol'Jessel, light of the kingdom. Such a person would need a *good* bard. A better bard than even he dreamed he could ever be. It was a foolish thing to

say, and he blushed until both his cheeks and ears felt hot. He was glad she rode up on the horse and couldn't see his face.

"See," Jess said, ignoring his offer, "I can't go back to Galdoron with you because . . . well, I kind of ran away."

"Ran away?" He almost stopped walking and Ernie nearly plowed into him. He quickly picked back up the pace. "Why would a princess ever run away?"

"Because my Ma and Da didn't want me to go." Jess idly flicked Mankiller's reins. "Nobody in the court wanted me to go. I'm the sole heir to the throne and princesses just aren't supposed to do this sort of thing. Only creepy Rimmah encouraged me to go. It's no fun having him on your side. Once Ma started talking about setting up the wedding I decided I had no choice. I slipped past the guards and made it out of the castle. I can't go back, you see. Not unless I want to end up marrying a stupid prince, or hairy slobbering Dougyal."

"Yes," Ben agreed. "I suppose you can't." It made him feel better that she had a good reason for not going back, but he still couldn't help thinking that it would be very lonely without her. "What about you, Ernie? Are you going to the court? If they have one wizard maybe they can use another."

"Oh, no, no," Ernie said hastily. "I think . . . I'll do something else. I'll go some place safe . . . where there is plenty of food." The wizard adjusted his hat and looked around. "Say, why couldn't we just all stick together? How about finding some agreeable place we all want to go. Hey, what do you say? We make good company. Maybe?"

The wizard hurried up to walk beside them, bowed under weight of his sack, staff wobbling in front of him. "What's the rush, anyhow? Why the hurry to go to the king, eh, young man? Your farm is already gone. Your parents, doubtless, are in the care of wonderful people. And why the rush to fight the goblins, princess? They'll still be around if you wait. Why don't we all go to a distant kingdom by the sea and vacation for a bit? A very distant kingdom. I'm sure the princess has plenty of money, and we all deserve a break. Don't you think?"

The two of them stared at Ernie.

"Bother," the wizard grumbled. "It was too much to expect either of you to see the sense in that. Young people these days!"

Jess gave Ben a meaningful sideways look that he didn't understand. Then she silently mouthed, "He's hiding something," and then Ben got it.

"If you're eager to travel why don't you conjure up some gold for yourself," Jess said aloud. Then she shook her head. "The rest of us are too responsible to go run away when this kingdom is in trouble."

"Run away!" Ernie's voice went up a note, and he hurried a little faster. "Who said anything about running away? Aren't you the one running away, princess? Running away from marriage."

“Running away from marriage to a man who loves himself!” Jess shouted. “Which is more than you can say, you worthless wizard!”

“Ah, look,” Ben said quickly, feeling it was time for him to interject something. “We’re coming upon an—er, place. Where are we?”

High stone walls rose on either side of the road, sheep pens by the sound of bleating that came from the other side. As they rounded a bend in the road they found a vast collection of houses spreading out before them. Ben had never seen so many buildings in his life before. He wondered if everyone in the world could come together and live in this place. All of York wouldn’t take up more than one or two streets!

“It’s a city,” Jess said. “Montifol. A grubby place, with no shortage of pickpockets, so watch yourselves. I’ll buy you some supplies Ben, and see you to the other side of the city. After that . . . I’m leaving you.”

“You don’t have to buy me supplies. I still have my eggs from Ned. I can take care of myself.”

“Ben . . . you remember that innkeeper who wouldn’t accept your eggs?”

“Yes,” Ben said, his voice growing hot at the memory. “The lout—”

“People won’t here, either,” Jess said, kindly. “At least, you won’t get much for a few dozen eggs. You’d be better off just eating them yourself.”

“I can’t do that! It’d be a waste. The king’s name—I’d eat up everything I got for Ned in just a few days.”

“Right. So let me buy you some supplies. Enough to get you the rest of the way to Galdoron. Listen, I’ll even buy you a good meal at one of the inns. Something to show you what they cook up in the cities.”

“Then . . . then . . . then I’ll give you the eggs,” Ben said. It was the most expansive gesture he could think of. “After all you’ve done, it’s only fair.”

He felt a hand gripping his shoulder and looked up to see Jess staring down at him from the saddle, her eyes flashing.

“Listen! Just keep the eggs. Do whatever you want with them. I’m giving you the supplies, okay? I’m a princess. I can do that.”

“Okay,” Ben said, a little surprised. “If—if—if you’re sure. But, I mean, if you came to York with my eggs you could buy something.”

“Stick close to me, both of you,” Jess said as they started down the house lined street. “And watch yourselves.”

The streets were filled with people going about their business. Most of the men walked with a bundle over one shoulder, the women with a basket under their arms. There were more carts out on the streets than in all of York, carts pulled by either donkey or oxen, the axles creaking as they moved along.

The further they went into the city the more people crowded on the road, bumping and pushing as they hurried along. Ben stared and stared, but Jess rode along tall and proud on Mankiller, looking straight ahead. People gaped at Jess, but Ben wasn’t surprised. With her black ringlets tied back and

wearing her green cloak and jacket and her fine white shirt she looked like the greatest princess that had ever lived, he thought. Then he noticed some people stared at him, and this made him a little embarrassed. He saw several little children pointing at him, and the large hammer slung across his shoulder, and women whispered to each other as he passed. More alarming, he saw men eying the gold-gilded Goblin Terror hanging at his waist. Then he remember Jess's warning about pickpockets, and he wondered if they would try to steal the sword away. If he lost the sword Ernie would be furious, and that thought made Ben rest a hand on the grip and glare round at the pressing crowds, wishing Jess had taught him a little more about actually using the weapon.

Deep in the middle of Montifol there stood a bustling market, and it was here that Jess brought them. At one stall she stopped and climbed down from Mankiller to purchase fresh loaves of bread. She handed over several copper coins to the grateful mother on the other side of the counter with her two small children. Ben stared, stunned, as the women accepted the copper with profuse thanks.

They went on through the press of bodies until they came to a butcher's shop where Jess bought a large amount of good salt-cured meat for a few small silver coins.

"What fools city people are," Ben laughed, as they walked out of the butcher's shop. "They take these metal things as payment. They should talk to a farmer before doing things like that. They'll be the laughing stock when they go and try to plant their coins. Money doesn't grow on trees, and you can't eat it. Why, I never thought there were so many fools in the world—"

"Ben," Jess said.

"What?"

"Stop. York may be different, but out here in the world it—just don't let anyone hear you, all right?"

"Ah." Ben stopped and thought a moment. Then he looked round at the people hurrying down the street. "Yes. I suppose they would take offense. I guess if everyone here accepts small metal coins it works out in the end."

Anything more Jess said was lost in a loud scream ahead of them. Mankiller—who had been left with Ernie out in front of the butcher shop—had the meaty shoulder of a scruffy man firmly clamped between his teeth. The man flailed about, screaming with all his might, dancing in one place. People pulled back, forming a wide clear circle. Ernie looked on, blinking, and appearing quite surprised.

"Oh, the filth—!" Jess hurried forward, but with one final howl the man managed to wrench himself free and took off, running like the dead had risen and were giving chase.

"What—" Jess said.

"Goodness," Ernie turned. "I didn't realize your horse had such a taste for

man flesh, Princess. You really ought to keep a better eye on him if you're going to bring him into these civilized parts.”

“I left you watching him, Wizard!” Jess snapped. “And he doesn't bite anyone except those who would lay a hand on me—or him! That was a horse thief, you imbecile! He deserved a lot more than he got, trying to snatch Mankiller. And what were you doing? I left you watching him!”

“Oh.” Ernie set down his sack and straightened his hat which had once again started to fall down over his eyes. “I was . . . er, watching the other direction. Your, um, Mankiller seems capable of watching out for himself, anyhow.”

“No thanks to you. Don't eat that.” She pulled the large section of dirty shirt from Mankiller's mouth. “You'll pick up some vile disease. And,” she turned back to glare at Ernie. “No more calling me princess while we're in Montifol. There could be agents of the king in the city, and I'd rather my father's men didn't learn of my presence and try to bring me back to Galdoron. Unless you'd like to go with me to the court, hm?”

“Ah, no.” Ernie quickly picked up his sack and looked round at the watching crowd. “Right. As you say, Prince—that is, Miss. Er, you mentioned something about a good lunch.”

Jess took them to an inn called Twenty Flags. It was a tall, two story building with large windows and a slate roof. It was all very impressive, Ben thought. Inside, there were many large oak tables and plenty of men sitting around most of them. Across the room, one table served a group of large burly men marked with many battle scars and armed with swords. The room felt a little suffocating with so many bodies and the loud talk and laughter, but the smell of cooking meat, bread, and fresh gravy was enticing.

Pulling out more money, Jess quickly had a nice large table all for themselves, laden down with all sorts of delicious food. Ernie promptly set down his sack and staff beside him, laid his hat in a chair, sat, and began stuffing his face.

“Erm. Delicious. Haven't eaten this well in a long time.” Ernie smacked his lips, swallowed noisily, and reached across the table to grab another leg of chicken, plunging it into the gravy bowl.

Ben settled uneasily on the edge of his chair. His hammer leaned against his leg in easy reach, and the bundle of eggs he had carefully set under the table. He filled up his plate, but, somehow, found he couldn't eat. Eyes all around the room seemed to watch them, especially the armed men surrounding the table across the room. It didn't feel right eating with so many people watching. Jess glanced at him, and he felt stuttering welling up inside. If he tried to eat he was afraid he would swallow his tongue.

“Is something wrong, Ben?” Jess lowered her mug. “You're not eating.”

“Ah, well . . . Ah, well . . . Ah, well . . .” he swallowed very hard and managed, “P—people are watching.” Then he felt heat creeping up into his

ears. That was just a stupid little thing. It wasn't the more important thing he had meant to say.

Her gaze flickered to Ernie—who now had gravy dribbling down his beard and was rocking back and forth, moaning with satisfaction—then across the room. “Yes. I'm not surprised. It's how things are in the city. We're a strange company, I suppose. Don't pay them any mind. Enjoy your meal.”

“But, ah—” Ben quickly snatched up his mug of wine and took a big swallow, trying to follow her directions. The wine burned going down his gullet and he choked, spraying Jess. “Urk,” he coughed. “You also, I mean, you said, that is, I was watching.”

“Yes?” Jess grimaced, pulled out a neatly pressed white handkerchief, and wiped her face.

The burning wine momentarily cleared away his stuttering and Ben managed to say, “I noticed one of the men got up and left that table when we arrived. He was looking at us when he left.”

“Really? Good eye. I was busy with the innkeeper.” Jess seemed to forget her handkerchief as she gave the men across the room a second appraisal. “They don't look like men in the service of my father. The man who left probably just had some business to attend. If they're rogues they won't try anything in here, either. It's probably nothing—but we'll be careful when we leave.”

Jess returned to eating, and Ben tried to pick at his food. He couldn't shake the sense of danger. His stomach was clenched, his every muscle waiting for the men to leap up from their table and coming roaring across the room, weapons brandished. He wasn't entirely sure why. With their scruffy faces, thick hairy arms, and overhanging brows they just . . . just *looked* like it was what they would do. And if they didn't do it during the meal, he had the discomfiting thought of being leaped upon as soon as they stepped outside. It was never good to exercise after eating a full meal, and Ben wasn't sure if he could eat anything with the possibility—however remote—of being pummeled to a bleeding mess in a short while.

It was Jess's money, he thought. Or else his sword. If they attacked, he wondered, should he give up the gilded sword? That might make Ernie mad, but it would save Jess and the wizard from a beating. It was a trade, he thought, Ernie might agree was worthwhile.

He was still pondering over the matter, and feeling miserable, when the door crashed open and the man returned, stepping inside with half a dozen more armed men following close behind. “It's her, men!” he roared. “And him! Get 'em!” The man charged, diving across the table, his teeth bared.

“You filth!” Seeing the large man lunging across the table for Jess made Ben's fear evaporate, replaced by anger. He grabbed something—as it turned out, his chair—and smashed it to splinters over the man's head.

“Watch out, Ernie!” Jess shouted, leaping back and overturning her chair

as she drew her sword. The room turned to pandemonium as a large crowd of sword-wielding men came for them, and the few innocent bystanders—screaming and shouting—made a mad dash for any exit.

“Eeep!” Ernie gurgled, his eyes going wide. He grabbed for his hat, his staff, and his sack—all at once—and dove under the table.

“Thieves!” Ben roared, now quite furious. “Goblin kin!”

He grabbed the table with both hands and heaved it over his head, the first stunned attacker sliding off, the last of the dishes raining down with a splatter and crash of broken pottery. With another roar, he hurled the table across the room.

The oaken table took several men down, but the rest continued the stampeding attack, brandishing their swords. Ben grabbed another chair and brought it up, blocking the first blade that came cutting for his head. Steel rang against steel as Jess met her attackers, sword flashing.

“Blast them, Ernie!” she shouted. “There are too many of them. You’re a wizard—blast them!”

But Ernie, bereft of his cover beneath the table, was cowering and crawling about on the floor. His last mouthful of hastily swallowed food seemed to have become lodged in his throat. At least, his mouth flapped alarmingly and he had turned quite purple in the face.

“Scoundrels!” The sight of Jess hard pressed made Ben’s blood roar in his ears. He knocked aside the swords that stabbed at him and grabbed the nearest man by the throat with his free hand. He began to shake the man, teeth rattling, shouting ever louder, “What did your mother teach you? Wouldn’t she be ashamed of you now! Wouldn’t she!”

With the last bellow he tossed the limp man over the counter and brought his chair smashing down on another head. It all would’ve been a frightening situation, if Ben hadn’t been too angry to notice. He was nearly surrounded by sword-waving men by this time, so he snatched up another table, heaved it around once, knocking the attackers backward, and then tossed it across the room to the sound of much shattering glass and several loud yowls of pain.

“Your sword,” Jess gasped. “Stop throwing things and use your sword!”

One of the stunned attackers landed squarely atop Ernie, blasting a wadded lump of bread and meat from the wizard’s throat. Coughing and hacking, the wizard managed to crawl across the floor and cower against the wall behind Jess. Covering his face with his hat he squealed, “Stop! Stop this madness! I want to leave! Someone is going to get hurt! Oh, stop! I can’t stand people getting hurt! I can’t watch!”

Ben was hard pressed. In his flailing about with the furniture he had managed to attract most of the attacking men. Now, with a chair in each hand, he was only just barely fending them off, and he couldn’t find any way of drawing his sword as Jess had instructed. It seemed he was about to come

to a quick end when he finally managed to bowl two men over, toss a chair—knocking out a few teeth from another attacker—then dive aside and grab yet another table. He heaved it up, deflecting several deadly sword blows with the hard oak surface, then charged forward, shoulders braced against the wood, plowing the men backward until they all smashed against the wall with enough force to unhinge the door and shake the building.

Struggling out of the heap of bodies, Ben finally managed to draw his sword. He was ready now, if only—he thought rather desperately—he could remember how to use it.

Jess stood pressed back into a corner. She had already taken several men down, blood slicked across the floor, but she still fought three at once, her hair hanging wild across her face as she stood feet braced wide, blade flashing in her hands.

“Blast them, you idiot wizard!” she screamed. “Blast them, or we're all done for! Blast them, or I'll kill you myself!”

“Please, don't,” Ernie whimpered. He peered over his hat at the whirling blades before him. “Oh, dear. I suppose, maybe, I could. Just a little. Maybe.”

Jess slipped on the blood covered floor and went to her knees. Ben gasped and leaped forward, squeezing his eyes shut as he began flailing about with Goblin Terror, swinging the sword with all his might. He struck with the flat as much as the edge, but he heard plenty of shrieks and screams. When Jess shouted, “Look out for me! Watch it, Ben!” he finally opened his eyes and saw that no one remained standing, except him.



Chapter Ten

Sniveling Confession

What barbarity,” Ernie gasped, uncovering his face again. “What senselessness! I’ve always said world peace was long overdue. Thank my fortunes, I didn’t have to blast anyone.”

“You—you—” Jess staggered back to her feet, turning around to face the wizard, bloody sword clutched in one hand, other hand clutching her side.

“Are you hurt?” Ben lowered his sword. “You’re—are you okay?”

“I—one of them got me when I went down.” The color was rapidly draining from Jess’s face and she wavered, her wrath for Ernie forgotten.

“No. It can’t be.” He dropped Goblin Terror and dashed across the room.

Kneeling in front of her, he took both her hands and gently pulled them away. There, on her left side, was a dark stain rapidly spreading through her green jacket.

“No. This is terrible. It can’t be happening!”

“What can one expect,” Ernie said, climbing to his feet. “The wages of violence . . . the results of risky youthful behavior. I read a study once that said—”

The next thing Ben realized he had his hands locked around Ernie’s throat, shouting, “Heal her! You’re a wizard. Even pacifists can heal. Heal her! Heal her!”

“Ack. Urk.” Ernie’s eyes bulged from his face, lips writhing. “Okay,” the wizard managed to rasp. “You only needed to ask. Let me go—before you kill me! I can heal her, let me go.”

Trembling and breathing hard, Ben let Ernie go and stepped aside.

Clearing his throat, Ernie straightened the neck of his robe. Picking his hat up from the floor he settled it back on his head and took his staff in hand. He gave Jess a sharp look. “Is she still going to kill me?”

“Heal her, wizard!” Ben roared. “Heal her or I’ll—”

“Right, right. Calm down.” Ernie poked the end of the staff at the wound. Jess gasped, her legs almost buckling beneath her. Ben leaped forward, grabbing her.

“Hurry,” he shouted.

“Patience, patience,” Ernie mumbled. “This is a mental thing. It takes a bit of effort.”

The wizard stared at Jess a moment, his eyebrows pinched in a frown. Then he leaned on his staff, squeezed his eyes shut and gave a few muffled grunts. Jess gasped again, and shuddered in Ben's grip.

“There.” Ernie opened his eyes. “Done. And I suppose one shouldn't leave a mess behind.”

Ben caught a whiff of fresh air, and saw that, suddenly, the bloody stain was gone from Jess's jacket.

“I—thank you, Ernie.” Ben cleared his throat. “Sorry about that strangling bit. You did good.”

“Nothing, young man.” Ernie fluttered a hand about. “A third order wizard like myself could do much more difficult healing than that.”

“Are you all right?” Ben turned to Jess, who was now standing without help. “Did he—did he—”

“I—don't hurt a bit,” Jess said, her voice touched with wonder. “I do believe he fixed everything, good as new. She pulled up the hem of her shirt, revealing a bare section of her side. “Not even a scar,” she said, peering down. “That is good!”

Ben looked away quickly, surveying the room. “What a mess,” he said, very loudly. The floor was covered with broken tables and chairs, many reduced to splinters. The door, now nothing but fragments of wood, hung from loose hinges. Not a window still held glass. Part of the bar counter had collapsed, and fragments of pottery lay everywhere. Of the innkeeper there was no sign. Silence filled the room, except the low moan of some wounded, and the faint tinkle of a few pieces of glass coming to rest.

“We did good.” Jess tucked her shirt back in. “Real good.” She walked over and picked up Goblin Terror from among the ruins. Plucking out a scrap of cloth from among the debris, she cleaned the weapon and handed it back to Ben. “But you must remember to use your sword next time, Ben. Use it better. You don't swing it with your eyes shut. You can't see if someone is going to hit you when you have your eyes shut, and you might hit a friend by accident. I must teach you more.”

“Yes,” Ernie piped up. “Dreadful there, you were. Incompetent. You must really work on—”

“You!” Jess whirled around. “Shut up. Ben did fine. He did great! He took out most of these men. He did a thousand times better than you!”

“Yes. Of course.” Ernie took a step back, holding up his hands.

Jess turned back to Ben, surveying the destruction. “Those men weren't

working for my father," she said.

"No. I didn't suppose so," Ben said. "It's shocking what men will do for a bit of money."

"That's true, but I don't think these men were just robbers after my money."

"Goblin Terror." He looked down at the sword in his hand. "I knew it."

"No." Jess pushed her hair back out of her face. "Do you remember what that one man said when they first attacked?"

"He went for you."

"That's what he did. What he said was, 'It's her! And him!' Those men were looking for me."

"And me?" Ben said, his voice going up a note with alarm.

"You—or the wizard." Jess cast a look over her shoulder. "There is something going on. Something big, I think. We need to find some survivor who will talk."

The two of them began picking through the rubble. Ernie, who loudly declared that he had had enough of violence and every other type of nastiness, stood by the wall with his sack on the floor beside him. Of the survivors they found, most were quite unconscious. Ben was beginning to think they had done their job too thoroughly in battle when Jess called out from near the door, "Ah! I got one. Come and give me a hand."

He hurried over and helped her lift away broken sections of table. Beneath the debris a man stirred feebly, groaning. Ben recognized the man as one of the six that had entered the room just before the battle began. The man looked much the worse. He had a sallow face, with a thin stringy beard and floppy hair the hung down in his eyes. He appeared to now have a broken nose, and several gashes on his face and forehead, his dazed expression covered in blood.

"What!" Jess gasped, kneeling. "I—I recognize him from the court." She grabbed the man by the front of his shirt, hauling him up slightly. "This is Missar, the sniveling boot-licker that always followed Douglar around. What are you doing here?" She gave Missar a shake. "Answer me!"

"What?" Missar's eyes swung round, wobbling a bit before locking onto Ben, who was peering down from over Jess's shoulder.

"No, no!" Missar clawed at the ground, trying to crawl back. "Don't let that—that—animal near me. That monster! They never told me you had a pet troll!"

"You answer my questions." Jess returned to her feet, standing over Missar. Drawing her sword, she put the point to his throat. "Were you in charge here?"

"Yes, I am," A hint of pride crept into Missar's voice. Then his eyes dropped slightly and he saw the heaps of wreckage scattered about the room. "I mean, I was."

“Who put you in charge? Who sent you? And why did you try to kill me?”

“I—I’ll tell you nothing more!” Missar paused a bit, as if for dramatic effect, then said, “I’m a loyal servant of my master.”

“Who? Rimmah?”

“Kill me now!”

“If I must,” Jess said through her teeth.

“Hold a moment,” Ben stepped past her. “Let—let me try.”

Stooping, he grabbed Missar by his neck and the belt of his pants. Hauling the man up out of the rubble Ben slammed him into the ceiling, cracking the plaster and making the entire inn shake.

“Speak!” he demanded.

Ernie winced. “Gently, gently,” the wizard said. “Be gentle. There is no need to get rough around here. A little talk, some aggression counseling and anger management, and I’m sure we can straighten things out.”

Neither Ben nor Jess was listening.

“Answer our questions,” Jess hissed, her face close to Missar. “Answer them!”

“I’ll break you to pieces if you don’t!” Ben shouted, and hefted Missar to slam him again. “I should crush you to pieces for threatening Jess. I—I—I should reduce you to a pulp! But—if you answer all of her things—her questions, I’ll let you live.”

“No more,” Missar yelped, and began sniveling copiously. “Please, no more! Princess, tell your pet monster to stop! Please, no more smashing! I’ll tell you everything. Everything!”

“Then start telling,” Jess said, not sounding the least sympathetic.

“It’s Master Rimmah and Captain Dougyal,” Missar babbled, still swaying in mid air from Ben’s grip.

“I figured something like that. So it’s *Master* Rimmah now, eh? And what about this *Captain* Dougyal? When I was last around—which wasn’t so long ago—he was nothing more than Rimmah’s hairy adviser.”

“Things change, Princess.”

“Obviously. Start talking—faster. Unless I need Ben here to crack your head again to loosen your tongue?”

“No! Master Rimmah has made himself Grand Exalted Adviser to the King and he’s appointed Dougyal Captain of the Guard.”

“What?” Jess stared at the bloody man, open-mouthed. “My father—”

“Master Rimmah has bound the king and queen to his will. They are his mind slaves, speaking his words. He had everything planned and set up for as soon as you left Galdoron.”

“Why not mind control me as well?”

“He said something about your will and character being too strong, and doing three was much harder than two. Exponential stuff, whatever that is.”

“Why not just kill us all? Blast us to cinders?”

"It's what I would've done," Missar said nastily. "But Master Rimmah said we must work quietly until we've gained full control of the entire kingdom. Only then can we reveal ourselves." Missar sniveled some more and then hiccuped, clearly getting into the stride of feeling sorry for himself.

"Drat that wizard! And blast him too!" Jess muttered. "I see it now. He was always whispering to me how I could do something myself, how I could leave all the delay of the courts behind and fight the goblins myself. He said I was a great warrior and could raise an army to defeat the goblins without bothering to wait around for my father! The slippery cheating liar! I should have guessed he had some insidious plot up his sleeve when he was so keen for me to go off and fight the goblins. Now Ma and Da are imprisoned, and we've a mess on our hands. All right, wretch, what does Rimmah have going? What does he plan to do? Out with it, or I'll—"

"He's commanding the goblins. Once they've built up enough force they'll come pouring across the kingdom and subjugate the people. From Tarn Master Rimmah will move on to conquer the world."

"Quite a plan."

"And when he does he promised I could be duke of all of Tarn."

"You're not going to be duke of anything, because Rimmah isn't going to conquer the world." Jess gave Missar a kick. "Now, why were you sent out here after me?"

"Ouch! Stop! All right! Actually, our goal was originally the wizard Hadagrath. You were supposed to go fight the goblins and meet an untimely demise. Master Rimmah conspired to have the council of wizard's kick Hadagrath out on the charge of pacifism. Once rid of his meddling—and with him outside the safety of the council—Rimmah planned to kill Hadagrath, by one means or another. When the first several attempts failed, and Master Rimmah learned that you were heading back toward Galdoron, I was sent to eliminate both of you by whatever means necessary."

"You certainly know a lot," Jess said.

"One overhears a lot when groveling," Missar said proudly.

"Well, you've done us a service." Jess looked at Ben. "What do you say? Should we kill him?"

Ben shrugged. "It wouldn't serve any purpose."

"No. I suppose not. Except it would allow me to vent some of my anger." Jess gripped the hilt of her sword. "This is a fine mess!"

Missar started to sweat, his face sagging like soft clay.

"Oh, let him go crawling back to his master."

"Okay." Ben lowered him to the ground. Missar was starting to get heavy. "But I've one question. Where do I fit into all of this? Why did this wizard Rimmah have the goblins try to kill my Ma and Da?"

"Who are you?" Missar's gaze focused back on Ben. "A troll?"

"He's not a troll!" Jess said angrily. "Ben isn't ugly like a troll. He isn't

stupid like a troll! He doesn't even smell like a troll. He is Ben the farmer."

"The Stuttering Bard of York," Ben added, feeling he ought to be as important as possible.

"Never heard of either." Disdain crept into Missar's voice.

"What about Rimmah?" Ben said.

"I think you're just an accident," Jess said kindly. "Rimmah wasn't interested in you. He doesn't even know you exist. Those goblins that came to your farm were just going on one of their many raids, preparing to take over all of Tarn at Rimmah's bidding."

"Oh," Ben said. He wasn't sure if that made things better, or worse.

"Rimmah will make sure you're dead, now that you've troubled him," Missar added.

"Shut up. We're done with you, you weasel, so get on out of here!" Jess gave Missar's backside another kick as he crawled toward the gaping entrance. "Tell your filthy master that we'll raise the whole kingdom against him and come with a great army to tear down his gates and string him up on the walls!"

Then Missar was gone.

"Raise a great army?" Ben looked at Jess.

"Well, no." Jess sighed. "But it sounded good. When making threats that's most important. And maybe it will make Rimmah worry when Missar tells him. I wouldn't mind an army at my back, but it'd take too much time to raise the entire kingdom and muster an army. And I don't think we've much time before Rimmah sends all of his foul goblins pouring into the country from the Shiddow Mountains. We'll have to do something quicker than that."

"What?"

"I haven't thought of it yet." Jess tapped her lips with one finger. "First, we get out of this city as fast as possible, before anything more happens. Then we'll talk."



"You were good back there, Ben."

They were beyond Montifol, hiding a short distance from the road, behind a screen of bushes that allowed them to watch the traffic come and go while remaining hidden. Jess sat on Mankiller, giving Ben an odd look.

"Ah—er, t—thanks." He shrugged and stuttered, feeling color come into his ears.

"You can be quite the rough thing when necessary. I never would've imagined it. You fought the battle bravely, and handled Missar quite well. I wouldn't have got him to talk like that without you."

"Well—they were mean to you," he mumbled.

Ernie stood silent nearby. The wizard was looking glum, though Ben

couldn't tell if it was because of the news they had just learned, the attack, or simply because he hadn't managed to finish the meal back in Montifol.

"It's been awhile now, and everything is still quiet. I don't think anyone is coming after us." Jess swung down from the saddle and dropped to the ground. "Any more time spent here is time wasted. We need to form a plan and get moving."

"That vacation to the beach I mentioned earlier?" Ernie said brightly. "We could sit on the beach eating jam pastries."

"No." Jess gave him a sour look. "We must defeat Rimmah and save Tarn—and my parents."

"Bad plan," Ernie said. "Too dangerous."

"What is your plan, Jess?" Ben asked politely.

"Simple. We go in and defeat Rimmah. We hang him from the walls. We win, and this will all be over."

"Okay," Ben said. "I'll do whatever you say. So long as the king is under Rimmah's spell I can't bring him my message. And, I suppose, it would be a bad thing for the goblins to conquer Tarn."

"I'm glad at least one other person here can see that," Jess said, shooting Ernie a look. But the wizard wasn't paying any attention.

"Very bad plan," Ernie said. "Way too dangerous. And unlikely to succeed. Very unlikely, statistically speaking."

"What—you have a better idea?" Jess glared at the wizard. "Let's hear it. I suppose you just think we should leave Rimmah in charge?"

"Yes. Exactly."

"But he's trying to kill you, you stupid wizard," Jess burst out. "And there are my parents to consider, and the safety of all of Tarn. What about all that?"

"Well, I've heard that being mind controlled isn't all so unpleasant compared to some things. And as for Tarn—that hasn't happened yet. Maybe Rimmah will change his mind."

"Really?" Jess's voice dripped with sarcasm. "And what about Rimmah polishing you off?"

"Oh, he isn't really going to do that."

"Such confidence!" She took a step toward Ernie, looking like she wanted nothing more than to take the wizard by the throat and shake him. "Why must you be so pigheaded? We're going to Galdoron to deal with Rimmah and his evil schemes. You're coming because Rimmah is after you."

"No, he isn't after me," Ernie insisted.

"Yes, he is," Jess said, her voice rising. "Missar says he is. You heard him yourself."

"Perhaps Missar is a bit confused about the facts. Some people have the hardest time understanding what they're hearing."

"Is that so?" Jess folded her arms beneath her breasts. "Then of course

you'll want to come with us to Galdoron. If Rimmah is your good friend, I'm sure he'll be glad for the chance to catch up on old news."

"Ah—no." Ernie looked around nervously, as if he expected Rimmah to come striding out from behind some bush.

"Then you admit he is trying to kill you?"

"No, no. But Rimmah won't like it when you come accusing him of these things. I'd rather not be around, thanks. Wizards get testy when they're accused of usurping a kingdom, attempted murder, and such."

"I can imagine," Jess said grimly. "Especially when it's true."

Then she shrugged her shoulders. "Fine. Don't come. It's your skin, after all. Stay behind—and deal with whatever Rimmah sends next all by yourself." She swung back up into Mankiller's saddle and wheeled the horse around.

"Wait. Wait just a minute!" Ernie shouted, waving his staff. "I didn't say I wasn't coming. Someone must come along to dissuade both of you from this foolishness."

"Then come along," Jess said. "Maybe you'll even be of some use. If you can't bring yourself to blast Rimmah maybe you can at least keep him from blasting us."



Chapter Eleven

Wizard Missing

That evening Jess gave Ben more sword lessons. They practiced long and hard in front of the fire, Ben doing his best—mostly to please Jess—while trying, at the same time, to make sure he never accidentally came close to hurting her. At last Jess stepped back and sheathed her sword.

“Enough. That’s good for today,” she said, breathing hard. “Ernie was right—you’re picking it up fast. You weren’t quite aggressive enough, but if you remember everything I showed you—and remember to keep your eyes open and use the edge of the blade—you should be able to send any lard brain out there running.”

“Thanks—I guess.”

He returned to the fire and sat opposite Ernie. Her compliments made him feel warm inside, but he really did rather learn how to play the flute or the harp. Somehow, the swinging of the sword—with all the movements—came easily and felt natural. But he had never wanted to be a warrior. He agreed rather much with Ernie that fighting was nasty. It was noisy, it was scary, and not at all pleasant. Nothing like walking out in the back field plowing with old Ned. Thinking of Ned made him sad. It reminded him of home, of good times, and of his parents.

“Ah, I do love to sew,” Ernie said, adjusting his spectacles. He was—as he always did in the evening—working on his massive quilt. “It’s so much like magic, really,” the wizard said, cutting out another odd shaped piece of fabric with his scissors. “All the threads weaving together so complex-like, to make an amazing whole. Yes—like casting a spell. The same creativity, the same wonder.”

“Like sewing?” Ben peered across the fire. “But I thought earlier you said it was mental.”

“Both, both,” Ernie said expansively, pulling his needle and thread through the cloth.

“What about strange ingredients?”

“Not often as people suppose. But sometimes. Especially when affecting weather and emotions.”

“What about machinations, and obscure incantations?”

“No, no. Most of all that is just to make things seem important. It's a mental thing. But sometimes we do have words. Focus words.”

“What are they?”

“Something that can bring out the spell better.”

Ben looked at him, puzzled.

“Something to focus the energies, focus the concentration,” Ernie explained, pushing his hat back up his head. “Like blasting, for example. Most wizard's have a special word that helps them focus their blasting and unleash it's power.”

“Do you?” Ben said.

“Ha,” Jess said. “He's a pacifist wizard, remember? He doesn't blast.”

“In training I did,” Ernie said, haughtily. “I was quite good at it, in fact. I had to pass tests, you know. And I do have a blasting word, Princess. My word is *Kazaam*.”

“*Kazaam*?” Ben tried the word out. He had expected something more ominous. Something full of power and danger.

“What kind of word is that?” Jess said, scornfully.

“A good one,” Ernie returned to his sewing. “It works quite well when you're screaming.”

“My word would be 'idiot.'” Jess grinned. “I'd blast my enemies out of this world with a final pronouncement on their—”

“And that is why you're not a wizard.” Ernie adjusted his quilt irritably. “Such shallow crassness does not suit the wizard mind. In our circles maturity and deep thinking are required.”

“Then I'm surprised that you ever—”

Sensing another fight brewing, Ben quickly interposed. “That's quite the quilt you're working on, Ernie,” he said. “How big are you going to make it?”

“I'm not sure.” Ernie held up the edge he was working on, staring at it. “I've been working on it so many years it seems a pity to stop. I've just been following my creative urge. You know, artistic inspiration.”

“Are you going to sell it when you're finished, or give it to someone?”

“Sell it? Give it?” Ernie looked up, his eyebrows climbing up his forehead. “My young man, never! Haven't you been listening? This is for the Guild Championship! We're talking about international fame! This is for me! My masterpiece, the pride of my labor. No one else touches this! Once I win the competition I'm going to hang this quilt and—”

“In case you haven't noticed,” Jess said dryly, “he is a very selfish

wizard.”

“A prerogative of old age,” Ernie huffed. “You young people have all the energy. They can save the world and do all that good. Myself, I can barely keep up with saving my own hide. Besides, this *is* important. I'm doing this for my quilting guild.”

“Quilting guild?” Ben watched the needle move swiftly in Ernie's fingers. “I thought that's what old ladies have.”

“Oh yes, it's a nice group. I always had the ladies over for tea, once a week. We would all chat and work together while we ate jam tarts.”

“Talk?” Ben said, wondering what a wizard and old ladies would talk about.

“The most wonderful gossip,” Ernie said, starting to look a little dreamy as he recalled. “Health problems, relationship dramas—there was never a visit without something interesting happening. They all thought I was such a charming fellow. Wonderful quilting guild. There is the great guild competition coming up near the end of the year. I'm going to win top prize for our guild with my quilt. Beat out every guild in the land.”

“Is that very important?” Ben asked.

“You can't even imagine. I'll have the last laugh on the council of wizards when my quilt wins first prize, and the best of show award, and the greatest quilt ever award. Then they all shall bow before me and admit that I—I, Ernie—am the greatest quilter there ever was.” Ernie laughed fiendishly, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. “Then they will beg me to come back. They'll beg that the greatest quilter might join the ranks of such lowly wizards. Imagine that! Can't you just see it! The glory!”

Ernie lowered his hands, his eyes shining rapturously. Ben didn't know what to say. He still wasn't entirely sure what a quilting guild was.

Jess tapped her lips, studying Ernie. “Do all wizards have delusions of grandeur?” she finally said.

“What?” Ernie started out of his thoughts. “Oh, so they say. The child psychologist Anthony Agnew did a study once and said he had proved delusions of grandeur were a necessity if one was going to remain cooped up in a tall tower for prolonged periods of time and forgo normal healthy social interactions that all stable children cherish. His findings have been hotly disputed. It's argued with some authority that his claims are biased and that a twit like Anthony Agnew couldn't penetrate the greatness of a wizard's mind any more than he could understand an ant.”

“Disputed mostly by wizards?” Jess said.

“Yes. Odd, don't you think? I would have thought more people could see it.”



By mid-morning they had come on the next town, nestled in a gently sloping valley of verdant fields and trees full of their fresh spring leaves. The settlement was far smaller than Montifol, but to Ben it still looked very big.

"We must be careful," Jess said, staring at the distant houses. "With my father no longer in control we must be ready for anything. Rimmah could have men watching the town down there, or even have a trap set for us."

"That's bad," Ben said. It was hard to believe the peaceful looking place below them could hold such danger, but he only had to remember what had happened yesterday to convince himself. "What are we going to do?"

"There is still my vacation at the beach idea," Ernie said, hopefully.

"You shut up." Jess swung down from her horse, only half paying attention to Ernie, her eyes distracted in deep thought. "If you want to go find some beach—go. We're going to deal with Rimmah."

"Okay." She turned to Ben. "We go into the town disguised and look around to make sure it's safe. Mankiller and Ernie stay behind because Rimmah might have people looking for them."

"And you," Ben said.

"Not if I go in disguise. Listen. I wear Ernie's cloak to cover my expensive garments. In Ernie's cloak I'd look just like some peasant woman."

"Not to me."

"But that's because you know who I am!" she said, growing exasperated. "Look, I'll be wearing the wizards filthy tattered cloak. Who would imagine a princess doing that?"

"I don't care for your comments about my clothes," Ernie said acidly. "Perhaps I don't want to give up my garment for this adventure."

"Okay, maybe you're right." Ben looked at the rows of houses below. "So then what?"

"I don't think Rimmah will have anyone looking for you. We can go into town as a husband and wife and nobody will guess. Unless Ernie would like to keep his cloak and go in my place."

"You go in and check for danger while I stay behind? An excellent plan, Princess." Ernie began to hurriedly take off his cloak. "And if any rough fellow happens to come along Mankiller can protect—I mean, I'll protect Mankiller from any possible horse thieves."

"But—" Ben said.

"What?" Jess took the filthy, patched, cloak from Ernie. "Not another problem?"

"Husband and wife?" He blushed.

"What?" Then she looked at him, and the barest hint of a smile touched her lips. "You *are* so funny, Ben. It's pretend. A disguise."

"But you're a princess," he mumbled. "And—"

"So? It's *pretend*. And I give you permission. Besides, nobody will know. That's the whole point. Come on, it'll be fun."

“Fun? I don't call fun something that makes me all trembly in my stomach. But . . . I suppose there is no other way.” He rubbed a hand through his hair. “I—it—still, you'll have to tell me what I'm supposed to do. I've never been a husband before.”

“Right. It's easy. See, we'll be a poor couple coming into town to buy supplies. I'll be your meek and quiet wife.”

“Meek?” Ernie snorted.

“We're pretending, and you keep quiet, Wizard.”

“But, couldn't I be meek and quiet and you do all the talking?” Ben shifted on his feet. “You . . . you talk better and you'd know what to say.”

“Can't.” Jess shook her head. “If I speak my refined accent would give me away. In this wizard's cloak I might look like a peasant, but I don't sound like one, do I?”

“No,” Ben admitted.

“What about the swords?” Ernie said. He had already plopped himself down on the bank of the road and was sitting beneath the shade of a bush, chewing on a grass stem. “Do peasants wear such fine swords? They'll give you away.”

Ben and Jess looked down at the swords belted around their waists, one gilded with gold, the other silver.

“Good point,” Jess said. “You'll have to leave the hammer behind, too, Ben. There is no way you can hide it, and you would look strange carrying it around. The swords—” she grimaced. “I hate to be without my sword, but I suppose we must leave them. We'll hide them among the bushes over there.”

“And what are we going to do?” Ben was growing more uneasy with the whole idea the more Jess talked. “What must I say?”

“We'll go around town, buy a few small things at some shops, and ask questions. Mostly we check to see if there are any men watching the place. Here are some small coins to pay for the things you buy.” Jess dug into her pouch and handed him some small copper coins. “Now remember, in this part of the world we use money. No talk of eggs. Got it?”

“Right.” Ben nodded his head. “People want worthless things like gold and silver. I'll remember.”

“Okay—right.” Jess rubbed at her forehead. “Good enough. Just, Ben . . . don't say that. Say as little as possible.”

“I'll do whatever you say.”

“While we're about we'll keep our eyes open for anything suspicious and you'll ask some innocuous questions to find out if anything is going on.”

“Me?”

“I'm supposed to be your meek wife, remember?”

“Me, talk to a complete stranger? Ask questions? What am I supposed to say? Or is—is what I do good enough?”

“Oh.” She paused, halfway through unbuckling her sword belt. “That's

right. I thought you were just complaining because you were nervous. I forgot you talk like . . . I stopped noticing it after awhile.”

“Yeah, but I stutter worse when I’m talking to strangers, and even worse when I’m—”

“True.” Jess tapped her lip thoughtfully for a few minutes, then shook her head. “You’ll just have to do the best you can. I can’t go around talking. I’ll whisper what you should say ahead of time. Don’t worry—they’ll be simple questions. I won’t embarrass you.”

Ben wasn’t worried about being embarrassed. That happened all the time and he figured he was about as used to it as he would ever be. He was worried that somehow his stuttering might get them into trouble. Being the cause of Jess’s death was something he didn’t think he could ever get used to. But he said nothing and tried to ignore the wiggling feeling of dread deep in his stomach.



In spite of Ben’s misgivings, and a fair amount of stuttering on his part, they were not thrown into a dungeon, or assaulted by armed men. It went well, he had to confess. There were only a few odd stares that people gave him when he couldn’t say some of the more lengthy things Jess whispered to him.

An hour and a half later they were back outside the city.

“See?” Jess said. “You did it. And you didn’t stutter too much.”

“Not too much?”

“Well . . . we did what we needed to do. That’s what counts.”

“I suppose,” he said, reluctantly. “That one merchant looked at us funny with you whispering to me all the time.”

“Yes, but we weren’t discovered. And we’ve learned that it’s safe to go through the town. With a little time and effort I’ll make you into a—where’s Ernie?”

“I don’t know.”

Both of them stopped, standing in the middle of the road. They were at the exact spot they had left the wizard sitting on the bank of the road not so long ago, only there was no sign of Ernie or Mankiller.

“Maybe he decided to find a good place to take a nap while he waited for us,” Ben said.

“That would be like him,” Jess said. “But why would he go far?” She climbed the bank and walked a few feet through the bushes. “Our swords and your hammer are still beneath this bush—and besides, Mankiller would never let that dumb wizard take him anywhere.”

Ben buckled on his sword and picked up his hammer. He peered under the bushes that lined the road. He saw a few bird nests, but no hint of a

napping Ernie. "Maybe Rimmah cast some vanishing spell on them."

"He better not have," Jess muttered, gripping the hilt of her sword. "If that Rimmah made Mankiller vanish he'll be sorry."

"Maybe . . . maybe . . . maybe Mankiller decided to take Ernie for a ride."

"Rimmah would vanish the wizard before Mankiller did that." Jess climbed to the high point on the bank and looked around. "And if vanishing was that easy why didn't Rimmah do it in the first place instead of going through all the trouble of sending men and goblins after us?"

"Then what did happen?" Ben asked.

"Not Mankiller taking that stupid wizard for a ride. Something bad. Whatever happened, Ernie is sure to blame. That wizard—hey, look here, they didn't vanish." Jess knelt in the grass. "See, the ground is scuffed and churned up here. Mankiller was frightened. He danced about here, and then went that way."

"And Ernie?"

"It's too confused. Maybe he made himself vanish."

"I doubt it," Ben said. "Maybe Rimmah, but not Ernie."

"Well, we'll have to look." Jess pushed back to her feet with a sigh. "At least we need to find Mankiller. He's carrying all of our supplies. Come on, we spread out a bit, but not too far. We keep each other in sight. Watch the ground for any sign of tracks. And watch—watch for any trouble."

"Right."

They began to work their way out through the tall grass and bushes, heading toward the thick forest that loomed on the other side of the field. Every few steps Jess whistled shrilly and called out, "Mankiller!"

Ben tried whistling, but he couldn't do it. The only whistling he knew was whistling a tune, not the shrill clear call Jess could do. Instead he cupped his hands around his mouth and bellowed, "Hereeee Mankiller! Come here, boy! Here horsey, horsey, horsey!" The words echoed from the trees.

"There. I bet he heard that." Ben lowered his hands. "That should—what?" Jess stared at him.

"Mankiller is a *horse* trained for battle—not a dog."

"Well . . ." He shrugged, looking down at the hammer in his hand.

There was a faint whinny, followed by the thud of hooves. Mankiller appeared in the distance galloping across the field, cantering up to Jess.

"Mankiller!" Jess hurried toward the horse, her hands taking the bridle. "What happened? What's the matter?"

The horse snorted, rolling its eyes, flanks trembling.

"Oh, someone is going to pay!" Jess ran a hand down Mankiller's neck. "Easy. Easy, boy."

"Look." Ben pointed at Mankiller's flank. "There. He's injured."

Jess turned. Running through Mankiller's silver coat were three long red claw marks.

“Goblins,” Jess hissed.



Chapter Twelve

Culinary Experimentation

That's good. Good, Mankiller," Jess whispered. She patted the horse's neck. "You stay here. We'll come back for you. And if the goblins come, run. Understand?"

The horse snorted softly.

They were deep in the thick tangle of the forest. At Jess's gentle coaxing Mankiller had led them into the forest, steadily picking his way deeper until the shrill cackling of goblins reached all of their ears. Then Mankiller balked at going any further.

"Ernie?" Ben murmured, peering through the dimness ahead, the hair crawling on the back of his neck at the wild goblin cackling.

"Somewhere up there," Jess said in a low voice.

"How did Mankiller escape?"

"He's a smart horse. Now, are we going?"

"I guess." Ben gripped his hammer tightly. "What are we going to do?"

"We'll figure that out when we get there."

"Maybe Mankiller is smarter than us," Ben said, and wished he didn't feel so sick to his stomach.

They crept further through the maze of trees. Limbs hung down thickly, the branches grabbing at their clothes and making it impossible to see very far ahead. Jess advanced in the lead, hand on her sword. Ben followed with his hammer held ready. The shrieks of the goblins were ghastly and grew ever louder.

"King's good name," Ben muttered. "I hope we can find our way out once we reach Ernie."

"We might not have to worry about that," Jess whispered. "If we don't survive."

Ahead, the trees appeared to thin, and Ben thought he could make out a

clearing past a row of bushes. Advancing on their hands and knees, they crawled up to the bushes and peered through.

They saw a large clearing beyond the bushes. In the middle of the clearing sat a big black metal pot. In the pot sat Ernie, blindfolded and tied up. Goblins danced around the pot, squealing and shrieking as they shoved pieces of wood under the pot and tossed eggs at Ernie's bedraggled figure.

"My eggs!" Ben squeaked indignantly. "They're using my eggs!"

"Forget the eggs," Jess whispered, putting a hand over his mouth. "The king preserve us—look at all those goblins. Things are in a bad way if so many of those foul creatures can get this far into Tarn. They're going to eat the wizard."

"There isn't a fire," Ben said.

"But there might be one soon," Jess said in a hushed voice. "We must do something—quick! Pass me my bow and arrows."

"The bow is with Mankiller and there aren't any arrows," Ben said. "I used them up last time, remember?"

"Drat all that," Jess said.

"I'm sorry."

"Well, one dead goblin is as good as the next I suppose. At least the arrows were put to use."

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't know." Jess chewed at her lip. "The odds are even worse than last time. Drat that wizard for getting us into this!"

Jess looked around the clearing, searching for some inspiration. Ben spent most of his time trying to count the goblins—which was very hard because they kept dancing around and mixing him up—and feeling increasingly dreadful. There were over fifty goblins, which made it twice as many as last time.

"Okay. I got it," Jess said suddenly. "Over there—that big goblin is the leader. Do your hammer throwing thing and take him out. Then we jump out from hiding with a great shout, swords drawn."

"Will it work?" he said, dubiously.

"It's the best I could come up with." She gave a sheepish shrug. "At least we can sell our lives dearly."

"Well . . . okay."

Not feeling at all happy, Ben took his hammer in both hands and prepared to wind up for his swing. Trying to calm his beating heart with thoughts of home, he took aim and let fly. The hammer shot across the clearing, right over the pot, and struck the big fat hairy goblin right between the eyes. There was a crunch. The goblin gave a muffled "Blaat!" and fell over backward.

"For Tarn and freedom!" Jess cried, and leaped out with her sword drawn.

"For my Ma!" Ben bellowed, and followed, Goblin Terror flashing high.

All the goblin shrieking stopped. The creatures stood still, their big drooling mouths hanging open, hands grasping tree branches and eggs.

“C-c-come on!” Ben stuttered, stepping out in front of Jess. “T-the f-f-first one to come pays for burning down the farm!”

Goblin eyes bugged out of their squinty faces. Wood dropped from fingers, weapons clattering to the ground, eggs shattering. Then a great howl went up and the goblins scattered in every direction, gibbering and screaming as they disappeared into the forest.

“We're done for,” Ben breathed. “They've gone for reinforcements.”

“I don't think so.” Jess lowered her sword.

“Then what? You think they were scared of me?”

“I don't know.” She peered into the surrounding trees. “They acted like they were. Ah—it was your sword. It must have a magical ability to bring terror for goblins. Ernie said something like that.”

“Really?” Ben stared at the shimmering polished blade. “He did say something like that. Well. I guess it is rather useful.”

“To say the least.” Jess frowned at the blindfolded Ernie.

“Hello? Hello?” Ernie called out from within the pot. “Is someone there? I think I hear talking. Can anyone hear me?”

“Yes,” Ben said, sheathing the sword. “It's us.”

“Yes, us.” Jess stormed across the clearing. “The only two people stupid enough to rescue a wizard like you. You lummoX! Why didn't you draw that sword last time we were attacked by goblins? We were almost killed and you just stood back shouting instructions. If you'd just waved the stupid sword around the goblins would have ran away and saved us a lot of trouble.”

“True . . . I hadn't thought about it at the time,” Ernie said. “I was a bit preoccupied with thoughts of premature death and such. Where are you? Could you untie me?”

Ben pulled off the blindfold and they both started untying the wizard's bonds.

“Those goblins were going to cook you and eat you,” Ben said.

“Apparently,” Ernie said.

“But I thought goblins ate their meat raw.”

“Yes.” Ernie flicked some eggshell off the shoulder of his robe. With broken eggs splattered all over him he looked a mess—even more a mess than usual. “Apparently they've decided to broaden their culinary horizons and experiment with cooked wizard. I'll have to report this development to the council when I get the time.”

“The goblins were about to eat you,” Jess said. “Why didn't you blast them? If we'd arrived a few minutes later you'd have been sitting over a roaring fire. Better alive then a dead pacifist.”

“I knew you'd rescue me.” Ernie bent over in the pot, coming back up with his hat.

“Knew!” Jess's voice rose with outrage. Then her eyes narrowed. “How could you know? You were blindfolded.”

“Ah.” Ernie picked a bit of sticky egg from the brim of his hat then settled it on his head. “That is, I was considering blasting them but since I was blindfolded I couldn't aim properly and I didn't want to hit any friends.”

“Friends?” Jess sputtered. “What are you talking about? Until we showed up and chased the goblins away you could have blasted in every direction and hit a goblin without worrying about friends!”

“Yes. Well. Truth is, I was scared stiff,” the wizard admitted. “I couldn't think straight enough to blast them.”

“I figured,” Jess grumbled, helping him out of the pot. “Remind me to never depend on you in a pinch. I swear, I've never met a more worthless wizard.”

“It's not so bad as that,” Ernie said. “I can do some things.”

“Like get in trouble,” Jess said.

Ben wasn't paying attention to either of them. His eyes had lighted upon his cloth sack. Walking slowly over, he knelt. “They wasted my eggs,” he said, mournfully. He peered inside the sack. “I've only half left. Now how will I ever get Ned back when I'm done adventuring? Those goblins have ruined everything! They'll pay for what they've done!”

“It's okay . . .” Jess came over and squatted beside him. “When we defeat Rimmah I'll make sure you get back twice as many eggs. You'll get Ned back, Ben, I promise.”

“Rimmah?” Ernie straightened, looking around. “Are you still caught up in that delusion?”

“Delusion?” Jess turned around, her fists on her hips. “Don't talk to me about delusion! When are you going to finally admit Rimmah is trying to kill you? When will you see that we must defeat him?”

“The latter is impossible, so I wish you would stop talking about it. As for the other . . . maybe he isn't after me,” Ernie said.

“How can you say that? How can he not be after you? The goblins came and captured you, didn't they?”

“It could have been misdirection. Those things can happen.” Ernie walked over and picked up his sack, carefully peering inside to make sure the goblins had disturbed nothing.

“Misdirection?” Ben said.

“An accident. Confusion of identity. A seeking spell misapplied. You know—that sort of thing.”

“An accident?” Jess stared at him. “If you were standing in a clear field and someone shot an arrow at you—would you think it was an accident?”

“Well . . . maybe they mistook me for a rabbit, or an antelope.”

“What they'd mistake you for is an idiot and it wouldn't be a mistake because that is what you are!” Jess gave a disgusted sigh. “Look, we're going

to deal with Rimmah. Are you coming along or do you want to wait around and see if someone is going to send more goblins after this rabbit that you keep being mistaken for?"

Ernie thought a moment. "Ah. I guess I'll be traveling with you for a bit . . . just to be safe."

"Fine. Let's get going. We've already wasted enough time. Got your stuff, Ben?"

"What's left of it." Ben had retied his sack of remaining eggs and retrieved his hammer. "Those goblins are going to feel my wrath next time they show themselves."

"Hopefully they won't," Jess said. "Because if they do it'll mean they're no longer scared of Goblin Terror."

"But—" Ernie hurried after Ben and Jess as they walked from the clearing. "Couldn't we resolve this peacefully? I mean, couldn't we take some conflict resolution class with Rimmah, or something? Maybe go in for professional mediation. They have services for just this kind of—"

"Evil wizards are destroyed, Ernie," Jess called over her shoulder. "That's the only solution."

"Bother." Ernie hiked his sack on his back and picked up his pace. "I hate confrontations. They get nasty—and never turn out nice. You're sure we can't do mediation? Maybe long distance mediation?"

"Ernie, Rimmah is trying to kill you!"

Ernie sighed. "Then you see why we musn't be confrontational about this."

"What, bargain it to halfway?" Jess threw up her hands. "I don't think so!"



Chapter Thirteen

Grave Hounds

They traveled hard the rest of the day, both Ben and Jess eager to make up for lost time and put as much distance between them and the goblins as they could manage.

When night finally came they set up camp in a small stand of trees a short distance from the road. After they finished supper Jess began another training session with Ben. It lasted until Jess became exhausted.

"It's not fair," she said, sitting on a log and resting her sword between her knees. "How can you keep it up? You're not even tired!"

"Well . . . it's not really hard," Ben said. He felt a little guilty, as if she had leveled some accusation. "I mean, not like working in Master Cendric's forge, or hauling rocks out of the field, or harvesting grain all day."

She looked at him a moment, then rubbed wearily at her brow. "The advantages of not growing up in court, I guess," she muttered. "The king's name, if we had a army of men like you the goblins wouldn't have a chance."

"We don't have to do this anymore if it tires you out too much," Ben said. The chance that he might accidentally hurt Jess had him constantly nervous, and he was only too glad to stop.

"No, I can take it." She stretched her shoulders and sighed. "You're learning fast, but you still have a lot to learn. Besides, I don't dare stop. If so many goblins can come this far into Tarn . . . I'm afraid of what we'll find in Galdoron. We'll need every able warrior I can get—especially since that wizard sitting over there isn't going to help."

"What?" Ernie looked up from his sewing. "You're not stopping already, are you?"

"Yes, were are. For tonight." Jess looked at the wizard levelly. "Why do you care, anyhow?"

"No, no. You haven't trained him enough for tonight," Ernie admonished,

wagging a long finger. "He must learn faster. He must become the best."

"But I'm tired. And *I'm* the one teaching him. Besides—" she got up and rammed her sword back into its scabbard. "Why? Why are you so insistent? Why do you care if he knows how to fight with a sword? I know you've a reason, wizard, so you can stop pretending you don't!"

"It's important," Ernie said, and looked back to his sewing.

"For what?" Jess crossed her arms. Ben looked at Ernie, curious too.

"So he can defend me," Ernie mumbled. "He is very good you know."

"But he doesn't have to be good. He can just wave that stupid sword around and any goblin would run away. In fact, you don't need him to do that."

"That only works with goblins," Ernie said, staring intently at his stitches. "We must take precautions—"

"You cheat!" Jess shouted. "What else? What is it you're preparing for! You're just using him! It isn't his responsibility to defend you. You're a wizard—you should learn to defend yourself!"

"He's handy—he can do a good job of it with a little more training."

"And he's expendable, is that it? He's just a farmer. That's what you think, isn't it? I know you wizard types! But it isn't his job. Look at him! He's some provincial . . . thing. I'm the princess. If anyone is supposed to look after worthless people like you it's me."

"But you won't," Ernie pointed out. "This young man will, so—"

"That's because he's too nice!"

"It's okay," Ben said, growing a little concerned at Jess's heated insistence. "So long as he stays around I'll help. I mean, I'd help anyone. It's not nice to be eaten by goblins."

"See, Princess?" Ernie beamed at him.

"Just wait," Jess glowered. "I warn you, Ben, he'll use you. He has no shame. He'd have you stand between him and any foul creature just so he could get away. And who knows what other foul things are going to come after him? I don't want you dying for that worthless old coward."

"Why not?"

"Why not?" She threw up her hands. "What kind of stupid question is that? Should I want you dead?"

"I thought princess don't much worry about it." He scratched his head, wondering what stupid thing he had said this time. "I mean, you've important things. Princesses shouldn't concern themselves—"

"That's what the court says." Jess sighed. "But I'm not like the court. I do care."



By mid afternoon of the next day they were climbing through high hill

country. It was steep forested land that reminded Ben of home, except there were no Shiddow Mountains rising in the distance.

Compared to the previous day, and saving Ernie from savage goblins, it was peaceful. An occasional bird twittered from the high canopy of branches above them and the *clop-clop* of Mankiller's hooves echoed in a relaxed and pleasing way.

No one spoke, and in the silence Ben's mind wandered off, back and away until his thoughts came to rest on *Spring Under The Mountains*, the last song he had begun and never finished. He began to hum the first line to himself, picking it over as he thought.

"Spring wind on the air, oh spring wind on the air," he sang aloud. Then the next line came back to him. "The sweet spring air makes me think of you."

"Oh I'm far from home and lost in this wide world," he sang. "But still this spring wind makes me think of you." He sang all his words over again, quite heartily, as he tried to think up the next verse.

"The shadow of the mountain looms so cold, but still my heart warms at the thought of you. Though I'm in this far distant land, still I remember you." He was silent a moment, then continued, "Everywhere I look, tis you. Oh the beauty of spring reminds me of you."

"First stanza repeated between each verse," he muttered, then re-sang it all, loudly, repeating the first verse in the proper place.

"Still too short," he said to himself, once he had finished. "Ned would like it, but I need more comparisons of beauty. Somehow to work in the clouds and the sun. Buds and flowers." He sighed.

"Well," Ernie said after Ben had lapsed into thoughtful silence. "If there were any bandits lying in wait, they know we're coming."

"Oh, hush!" Jess said sharply. "Since when have you become a music critic?"

"I've heard and seen a lot in my life and never has that been called—"

"Shut up, Wizard. Be nice to him!"

Ben started from his thoughts. He was walking in front, and, caught up in his own world, he had forgotten that there were other people with him and he was traveling to Galdoron to defeat a powerful evil wizard that might kill him. He blushed, realizing what they had heard.

The silence stretched on painfully.

"You know," Jess said. "Your voice actually isn't bad. Your singing is . . . strange. Unrefined—but it is more joyful than any I've heard before."

His ears grew quite hot and he was glad he walked ahead, where no one could see his face. He would not make a very good bard, he thought. Bards didn't become embarrassed.

"How do you come up with that song?" she said.

"Different ways," he stuttered, and then added, almost tripping over his

own words, "it isn't finished." None of which exactly answered the question. The beginning of the song had come about in much the same silly way as most of his other songs, but he wasn't going to tell her who he had been thinking about when he came up with the rest of the lines.

The silence seemed to strain on for endless seconds. "I like your hair," he finally mumbled, and then was sorry it had burst out.

He was saved from immolation at his own embarrassment—or Jess saying anything—by Ernie, who suddenly said quite sharply, "Did I hear something?"

"Probably those bandits you're worried about," Jess quipped. But Ernie wasn't taken.

"No, no," the wizard said, his face serious. "It sounded . . . more animal."

"Like what?" Ben said. "A bird?"

"More like a howl," Ernie said, uneasily. "A baying."

"Maybe a wolf," Ben said. "It's a little early in the day, but—"

"Maybe," Ernie muttered. "How about we pick up the pace a little bit?"

That was odd, Ben thought, because the wizard always complained about wanting to travel slower.

They went on, another hour slipping away. A slight breeze came, rustling the leaves.

"Say." Ben slowed, looking back. "I thought I heard it too. That was a strange howl. I've heard no wolf like that before."

"Really?" Ernie laughed nervously. "Probably you were mistaken. Are you some kind of expert on wolves or something?"

"Wizard . . ." Jess gave Ernie a stern look. "Ben isn't as stupid as he sometimes sounds."

"We have wolves around the Shiddow Mountains all the time," Ben said. "I hear them almost every night. I know what they sound like. There! Hear it?"

"Yes, I do now." Jess cocked her head to one side. "That is the oddest sound . . ."

Odd did not describe it. It was a shrill, powerful call that seemed to make the very air grow chill and put an unspeakable dread in their hearts.

"Oh, bother," Ernie whimpered. "Bother and double bother."

"What?" Jess's hand drifted to her sword hilt as she looked back through the trees. "What is it, wizard?"

"It might be—it could be—possibly—" Then the howl came, clear this time and louder. Mankiller whinnied and snorted, rolling his eyes. Ernie swallowed. "I mean to say, it probably, definitely, surely is grave hounds."

"What?" Jess's head snapped around and she glared at Ernie. "Child's legends. Nightmare stories to scare the little ones. I'm in no mood for jokes, wizard."

"But it does sound just like I imagined grave hounds would sound," Ben

said, rubbing his short chin hairs. "Amazing, the coincidence."

"That's because they are!" Ernie gripped his staff, knuckles white.

Another howl came, followed by several more. Ben felt the hair on his neck stand on end. Mankiller shied.

"King's name," Ben shifted his grip on the hammer. "Maybe we all stopped along the road somewhere and took a nap and we all just dreamed we kept walking. That would make this a dream. Or a nightmare."

Jess looked uncertainly at Ernie.

"Believe me," Ernie pleaded. "I'm a wizard of the third order. I know these kind of things. Trust me when I say it's grave hounds. More than one. Many more than one! And they're coming this way!"

"So . . ." Jess loosened her sword in its scabbard. "Let's say you're right. What do you suggest we do?"

"Run!" Ernie gathered up his robes and prepared to follow his own advice.

"Run?" Jess frowned. "We should find a good defensive position and fight them."

"Fight? Impossible! They're fearless creatures of immense power!" Ernie babbled, waving his staff wildly. "Huge black shapes, tireless in the hunt, blood chilling to behold. They kill swift as death itself and are nearly impossible to stop! Our only hope is to outrun them."

"How?" Jess demanded. "You said they don't tire."

"Well, they don't know how to swim," Ernie said. "We can hope there is a deep river somewhere ahead. Close ahead. Even a lake would do."

"Then let's go," Jess said. "I hope you're right, and I hope there is a river ahead because I really don't feel like fighting whatever is following us."

"Only one problem." Ernie sounded miserable. "I don't know how to swim."

"It figures you wouldn't," Jess said through clenched teeth. The shrill baying was growing louder. "Come on, we'll worry about that after we've found some water. Everyone up on Mankiller. No one is going to outrun those things on foot."

Ben shook his head. "Your horse can't carry all of us. Not and run. You and Ernie go, and I'll keep up as best I can on foot."

Jess chewed at her lip. "You're right," she said at last, reluctantly. "But we're not leaving you behind."

"Not unless we must," Ernie said, scrambling up behind Jess.

They ran. Jess kept Mankiller at Ben's pace and Ben ran as fast as he could. The shrill blood chilling howls spurred him on.

The shadows of afternoon lengthened through the forest toward evening. The baying of the grave hounds didn't growt more distant. Slowly, ever closer, they came. With each fresh howl a terrible sense of doom clutched at their hearts, squeezing tight until it felt as if they couldn't breathe.

"This isn't going to work." Ben stopped running, gasping for breath and

trying to muster up what little courage he had left. "I'm slowing you down. Go on. I'll stay back and hold them off."

"Never!" Jess pulled Mankiller around. "We're not leaving you. Don't be stupid! Either we all survive, or none of us do. Now hurry up."

"She's right," Ernie said, his eyes wide with fright. "Alone, the hounds will finish you off without a pause. Much as I'd like it if you could delay them, you're of more use protecting me when they finally catch us all."

"Then we'd better start thinking about what we'll do when these grave hounds catch up with us," Ben said grimly, staring back through the darkening shadows of the trees. "We haven't much time left."

"We run as fast and far as we can," Ernie said. "Go, go!"

Reluctantly, Jess turned Mankiller away from the howling pursuers and flicked the reins.

Ben ran, his heart pounding in his chest so hard it felt as if it would burst through his breast bone. Evening grew dark and he thought there could be nothing more terrifying than facing the grave hounds in the pitch blackness of night. He wished he was dead already. Every time another chill howl went up he almost thought he could see the great dark shapes of the grave hounds leaping through the forest behind them, closing in hungrily. The choking fear made him want to throw up, and it was all he could do to keep from turning around and looking.

"There!" Jess cried out. The trail sloped downward in front of them. Ahead, in the fading light, they saw white water splashing through the trees. "We're saved! Hurry!"

They plunged down the trail, running full out until they burst clear of the trees and reached the burbling stream. They splashed across to the clearing on the other side. The water only came up to the middle of Ben's calves as he crossed.

"No good," Ernie groaned when they reached the far bank. "No good. That won't stop the grave hounds. Slow them for a moment and no more. Our odds were slim, now gone to none. We've bet the house and lost! We're doomed."

"Be quiet," Jess said sharply. "We'll have to make our stand here. This is the best we'll manage."

"I could stay here and you go on," Ben said. He was glad to stop running and finally turn to face what pursued them.

"Yes," Ernie said. "Maybe we should—"

"No," Jess snapped. "We all stay and fight together." She swung down from Mankiller's back and drew her sword.

"Bother." Ernie scrambled off Mankiller, dropping his large sack to the ground. He stood, wringing his hands. "I was afraid of this. Why, why, why couldn't we have gone for a vacation at the beach?"

"Just shut up, Ernie." Jess took her stand beside Ben. The burbling

splashing creek was in front of them, the wall of the forest behind them. “You can always blast those foul creatures if you stop your sniveling and actually try.”

“Try? Do you know what blasting is like? Why, if it was all so easy as that —” Ernie choked off.

In the growing darkness they could see no further than the trees along the opposite bank. And there, in the deep shadow, black shapes appeared. They were nearly impossible to see in the darkness except that their milky white eyes glowed with an unnatural radiance.

“Save us.” Ernie gurgled and tottered about as if he thought to run, but couldn't decide where.

The black shapes slunk forward to the edge of the water. There were six of them, massive in size, with thick black bristling coats, large grizzled heads, and gaping mouths that seemed full of oversized teeth. White foam rimmed their lips, dripping on the earth, tongues lolling in their great mouths as they stood on the bank panting loudly, hungrily.

Ben took a deep breath. “It doesn't look good,” he said.

“Statistically speaking, we're dead,” Ernie whimpered. “We haven't a chance. I almost wish I could blast those creatures.”

“Then do it!” Jess hissed.

“Can't. Blast them? Why, all of that howling and teeth gnashing makes my knees knock so bad and my lips tremble so much I don't think I could bring up much more than a light sprinkle.”

“What?” Ben turned.

“Prostate trouble,” Ernie muttered. “It affects bladder function when you get old. Pay attention to those creatures—I'm expecting you to defend me.”

“Well, I think our wizard is bad at his math,” Jess said, her voice loud. “I think we've a chance, and I intended to fight to make it a good chance.”

“Done for,” Ernie groaned. “Only Calbrac the giant warrior took on six grave hounds single-handed and survived.”

“We'll do our best,” Jess said, testily. “Now be quiet. Those foul beasts are about to cross.”

“Too bad he isn't here,” Ben said.

“Well, you have his sword. A pity not the skill, not yet. If only you'd been trained more.” Ernie put himself well behind Ben and Jess. “I knew you should have. Then we'd have a chance.”

“Wizard,” Jess flared. “I told you—”

“Yes, yes. Okay, I'll be quiet. Just one more thing.” Ernie backed up until he was at the base of a very tall pine tree at the edge of the clearing. “Don't let them bite you unless you must. Anyone who touches their saliva will be driven slowly, raving, mad.”

Anything more Ernie had been thinking of saying was lost as the six black grave hounds lifted their heads in unison and howled their chilling,

limb stiffening cry. Then the smallest of the hounds gave a great leap and cleared the creek in one bound. It gave one look back at the others, as if to encourage them on, and then began to advance. Snorting and huffing with displeasure, the rest of the hounds waded across.

“Aaarrrgggh!” Ernie shrieked. “Make it to safety! Climb as high as you can!” Squealing like a frightened pig, the wizard began attempting a mad scrambled up the pine tree.

Ben very much wanted to do the same thing, but somehow he managed to remain where he stood. As the grave hounds advanced, picking up speed, he managed a rather strangled roar and hurtled his hammer at the leading runt. The aim was true and the hammer struck the wide skull of the grave hound with a resounding crack. The creature went down and flipped end for end like a limp bundle of fur.

The largest and most fearsome of the hounds leaped into the lead, coming for Ben, snarling ferociously. Ben nearly choked on his tongue, terror clawing in his throat. Somehow, he managed to pull Goblin Terror out of its scabbard and bring it up, his feet braced wide. The grave hounds didn't even slow at the sight of the flashing blade.

The great leader of the grave hounds came on. Looking at the milky, wild, eyes, Ben felt his strength leave him, his mind gone numb. The creature bounded forward and Ben stood unmoving. The hound leaped, mouth agape. At the last moment Ben squeezed his eyes shut, dropped to his knees, and swung Goblin Terror over his head with all of his might.

The grave hound sailed over his head and Goblin Terror's blade connected with the foul beast, splitting the creature from chest to tail as it passed over Ben. The hound struck the ground, dead, sliced nearly in half, insides spilling across the ground. The foul stench of death filled the air, overpowering.

Ben staggered to his feet, gasping.

“Excellent blow,” Jess said, her voice trembling. “Finished in one strike.”

“I closed my eyes,” he confessed.

“Only four left. You're doing fine. Keep it up and we might survive.”

The four remaining hounds slowed, hesitating, uncertain now that their leader had fallen. They began to spread out, coming from different directions, heads low, slinking. Ben and Jess went back to back, their swords held up. Ernie whimpered from in the tree. The wizard had only made it halfway up before his robes became entangled in the branches, and now he clung tight, exposed against the trunk.

“Two for each of us,” Jess said. “We'll have to be quick.”

“Right,” Ben said.

Then the grave hounds attacked.

“Careful!” Ernie shouted from his perch in the tree. “Oh, careful! Watch their bite! Watch it! Oh, I can't watch! Oh! Oh! The king save us! Watch

them, get that one! Hit them! Don't be incompetent!"

It was a desperate fight. Ben swung his sword, the blade slicing up the side of the first black hound to reach him. The creature leaped back, but the second came on and he turned only just in time to meet it. His sword caught the hound across the front, but the impact knocked him back, almost sending him to his knees.

Snarling, the two grave hounds circled, snapping at him with their large gleaming teeth. Ben swung his blade at their heads, trying to keep them back. Then, suddenly, one of the hounds whirled about and attacked the tree Ernie was hiding in while the second lunged for Ben again. Caught by surprise, Ben was driven back parrying the snapping jaws.

The grave hound that had gone after the wizard tore large chunks out of the tree, its powerful jaws making the entire trunk tremble.

"Save me! Save me!" Ernie screamed, quite out of his mind. "I'm done in! Finished!"

Nobody came, Ben and Jess unable to do much as respond. With all her skill Jess was just keeping her two grave hounds at bay, and Ben desperately struggled against one. The hound came from first one side, then another, snarling, lunging, and then leaping back. Ben never knew where to defend, and was sure his death waited only seconds away.

The creatures reeked of rotting graves, the stench so foul it was limb-weakening and stomach-sickening. Ben felt light-headed, his throat tight against a gag as he struggled to keep on his feet. The hound slunk round to the side, coming in low. Fighting to collect his scattered thoughts, Ben feinted to one side. The hound leaped and Ben spun, meeting the grave hound's attack, his blade coming down, splitting the creature's skull clean in half.

He straightened, stepping away from the dead creature and looking for Jess. She lay on the ground, her sword through the chest of the grave hound looming over her. The creature still fought, its jaw snapping for her face as its large feet clawed at her front. Hands gripping her sword plunged through the creature, one foot braced against the hairy chest of the hound, it took all of Jess's strength to keep the beast at bay.

The second hound went for Jess, but Ben leaped forward with a great roar, intercepting the monster. His sword point scoured the side of the grave hound and the creature whirled from Jess, snarling. Goblin Terror waving in the air, Ben forced the hound backward.

His mind whirled. Jess struggled for her very life and in a few minutes Ernie's tree would come crashing down and the wizard would end his life beneath the reeking jaws of a grave hound. This was the end, Ben thought. He had to act now, or everything was lost.

The hound lunged, its teeth snapping so close to his leg he could feel the wash of hot putrid breath. He stumbled back, swinging his sword clumsily to

ward off the beast. The hound leaped again with a growl of triumph. Ben threw himself aside with a cry and swung his sword out. The grave hound howled.

Ben struggled to his knees, turning. His wild blow had opened a deep gash along the thick neck of the hound. Black blood gushed from the wound, sprinkling the ground, but the creature still turned toward Ben, fury in its white glowing eyes.

“The king destroy you!” He swung his sword again, and this time he aimed true. The grave hound's head fell from its body and the creature collapsed, dead.

“Jess!” He sprang to his feet, fighting against his sickness and weariness.

The princess gave a great shout and shoved her sword to the hilt in the chest of the grave hound atop her. Struggling, she heaved the giant beast off. The grave hound rolled, flopping across the ground, its foam rimmed mouth snapping wildly.

“Oh.” Jess rolled over onto her hands and knees, her voice weak. She looked up, her face deathly white. “Oh,” she said again, then collapsed.

“Jess!” Ben hurried to her, but she lay limp and unresponsive under his shaking hand.

“There is nothing you can do for her,” Ernie squeaked from up in the tree. “Except win this fight and save us all! Look out! That one's coming round!”

Ben looked up. The first grave hound he had hit with his hammer was staggering back to its feet, teeth bared. The other remaining grave hound continued tearing at Ernie's tree, the trunk almost completely torn through, the tree wavering.

This wasn't a fair fight, and Jess was hurt. The grave hounds were mean—mean and evil. A small hot coal of anger formed in Ben's chest, giving him some strength and clearing away the blackness that had enveloped his mind. Before the injured grave hound could completely regain its footing and come for him, Ben charged for the hound attacking the tree, shouting, “Face me, you brute!”

The grave hound whirled and leaped, catching Ben completely off guard. He took a step back and brought Goblin Terror up in front of him in a futile effort to ward off the beast. The grave hound hurtled through the air, mouth agape—and impaled itself on the end of Goblin Terror. The impact sent Ben backward, sprawling on the ground, landing half on top of Jess.

With a maddened howl the last injured grave hound runt came on. Ben caught the beast by its throat before the creature sank its teeth into him. There on the ground they wrestled. Ben forced the grave hound's head back, the creature snarling and clawing at him with its massive feet. Thick black blood streamed from where his hammer had struck the hound on its head, but still the loathsome thing struggled with unbelievable power.

Ben felt his strength wavering as the grave hound redoubled its efforts.

His free hand scabbled about in desperation, searching for anything he could use as a weapon. Jess lay half pinned beneath him and his grasping hand came to rest on the dagger hanging from her belt. He wrenched the weapon free and plunged the narrow blade into the stomach of the hound atop him. The creature jerked, but then struggled all the harder.

His arm holding the hound's head back trembled. Darkness rose up to engulf him again, deep blackness filled with snapping teeth, a great roaring howl in his ears.

“Die!” he shouted, fighting against the roaring darkness. “Die! Why won't you die!” He stabbed again and again, feeling the hot blood of the grave hound spattering on him. Everything smelled of festering, rotting, graves.

With the last of his strength Ben rammed the dagger up through the grave hound's throat and into its skull. Then he hurled the creature away, completely spent. Blackness swirled across his vision, and his stomach heaved.

As if from a great distance he hear Ernie shriek, “The tree! The tree! I'm falling—it's falling! Look out! Look—”

Then there was a great crash, and darkness took him.



Chapter Fourteen

The Infernal Regions

The sensation of prickliness brought Ben back toward consciousness. He thought he had fallen asleep in the old hay loft on the farm. He tried to roll over and get more comfortable, but found it difficult to move.

“Uunng,” a voice said, and he felt something move beneath his head. “Was that all a nightmare?”

Ben wondered how old George the cat had learned to speak, but he supposed he was half dreaming and let his mind drift along.

“Where are we?” the voice said. “What happened? Ben, stop lying on me. Your head is like a rock and you’re giving me a stomachache. Ouch, I hurt all over. Ben—are you all right?”

Like a flash of light the voice shattered the darkness surrounding his mind and he remembered. The grave hounds—he sat up with a jerk, and cracked his head on something very hard.

“Careful,” Jess said. “We don’t have much room.”

“What?” Ben fumbled about, his eyes watering from the blow, head throbbing. “Where are we?” Last he remembered they were fighting grave hounds at nightfall in a clearing. There shouldn’t have been anything nearby for him to whack his head against.

“Under a fallen tree, apparently. King’s good name, seems it got you good when it came down. You’re pretty battered up.” Jess reached over and touched his face. When she pulled her hand back there were dried flicks of crusty blood on her fingers.

“What happened?” she said. “Last thing I remember was a grave hound on top of me and blackness closing in. Did we win?”

“I guess so.” He felt over the top of his head, then reached up and touched the massive trunk above them. The pine tree fell so as to squash them flat,

but the great tangle of branches had stopped the trunk just short of the ground, trapping them in a prison of limbs. "I was afraid you were dead."

"The grave hounds?"

"I think I killed the last one. What time is it?"

"Is that important? Morning, I guess. Can we get out of here?"

"Sure." Ben took several of the limbs and bent them out of the way, snapping off several of the smaller branches until there was a narrow path out to daylight.

"Golly, I wish I could do that," Jess said, watching. "It's not fair I had to be born a princess."

"There. Be careful," Ben said as Jess crawled through the opening.

"Oh—king's good name!" she gasped.

"What?" Ben hurriedly crawled after her, wriggling out into the open and standing. Then the smell assailed him, enough to make him gag. It was the foul putrid stench of decay. The dead grave hounds lay scattered about, their bodies rotting with unnatural speed.

Jess looked at him, and he looked at her. They were both filthy and battered, their clothes torn and covered with dark spatters of grave hound blood. Pine needles filled their hair. A grin quirked the corner of Jess's mouth.

"What?" He felt his head, wondering what she was grinning at.

"That was the biggest adventure I've ever had," she said, and looked ready to laugh. "I'm not sure I want to repeat it any time soon. I say, you're strange company, Ben."

"Sorry," he said, awkwardly. "I didn't realize life would be like this when I left York."

"It's Rimmah's fault." Jess brushed a hand through her hair. "Speaking of wizards . . . where is ours?"

"Maybe wherever Mankiller is," Ben said. He felt his spirits reviving. Jess was all right, and the day was sunny and warm. The only problem was the stench of the dead grave hounds and the buzzing flies over the carcasses. But that, really, was nothing. Everything was wonderful. Somehow, when one survived nearly dying it was impossible to believe anything more could go wrong with the day.

"No, Mankiller is over there by the trees and no wizard. The chicken horse—he ran away when those grave hounds crossed the creek. Ah, not that I can blame him." Jess sighed. "Everyone has their limits, and who can expect a horse to fight grave hounds?"

"Ernie!" Ben bellowed. "Where are you? You can come out now! The grave hounds are all dead!"

A faint groan came from above them, drifting through the tree branches.

"Are we dead?" Ernie said faintly.

"Not unless the priest back in court lied to me," Jess said. "This doesn't

look like heaven or hell. In either case I'd hoped death would rid me of you."

"I hurt," Ernie moaned. "What happened?"

"Your tree fell down," Ben said.

"On Ben," Jess added.

"The grave hounds?"

"Very dead," Ben said.

"No thanks to you, Wizard," Jess added.

"Don't be so harsh." Ernie's head appeared, poking up out of the tangle of branches, his hat askew and quite crumpled. "At least I kept one occupied while it chewed on the tree I was hiding in."

"If that's all wizards of the third order are worth then they're severely overrated." Jess turned away. She appeared in a good mood, one she wasn't willing to let the wizard ruin.

"Well. We're good for many other things, too." Ernie struggled through the branches until he finally managed to climb to the ground. "All sorts of very, very . . . very . . . useful things. What's for breakfast?"

"How can you even think about eating when we're standing among all these rotting creatures?" Jess made a face. "Why don't you make yourself useful and tell us a little more about these grave hounds we killed."

"I suppose I could." Ernie took off his hat and pushed it back into shape.

Ben walked up to stand beside Jess, looking down at the dead grave hound in front of them. The creature had already become a festering corpse, maggots and flies crawling all over its shrunken frame.

"The king's name," Jess whispered, her face growing pale as she stared at the corpse. "I've never seen anything like them. They're evil, unnatural things. I've never been so scared in my life as when they came for us last night."

Ben glanced nervously at the gaping teeth-lined mouths, remembering, then looked quickly away. "Yeah . . ." he said. "When they first came across the creek, I almost did something very bad in my pants."

His words hung on the air. His mouth stopped, still open. He hadn't meant to say those words aloud, only to think them. You never said something like that in front of a princess, even if it was true. Jess stared at him. Being bitten by one of the grave hounds would have been better. You never told a princess that you almost—Then her lips began to quiver and suddenly she burst out laughing.

"Me, too!" she said, shoulders shaking. "All right, I'll admit it. Bowel control is rather hard when facing a grave hound charge." And when she had finished laughing, some of the paleness was gone from her face, color returning.

"Ah yes, grave hounds." Ernie had finally straightened himself out and came over. The wizard peered down at the dead creature, pulling out his spectacles and adjusting them on the end of his nose. "They've come some

distance.”

“How do you know? Where do such things live, anyhow?” Ben said, still—on reflection—much disturbed that these things were not just the figments of very bad bedtime stories.

“Oh, the infernal regions. The great fiery chasms beyond the Shiddow Mountains. There are all sorts of nasty creatures there.”

“That’s far away,” Jess said. “Someone must be bringing them from there.”

“Yes. Quite right.” Ernie straightened, waving a hand in front of his face as if somehow that might make the stench vanish. “If one ventures to the infernal regions you will see many grave hounds naturally, but for them to come here they must be called. Called and mastered by a powerful wizard.”

“Rimmah.” Jess clenched her teeth. “But we already knew that. All our troubles point back to Rimmah. He’s trying to kill you, Ernie. Will you believe me now?”

Ernie looked at the dead, rapidly rotting grave hounds and tugged at his beard thoughtfully. “You could be right,” he said at last. “That is annoying. Maybe I could buy him off. Princess, you’ve a good amount of money. How about lending a bit of gold to an old man in need? How much do you think I should offer Rimmah to get him to stop?”

“You’re not getting any money from me to buy off Rimmah, you toad.” Jess took a step back, giving Ernie a disgusted look. “How could you even consider it? Maybe if you promise to lick his boots clean every morning he’ll reconsider killing you. Myself, I’d think blasting him is a better option.”

“No, that wouldn’t work.” Ernie sighed, heavily. “My tongue would wear out before I’d licked his boots a week.”

“Then you see how killing him is the only way.”

“No, no.” Ernie shook his head vigorously. “I say we just keep running and hope he gets bored of killing us.”

“The only direction Ben and I are running is toward Galdoron. My parents need to be saved and the goblins must be stopped. Are you coming, or have you decided to run a different direction?”

Ernie looked around at the scattered dead grave hounds, tugging at his beard in further thought. “You going to have breakfast?” he said.

“After we’ve left these stinking grave hounds behind, yes.”

“Well . . . I am hungry,” Ernie said, wavering. “I guess I’ll travel with you a little further.”



Before they left Jess insisted that Ernie use his magic to clean up all their weapons and clothing. If the wizard wouldn’t kill the grave hounds himself, she said, it was the least he could do.

After everything was packed they started on their way, stopping for breakfast once they were several miles from the stinking grave hounds. It was a large breakfast as they had all missed supper the night before. After stuffing himself Ernie stopped complaining so much and they set out once again.

They traveled at a good pace all morning. The spring day shone fresh and sunny. Not a gray cloud hung in the sky. In spite of all the outward cheer, and happy twittering birds in the trees above them, all three travelers remained ill at ease. The slightest sound or shifting shadow had Ben and Jess reaching for their weapons, sure more grave hounds were preparing to leap out on them. Ernie started out the day whistling loudly with the pretense that he had not a care, but as the morning waned late he began to whine about vacationing at the beach.

Lunchtime came and they stopped in a mossy clearing to eat. Everyone sat on the spongy ground. Ben absently accepted a cheese sandwich from Jess. He was rather morbidly wondering what it would feel like to be killed by a grave hound. And, along with that thought, he wondered if he would ever be able to sleep at night again. The thought must not have been his alone because they had scarcely begun eating when Jess spoke up.

"Is that the worst?" she said.

"No." Ernie shook his head. "I've eaten worse. But, I tell you, I wouldn't mind a few more hot meals."

"The king's good name!" Jess looked like she wanted to throw her sandwich at Ernie. "Can you for one minute think about something beside food! What else can Rimmah send after us? Are grave hounds the worst he's got?"

Ernie swallowed his mouthful of food. He sat silent a moment and stared down at the sandwich in his hand, picking crumbs from his mustache. "No." He looked up, his voice serious. "There are much worse things that dwell in the infernal regions. But to bring them would require effort and resources. We don't know that Rimmah would bother to go through all that trouble, and we don't even know for certain that he is after us."

"Sure," Jess said dryly. "And with all evidence showing that he'll go to any lengths to be rid of us, let's just suppose he does decide we're worth the effort. What is the next monster your fellow wizard is going to send after us?"

Ernie—about to take a large bite out of his sandwich—stopped. "Do you really want to know?" he said.

Jess thought about that for a moment, fiddling with a lock of her curly hair. Finally, she shook her head. "No, I suppose not. There isn't much we can do in any case, and I'll already have a hard enough time sleeping after those grave hounds."

Everyone went back to eating. Ben said nothing, but now *he* was curious about what Rimmah might send. It was like, he thought, wondering what

monster might be hiding under your bed at night. The thought made one feel peculiar, and not very comfortable.

“So, anyhow, Ernie,” Jess said. “Why is Rimmah so interested in you? Did you snub him at some official ball or something? Cancel funding for his pet project? Maybe steal the maiden he was about to marry?”

“Ah . . . it goes back a little ways.” Ernie looked away. “Rimmah is blowing this completely out of proportion, really. Just minor differences . . . that sort of thing.”

“Yeah, like maybe you would decide to interfere with his plans,” Jess said. “People bent on world domination generally don't like that. Wizards in particular.”

Ernie said nothing.

“There is more to you, Wizard, than meets the eye,” Jess said after awhile. “You go through such effort to make it seem that you're nothing, but Caldarc the giant warrior's sword is no small thing to possess.”

“Better if I had Caldarc's great shield too,” Ernie said, frowning. “Dragon's Bane it was called. But somebody pinched that. Very rude of them.”

Jess snorted. “Everything would be so much easier if you'd just blast all our enemies. Honestly, what good is a wizard that won't blast a few evil creatures to cinders?”

“Well. The life of a pacifist is a hard one.” Ernie adjusted his robes. “No one understands, and people always make fun of you. But let me tell you, blasting isn't what you think. Why—”

Jess groaned. “Time to get moving.” She climbed to her feet and went to fetch Mankiller, who grazed at the sparse grass growing around the edge of the clearing. “Maybe some other time you can tell me your thesis of blasting. Right now we have a wizard to catch.”



Chapter Fifteen

Foggy Fight

By evening they had reached the edge of the hilly wooded land. Ahead the terrain spread out in a great grassy plain. Standing at the border of the plain, a person could see for miles. In the distance, through the fading twilight, they could make out the twinkling lights of a large city. Jess called the place Juzbon, and said it was the last city before Galdoron if they continued to follow the main road. Ernie spoke fondly of having a nice warm bed to sleep in that night, but Jess said they wouldn't enter the city until morning.

"It's too dangerous," she said. "We're getting close to Galdoron now. Rimmah's spies will be everywhere."

Ernie complained the rest of the night about how cold it was, and how uncomfortable the ground was for sleeping.

Morning came gray and overcast. A thick fog hung low over the world making it near impossible to see more than a few feet ahead. Ben woke feeling uneasy. His first thought on waking to see the fog was that too many dangers could hide unnoticed in the dark shroud.

He helped Jess make the breakfast porridge. As it was being served he asked, hesitantly, "Do—are we going like last time?"

"What do you mean? Pretending to be a husband and wife?"

"Yes."

She looked at him. "Why? You don't want to?"

"I don't know how to do it. We only escaped last time because no one was looking for us. It's dangerous. We know people will be watching for us in Juzbon. I don't have any training. I'll make a mistake."

"Everything is dangerous, now. And you don't need training, Ben. You did fine last time, except for your stuttering. But even some husbands stutter."

"But I get all sweaty and my stomach has this knot in it—"

“That's what happens when you're on an adventure. It's the danger and excitement.”

Ben was silent for a bit. Then he said, “I think I don't like adventure so much as I imagined. I wish Ned was here.” He sighed. “But I suppose I must be brave.”

“Cheer up, Ben. We won't go around asking questions this time. We just need to get through the city safely.”

“Are you leaving me behind again?” Ernie said. “If everyone will remember last time that ended up with me captured by goblins—”

“Because you wouldn't blast them to save yourself. Yes, we remember,” Jess said. “And, no, you're not being left behind this time. This time Ben and I will go traveling as a husband and wife on a journey to the great shrine of Durne with an annoying father-in-law along.”

“Whose?” Ernie said.

“Does it matter?” Jess frowned at him. “My father-in-law, then, since I find you so annoying.”

“He doesn't look like my Da at all,” Ben said.

“But nobody will know that.” Jess turned to give him an exasperated look. “We're pretending, remember? This is a fiction, and nobody here knows the difference.”

“Maybe so,” Ernie mused. “But I'd say that for a poor couple and their ill treated father-in-law to have two striking swords and a royal horse is rather odd—and eye-catching. You can't leave them behind this time.”

“Yes, I know. I know. I'll have to disguise Mankiller and myself. Can you think up solutions instead of problems?”

“And the swords?” Ernie said.

“They'll be hidden, all right? I'll take care of everything. You just remember to keep quiet and not cause any trouble.”

Mankiller wasn't saddled up before they left camp. Instead, the horse was covered with a large blanket to disguise his build. His saddle, along with all of the gear, was stowed away in nondescript sacks. To disguise herself Jess again borrowed Ernie's tattered cloak and pulled the hood forward to hide her face and long curly hair.

“We should be all right,” Jess said, revealing a bit of unease herself as they left camp and started down the road. “Anyone with an eye for horses will see right through Mankiller's disguise. He still doesn't look like a pack horse. But the fog should help us.”

“Help?” Ben squinted ahead. He couldn't see much more than an arm's length ahead. Jess had insisted that he not only hide his sword among the baggage but the hammer too. He felt strangely naked and defenseless, which was odd because not so long ago he could spend the entire day without a hammer or sword and think nothing of the fact. The adventure, he thought, was changing him.

"I—This fog is so thick we'll get lost," he said. "It's easy to get lost in the fog. And dangerous things live in the fog. Reminds me of a story about my grandfather. Not a good story."

"We just stick to the main road and we'll be okay. It goes all the way through the city to the other side." Jess's voice sounded almost dis-embodied as it drifted through the fog.

"But—but—if someone is waiting for us we won't be able to see them."

Jess tisked from where she walked on the other side of Mankiller. "They won't be able to see us, either. We'll slip right past them. Besides, with this fog most people will stay indoors. Stop worrying, Ben. It's the perfect time to slip through Juzbon."

With the fog wrapped around them it felt as if they had stepped into a timeless place where they could walk on forever without reaching any destination. He wondered if they would. Even the clop of Mankiller's hooves was muffled, as if the world had swallowed up the sound. The city of Juzbon lay several miles ahead, but Ben had no way of determining how much distance they had covered.

"Um, Jess," he said. "How do we know when we've reached Juzbon? How will we know when we've made it through?"

"The main road of Juzbon is cobbled." Her voice came drifting through the fog. "We'll know we've reached the city when we're walking on cobblestones. So long as we stay to the main road we'll know when we're out of the city because we'll leave the cobble stones again."

It was true. A short time later Ben felt the hard irregular shape of stones beneath his feet. The sensation was most peculiar, he thought. The fog remained so thick he couldn't see to either side of the road, the effect such that it seemed as if they walked on a road in the middle of nowhere.

"Hey," Ben said after awhile. "The fog must be thinning a bit. I can see a faint glow through the fog. See, over there. They must be windows in the houses along the street."

"Let's hurry then," Jess said. "Better if we're through Juzbon before the fog lifts."

They picked up their pace, Ernie complaining that he wanted to stop for a good meal. The fog continued to thin as they went along and the faint outline of buildings became visible. It gave the world a dreamlike quality that Ben found fascinating. He started to slow, looking around, and only Jess's sharp admonition made him pick back up his gait.

Other people began to appear on the street. Most of them were faint and indistinct, shapes that hurried about without looking up. Ben sensed Jess's growing tension. What had begun as a muffled fog shrouded morning was now filled with a hovering sense of danger. They were not alone in Juzbon, and people were looking for them. Ben began to cast frequent glances over his shoulders, half expecting to find them followed by a crowd of indistinct

shapes waiting to attack.

He spent so much time looking back that he failed to see what was ahead until Jess muttered, "Drat. As the day I was born—Drat."

"What?" His head jerked around and he almost tripped over his feet. The fog was still thick but ahead he could faintly make out the shape of men standing on either side of the road.

"A checkpoint," Jess whispered. "They're stopping everyone who passes."

"That's bad," Ernie said. "Very bad. I guess that means we can't go on. We'll have to turn around and go someplace else. The beach—"

"No," Jess said firmly.

"Maybe we can slip past without them noticing in the fog," Ben said in a low voice.

"Can't." Jess shook her head. "Too many, and the fog's not thick enough anymore. Listen, we stay calm. Act as if you're not worried. The fog should keep them from noticing much. They'll see us, but we're disguised. Remember, we're a husband and wife and father-in-law going on a pilgrimage to the shrine. Ben, if they ask any questions you answer."

"Me?" he choked.

"Yes, you," she hissed. "Grunt or something. That's what most husbands do, anyhow. A wife doesn't speak and neither should a father-in-law if he knows what's good for him. Don't worry—just mumble mostly. If you sound like an idiot they'll let you go without much questioning."

"Right. Maybe. I'll try." He swallowed.

They slowed as they drew near the checkpoint and Ben felt his heart begin to hammer in his chest. His tongue was frozen to the roof of his mouth. Mumble, Jess had said, but he wasn't sure if he could make anything but a thin strangled sound in the back of his throat. What was it like, he wanted to know, to be captured by an evil wizard?

The line of people slowly made it's way forward. The murmur of questioning voices could be heard ahead, always ending with, "Enough, enough. Move along now."

Suddenly, there came a shout. Ben started, thinking his turn had come and he hadn't noticed. Then he heard, "There! Over there! I see them!" Faster than Ben could make sense of the commotion, men appeared through the fog, rushing in from every side.

"Too late!" Jess shouted. "Break for it!"

Mankiller whinnied and reared up, hooves flailing. There was a dull thunk of hoof against bone and a man dropped. Then Ben was hit from behind, hard, and he went down, skidding on his stomach across the damp stones. He heard much shouting, and the clatter of running feet.

Gasping to get his wind back, Ben scrambled to his feet. Confusion reigned on every side, shapes dashing this way and that, appearing and disappearing in the fog almost as if conjured from thin air.

“Jess!” he shouted.

“Run!” he heard.

“Where are you?” He glanced wildly through the fog, searching for any sign of Jess, or even Ernie or Mankiller.

“Just run!”

Then he thought he saw Mankiller's pale mane flashing from the other side of the street. Faintly, he heard Ernie squealing.

“I'm coming!” he called, and plunged forward.

Halfway across the street he ran full into someone dashing the other direction. Stars burst across his vision as they crashed together and he toppled over backward.

“Jess!” He leaped back to his feet, stepping over the now unconscious man he had collided with. He shouldered his way forward, heedless of everything and everyone as he pushed and shoved his way through the crowd.

“Get out of my way!” he grunted. “Move, or I'll—Jess! Where are you? I can't see—”

Then he stumbled free of the crowd, staggering into a clear circle. Men clustered on every side. Opposite him stood Jess and Ernie. Two men held Jess, one with a hand clamped over her mouth.

“Well, well,” someone said. “Who is this mongrel you've picked up, your Highness?”

Ben blinked. He didn't want to believe what he saw, but his mind said it was true.

“Let her go,” he said, slowly.

“I think not. Master Rimmah—”

“Let her go!” he howled, and threw himself forward.

He landed on them like a mindless wild beast, punching and kicking with a strength fueled by desperation. The men holding Jess and Ernie went down pummeled and bleeding. The rest of the crowd retreated before the unexpected assault, cursing.

“The swords!” Jess shouted. “Get the swords!”

But Ben had no idea where Mankiller was, and it didn't matter. The crowd had recovered. Men were all around him, closing on every side, striking out. There was no breaking free.

“No!” he shouted back to her. “There are too many! Just run!”

He hoped Jess listened. It was impossible to tell. What followed was the most confusing fight Ben had ever experienced. In the chaos it was every man fighting every man, with no distinction between friend and enemy. The confusion saved Ben from a quick death, but the free-for-all still ended up as the worst drubbing he had ever known. If he wasn't being knocked down, he was already down, trod under the boots of the battling men. By the time he managed to pull himself free he was so battered he could barely stand

upright, and so addled he didn't know which way to run. His first quick dash to make good his escape sent him straight into the side of a building.

Impact was full, hard, and direct. The stone wall didn't give way. When he came to he was lying flat on his back, ears still ringing. Dimly, he heard shouting.

"They went that way!"

"No, that way!"

"Find them! Go!"

"Come on!"

Somehow, he managed to roll over. Grabbing at the wall, he pulled himself back to his feet. Through his swimming vision he could see groups of men running off through the fog in every direction. Swaying like a drunkard, he felt along the wall, this time making a slower and more hesitant escape.

As he stumbled along the shouting grew faint. That was comforting, but he had no idea if he was escaping in the right direction. In the confusion he had lost all sense of direction.

After some time he realized he wasn't walking on cobble stones. Ben supposed he hadn't been for some time and simply hadn't noticed. That was an unhappy thought. He most certainly wasn't going the right direction, but since he could still see glowing lights on either side he was sure he hadn't left the city. Beyond that one small certainty he was sure of nothing. If the fog didn't let up, he thought, he could wander about the city for the rest of his life.

He hoped Ernie and Jess had somehow made it to safety. If they were safe he could deal with his own problems—somehow. At least, that was what he told himself.

He was beginning to feel he had perhaps escaped for good when the shouts of pursuit began to grow loud again. He picked up his pace, moving faster. The call of voices continued to grow louder. He gave up walking and ran full out. Better to risk another crack to his sore head—The men were definitely coming his direction.

How close were his pursuers? A quick glance over his shoulder showed only thick fog visible behind, but when he looked ahead again a shape loomed in front of him. It was a massive dark thing, towering in the fog, and Ben was moving too fast to stop or turn aside. The thing—whatever it was—was hairy, very hairy, and gave a muffled grunt of surprise when he ran into it.

"Pardon me." Ben staggered back. "I didn't realize—"

A massive paw seized him, powerful blows raining down, pummeling him near senseless. *A bear*, Ben thought, his mind reeling. *I'm being killed by a bear*. He fought back with a ferocity born of desperation, biting, punching, clawing, and kicking. The attack from the behemoth didn't let up. Ben was sure his end had come when, suddenly, he hurtled away. Blackness swirled

around him as he shot through the air, then he struck the ground and skipped several times before coming to rest in a street gutter.

For a moment he lay there, quite stunned by the landing, and surprised to even be alive. Angry guards, and an angry bear—he had suffered the two worst beatings of his life in one day. Crawling along, he eventually managed to gather enough strength to get back to his feet and totter on. He hoped those who chased him would run into the bear. That would end any thought they had of pursuit. It was his only hope. Limping and bleeding, he was in no condition for running.

The fog continued to lift and an hour later the world had cleared. Ben found himself at the edge of the city. He heard no sound of pursuit, but then, he clearly wasn't at the right place for running away, or reaching Galdoron. The narrow dirt road he had followed simply ended in front of him. The green grass of the plain rolled on, waving gently in a morning breeze.

There was no road to Galdoron.

"I think I'm lost," he said.

He walked a short distance into the tall grass, wishing there was a sign that said, "Lost? Want to know the way to Galdoron? It's that way!" and had a nice arrow pointing in the right direction. Unfortunately, there wasn't a sign. In his experience Ben found there rarely was a sign when you needed one.

The day had turned out badly. Ben looked down at his torn and dirty clothes and wished he hadn't got up that morning. Now he had lost Jess and Ernie and didn't know where to find them. If they were captured in the city he would have to go back to rescue them, a idea he didn't like, especially with a huge wild bear running loose and men hunting for him. If Ernie and Jess had escaped he expected they were on their way to Galdoron without him. He was sorry he had ever left York. What had he thought to accomplish anyhow? It would have been better to stay back with Ned. He could have rebuilt the house and kept farming. Things were so much simpler then.

Ben sat down in the grass, feeling very miserable and defeated.



Chapter Sixteen

Dougyal Hunts

Ben! What happened to you?"

He leaped to his feet at the sound of the voice. He had spent the last hour drifting from one mournful thought to another without coming up with a good plan of action. Deep in thought, he hadn't heard the rustling grass which warned of an approach.

Jess and Ernie stood behind him, Jess leading Mankiller. The wizard and the princess had returned to their proper garb, Mankiller saddled and Jess wearing her sword and green cloak.

"You're alive!" he cried, delighted.

"And you look nearly dead," Jess said. Her face showed alarm as she took in his bedraggled and bloody condition.

"I'm okay. Are my eggs okay? Did somebody smash them when—"

"Your eggs are fine," Jess said, patiently. "Does it really matter? We all survived—that's what counts."

"How did you find me, anyhow?" Ben said. "I didn't know how to find you."

"It was the wizard's idea. He said you had probably made it out of the city and the way to find you was circle around until we met up."

"Yes." Ernie beamed, quite pleased with himself. "I've a methodical mind. My mother always used to say I could do anything if I set my mind to it."

"But you're terrible, Ben. What in the king's name happened to you? I thought we had all escaped to safety. You look as if—"

"It was an accident, really." He looked down at his tattered self. "I met this huge bear on the street when I was trying to get away. I wasn't watching where I was going and I ran into him. Stupid of me. The bear must have got lost in the fog or something. It was huge and we had a terrible fight. I'm lucky to be alive."

"A bear?" Jess frowned.

"He does look rather mauled," Ernie commented.

"A bear wouldn't get lost in the city, even in the fog," Jess said. "It must have been a man."

"No. It was a bear," Ben said, firmly. "There never was a man that big. Or that hairy. It was a beast. It was hairy like a bear, I'm sure."

"Dougyl," Jess said, grimly.

"What?" Ben looked back toward Juzbon, almost expecting to see a lumbering Dougyl beast coming from the city. "Is that the next terrible creature Rimmah has summoned?"

"Almost as bad. Dougyl is the biggest and hairiest man ever born. He practically is a monster. He's Rimmah's right hand. If he was sent to Juzbon to stop us—this is terrible news."

"Well." Ernie laughed nervously. "Maybe he wasn't. Chance encounters happen all the time. A small world and all that."

"With Dougyl?" Jess shook her head. "He wouldn't leave Rimmah's side without a reason. That reason is us. We need to get out of here. Now." She swung up into Mankiller's saddle.

"Where do we go?" Ben said.

"We can't take the road. Not yet. Dougyl will have men watching it. We must cut cross country for awhile. Wizard, heal Ben! Must I tell you to do everything? Can't you see he's hurt?"

After Ernie healed Ben they traveled away from the city, crossing through the tall grass of the plain. They saw the occasional herd of cows or flock of sheep but the land remained mostly empty. Juzbon continued to shrink in the distance until the city was only a small shape on the horizon. Ben began to imagine they had made good their escape and that they would see no more of the monstrous Dougyl. Then, even as he was daydreaming about safety and no more danger, there came a distant trumpet blast from the city.

"Eh?" Ernie stopped walking and turned, shifting the weight of the sack on his shoulder. "Are they giving us a farewell salute?"

"That's not funny." Jess pulled Mankiller to a stop and looked back. "Those were hunting trumpets."

"Ah." Ernie straightened his hat and turned back to walking. "It's a fine day for hunting, I suppose."

"A fine day! Use a little imagination! Who might they be hunting? Not foxes today, I think!" She flicked Mankiller's reins, the horse moving to a quick trot. "We'd better make for the forest ahead. Fast."

The distant forest was still an hour's travel away, but they pushed hard, Ernie complaining at the pace. Even Ben felt tired. Ernie's healing had taken away his outward wounds, but left him with the weariness from the battering he had suffered. But he said nothing, sensing the tension in Jess.

They had just reached the shadow of the forest's edge when the sound of

baying came faintly on the air. Jess stiffened in the saddle. "Hounds," she said, her voice tight. "I knew it."

"Not grave hounds," Ben said, and actually felt relief. The faint but lusty baying sounded like normal eager dogs. Compared to the grave hounds it seemed friendly and inviting.

"They'll track us in any case, and almost as well. We fought six grave hounds and almost lost. Dougyal will come after us with many men. We can't fight them all with only two swords."

"Surrender is always an option," Ernie said, chewing on the corner of his mustache.

"Not with me." Jess nudge Mankiller into the tangle of trees. "I'm going to free my parents from Rimmah, whatever it takes. We've got to escape Dougyal and these hounds."

They pushed through the bramble, struggling against the clawing tree limbs as they went deep into the forest. Jess was forced to dismount and lead Mankiller, the horse snorting with disapproval as they hurried. The baying of the hounds grew louder. There were many hounds, filled with the excitement of the hunt. Mankiller snorted again, nervously.

"They have our scent." Jess stopped to look back, breathing heavily. "They'll have caught us before sundown unless we can shake them."

"Maybe Ernie could do something," Ben suggested.

"Could you?" Jess looked at the wizard. "Something to throw the hounds off our scent?"

"Hm. I could." Ernie leaned on his staff. "If we stopped for an hour or two I could—"

"Never mind. We stay in one place for an hour or two and we'll be caught already. We keep moving."

They scrambled on through the thick growth of trees, the baying of the hounds growing continually louder and more insistent behind them.

"Maybe if we split up we could confuse them," Ben said. "I'll go on ahead and you and Ernie circle around back."

"Too dangerous." Jess untangled Mankiller's reins from a branch. "And little chance of working. We stick together."

A short time later they came upon a stream winding its way among the trees. The stream was wide and shallow, tree branches hanging low over the water.

"Quick! We'll follow this," Jess said. "Maybe we can lose our scent, or confuse them."

They splashed through the water, stumbling over the slippery stones as they hurried. The baying of the hounds was now very close, the loud calls echoing eerily among the trees.

"My feet are wet," Ernie complained. "It's not good for a man of my age. My health—"

"Will be a lot worse if the hounds catch us. Be quiet," Jess said. "This is our last chance to escape."

"There are over twenty hounds." Ben shook his head, amazed at the number. "I can tell by the baying."

"That I didn't need to know," Jess muttered. "The king's good name—it's no use."

"We give up?" Ernie said, almost hopeful. "Surrender and plead for—"

"We get ready to make a last stand. If we haven't shaken them, we meet them here." Jess turned Mankiller up out of the creek bed and climbed into a small clearing.

The princess drew her sword. Ben followed her example, thinking she looked quite brave and beautiful when she was determined.

"Oh, dear." Ernie sighed, shifting uncomfortably as the call of the hounds echoed very loudly, seeming to come from all around them. "This is the way young people always want to go. I really do hate it when things end this way. It's all so icky. Couldn't we just bribe this Dougyal? He could tell Rimmah he killed us, and we could go live out our retirement at some beach town on the coast. Beach towns are quiet, you know. We could eat jam pastries every morning and afternoon."

"Dougyal can't be bribed. And I'm not ready for retirement." Jess positioned her legs in a wider stance, her gaze sweeping across the trees. "If it's all so icky to you, make us disappear or something. King's good name, there has got to be plenty of things you can do besides blasting."

"Invisibility is a narrow field." Ernie set down his sack and sat on top of it. "I was never very good at it, especially with the making un-invisible part afterward. Not that it isn't a useful skill. But mostly only thieving wizards bother to learn it much. Like wizards that might want to pinch the shield of Caldarc the giant-slayer, the finks."

"Great." Jess shook her hair back. "In that case stay out of the way and stop whining. Here they come."

The large blood hounds appeared among the trees, bounding forward, their ears flopping wildly, mouths slavering in eagerness. The dogs covered the distance fast, muscles rippling beneath their dark reddish coats.

"Oh, they look like such nice doggies," Ben said. "Do—they're only doing their job. Do we really have to kill them?"

"Ben—yes. Don't get soft on me now," Jess said evenly. "They might look nice, but they aren't going to be nice. They're leading Dougyal and his men right to us, and those dogs are going to attack. Understand?"

"I suppose. I had a dog once—"

"Not now, Ben. Please."

The hounds circled them, yipping and howling with excitement. Jess stepped out in front, her sword moving in a blur as several of the dogs leaped for her. Two fell dead, but the third caught her upper arm, tearing away a

large portion of her sleeve. Jess cried out. Ben gasped. Then he quickly decided the dogs weren't going to be nice—even if he wanted it that way.

It wasn't so frightening as battling grave hounds after dark, but it was a fearsome fight. Their swords flashed bright in the sunlight as Ben and Jess defended each other from the attacking dogs. Mankiller joined the fight, his hooves knocking dogs through the air. There was much howling and snarling. Ben was bitten twice, but he kept fighting. The hounds couldn't break through the combined defense of the princess, Ben, and Mankiller. Not a dog survived.

"Terrible. It's terrible." Ben choked. He wiped blood off his cheek, his eyes watering as he surveyed the twenty-five dead dogs. "Goblins and grave hounds are one thing, but dogs . . . they were only doing their job. They didn't mean anything by it."

"I know, I know. Not nice," Jess agreed, cleaning her blade. "Remember to bring the matter up with Dougyal. He was the scum who sent them."

"I thought we were trying to avoid Dougyal," Ernie said. The wizard had covered his eyes with his hat while the battle had raged. Even now he looked slightly pale.

"Today, we are. But one day he will face justice. Him and Rimmah." Jess sheathed her sword. "Ben, we must find someplace to hide. The dogs are . . . gone, but Dougyal is still coming."

"I'm not hiding anywhere near here," Ben said, sadly. "We'd better continue on and look for a hiding spot along the creek."

The three of them left the clearing and went back down the bank, splashing through the water. Ben took up the rear, limping, and bleeding from his leg where the hounds had bitten him. Behind them, he could hear men shouting. He tried to ignore the pain and move faster. After the fight with the hounds none of them were in any condition for another battle.

They struggled on, growing more desperate as the sounds of pursuit became louder.

It was Ernie who finally spotted their hiding place. They were crashing through the bramble, casting frantic glances behind for any sight of the pursuing men, when Ernie called out, "There! We can hide up there!" The wizard pointed to a large hollow in the creek bank. The earth had crumbled away and collapsed a tree down the bank, screening the hollow.

"Too obvious," Ben said. "Anyone would look there."

"Not Dougyal." Jess leaned against Mankiller's flank, wiping sweat from her brow with the back of a hand. "Dougyal is big but his brain is no larger than a bean. Besides, we don't have any better choice. We can't keep this up. It'll have to do."

Carefully, Jess led Mankiller up the incline and behind the fallen tree. With gentle words she coaxed the horse to lie down in the hollow. Then she motioned for Ernie and Ben to come up, whispering, "Hurry. Obscure the

hoof marks.”

Ben came up behind Ernie, smoothing out the hoof indentions as best he could and brushing old dried leaves over the tracks. From behind there came the loud crashing of many bodies as they smashed through the brush, followed by rough shouts, reminding him of how little time he had. Finally, he reached Jess. The princess pointed for him to sit beside Ernie in front of Mankiller and unclasped her green cloak. Settling beside Ben, she spread the deep green garment over the three of them as best she could. Then she grabbed at the loose dirt around them and scattered it across the garment.

They sat in silence, listening to the tumult of pursuit. The crashing and smashing drew nearer, and Ben's thoughts went back to the monstrous thing he had fought in the fog that morning. The hairy beast Dougyl came for them. His stomach grew cold with the thought.

He looked at Jess and found she was studying him. They stared at each other as the tramping and shouts grew louder. Ben thought that even with dirt smudging her face and twigs stuck in her hair she looked so beautiful it made his chest hurt. He didn't particularly enjoy the thought of dying, but looking at her he thought he would do it for her.

“Ben,” she whispered.

“What?”

“I just wanted you to know—that is, if this somehow happens to be the end—I'm glad I met you.”

“Why?”

“What kind of question is that? Because I never met someone who was as honest and loyal as you, or as kind. I was always the princess, light of the kingdom, and I've never had a friend before. I thought . . . never expected a friend to be like you.”

“Oh.”

He was silent a moment. He thought about saying how he had never really had a friend before either. Except Ned, but now he thought maybe a horse didn't count. Then he thought about admitting that she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen and he would gladly die for her. It was true, and seemed the proper sort of last minute confession, especially when he considered that he might be doing it in a few minutes. But then, before he could speak, Jess gripped his arm and said, “Hush. Here they come. Don't move. Don't breathe.”

There came a thunderous crack and a large limb hanging down over the creek—thick as Ben's waist—flew aside as a great lumbering shape came charging through. Ben's fleeting glimpse of Dougyl was that of a giant man, towering above even the tallest of normal men, with a girth to match. Then the hairy mountain of black and brown was gone, and the men following him came into view. They were guardsmen, riding their horses along the trail which the charging Dougyl had cleared. They wore armor and shields, some

of them carrying spears.

“Go, go!” Dougyal grunted from ahead. “We’ll get ‘em. They can’t escape! They can’t be far!”

“Sir!” One of the lead horsemen shouted, pulling up his horse almost directly opposite the hiding place. “Sir!”

“What?” The bellow came back, shaking the tree branches. “I’m on a hunt, and I don’t like being interrupted!”

“Yes, sir. But, sir, would it be good for some of us to spread out and search the area? They might be hiding—”

“I’ll catch the princess and that old man. Don’t you worry! Come on—all of you. You’re all just lazy and don’t want to keep up with me, that’s all your problem is.” The crashing and smashing of brush resumed.

With an audible long-suffering sigh, the lead horseman spurred his mount on again. The column of mounted men followed. It was a long line of soldiers—about a hundred, Ben guessed, not being able to count them very well as they passed. As the guardsmen rode along snatches of their conversation carried to the hiding place.

“Did you see the hounds?”

“Yeah. All of them dead. They say the old man is a wizard that Rimmah is determined to subvert.”

“Subvert?”

“Something Missar told me back at the castle. Bend this wizard to his will or something. Maybe suck all the power out of him. It sounded like a nasty business.”

“Those hounds weren’t killed by a wizard. They were killed by a sword.”

“The princess?”

“They say she fights like a warrior. One of the best.”

“Well, that or she has a pet devil. Missar said something about that when he came back all battered. King’s name, did you see what Missar looked like? I’m glad Rimmah sent so many of us.”

“Ha,” someone else laughed. “All we need is Dougyal. He’ll take care of the princess and any pet devil she has all by himself.”

After what seemed like a very long time the last of the horsemen had passed and the crack and snap of brush faded to silence. They sat awhile longer, Ben and Jess straining to hear any sound. The afternoon began to fade toward evening. Ernie began to snore softly.

Jess sighed. “Better have the wizard heal us from the wounds those hounds gave. We’d better move as fast as we can, while we can.” She threw off the cloak. “Wake up wizard. We’re leaving. Did you hear what they said about you? What do you think of that, eh?”

“What? What?” Ernie pushed back his hat, snatching for his sack full of quilt. “What are you talking about?”

“The men when they were riding past. Did you hear what they said, or

were you already asleep?”

“Oh, yes. That. Hm! All nonsense. Gossip. Rumor. Hasn't a word of truth to it.” Ernie stood up quickly. “I assure you. Mind bending is strictly against the rules of the Wizard's Council.”

“As is power sucking, or whatever, I suppose?”

“Yes. No law abiding wizard would ever—”

“Laws haven't stopped Rimmah. What's he done to my parents?” Jess demanded, helping Mankiller back to his feet.

“Well . . . but he wouldn't do it to a fellow wizard,” Ernie protested.

“I advise you to not test that theory,” Jess said. “Come on, Ben. We need to get far from here before we stop for the night. Dougyal isn't smart, but he's very persistent.”

Jess told Ernie to heal their wounds, causing the wizard to complain that healing people all the time was tiring him out. After Jess threatened him, he quickly agreed that a few dog bites wasn't too much, and immediately set the injuries right. They retraced their steps a short distance down the creek, then set off in a new direction, moving as quickly as their tired bodies would allow. Jess urged them onward throughout the evening, not allowing them to stop until it was completely dark. Then they all collapsed to the ground, ate a small supper, and slept a deep, exhausted sleep.



Chapter Seventeen

Dougyal Gloats

Ben woke to find himself hanging upside down, securely bound with thick ropes. His head felt swollen, which told him he had been hanging upside down for some time. He blinked—his eyes feeling as if they wanted to explode out of his head—and looked around. He saw he dangled from a very thick tree branch, and from what he could see of the world around him they were on the edge of a forest—the forest he had been sleeping in last night, he thought. That left the question of why he was tied and hanging from a tree.

Hanging beside him was Jess. She appeared unconscious. He saw a purple bruise on her temple, but otherwise she looked unhurt though quite miserable being tied up and hanging from her feet. He was wondering if he should try to wake her when his thoughts were interrupted by deep throaty chuckles.

“Hehe. A merry chase, eh? Hehe.”

He turned his head and found himself looking down—or up—at the massive and hairy shape of Dougyal. The man looked even more terrifying and gigantic up close than he had in the forest. A mouth full of crooked dirty teeth seemed to leer at him from a forest of a beard over which were perched two black beady eyes. Dougyal looked capable of eating a man alive for lunch—and enjoying it. His breath smelled bad enough that Ben wondered if he had.

“Let Jess go,” he said stoutly. “She is a princess and doesn't deserve this treatment.”

“I'll treat her as I like, runt.” Dougyal glowered at him. “Maybe I'll treat her nice, maybe I won't. It all depends on how she treats me.”

Jess groaned, and stirred, swinging slightly from where she hung.

“Ah, now. She's coming round. What a sweet thing.” Dougyal gave another chuckle and rubbed his massive hands together.

“Wha—?” Jess opened her eyes, blinked several times, then grimaced. “Captured. Great, and drat besides. That was stupid of me. We should have posted a watch. Ouch. This isn't comfortable.”

“It was foolish to run. No one ever escapes the great Dougyl,” Dougyl intoned. “Now you are in my power.”

“Eat grass and die, you giant hairball,” Jess shot back.

“Jess! He said he'd be nice to you if you were nice to him.”

“Nice?” Jess looked at Ben. “I'm surprised he knew the word existed. He can sit on a sharpened stake and sing like a canary before I'll be nice to him. Let us go, Dougyl!”

“Never!” Dougyl pulled himself up to his full height—which was quite impressive—and threw out his chest. “Rimmah gave me orders and I intend to fulfill them.”

“Oh?” Jess arched an eyebrow, upside down. “And what were they?”

“To bring you all back to him.”

“And the wizard?”

“I'm keeping him pegged up in a barrel. Special orders.”

“Poor Ernie,” Ben said. “He didn't even want to come.”

“I hold you in my power, Princess,” Dougyl said, ignoring Ben. “Look at me. Sorry you didn't take me, Princess? You can always change your mind. Marriage could solve all your problems.”

“He's Elfonso?” Ben's head whipped around.

“No, he's Dougyl,” Jess said irritably. “Can't you keep names straight?”

“But he just said—”

“He's my mother's alternative if I didn't take Elfonso. He is the more manly choice, you see. And no, Dougyl,” she added, “I'm not sorry. I'll marry a dog before I marry you. Now let me go!”

“Hehe,” Dougyl said again. “We shall see. We shall see after I'm finished with you.”

“I'm not scared,” Jess said, and she didn't sound it, though Ben felt terrified. “You're not looking too good yourself, Dougie-boy. Someone fix you up in a little scrape, eh? Not so big as you thought?”

It was true. If one looked carefully beneath all the hair that covered Dougyl's hands and face there was a mottling of bruises, and what looked like several deep cuts, and his clothes were torn as well.

“I . . .” Dougyl touched the side of his face, gingerly. “I told you before not to call me Dougie-boy.” He straightened, and seemed to come to himself. “It was nothing. Some strange dog attacked me in the fog at Juzbon. Had quite a bite, he did, but nothing I couldn't handle.”

“Really? It must have been some dog to maul you like that.”

“Very strange,” Dougyl agreed, seriously. “It bit and punched and kicked me and growled like a monster. I thought I was done for, but I managed to shake it off. Don't laugh . . . all sorts of strange things live in the fog. Why,

my mother told me once—”

Dougyal started, then frowned, folding his arms across his massive chest. “That is, I’ll give you time to reconsider your answer, Princess, but it’ll go bad with you if you don’t become agreeable. Mark my words! Mark my words, I say!” With that last thunderous declaration Dougyal turned around and stomped away.

“Good,” Jess muttered, glaring after the giant. “Good riddance and glad to be rid of the oaf. Now maybe I can think.”

“Are you okay?” Ben said. “You’ve a bruise on the side of your head—”

“I’ll be all right.” She gave a small laugh, looking at Ben. “If all I have is one bruise I’m doing much better than you. You should see yourself. Guess Dougyal wasn’t too careful when he captured us. Anyhow, we might as well not think about our condition since Ernie isn’t going to be healing us anytime soon. As for Dougyal . . . It made my heart glad to see Dougie-boy all chewed up like that. Dog—ha! That pea brained giant doesn’t know what hit him. Dog—I’ll give him dog, calling you a dog like that.”

“It’s not funny,” Ben said. “He’s not a nice person.”

“I know he’s not. He was around far too much while I was in court. Slobbering fool. He tried to drool over me every chance he got. But he’s stupid as a brick, so we only need to figure out some way of escaping.”

“Dougyal was the more manly choice?”

“So said my mother. She preferred Elfonso. Said he was more refined.” Jess struggled in her bonds, but they held tight. “Why do you care, anyhow?”

“Why didn’t you take him?”

Jess stopped struggling and stared at him. “What kind of question is that?”

Ben shifted uncomfortably. “Well, I mean, that is,” he said, beginning to stutter. “You wouldn’t be in this situation then, and it, I mean, Dougyal could smash all your enemies.”

“And a worse slobbering piggish uncivilized lout has never been created. At least Elfonso didn’t make me want to pass out from his stench every time he was near. Stop worrying about Dougyal and help me figure out some way of getting free.”

Unfortunately, Ben couldn’t think of any way to escape. He tried bouncing up and down on his rope, but that only made his head hurt worse, and it made the branch jiggle which made Jess jiggle, which made her head hurt. Then he tried swinging back and forth, but that only ended up making him dizzy, and sick to his stomach.

“It’s no good,” Jess said after he had given up and was hanging limp, gasping for breath. “We need something sharp to cut us free.”

“Your dagger?” Ben said, trying to swallow back up his stomach.

“I don’t have it anymore. They took all our weapons. Maybe I can ask Dougyal where they are and he’ll tell me.”

“What good is that?” Ben rocked feebly, feeling irritated and more uncomfortable by the minute. “We can't walk over and get them. You think he'll bring them to us?”

“Maybe if I asked him right,” Jess mused.

“Then you'll have your chance soon enough,” Ben said. “Here he comes.”

The tree trembled as Dougyl stomped over. “We're about to leave for Galdoron,” he announced. “Have you changed your mind, Princess?”

Jess was silent a moment. Just as Dougyl was beginning to get fidgety she pursed her lips and said, “Before I'd even begin to consider marrying you, Dougyl, you'd have to prove yourself worthy.”

“Hehe. Aren't my good looks enough?” Dougyl spread his arms wide and closed his eyes beatifically, missing Jess's grimace. “But okay. I'm generous with beautiful women. How should I prove myself? Tear up a tree from its roots with my bare hands?”

“No.” Jess shook her head. “Too easy.”

“Too easy?” Dougyl scratched at his hairy chest. “Okay. How about if I wrestle a bear and kill it with my bare hands?”

“Child's play.”

“Really?” Dougyl growled in frustration. “Then breaking boulders over my head?”

“Math,” Jess said firmly.

“Math?” Dougyl's eyes bulged.

“That's tough,” Ben agreed. “I was never very good with math either. I never got beyond multiplication and division.”

“Ben, be quiet,” Jess said out of the corner of her mouth. Then to Dougyl, “If you can't, I won't even consider reconsidering.”

Dougyl fumed. “Rimmah's beard . . . all right. I can do anything. Give it to me.”

“What is twelve times twelve take away twelve times twelve?”

Dougyl stared blankly at her.

“Try using a piece of paper,” Ben suggested. “That sometimes helps.”

“Ben!” Jess said. “Don't help.”

“Quiet, you runt.” Dougyl bared his teeth at Ben. “I don't need help from stupid dogs like you.”

“Answer the question, Dougie-boy,” Jess said sharply.

“Gimme a minute, and don't call me that.” Dougyl paced, kicking up chunks of sod and muttering to himself. The he stopped in front of Jess, pulled himself up and said, “The answer is twelve times twelve.”

“Wrong. Here is another one. One thousand and sixty eight, take away nine hundred and two. From the remainder take away one hundred and sixty-two. What is left?”

“Tricky one,” Ben said. “I liked subtraction best because my Ma taught me with berries and she let me eat the berries I subtracted.”

“Ben!” she said loudly.

“Quiet, you,” Dougyal said. He wasn't paying much attention. His eyes had taken on a far away look and he was picking his hairy nostrils with one fat finger and eating the boogers thoughtfully.

After a long meditative silence Dougyal said, “Eight?”

“Wrong again. Do you really expect to be my husband, Dougie-boy? Here is one more. What is negative eighty-seven plus eighty and plus seven?”

“Ooh, I know, I know!” Ben wriggled in his bonds. “This one is easy. You just—”

“Ben!” Jess shouted. “Shut up!”

“I don't need any help,” Dougyal growled. “Not from no runt. This is easy stuff. That answer is . . . it's . . . it's eighty-seven!”

“Wrong again! Too bad. Better luck next time, maybe. Now, why don't you redeem yourself and go fetch me my weapons.”

Dougyal started away, but he had only gone three steps before he halted and spun around with a bellow. “Cheat! You cheated!” He stormed back. “Those problems didn't have any answer! Little cheat of a princess! You're tried to make me look stupid, but big Dougyal is too smart for you! Oh, he is too smart for you! Cheater! Rimmah was right. He's always right. Well, you'll be sorry you didn't agree to marry me. I'll take you back to Rimmah and then you'll be sorry. The weapons are going to stay right in that wagon over there, and you're going in the wagon over there all the way to Galdoron where Rimmah will deal with you. And if you're smart you'll decide to marry me before then.”

“Doubtfully,” Jess said, coolly.

“Think so? Think so?” Dougyal hopped up and down, waving his arms furiously. “Well, when Rimmah gets hold of you he'll do all sorts of nasty things. Like this, and like this.”

The giant man began smacking Jess, making her swing from the rope with every loud slap. She shrieked.

The next thing Ben knew his teeth were sunk deep in Dougyal's leg.

Dougyal bellowed and squealed, but Ben latched tight—fury roaring in his mind—and wouldn't let go. The hairy man leaped up and down, pummeling Ben with both his fists, screaming in pain. Ben closed his eyes tight, teeth sinking deep, and gripped all the tighter until darkness took him.



Chapter Eighteen

Midnight Escape

Sorry.”

“Huh?” Ben rolled over, groggy. “What?”

It was dark, almost pitch black. He could feel that he was still tied up, but it was impossible to see anything.

“I said I was sorry.”

“Jess? How long has it been? Where is Dougyal?” He struggled, but the rope bonds on his arms and legs held firm and all he ended up doing was rolling against a warm shape nearby. By the feel if it the shape was Jess. “Are you all right?”

“Better than you. Things didn't turn out as I had expected. Hoped. I'm sorry. You shouldn't have tried to stop Dougyal. He wouldn't have done anything serious to me. He was just a little mad . . . but then you went and made him furious—biting him like that on my account.”

“Well.” Ben winced at the memory as much as at his current hurting. “Maybe he'll remember to treat a princess better next time. It's disgraceful how he treated you. I'm not sorry for it, and you shouldn't be.” He rested his head back in the darkness, feeling her leg under his neck, the rough timber against the back of his skull.

Jess gave what sounded like a forced laugh. “More likely he'll just remember to keep himself well away from your mouth.”

He chuckled a little to show her he was all right, but his heart wasn't in it. He did hurt—everywhere. It was amazing, he thought, that nothing felt broken. He hurt as if he had been trampled by an entire herd of stampeding horses.

“Where are we?” he said. “What's happening?”

“We're in the back of a wagon, being carted to Galdoron to face our doom.”

“Ernie?”

“I guess on one of the other wagons, stuffed in a barrel, like Dougyal said. He seemed to be careful to make sure we weren't near the wizard.”

Now that he paid attention, Ben did notice the rough planks beneath him were rocking slightly with movement. He could hear the squeak of an axle and a steady *patter-patter*.

“What's that noise?”

“Rain hitting the tarp over the cart. It's been raining for a while. You were out for a long time. It's night now. Oh, Ben,” she burst out, “I've made a terrible mess of things. I thought we'd go and defeat Rimmah and rescue my parents but instead we're captured. We're captured and I didn't get us to escape so now we're finished and Rimmah has won and he'll take over the world. And it'll be all my fault,” she finished, sounding ready to cry.

“Nonsense,” Ben said, repeating what his mother had always told him when he complained about the monster under the bed that was going to eat him. It didn't seem very appropriate to this situation, but he was so shocked to hear Jess defeated and near tears that it was the only answer that came to mind. “It's not your fault. You're the one who got us this far. Rimmah isn't going to take over the world, I promise. We'll escape, and punish him for what he did to my Ma and Da, and what he's done to your parents.”

There was silence, and in the distance thunder rumbled.

“How?” Jess finally said. “It isn't like I haven't tried. All day while you were unconscious I tried to get free, but if anything I only managed to make the ropes tighter!” Her voice choked.

“Well . . . well . . . we'll think of something.” Ben didn't feel like he could think of much of anything besides wishing he could die and stop hurting. But he didn't say that.

He rolled onto his elbows and knees and inched forward until his head bumped into the wall of the cart. He felt upward with his bound hands until he reached the edge of the tarp where it was lashed down over the side of the cart. Thunder rumbled again, louder. Working clumsily in the darkness, he pushed at the edge of the tarp trying to wiggle it loose. After several minutes he had managed to work a small section free. By reaching over the side of the cart and moving his bound hands back and forth he was able to enlarge the free section. Then, pushing up, he opened a small space which they could look out at the rest of the world.

“There,” he said, brightly. “That wasn't too hard. See, Jess? Before you know it we'll be free.”

They both looked out through the small opening. It was pitch black except when lightning flashed—then the world became bathed in brilliant light, everything laid bare in stark relief as the thunder boomed and rumbled. In the occasional flashes of light they saw rain falling steadily, everything in sight thoroughly drenched. Directly across from them moved

another wagon, covered with a tarp and pulled by a bedraggled looking horse. By pressing his face up against the side of the wagon Ben could look ahead or back. In either direction he saw armored horsemen riding, blocking the carts in.

"Miserable weather," he muttered. "You got to feel sorry for those fellows. Even their cloaks can't keep out all the rain."

"You can feel sorry for them," Jess whispered. "But I won't. They're keeping us imprisoned here."

"A good many of them, too," Ben admitted.

"Even if we somehow got free from these bonds there is no way we could slip past them."

Ben was about to agree when he remembered that Jess was despairing and it was his job to think up solutions. It was hard.

"We won't know unless we try," he finally said. It came out lamely.

"We can't even try unless we get free. How can we do that? Chew through our bonds?"

"That is an idea. You think of everything," Ben pulled back from the small opening and sat, starting to chew at the thick cords around his wrist.

"Won't work. It's too tough. You'd need teeth like—" There came a blinding flash of lightning, followed by an earsplitting crack of thunder. The brief illumination showed Ben chewing on on his bonds, jaw working.

"It can't—"

"I think I can. Watch."

A few minutes later lightning flashed again.

"You're doing it," she gasped. "King's name! How—that's not humanly possible. You're like an animal. Your jaw must be strong as . . . as, and your teeth—"

"I'm getting rope fiber stuck between my teeth." He stopped chewing at the rough cords, pushing his tongue around his mouth. "It feels strange . . . like when you get a bit of apple skin stuck between your teeth and you really want to get it out but—"

"Never mind that," Jess said hurriedly. "You can pick it out of your teeth later. Can you finish getting free?"

"Yes. I think so."

It was hard chewing, and the rope tasted terrible, though he wouldn't say as much. The muscles in his face were cramping when, after what seemed a very long while, the bonds around his wrists parted and fell away. His jaw ached, but his hands were free.

"There," he mumbled, finding it hard to open his mouth or talk properly. "Now to untie my feet."

"Hurry," Jess said.

Untying knots in the dark was hard, but he had no choice, so Ben gamely picked away until the bonds loosened. "I'm free. But what about you? Is

there enough time to untie you?”

“I don't know. I think I might have pulled the knots too tight.”

“Well . . . I could carry you.”

“How far? You'd get tired.”

“No I wouldn't. You're very light.”

“Thanks. But it won't work.” Oddly, Ben thought, she sounded on the edge of a laugh.

“If I knew where our weapons were maybe I could sneak and get them. Then I could cut you free.”

“Our swords are in the wagon traveling beside us,” Jess said. “I watched Dougyal. But it doesn't matter. Getting them won't work either. You can't reach the wagon without being caught.”

“I'll find a way.” Ben stared out past the loose flap of tarp, thinking. “When there is no lightning, nobody can see any further than their hand in front of their face,” he said. “If I leaped across to the other cart and managed to get under the tarp before the next flash of lightning, nobody would know.”

“That's impossible,” Jess said. “If the lightning came you'd be spotted and that'd be the end of you.”

“I've got to try,” he mumbled, still finding it hard to work his jaw. “It's the only way you'll get free.”

“Ben—”

“Don't worry, I'm fast.”

Between flashes of lightning he worked at the tarp, loosening it further until there was a wide enough opening for him to fit through. The gap between the two moving wagons now looked very large, and the time between the lightning flashes seemed very short. He wondered if he was fast enough.

“You must hold this flap shut behind me,” he said through his closed mouth. “If the lightning flashes, and the riders see the tarp loose—”

“Right. But if the lightning flashes and they see you, you're dead.”

“Take care of the tarp. I'll worry about myself.”

Ben found he wasn't worrying. He was scared, but he felt quite numb, as if it wasn't really him about to jump out into the rain and danger but someone else. It was good he felt so numb, he thought, because otherwise he legs would be weak from quaking. That would have ruined everything.

Another blast of light came, followed immediately by the crash of thunder. Grabbing the edge of the cart Ben pulled himself up and rolled over the side and out into the rain. He dropped to the muddy ground and almost slipped. The carts were still moving, putting him off balance. He lunged, grabbing the side of the second wagon before it moved out of range. The cart kept moving and he was pulled off his feet, dragging along. Hanging on desperately with one hand, he worked at the tarp ties with the other. Rain washed in his face and soaked his clothes as he struggled in the dark. His limbs ached where the ropes had dug into his flesh, and pain flared from his bruises. His heart

beat fast as he struggled with the tarp.

One tie came loose, then another. Still, the space wasn't wide enough for Ben to slip through. He could hear the snort of the horses that followed behind the carts, reminding him of the riders there, ready to see him as soon as another flash of lightning came. His fingers slipped, their grip loosening on the side of the wagon. He clung all the tighter.

Another tie came free and Ben pulled himself up the side of the wagon, sticking his head through the opening. He started to climb inside the cart but halfway inside the tarp caught around his waist. His legs flailed out in the rain, his pants caught fast. Then, with a final desperate heave, he tumbled inside. Lightning flashed as his legs disappeared under the tarp, blazing the world to white light.

Ben lay on the lumpy bundles inside the cart, panting for breath, feeling the thunder trembling through the boards. Silence came again, and the pattering of rain. Voices drifted through the tarp, muffled.

"Did you see that?"

"What?"

"In the lightning flash."

"I didn't see anything. How can you? The light is blinding."

"I thought I saw a movement."

"It was just the tarp on the wagon over there. It must have come loose. We'd better fasten it or Dougyal will crack heads."

Ben scrambled away from the opening, looking around desperately for some place to hide. He crawled into the furthest back corner and grabbed a bundle of arrows to pull up in front of himself.

The loose section of tarp flapped as someone grabbed it.

"I don't know how it came loose," a voice said, very close. "It was lashed down good and proper."

"Ah, you're just trying to excuse your poor work last time," another voice said. "Hurry up and tie it down, and this time do a better job."

The tarp was pulled tight and after a bit of muttering the voices fell back. Only then Ben let out his breath and stopped clutching the bundle of arrows in front of him. A near escape, but there was no time to think about that. He had to find Jess's sword, and Goblin Terror.

Unable to see a thing, it was a difficult search. Fumbling around in the dark, he poked and stabbed his hands on various sharp things. He almost shouted when he cut his thumb on something, but stopped himself by biting his lip. At last he found the two swords, bundled together and tossed along one wall of the wagon. In the darkness he only recognized the weapons by the feel of the hilts. Grabbing the bundle, he found Jess's dagger tied in with the swords as well. Satisfied, he crawled back to the other side of the wagon and tried to work the tarp free again.

After several minutes of labor Ben was forced to admit the tarp was tied

down much better than before. Whoever had refastened the lashings had done a thorough job. He couldn't get the edge loose no matter what he tried. After several more attempts he was forced to conclude he had no choice but to find some other way out. Fumbling around in the dark, he found the handle to Jess's dagger. Drawing the weapon, he shoved the blade through the tarp and cut a long horizontal slit, just large enough for him to slip through.

He peered out. Rain dripped in his face, making him blink, but as he squinted distant lightning flickered and he could make out the faint shape of the following riders. Somehow, he had to make it back across the distance between the wagons without being spotted. He had to move fast, carrying the bundle of swords, and hope that they made no loud clatter and no lightning came at the wrong moment. Last time it had been too close.

Thunder rumbled and a horse somewhere nearby snorted. Ben gripped the two swords under one arm and held the unsheathed dagger in his other hand. Then he leaped, passing through the slit in the tarp and out into the rain. He dropped to the ground, prepared this time for the jolt when he hit the muddy road. Flinging himself forward, he slashed the tarp in front of him and shoved the two swords through the slit. Then—one hand free—he grabbed the edge of the cart just before it rolled out of reach and pulled himself through the split tarp. He landed inside the cart, right on top of Jess.

"What are you doing?" she gasped from beneath him, speaking through clenched teeth. "I would have opened the tarp for you. You tell me to hold it shut and then almost cut my nose off and throw the swords at me, before you leap in and almost squash me flat!"

"Sorry," he whispered. "I had to move fast. Last time they almost caught me. I couldn't explain. Here, let me cut you free."

He scrambled off of Jess and felt through the darkness until he found her bound wrists. A bit of careful sawing with the dagger and the ropes parted. Next he cut her legs free.

"King's name, that feels good. I thought I was never going to get free. Where's my sword?"

"Here." He passed the sword by its scabbard.

"Now we make Dougyal pay." The rasp of drawn steel came through the darkness. "When I'm done he'll be sorry he ever laid hands on me."

"Uh . . . there are a lot of riders." Ben kept his voice low. "I thought we'd try to get away first."

"Get away?"

"Escape. Deal with them later once we've had some time to think of a good idea."

"Maybe we should." Jess hesitated, sounding torn. "I'd rather make Dougyal pay . . . but suppose that does wait until some other time—how could we escape without them noticing? We climb out of this wagon and

they'll notice us in the next blast of lightning before we get ten steps away—or when they trample us under their horses. Better if we attack them while we still have the surprise.”

“They won't see us if we get down in the mud.”

“What?”

“It's how I always won games of 'hide in the barnyard.' Nobody would ever look in the mud with the pig.”

“I imagine. But—”

“It's the only way we can get away,” Ben insisted. “Trust me. Otherwise, we'll have to make our last stand against all of those riders.”

There was a moment of silence. “Okay,” Jess said, slowly. “I'll trust you. There are worse things than mud, I suppose. Just tell me what to do.”

“It's easy. On the other side of the wagon there is the ditch running alongside the road. We leap out of the wagon and roll through the mud. When we fall into the ditch we lie still until everyone has passed. Then we get up and run.”

“To home free, right?”

“Yes—no. There isn't a home free.”

“I know. I was joking, Ben. A little humor to lighten the tension.”

“Oh.” He crawled to the other side of the cart and carefully slit the canvas tarp. “As soon as you're ready.”

“Ready as I'll be. A princess rolling through the mud. This is something I've never done before.”

“It's pretty easy,” he assured her. “There's a jolt when you first land. Here, give me your hand—we'd better not get separated in the dark.”

“Right. If we did I wouldn't be able to find my way to home free.” Jess stifled a nervous giggle.

Ben took her slim hand in his grasp. He tried to quell the sickness in his stomach. He didn't understand what was funny. Maybe princesses could giggle at times like these, but if it hadn't been so long since he had last ate, he was sure he would have vomited. No time for second thoughts. He gripped her hand tight and whispered, “Go.”

They landed in the mud—Jess on top, Ben cushioning her fall—with a jolt that rattled his teeth. Then they were rolling, mud splashing over them. They landed in the ditch. It was deeper than Ben expected and cold water washed around them, rushing fast. Jess gave a stifled gasp as Ben pulled her out from under him, getting her head above the water. He gripped her tight, trying to keep perfectly still his heart hammering in his ears as he listened to the jingle and creak of riders passing very near. It seemed like hours before the sound faded away.

Cautiously, he lifted his head. In the next faint flicker of lightning all he saw was an empty rutted lane winding its way through rain drenched fields.

“They're gone,” he croaked. “Let's go.”

They scrambled up from the water, climbed the bank beside the road and then over the stone wall. They ran through the darkness, rain whipping in their faces. It was blind flight, stumbling through bushes and clambering over walls, not stopping until they were completely out of breath. Then the two of them slumped beneath a hedge, hunched over in the drizzling rain, shuddering and gasping for breath.

“We escaped,” Jess whispered fiercely. “We're free!”



Chapter Nineteen

Finding Ernie

S ometime late in the night the rain finally stopped and Ben drifted into a cold and uncomfortable sleep. He dreamed he was lost in a great swamp where he wandered forever, always sinking down in the muddy water, never able to find his way out. Then he woke and found himself sprawled on the muddy earth beneath the hedge. He sat up and saw Jess standing a few feet away in the morning sunshine.

It was a new day, and not nearly so miserable as his dream. Birds nearby were singing from the wet brush and the sky shone a clear morning blue.

“Hey, you're up.” Jess turned around. “I let you sleep. I thought you needed it.”

“I guess. I had the strangest dream.” He climbed stiffly to his feet. A chill had settled in his muscles and it seemed he had cramps almost everywhere.

“Really? So did I. What was yours?”

“I was in this huge swamp and I was trying to get out. But I couldn't. I didn't know the way and I just kept going on and on and on . . .” he trailed away, feeling foolish. “It was a strange dream.”

“Comes from sleeping in a puddle.”

“I suppose. What was your strange dream?”

She looked away a moment. He thought she wasn't going to answer, but then she said, “It was about you.”

He stood a moment, quite shocked. Frequently he dreamed of his Ma and Da, and recently Jess was often in his dreams, but he had assumed people like kings and princesses always had more important things to fill their dreams with. He didn't know what to say. After a bit he said, “I hope it wasn't a bad dream.”

She laughed, her clear laughter brightening the wet morning. “No, Ben. It wasn't. You look a sight this morning. I don't think I properly thanked you

for everything yesterday. I was ready to give up but you pulled us through.”

“I didn’t do anything except get back our swords.” He shrugged. Jess’s clothes were streaked with mud, her curly black hair matted against her face, but she seemed much returned to her usual self.

“And chewed through your bonds,” she added. “I’ll never forget that. And you didn’t let me give up. Would you like to be a duke when this is all over? I’m sure my father would give you lands after all you’ve done.”

“No,” Ben said hastily. “I’m a farmer. I thought once I might want to be a bard—”

“A court bard, then! You can be that!”

Ben almost swallowed his tongue at the thought of trying to be a bard in front of famous people, but said nothing more. He didn’t want to disappoint Jess, and somehow he thought she would be disappointed if he said he didn’t want to be anything. Secretly, he was quite sick of all this adventuring and was beginning to wonder how going to the king could be worth all this trouble. All he wanted was to work in the fields with Ned, plowing and harvesting. Working in that simple life which didn’t have people chasing you, goblins trying to eat you, or sleeping under a hedge in a puddle of water.

“What about right now?” he said. “We need to make plans. I wouldn’t mind a plan that involved breakfast. It feels like my stomach has shriveled up like a raisin.”

“You’re starting to sound like the wizard,” Jess said.

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “It’s just—”

“No, it’s okay. We’ll get something to eat, somehow. But we have bigger concerns to worry about. Like my Ma and Da. Like saving the kingdom and the evil plans of Rimmah.”

“And Ernie,” he added. His hungry stomach did remind him of the bedraggled wizard. “We can’t forget him.”

“I say we forget him.”

“We can’t do that,” Ben said, shocked.

“Why not? He’s never seemed very concerned about us. He never does anything, and he is just trouble. Better we leave him and go on to Galdoron alone. Rimmah is enough trouble without Ernie along.”

“That isn’t nice,” Ben said. “And have you forgotten what Rimmah intends to do to Ernie? If we don’t get Ernie back the world ends, or something like that. Besides,” he added, “you need Mankiller back.”

“Mankiller. Yes.” Jess stared across the flat grassy fields, her face grim and determined. “I had forgotten. That filthy Dougyal doesn’t know how to treat a horse right. He’s surely treating Mankiller cruelly. Maybe even trying to kill him. We must rescue Mankiller!”

“And Ernie,” Ben prompted.

“Yes, the wizard, too. I suppose we can’t take any chances, though I rather think anyone who tries to use that wizard’s powers will find it only

brings disaster.”

“It can't be very fun stuck in a barrel,” Ben said. He didn't think it would be very fun having power sucked out of you either—whatever that meant. “But how do we find them? They're long gone.”

“Follow the road toward Galdoron,” Jess said. “And hope Dougyal has realized we're missing. We can't catch up with him on foot unless he turns around and starts looking for us.”

“Okay.” Ben straightened Goblin Terror at his waist. If Jess was determined to get Mankiller back, he was equally determined to get Master Cendric's hammer back. “We just make sure Dougyal doesn't catch us again.”

“Right,” Jess agreed.



After an hour of walking across the empty fields they reached the main road. They followed the road, keeping to the edge and ready to hide at the first faint sound of hoof beats. A few miles along the road they came upon an old ramshackle farmhouse with an elderly farmer's wife putting out the laundry to dry. When Ben stuck his head over the backyard fence and asked for directions they were nearly run off with a stick because of his filthy condition. Only when Jess made her appearance and interceded on Ben's behalf did the old lady calm down. Then, clucking about how they were poor dears the women fetched them some warm food, and water to wash, all the while telling them about the terrible racket last night when a whole troop of horsemen and wagons had passed.

“Never heard such going-ons since the last goblin war when I was just a young girl,” she said. “Such is only a sign of trouble.”

Washed, and with her hair combed out, Jess's mood seemed quite improved. She sat on the front steps of the farmhouse and ate her bowl of stew, talking happily about how they would snatch everything out from under Dougyal's nose. Ben, also much cleaner but still feeling the wear of the past day's adventure, was quiet. He thought about Dougyal too, but the closer they came to that giant hairy man the less comfortable he felt. He didn't feel so certain they would snatch Ernie and Mankiller out from under Dougyal's nose, and he didn't relish another fight. In fact, he concluded as they finished up the meal, he dreaded it.

The kind lady packed them some lunch and supper and refused Jess's payment. Thanking the woman profusely they took to the road again, feeling the warm sunshine beating down upon them.

Later, when they stopped and sat on the grassy bank beside the road to eat their lunch Ben said, “Do you think Dougyal has discovered we're missing yet?”

"Maybe. Probably," Jess said around a mouthful of food. "He probably discovered our absence about right now, when he went to check on us during his lunch."

"Do you think he will come back for us?"

"He will. If there is one thing Dougyal is, it's determined. He'll come back for us with a vengeance."

"Ah." Ben looked down at the sandwich in his hands. "And we're going after him. Seems a little funny when you think about it."

"Yeah. You were the one who suggested it."

"Well, there is Ernie and the destruction of the world to think about, too," Ben said, reluctantly.

"And Mankiller. We'll manage it, somehow. We've the advantage that Dougyal would never expect us to come after him."

Ben didn't find that thought very comforting. He decided he wasn't hungry anymore.

With lunch finished they set on their way again, Ben with growing trepidation. They walked all afternoon. In the lengthening shadows of evening they found Dougyal's encampment.

The first warning that the camp was over the next ridge came with Dougyal's bellow blasting through the air. "I don't care how much that wizard whines, he stays in the barrel!"

Ben and Jess stopped. Whatever else Dougyal said was lost in an indistinguishable rumble, but neither Ben nor Jess was listening. They made a mad scramble for the bushes along the road, flinging themselves down behind the cover. Lying among the weeds they shared a glance. Ben tried to look brave and determined.

"I didn't hear the sound of horse hooves," he whispered. "How did they manage to sneak up on us?"

"I don't know," Jess said. "Let's go check."

"Just walk up there and look?" He stared at her.

"Of course not. We sneak. Come on."

They crawled through the tall grass until they reached the next ridge and they could see the land sloping down ahead. A camp was set up on the flat below, a large irregular collection of tents. The largest tent in the middle—Ben knew without being told—belonged to Dougyal. The camp looked as large and as intimidating as he had imagined. It seemed an entire small army stood between them and their goal of freeing Ernie and Mankiller—and getting back his hammer. He was beginning to wonder why he had ever suggested the rescuing idea. He was almost certain this all had something to do with not following Master Cendric's advice about saying as little as possible.

"Do you—do you think Dougyal would take my hammer? I mean, it's a good hammer, and maybe he would want it for himself."

"It'll be with the rest of the weaponry, unless Dougyal has taken a liking to it. Then it would be with him, or in his tent. But why worry about that, anyhow? It's just a hammer." Jess chewed on the end of a strand of her hair, staring thoughtfully at the camp below.

"No reason, I suppose. It isn't really important, not really, but—except—Master Cendric gave it to me." He trailed off, stuttering and mumbling.

Jess was only half listening. "See, over there are the picket lines," she motioned to the far side of the camp. "I think I can see Mankiller among the rest of the horses. We'll need to get over there, somehow."

"And Ernie?"

"He'll be somewhere near Dougyal. It would be just like that stinking man to keep the wizard in his tent so he could torture him whenever he wanted."

"In the tent?" Ben gulped.

"Can't know until we check. If we're lucky the barrel will be outside and we can break the wizard free and get out of there before Dougyal even manages to figure out what is going on."

"Now? We go in there and—"

"No. We attack after dark."

"Attack? After dark?"

"Yes. I'll go for the picket lines, you go for the wizard. We take out any sentries we meet. Keep everything quiet and it'll be no trouble."

Ben was silent a bit. He had never thought this far ahead. Mostly, whenever he thought about getting Ernie back he had thought about avoiding another drubbing from Dougyal.

"But," he said, "should we really do that? I mean, isn't attacking the king's men illegal?"

"What?" Jess turned to look at him.

"Against the law," he explained.

"I know what the word means," she said.

"Well, I'm pretty sure it is," he said.

"So?"

"I've never broken the law. It's a very bad thing to do. My Ma said I should always—"

"Ben, don't be dumb," she burst out. "We've already broken the law. We fought Missar and his men, remember? We fought back in Juzbon. It's a little late to be thinking about what's illegal."

"Well, I hadn't thought about it before. Does it count if you weren't thinking about it?"

Jess tisked. "When evil is in charge everything good is breaking the law. Rimmah is trying to catch us. We're outlaws no matter what we do."

"That's true," he said, a little doubtfully.

"And anyhow," she said. "I'm a princess. I'll give you a royal pardon, okay? My Da will too, once we free him from Rimmah."

“I guess it is better to save Ernie and the world from destruction. I don't know if my Ma would approve, though.”

“She would be proud of you. Believe me. Now, we just wait until after dark when everyone except the sentries have gone to bed.”



Chapter Twenty

Rescue of a Sort

Ben had several hours to go over every terrible outcome he could imagine. He managed to work himself to the point where he was certain he would rather do anything in the world besides sneak into the camp and rescue Ernie from right in front of Dougyal's nose. Long after darkness had come Jess finally whispered, "It's time."

"Tell me again what we're doing," he whispered.

"I'm freeing Mankiller. I'll get a horse for you and the wizard. The rest of the horses I'll set loose so the men can't chase us. I'll wait for you outside the camp. You free the wizard. You'll have to do it quickly because once I set the horses free we won't have much time."

"And . . . um . . . where do we meet up?"

"Beyond the camp. Since I'll have the horses, I'll find you."

"All right," he said, doubtfully.

"Ben . . ."

"What?"

"I . . . Good luck."

"Yeah, well . . . if they capture you I'm coming back in for you, Dougyal or not."

"Thanks. I will, too."

They crawled off, each going their separate direction.

Ben slithered through the grass, straining for any glimpse of the sentries. He tried to not think about the danger Jess faced, and he tried to not think about Dougyal.

After what seemed like too long a time he finally saw the shape of the sentry rising out of the darkness ahead. The man's armor shone faintly in the starlight. Biting his lip, and trying not to breath loudly, Ben fished one of the large rocks out of his pocket. Now he had to put all his practice throwing

rocks out of the fields back home to use. He had one chance to throw this stone right. Rising to his knees, he bounced the rock three times in his palm, measuring the weight, then threw.

There was a solid *thunk* and the sentry pitched over, landing flat on his face. Climbing from his knees, keeping in a crouch, Ben scurried forward until he reached the first row of tents.

A silence hung over the camp. It felt like a breathless silence, he thought. Certainly he was having a hard time breathing. Worse—it always went like this—he had to go pee. It happened every time without fail. Any time he was supposed to keep hidden he suddenly had to pee, bad. It happened when he played hide-and-seek and it happened now. It wasn't fair. It wasn't like all the great stories went. He never heard of any hero crawling through the enemy camp having to pee so bad the hero thought he would wet his pants. That didn't sound very brave. It didn't feel very brave, either.

Trying to not think about how badly he had to go, Ben made his way further into the camp. He kept to the darker shadows near the tents and moved as fast as he dared. Someone muttered up ahead and he froze, crouched low beside a tent. Footsteps came, from ahead and to his left. A watchman appeared among the tents. Ben's hand went into his pocket, gripping another large stone. Don't let anyone raise the alarm, Jess had said.

The watchman passed. Ben let out his breath. Close. He had to hurry. There wasn't much time to begin with, and less remained now. Peering down the line of tents he checked to make sure the watchman was gone, then hurried deeper into the camp. When he next stopped he could see the large shape of Dougyal's tent rising ahead, black in the starlit night. The large shaped towered, ominous and threatening. Ernie was there, someplace. But so was Dougyal. Ernie, who was going to have his power sucked out of him to doom the world. Dougyal, who could break boulders over his head.

Ben crouched, hesitating. *No*, he thought. *I must do it*. He rose and started forward, promptly tripping over a tent rope stretched taut in his path. The cord twanged loudly and the scabbard to Goblin Terror slapped hard against his shins as he tumbled over his own feet, landing hard on his chin, teeth rattling.

He bit his tongue to keep from cursing or screaming—he wasn't sure which. Sparks of light danced across his vision, his shin throbbing. Someone stirred inside the quivering tent and groaned. Ben tensed. He heard the rustling of cloth, then a dreamy voice mumbled something about passing the cheese and wine. Ben felt a hysterical giggle working its way up his throat and he clamped both hands over his mouth. This wasn't supposed to happen. He was going to ruin everything. Bards didn't almost wet their pants when sneaking into an enemy camp. Great heroes didn't get hysterical giggles when on a daring rescue. But all that didn't matter. He was Bennelzor Transom, the stuttering farmer from York, and in a second his shrieking

laughter was going to burst across the camp and doom them all. In that moment he couldn't think of a more ignoble way to die.

That thought, along with the thought of Jess, made him clamp his hands over his mouth all the harder. He went cross-eyed and shook with the repressed hysterics, but finally they passed. Weak, and gasping for breath, he staggered back to his feet and made it the rest of the way to Dougyal's tent. Every delay was time lost. He had to work even faster.

Great rasping snores, like one might expect from an over-sized dragon, came from within the tent. It was enough to drive all laughter straight out of Ben as if it had never existed. The sleeping Dougyal lay just on the other side of the cloth. That was enough to make his knees go weak.

As if daring Ben to come and try a rescue, a large barrel sat beside the tent flap. The barrel, just sitting there, almost felt like a threat. Licking his now dry lips, Ben eased his way alongside the tent, creeping forward. The air holes drilled in the top of the barrel made him certain he faced the prison of Ernie.

Gingerly, he tapped on the top of the barrel. "Ernie?" he whispered. "Hey, Ernie. It's me. Ernie!"

There was no reply. Not even a stirring. Ben scratched his chin, a tickling of doubt working up in his mind. Perhaps the wizard was asleep. Or—remembering what Jess had said about torture—and he didn't want to think of it, perhaps dead.

"Ernie? Hey, say something."

It was no good to end up rescuing a barrel of potatoes. If Ernie was alive in there he had to let the wizard out. And if Ernie was in there but not alive . . . There was only one way to find out.

He took hold of the lid, working it back and forth, struggling to loosen the slab of wood without making too much noise. It seemed Dougyal would hear nothing through the ruckus of his own snoring, but Ben didn't want to take any chances. Careful and slow, with a final faint scrape, the lid came loose.

Ernie's head popped up, beard and hat eschew.

"Have mercy," the wizard panted in a squeak. "I beg you! I'll do whatever you want, just don't put me back in there. While in that barrel I discovered I'm claustrophobic. I'll tell you any secret, betray any friend, just don't put me back! In there it's like—"

Ben's hand clamped over the wizard's mouth. "Jess and I have come to rescue you," he whispered. "So you don't have to give Rimmah whatever horrid things he wants. Just keep quiet."

"Oh, it's the young man. The ignorant lout! The wonderful naïve bumpkin! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Ben fended off Ernie's slobbering kisses of profuse gratitude. "Okay. Enough. Be quiet. We haven't much time. Jess is going to let the horses go and we've got to be out of here before then. Where is my hammer?"

“Who cares about the hammer? My quilt is right here in the barrel with me. Let's go.” Ernie started to climb out.

“Where is my hammer?” Ben caught the front of the wizard's robe.

“Er . . . I don't know, exactly. When I was . . . um . . . whining earlier that big hairy oaf threatened to flatten me with it so—”

“Dougyal has it,” Ben breathed. “The stink. The little stink. Why . . . I'll—I'll teach him to take what's mine. I'll get it back!”

“I hardly think that is necessary.” Ernie laughed weakly. “We're not—how shall I put this?—in an advantageous position to contest issues. How about you just leave a note asking for it back? You can always, er, catch up with him later. Say, when I'm not around.”

“Get out of that barrel and wait for me. Be ready to run.”

“Right. Run.” Ernie paused. “What are you doing?”

“Getting my hammer back.” Ben drew his sword and cut off one of the tent ropes near the entrance. The tent sagged slightly but held. Working fast, he tied one end of the rope to a tent peg near the entrance then stretched the cord taut across the opening.

“Bad idea,” Ernie whimpered. “Very bad idea. Leave the thinking to the princess. I'm telling you, when that giant comes charging out he'll—”

Whatever more Ernie said was lost in the loud whinny of horses from across the camp. The thunder of hooves echoed through the night, followed by alarmed voices, shouting loud. Almost immediately, the camp burst to life. Tent flaps were thrown open and men stumble out, yelling to know what was going on.

Ernie groaned.

A great snort burst from within the tent, followed by a grunt. Next came a growl as the tent flap burst open. “What's gone wrong now?” Dougyal bellowed as he charged out into the night, Ben's hammer clenched firmly in one hand.

One step outside the tent Dougyal's foot connected with the taut rope and the giant man went flying. The rope tangled with Dougyal's foot and, with a jerk, Ben went flying too.

Ernie gasped.

Dougyal landed with a solid thud and skidded across the ground, plowing into several tents, collapsing them on their inhabitants. Ben landed on top of Dougyal.

Ben—perhaps having guessed in some subconscious part of his mind that things might go awry in this fashion—was the first to recover. Quick as a darting snake, he snatched the hammer out of Dougyal's slack hand. Hefting the hammer, he bellowed, “Take that, you cankerous sore!” and walloped Dougyal twice over the head with all his might.

“That's it. Run for it, Ernie!” He gave this last shriek and leaped off the giant man.

The wizard remained transfixed. Whether by Ben's daring—or by the fact that they were now surrounded by angry and armed men—scarcely mattered. Ernie was on his knees, mouth hanging open. He wasn't running.

“Run!” Ben squawked. “Didn't your mother ever tell you what that means!” He dashed past the wizard and grabbed him by the first handy object—which happened to be Ernie's long and now rather bedraggled beard.

“Not the beard!” Ernie had time to yelp, and grab his sack and staff, before Ben was dragging him along, crashing through the advancing men.

It was a chaotic flight. The camp wasn't prepared for battle, but escape wasn't helped by Ben forgetting which direction he was supposed to flee. In the dark every direction looked the same. He dashed this way and that, avoiding the groups of chasing swordsmen and tripping over tent ropes. It was hard to think with the pursuing men so close behind, waving their swords. Ernie didn't help, bouncing along behind him screaming, “Not by the beard! Not by the beard! You ham-fisted son of a savage! Let me go!” with every bump and jostle.

The chase might have gone on all night—or until the entire camp was in ruins—except Ben finally heard the distant sound of Jess's voice calling “Over here! Ben, this way!”

Abruptly changing course, he ducked through a tent and raced out the other side, leaping over the smoldering coals of a fire. Jess was somewhere ahead. They were almost free. He sprinted onward, Ernie howling behind him.

The hope of escape ahead gave him fresh speed and the shouts of the chasing men grew more distant. Then the last of the tents were behind him and he saw Jess mounted on top of the silver form of Mankiller, two darker horses held behind her.

“There you are, Ben!” she called out. “You had me worried. I was about ready to come after you.”

“We managed,” Ben said, releasing Ernie.

“We didn't!” Ernie gasped. “You should have come, Princess! You should have saved me!”

“Ben got you out. I had to get the horses. Now mount up, we don't have much time.”

“Got me out? This—this—this unhinged loon nearly killed me!” Ernie spluttered, almost incoherent. “First he indulged in the most unnecessary masculine score-settling with a ferocious beast and then he drags me through the camp by my beard in the most undignified and painful manner, only to finish it off by trying to start my backside on fire by dragging me across hot coals! Is this how we treat wizards of the third order? I've never been closer to death in my life. Am I a wizard of the third order or am I a piece of luggage?” Ernie finished his tirade, tossing his hat on the ground and stomping on it several times for good measure.

“You don't want that question answered, Wizard.” Jess looked at Ben. “Masculine score settling?”

“I got my hammer back. Dougyal had it.”

“And he nearly got us killed. He whacked that ogre on the head, twice, when we should have been running for our lives.”

“You whacked Dougyal?” Jess gaped at him through the faint starlight. “Golly, and drat that I wasn't there to see it. That makes this entire night worth it.”

“Worth it?” Ernie sputtered. “It nearly ruined the rescue. My rescue! Don't I have any say in the matter?”

“Oh, be quiet,” Jess said. “You were rescued, that should be good enough. You haven't exactly been the greatest wizard so why do you expect the greatest rescue? Now mount up, unless you'd like to stay behind and be captured again. I let all their horses go, but we still need to put as much distance as we can between us and this camp.”

Still grumbling, Ernie hauled himself up onto one of the two remaining horses. Ben mounted the other, and, with Jess leading, they galloped off into the night.



Chapter Twenty-One

Bikalis Attack

Dawn found them still riding. The frantic midnight flight had given way with the approach of morning to a more reasonable pace. The three horses plodded along, their riders hunched wearily in the saddles. An exhausted peace hung over the company.

In the early hours after his rescue Ernie had complained incessantly about the quality of the rescue until even Ben was sorry he had let the wizard free. Finally, Jess had turned around in her saddle and said, "If you didn't like how we rescued you, why didn't you set yourself free? You could have blasted the barrel to splinters and vanished yourself and worried about the un-vanishing part later."

"Well . . . doing magic when you can't see what you're doing is dangerous. Would you use a knife with your eyes closed? What if I injured myself?"

Jess gave a loud snort. "Then you've only yourself to blame if you weren't willing to take a little risk. You should be thankful Ben was so kind as to pull you out. You complain about our rescuing, but I can't imagine being stuffed in a barrel with your precious quilt was any more comfortable."

"No. But you've never been pulled about by your beard." Ernie sniffed. "Or dragged across hot coals. If you ever had you would know—"

"Do you want to go back to the *nice* Dougyal and have a meeting with that *kind* and *forbearing* Rimmah?" Jess nearly thundered.

"No," Ernie said, suddenly meek.

"Then shut up!"

One thing Ben had to admit was Jess knew how to deal with Ernie. The wizard remained silent after that, and a few hours later they could hear him gently snoring in his saddle. With the coming of dawn he was still snoring, slumped forward across the neck of his long-suffering mount.

The twittering and chirrup of morning birds in the nearby trees and

bushes roused Ben from his stupor. He straightened in his saddle, knuckling the small of his back.

"Hello. Morning, at last. But where are we?" He looked around. They were in rocky hill country, boulders rising here and there from the wavy grass, clusters of trees dotting the undulating land. It looked like the sort of place shepherders might live, but there wasn't even the smallest hint of civilization as far as he could see.

"We're in the kingdom of Tarn," Jess said.

"That's good." It was nice to know they were still in the right kingdom. "But where exactly are we, and . . . um . . . where are we going?"

"We're in the eastern rock foothills. We're going to Galdoron. Eventually."

"Ah." Ben looked around again. "I don't see any roads. I don't even see the hint of a footpath. Are you sure—"

"We're far off the beaten track," Jess agreed. "I thought it best to travel this way until we've thoroughly lost Dougyal. Then we can circle around and head for Galdoron."

"Good idea. If we can get there. If only we knew the way."

"What?" Jess glanced back at him.

"The way to Galdoron." Ben waved at the expanse of hills. "When I left York they told me to just follow the road straight. There isn't any road out here. Unless we happen upon someone who knows the way to Galdoron, we're lost. I never like being lost because people always end up laughing at you. Last time I was lost was when I was ten. I went out to pick blackberries and I got all turned around and—"

"Ben." Jess gave an exasperated tisk. "We're not lost. I live in Galdoron, remember? I'm princess of this kingdom. I know the way. It's south-west of here. Now that the sun has risen we'll change course and head that direction."

"I had forgotten you lived there." Ben scratched his head. "It's hard to remember because you act so normal."

Jess laughed. "Thank you. I take that as a compliment, considering how everyone else in the court acts. Come, we're turning this way."

"What about Ernie? Shouldn't we wake him and tell him we're changing direction?"

"Why bother? He'll just complain that we haven't any breakfast. Why don't we just let him ride on wherever he is going and leave him."

"Jess!"

"Well, we set him free from Dougyal." She looked petulant. "All right, all right. Reach back and grab the horse's bridle. You can bring the horse round and along with us. But don't wake the wizard. I'd rather as much peace without him whining as we can get."

That Ben could agree with.

The day had waxed toward late morning before Ernie woke. The wizard

sat up, yawned loudly, and smacked his lips. Straightening his hat he blinked at the sun drenched world and said, "What's for breakfast? A plate of eggs and ham with warm blueberry muffins fresh out of the oven?"

"It's closer to lunchtime," Ben said.

"Lunch, then." Ernie scratched at his beard and muttered something about fleas. "I could use a nice slab of mutton and a pheasant pie, with—"

"Looks like we have plenty of grass for everyone," Jess said.

Ernie went silent. Ben had the feeling the wizard was glaring at Jess, but he decided to not look back and check.

"That's not funny," the wizard said. "You've rescued me so we can all starve out in this barren wasteland?"

"What did Dougyal feed you?"

"Nothing. When I said I was dying of thirst he would splash water down through the holes in the barrel and he just laughed when I said that would drown me."

"So this is an improvement," Jess prompted.

"Yes," Ernie admitted, grudgingly. "But that doesn't make starving to death any better."

"Then conjure up a feast for all of us."

"Conjuring edibles isn't easy. Don't you think I'd do it all the time if it was? I'd love to conjure myself a strawberry pudding before bed every night and jam pastries every morning. But I haven't, you notice. Very few wizards can conjure food."

"I thought you were a wizard of the third order. What can you do?"

"I can conjure a storm, if you give me enough time. I don't do it often because I hate bad weather. I can sew very well, too. If you ever want a dress —"

Jess gave Ernie a black look over her shoulder. "What about something useful?"

"I've won awards for my skill in the healing arts."

"True. You can do that." Jess gave a small nod. "Not a skill I particularly care to need use of. But does that make you a wizard of the third order? Healing my sword wound should only rate for the second order."

"I passed all the tests. I was certified," Ernie said defensively. "I'm very good at it. I have powers you can't even begin to imagine."

"Right. I'll just hope I never have to find out." Jess reined in her horse. "Okay, we stop here for a rest. Wizard, before we move on you must use your great healing art on Ben and fix him up. Dougyal's roughed him badly."

"Again? Why bother?" Ernie looked at Ben. "Healing is tiring work, and the boy hasn't been complaining."

"Because," Jess hissed, "I said so. Because you want to keep that complaining head attached to your shoulders!"

"Ah. Right!" Ernie said quickly. "After we've all had a chance to rest."

Their horses stood at the edge of a small brook. Trees grew along either bank, casting cool shade across the mossy rocks. Clear water gurgled happily as it passed between the stones. The sight reminded Ben of how thirsty he was.

"The horses need a drink. I need a drink. We all need a break." Jess swung down from her saddle. "Drink. This is all the refreshment we've got until we reach a village and I can buy some proper supplies. I like it no more than anyone else, but complaining won't do any good."

Ben had no intention of complaining. As unpleasant as the lack of food was, he considered it far better than being chased by grave hounds, or Dougyal. Ernie seemed to consider saying something, but visibly changed his mind. They both climbed down from their mounts and joined Jess at the brook, drinking the cool sweet water.

"Better." Jess wiped her lips on the back of her sleeve. "Nothing like fresh water to clear the mind. Soon we'll reach a village, and then we'll be on to Galdoron. In a few days we'll reach the city and then we'll set my parents free. After that . . . What are you going to do after that, Ben?"

"I don't know." He gave a small shrug, staring down at his wavering reflection in the water. "Go back to York, I guess. The whole reason I left was to bring a message to the king. I thought once that I would try to be a bard, but I've decided not. It doesn't go with stuttering."

"You can be a court bard at the palace," Jess said.

"No." Ben flicked a pebble into the water. "I couldn't. People would be staring at me all the time. It makes me get all hot and I forget how to say things. Besides, I don't know very many songs, really. It was a dumb idea to think I could ever be a bard."

"You don't have to know a lot of songs," Jess insisted. "I'd like it even if you sang only a few."

"I don't know any good songs. '*Chase The Bed Monsters Away*' isn't what you sing in court."

"I'd like it."

"It wouldn't be fun. I miss Ned. I miss working on the farm."

"What about fun for me? You think I find it fun in court? All you think about is that stupid horse. What about other people?" Jess hugged her knees against her chest. "I hate it there, too, but do I have any choice? All I have is a mother trying to get me to marry one creep or another and snotty ladies who think they're better than everyone else."

"It's all a little premature to think about these things," Ernie said, before Ben could even begin thinking up something to say. The wizard had produced a bar of soap from his large sack and was lathering up his beard. "This whole adventure may end a little short of any happy ending. I really think you should give up this hare-brained idea of fighting Rimmah. Nasty wizards are best left alone. Take it from me. Why don't we all move to the

beach like I've been suggesting? Then nobody would have to go to court. We could all lay back in the sun and write our memoirs or something."

"Which would be lovely," Jess said dryly, "until Rimmah's goblin horde overruns our little beach town. You don't really think he is going to stop with Tarn, do you?"

"We can hope," Ernie said through his lathered beard.

"It's amazing you've lasted this long." Jess watched with a mixture of amusement and disgust as Ernie dunked his soaped beard in the water, splashing and swishing around.

"I specialize in self-preservation." Ernie wrung out his beard then opened his sack again. "I had a towel in here . . . oh. I forgot that was in here." The wizard pulled out Ben's small egg sack, which was dripping sticky contents.

"My eggs!" Ben exclaimed. "I thought they were lost forever."

"No. Some juvenile jokester thought to stuff them in my sack while we were in captivity. It was rather cramped in the barrel. Such a mess. At least this will make us a good meal."

"Broken?" Ben snatched back the package, carefully opening it. His face sagged. "Only a dozen left," he said mournfully. "I'll never get Ned back. What will Pa say?"

"Enough for a good brunch. Perfect," Ernie said. "I knew I was smart to avoid squashing them while I was in the barrel. I said, 'Ernie, you never know when you might need to eat those eggs.'"

"We're not eating Ben's eggs," Jess said sharply. "Instead of making dumb suggestions, couldn't you figure out some way of blasting some wild animals we could eat? That would be useful."

Ben carefully cleaned off his remaining eggs and washed out the cloth bundle before tying it back up. He left Jess and Ernie arguing about how blasting wild animals for food would violate the wizard's pacifist principles and walked to the top of the dell, standing at the edge of the trees and staring out at the far horizon. Maybe Ernie was right. Maybe they should just eat the eggs. Maybe it was premature to think about after Rimmah, but he couldn't help it. He thought about how he needed the eggs to get Ned back, but he also thought about what would happen with Jess. The eggs almost seemed unimportant compared to that. He didn't want this time with Jess to ever come to an end. It was a rather silly thought, he supposed. Stuttering farmers who thought they would become a bard weren't the type who were supposed to keep company with princesses. With his mother and father waiting for him he would go back and be a farmer. Not so long ago that hadn't seemed like such a bad idea. He thought—and immediately squashed the thought—that maybe Jess would like to come live at York. Then he would be happy to go back to York. But princesses didn't do that. It all made him very sad.

It seemed, he thought, that the world was sad with him, silent and

gloomy. He looked around. That wasn't right. The world didn't know what he was thinking. But . . . everything was strangely quiet. All he heard was the sound of Jess and Ernie arguing behind him down by the brook. There was no twitter of birds. Not even the buzz and whine of insects near the water.

"Why is it so quiet?"

Ernie and Jess stopped arguing to look up at him.

"It normally is quiet," Ernie said. "Especially when all the wild animals hear an argument about blasting them into dinner."

"Not this quiet." Jess rose, her hand drifting to her sword hilt, eyes shifting to look around. "This . . . this is like the quiet before a storm. The quiet of fear."

"Well, I have a good sense for weather changes." Ernie stood importantly. "And I can tell you there is no storm front approaching. So it can't be that. It must be something else . . . approaching."

The wizard's face went pale, his eyes darting this way and that. "Er . . . it's time we moved on. Long past time, actually." Ernie hurried over to his horse and began scrambling up.

"What?" Jess's eyes narrowed. "Wait. You haven't healed Ben yet."

"No time! Maybe this evening!"

"Wait! What is it? You know something, Wizard."

"Let's just call it a hunch." Ernie had managed to get atop his horse and was straightening his hat. "And I don't want to find out if my hunch is correct. Let's go." Without waiting to see if they would follow, the wizard kicked his horse and began to awkwardly gallop away.

"Drat him!" Jess hissed. "We'd better follow. I don't like the feeling in the air."

They mounted their horses and galloped after the wizard. Ernie was ahead, galloping furiously, as if—Ben suddenly thought—something much worse than grave hounds were after him. That thought made a strange cold prickle crawl up the back of his neck. It was a feeling Ben didn't like. It only got worse when he heard a faint rumble in the distance, like muted thunder.

"Did I imagine that?" he shouted over to Jess, galloping beside her. "Ernie said there wasn't a storm coming. I must have imagined—"

"You didn't," Jess shouted back. "That was something. We'd better catch up with the wizard!"

Ernie hunched over his horse, leaning forward, staff under his arm, riding for all he was worth. But the wizard wasn't a very good rider, so Ben and Jess caught up quickly. Ernie gave them both a wide-eyed glance and said, "There wasn't a rumble, was there?"

"There was," Ben said.

"Faster," Ernie muttered, and gave his horse another kick.

"What is it, Wizard?" Jess shouted. "In the king's name, you tell us what is coming!"

"It might be—possibly—perhaps—" Another rumble came from behind them, louder. "That is to say, almost certainly," Ernie said, hastily, "a bikalis."

"What's a bikalis?" Jess yelled over the beat of the horses' hooves.

"Can we outrun it?" Ben asked.

"The bikalis is a terrible creature. Its blood burns like acid, its spittle is deadly poison, and its scream strikes utter terror in the heart of every man and beast!" Ernie sounded utterly terrified already. His white-knuckled grip clung to the reins of his horse. "It's never been outrun before, but I'm trying for a first."

There came another rumble, now clearly a distant bestial roar, closer.

"It's no use," Jess said. "The thing is gaining fast. It'll be here in a few minutes. We'll have to stand and fight."

"Has that ever turned out well? I distinctly advise against that unless you're immortal or have a full dozen wizards to aid you in battle," Ernie said shrilly. "But if you would string out behind me so the bikalis slows to eat both of you first I'd be much obliged!"

"We stick together!" Jess shouted. "We can beat this thing if we stay together. We can take anything Rimmah sends!"

The roar that came next sounded as if it was right behind them, echoing off the hills. The horses whinnied in panic, fear giving them more speed.

"Where is it?" Jess had her sword out in one hand. Ben wanted to do the same, but his hammer was in one hand and he didn't think he could draw Goblin Terror without taking his horse's head off. "I can't see anything behind us, Ernie!"

"It's probably hiding," Ernie squeaked. "They like to hide behind the hills and then come swooping over when you least—"

A great and terrible scream rent the air. It was a scream like some agonized animal and terrified women combined and amplified a thousand times. The shriek tore at Ben's ears and seemed to pierce right to his very heart, freezing the blood in his veins and locking his muscles like ice. The horses screamed in response, wild with fear.

Then a great winged creature burst over the tree tops along the ridge of the hill, the gust of wind knocking branches loose, swirling through the air. Swooping toward them came a giant creature covered in black and red scales, massive leathery reddish black wings spread wide, long pointed tail lashing the air. The hideous beast appeared like a dragon, except with two heads on the end of two long necks. It's four eyes burned a fiery red, and both mouths opened to scream again.

Ben went numb. He couldn't scream. He couldn't think. All he could do was hang on and close his eyes as the bikalis swooped and then dove straight for them. There was a great blast of air—filled with a horrible stench—that nearly knocked Ben from his saddle. Then the bikalis was gone.

When Ben opened his eyes he discovered he was still on his horse. The horse was bucking and leaping, running in a circle, mindless with fear. His saddle had come off, but he remained on the horse, arms wrapped tight around its neck. The world bounced and jiggled with the horse bucking and leaping. It was difficult to see straight, but he looked around for Jess and Ernie as best he could. He saw Ernie first. The wizard was off his horse, scrambling up from the ground. Only half of Ernie's horse remained, lying a short distance away among the grass. Then Ben saw Jess. She lay further along, spread out flat on her back.

"Jess!" He let go of his horse, intending to climb down. Instead, the next buck of his horse promptly shot him through the air.

He landed on his face a few feet short of Jess. It hurt, but he wasn't much thinking about his bloody nose, or his bloody face, or his mouth full of gravel. Blinking the dirt out of his eyes he crawled over to the princess.

"Jess, are you all right?" He gently touched her shoulder.

"Oooh." Jess groaned and started to sit up. "That bikalis hit me." A long gash ran down the side of her head, bleeding freely, splashes of blood dropping on her fine green jacket.

"It's okay, I'm here." Ben didn't know why he said it because it wasn't okay—they were about to be eaten by a bikalis—but it was what his mother had always said when he was hurt.

"Where is Mankiller?" Jess looked around, clutching at the bloody side of her head.

"He's all right. Don't worry, he's coming back." Mankiller, snorting and rolling his eyes, was reluctantly trotting back through the grass. "Here, I'll help you up."

"We must stand and fight," Jess said, groggily.

"No, you must get away." Ben picked her up and set her in the saddle. "You must get away. The bikalis ate half of Ernie's horse but I think that was only an appetizer. It's coming back for more. Ernie—hurry!"

The wizard, gibbering with fear, tottered over, gripping his staff and massive sack with both hands.

"Save us! Save us!" Ernie croaked, pawing feebly at Ben's arm. "I'm not ready to die! I haven't spent all of my retirement! I haven't—"

Ben shoved the wizard—sack and all—up behind Jess. Then he picked up Jess's sword from where it had fallen and handed it to her.

"Ben, what are you—"

"My horse ran away. I'm going to hold the bikalis. Go. I'll hold it. I'll make it pay for hurting you."

"No, Ben! No! You can't! Ben, stop! You'll get yourself killed. You—"

"Just go. Run!" He gave Mankiller a kick and the horse ran.

The bikalis screamed again from the sky.

"I hear you! It's just me and you now, monster." Ben walked back to

where his pack had fallen off his horse. Making sure his remaining eggs hadn't broken, he set the pack aside and picked up his hammer, gripping it tight in both hands.

The bikalis seemed not to notice him. The creature swooped low, both of its heads gazing after the sliver fleeing shape of Mankiller.

"Fight me, monster. Fight me!"

Swinging the hammer round and round Ben hurled it harder than he had ever thrown before. The hammer leaped through the air, a blurred streak, and struck the bikalis squarely in one of its heads. The bikalis screamed, but this time in pain. The creature swung round, teeth snapping.

Ben drew Goblin Terror. The blade flashed as it came up in his hands, glittering bright. At least this wasn't an embarrassing way to die, he thought, and charged.

The bikalis dove for him, but at the last moment Ben ducked under the lunging, snapping teeth and swung his sword toward the broad, scaled front of the beast.

They crashed together with such force that Ben was knocked breathless. The bikalis screamed and roared, lifting into the air. Ben, still clutching the sword impaled into the beast, rose with the bikalis. Man and beast grappled in the air, swirling, bikalis wings flapping. Ben held onto the embedded Goblin Terror with all his strength.

The bikalis roared again, clawing at him, teeth snapping. Long claws tore Ben's flesh, and jagged teeth snapped just beyond his shoulder. Hot spittle splashed down his back. Soon as the bikalis could shake him free he would end up devoured in a single bite. And that would be very soon.

Ben gripped the scaly hide with his left hand and pulled Goblin Terror free, hewing at the beast's tough hide with all his strength. But it wasn't enough. Though bikalis blood splashed everywhere, drenching him, the monster didn't weaken. The blood burned as if his flesh were on fire. He was going to die without even stopping the bikalis.

The next time the bikalis lunged, snapping at him, Ben leaped and caught its throat, hanging on tight. The monster jerked back and Ben went soaring, his grip firmly fixed on the leathery throat. The creature reared in the air, bellowing, mouth frothing in fury.

The world spun beneath Ben, a blurred image of trees and sky. His grip was weakening, strength fading. Hand trembling, he swung his sword at the bikalis's throat. The blade cut deep. More hot blood gushed from the wound splashing across him. His entire body became one mass of pain. Pain like he had never known filled his mind. He was screaming, but still he slashed at the monster, cutting deeper.

The bikalis writhed, claws tearing at Ben, trying to shake him loose. He felt his consciousness slipping, darkness creeping across his vision. With the last of his strength he plunged the sword in the thick neck, right to the hilt.

The bikalis gurgled, then went limp.
They were falling, down . . . down . . . down. Tumbling, smashing.
They came to a stop with a jolt.



Chapter Twenty-Two

Dying

The world was the color of blood. He stared. Everything he saw swam round and round. I'm drowning in blood, he thought.

"Oh, Ben! Ben!" Jess appeared above him, crying. He could see the tears running down her face, but her voice came distant.

He tried to reach up to touch her, to tell her everything was all right because the bikalis was dead—but his arm wouldn't respond. Did he have an arm?

"Ernie!" Jess screamed. She was kneeling over him, shaking, but he couldn't see what she was doing. "Ernie, get over here!"

Who was Ernie?

"Coming, coming," a faint voice said. "Is . . . er . . . the thing really dead?"

"Forget the stupid bikalis! It's Ben. Look at him! He's dying! Do something. Ernie, do something!" Her hands were touching his face but he barely felt them. "Don't die, Ben! Don't die!"

"Oh, save us! Look at him!" A bearded face appeared, wavering. "Oh, it's terrible! I can't stand to look. I think I might be sick!"

"Don't be sick!" Jess shouted through her tears, grabbing Ernie by his robes and shaking him. "Do something, you incompetent wizard! Heal him before he dies!"

"I—I suppose I could try." The bearded face stooped low over him again. "It's not easy, you know. This is tricky and if—"

The world swirled away into darkness.



When Ben opened his eyes he first saw the cool blue of a morning sky. "Am I dead?" he said. Then, after thinking a bit, "Yes, I must be dead."

No one had ever made it exactly clear to him what being dead felt like, which had always made him wonder how one could tell whether you were alive or dead. Oddly, being dead felt just like living, which only confirmed his fear that one might get confused over whether they were alive or dead. Fortunately, he thought, in his case it was quite clear. He remember fighting the bikalis and the terrible pain. He remember falling, and then Jess crying. Jess crying was the worst part. It made him sad.

"I wish I hadn't died," he said. "I suppose it couldn't be helped, but it does make for a very sad ending."

"That's good to know, as you shouldn't be disappointed to find out you are actually alive."

He sat up with a start, his heart feeling as if it had nearly leaped into his throat. Jess sat on a rock a few feet from him, such a glad smile on her face that she seemed radiant.

Ben stared. "You're dead too?"

"No. I'm quite alive, though I would have wished I were dead if you hadn't pulled through. It was a very near thing. You had us worried."

"Then I'm dead?" Ben rubbed his forehead, feeling confused.

"Not unless Ernie has animated the dead. You look alive to me."

"That's good. I'm a little confused. What day is it?"

"Yesterday you fought the bikalis. Once Ernie healed you all we could do was wait. He said the shock might still kill you. It was an awful long night."

"I guess it didn't. What happened?" He looked around. They were on the rocky slope of a ravine. A short distance below them, filling the entire bottom of the ravine—wings outstretched—lay the dead bikalis.

"You went through the flying meat grinder," Ernie said from behind him. The wizard giggled at his own joke. "You were nothing more than ground meat by the time we got to you. Living ground meat. Can you imagine?"

"He wasn't acting so funny when we first found you." Jess gave Ernie a half annoyed, half angry look. "It was horrible. I made Mankiller turn around, even though Ernie didn't want too. We saw you fighting in the air, we saw the bikalis fall and land in the ravine. Then I came and found you." Jess swallowed at the memory. "I thought you were already dead at first. Then . . . then . . . I had to make the wizard heal you."

Ben looked down at himself. His clothes were in tatters, as if his shirt and pants had been eaten by fire. What remained of them was dirty too, a mixture of blood and dirt so thick he couldn't see—or remember—what their original color had been. Beneath the tatters of his garments he saw his flesh smooth and whole, the faint tracings of scars spidering all over his body.

"Ah, well." Ernie coughed. "Yes, the healing wasn't perfect. Wounds inflicted by a bikalis are difficult, you see. Wounds from their blood especially so. You know, with all the burning and such . . . It does have a detrimental effect on beauty, but I'm sure with some judicious application of skin creams

the disfiguring effect could . . . er . . . be masked.” It was the first time Ben had ever heard the wizard sound apologetic.

“It’s okay,” he said. “It doesn’t matter. A hundred times better than how I was. Thanks, Ernie. I don’t hurt a bit.”

“Well, yes. I . . . I am pretty good.”

Jess snorted and mumbled something about the most vain wizard she had ever met. Then she stood. “Ben, can you walk? Or are you too weak—”

“No. I feel as good as new.” He stood and stretched, marveling that even his throbbing wounds and aches from Dougyal were gone. “But I’m starved like I’ve been a week without food. I could eat a cow before it stopped mooing.”

“That’ll have to wait. But I promise you that at the first town we reach we’ll have a feast. A feast to celebrate surviving the bikalis.”

Fascinated and repulsed at the same time, Ben found himself drawn toward the massive corpse. The bikalis was as hideous in death as it had been in life.

“Ug.” Jess stood beside him, looking down at the sprawled heads of the beast, her arms wrapped around herself. “I say we can’t get away from this place fast enough. What you did, Ben—That was close. Too close. I—it was very nice of you, but don’t do that again.”

He gave a little shrug, feeling embarrassed. “I wasn’t going to let that creature hurt you,” he said, simply.

They stood together, silent, looking at the bikalis. Ernie was making his way around the dead monster, poking at it with his staff and frowning while he mumbled to himself.

“The wizard says you couldn’t have done it without that sword he gave you. He said a normal sword would have struggled to even pierce the hide of a bikalis. Of course, he said you shouldn’t have been able to kill the bikalis by yourself, anyhow. He said any reasonable person would have died after suffering less than half what you survived.” Jess gave an odd laugh. “He wasn’t very good company last night when I was watching over you.”

Ben just stared at the bikalis. He still couldn’t believe he had killed it.

“I—” Jess shifted. “Ben . . . I . . . When I first met you, I pitied you. At first I came along because I thought I’d look out for you. I thought you needed someone to watch over you, to make sure you didn’t get into trouble. But I was wrong. Now I see you’re plenty capable of watching out for yourself, and others. You saved me. Thank you.”

Her praise made him blush and he felt the heat go all the way up to the tip of his ears. “I—I’m. I mean—I—I’m glad you came along,” he finally managed to say.

It was an awkward moment, so he took one step closer to the bikalis. He squatted, peering intently. The head nearest him had a large portion of the skull caved in. Buried in the bone and flesh was the large head of his

hammer, the handle snapped off near the base.

"I'm sorry I lost the hammer," he said. "It was a good hammer. Master Cendric will be sorry to not get it back."

Jess laid a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sure he'll understand, Ben. At least you still have the sword. I pulled it out of the bikalis last night. I thought if you died I ought to have something to remember you by. Ernie cleaned it up. It's as good as new."

"That's good," he said. But he thought it wasn't the same. The hammer reminded him of the past. It was a piece of York that he could take with him wherever he went. It was like a piece of Master Cendric.

"It's outrageous, really," Ernie said. The wizard had finished circling round the bikalis and now stood near them, leaning on his staff.

"What?" Ben looked up.

"A bikalis—really!" Ernie shook his head. "Rimmah has gone too far. I should take this to the council. They could reprimand him. This is even serious enough for sanctions."

"Reprimand? Sanctions?" Jess turned. "You think those things mean anything to someone like Rimmah? The only thing a wizard understands is a sharpened blade shoved through his gullet."

"Er, actually," Ernie looked quite alarmed. "I find a good cup of tea solves most of my problems."

"Yes—and you're trudging around out here with a bikalis and other foul creatures hunting you, while Rimmah is running the kingdom. It says something, doesn't it?"

"Like what?" Ernie watched her, curious.

"Never mind," Jess said through clenched teeth. "You can sanction and reprimand Rimmah's corpse as much as you want when I'm finished with him. He is going to regret he ever touched my parents!"

"Sanctions are more civil. And less dangerous to one's own safety," Ernie said, contemplative.

"Sometimes to accomplish much much must be risked. Ever heard that?"

"As I recall it's what most leaders have said before they ruined their empires. Are you sure you won't take up my idea of vacationing on the beach until this whole nasty deal blows over?"

"How about vacationing with a few bikalises? You care to do that?"

Ernie looked at the one dead bikalis in front of them and his face fell. "No."

"Neither do I. So I say we hurry up and get to Galdoron before Rimmah unleashes any more monsters on us. If you'd rather stay behind and fend for yourself you're welcome to try."



It was a bedraggled and hungry group that left the putrefying corpse of the bikalis behind and struck out in the direction of Galdoron. Ernie remained unusually quiet. The wizard trudged along behind Mankiller without complaint, sunk in his own thoughts. The absence of sniping between Jess and Ernie was—Ben had to admit—a blessed relief. But, in a strange way, it was also unsettling. The silence marked how much the bikalis had destroyed any last shreds of normalcy in their lives.

Early in the afternoon they came upon a small village. Then, for a brief time, all their troubles were forgotten. Jess led them to the inn at the center of the village and, laying a gold coin on the counter, ordered them all some of the best food available. Once all three of them were thoroughly stuffed—Ernie especially—Jess brought Ben to the local tailor and bought him some new clothes. They didn't have time to wait for the tailor to sew something special for Ben, so their choice was from what he had on stock. None of it fit Ben very well, or looked particularly good, but the appearance of a poor peasant in ill-fitting clothes was better than his previous tattered state in which he could have easily been mistaken for a vagabond.

Next Jess purchased new horses for Ben and Ernie. They weren't so good as the horses they had stolen from Dougyal, but Jess said they would have to do. Their last stop before leaving the village was to pick up food supplies for the remainder of the journey. While Jess picked out bread, cheese, and salted meats, she asked the store manager for any news.

"Things are in a bad way," the pudgy man said, leaning on the counter and polishing his spectacles which looked so old Ben wouldn't have been surprised if they had been passed down three generations.

"What's bad?" Jess asked.

"Everything." The store man put the spectacles back on the end of his round nose. "The goblin trouble, I hear, is getting terrible. More raiding, and more burning. Whole towns are threatened."

"What about York?" Ben put in. "Is York okay? It hasn't been burned, has it?"

The man stared at him blankly. "Never heard of the place. Sure it's in Tarn?"

"What about Galdoron," Jess said. "What is the news from there?"

"All bad, too. Strange things going on at the castle, I've heard. The king and queen have been acting . . . odd. People say a blackness, like a living dread, hangs over the whole city. Seems that wizard Rimmah is turning up everywhere. They say smart people stay away from Galdoron these days."

"No doubt," Jess said grimly.

"Say, you don't look like you're from those parts, miss." The man leaned across the counter. "If you're thinking of heading back that way I advise changing plans. Take your old Pa and your servant man and head to the south country. They say the goblins don't care for where it's warm."

"Thanks," Jess said coldly, "but I've already made plans."

"Hold on a moment." The storekeeper took off his glasses again to polish them and squint at Jess. "I say, you rather look like the princess. King's name, but you are the princess, aren't you? Mol'Jessel, light of the kingdom! Begging your pardon, I meant no disrespect. Just repeating what people say about the king and queen and all that! You know how foolish people are."

The storekeeper knuckled his forehead and ducked in what might have been a cross between a bob and a bow. It ended up being neither when he cracked his forehead on the counter and fell over backward with a crash of dislodge pans. The fat man scrambling up hastily, babbling his apologies. Ben had to cover his mouth to keep from laughing.

"Never mind all that," Jess said. "This is what I want to buy." She set the supplies on the table.

"Begging your pardon, Princess, but where are you headed?"

"Back to Galdoron."

"Back?"

"Yes. To remove the evil Rimmah and set things right. Now, how much will this be?"

"Begging your pardon but they say Rimmah is the most powerful and evil wizard in . . . in . . . in the known world. They say he can read minds, see through walls, and burn to cinders all who annoy him. Er, with all respect, if the king hasn't done away with the wizard then you can't possibly do it with this old man and that fellow with hay behind his ears."

"That old man," Jess said loudly, "is the great and most powerful wizard Hadagrath who will blast Rimmah to cinders. And that man who you incorrectly say has hay behind his ears is the great warrior-bard Ben who can thrash any goblin army. We most certainly intend to march into Galdoron and promptly feed Rimmah and every one of his hairy and foul minions to the carrion. Now, if you don't tell me how much these supplies cost and send us speedily on our way I will not pardon you!"

"It was very nice of you to acknowledge my abilities, Princess," Ernie said once they were out of the village and on their way. "But I would prefer it if you didn't spread the impression that I'm going to have any kind of conflict with Rimmah. You know turning him into cinders is strictly against my principles."

"Yeah, sure," Jess said.

"But I'm not a great warrior bard and I've never thrashed an army of goblins," Ben said.

"I know, I know." Jess sighed. "Look, that ignorant fool made me angry so I just said something to shut him up."

"Then we're not really going to Galdoron," Ernie said, eagerly, pushing his hat out of his eyes and kneeling his horse to hurrying up.

"No. We are."

“But you heard the man! Smart people stay away from Galdoron. It's impossible for us to remove Rimmah.”

“I don't care what anyone says.” Jess stuck her chin out and stared straight ahead, rigid in Mankiller's saddle.

“Promptly feed Rimmah and his minions to the carrion?” Ben said.

“Well, maybe not promptly, but in short order.”

“How?” Ernie wailed. “How can we possibly do this?”

“I don't know,” Jess said. “We'll think of something. We have some time before we reach Galdoron.”



Chapter Twenty-Three

Getting Inside

There it is," Ernie said. "Galdoron. We've arrived, and does anyone have any plans? Any ideas?"

After two days of hard traveling they had arrived at the city. Galdoron rose before them in all of its size and wonder. The road ahead dipped into a valley and then climbed the hill on which the city was built, rising ever higher until it ended in the castle battlements mounted on the summit. The towers rose above the walls, soaring into the sky, banners fluttering from the very top. It was an amazing, breathtaking, almost magical, sight, alive and bright in the afternoon sunlight. Ben simply sat on his horse and stared.

"Well . . . indeed . . . really . . . it's rather more pointy than I expected," he said.

"That's just the towers." Jess glanced at the castle. "Inside it's mostly square. Drafty in the wintertime too, but it's never cramped."

"No plans," Ernie said. "I thought not. How unfortunate. I guess that means we must turn around and leave."

"I'm thinking." Jess shifted on top of Mankiller. "Be patient."

"Why don't we just walk up to the gate and say we want to see Rimmah. Then we fight him when he shows himself." Ben scrubbed at his hairy chin, still marveling at the vast sea of houses and the pointy towers. "That's what I thought we always planned to do."

"Indeed," Ernie snapped. "A fine idea! Why don't we just walk into a city teeming with the servants of Rimmah, knock on the gate, and turn ourselves in to his soldiers? I'm sure they'd be more than willing to drag us to the deepest dungeon and torture us until we beg for death! Somehow, I don't envision Rimmah willingly participating in our plans for his demise."

"Be quiet, wizard." Jess looked at Ben. "I'm afraid it isn't quite that

simple, Ben. The entire city is surrounded by a wall and all the gates are certainly watched. If Rimmah has control over my Ma and Da then he certainly has control over all the palace soldiers. Fighting our way in would be difficult. We must sneak in, I think.”

“Well,” Ernie said grumpily. “At least that idea doesn't involve fighting. I still think calling the whole thing off is better.”

“The plan,” Jess continued, “is to sneak into the city and then sneak into the castle. Once we're in the castle we find my Da and Ma and set them free from Rimmah. Then, with everyone in the castle back on our side, we destroy Rimmah. That wizard can't fight us all at once.”

“That is a nice plan: Have someone else do all the fighting for us. Unfortunately, it won't work.” Ernie rested his staff across his horse and leaned forward, looking miserable.

“Why not? I know every secret passage in the castle. I can sneak out any time I want and I can sneak in. We'll get to my parents before Rimmah even knows we're there.”

“It wasn't the sneaking part. It was the setting the king and queen free. It can't be done.”

“Why not?” Jess demanded.

“Let me explain mind control. Once mind control is locked in place it's very hard to break. Either the one controlled must have sufficient mental power to break the binding themselves, or else a wizard of much greater power than the one who cast the enchantment must break the spell. Anything less and it can't be done, or the attempt will drive the enchanted person insane. A wizard of much greater power than Rimmah—”

“Which you aren't,” Jess finished. “I should have guessed it wouldn't be easy. There are always all sorts of stupid rules and regulations for all of this magic stuff. There is always some trick. So is that it? We have to either hope my Da and Ma can free themselves or try to find some even more powerful wizard that happens to live off in some remote jungle and is willing to help us? Those aren't very good choices, wizard.”

“There is another option,” Ernie said. “The wizard that casts the spell can remove it. And, if the wizard is unwilling, he could be persuaded or . . . um . . . removed. If the wizard that cast the mind control is no longer . . . in existence . . . the spell will cease.”

“Yes. Of course.” Jess gave a fierce grin, her hand curling round the hilt of her sword. “It all comes back to Rimmah. Dealing with him first will be a little more difficult, but that is my preferred method. Rimmah will weep at the memory of the day he first thought of touching my parents.”

“Okay,” Ben said. “The first thing to do is try to get in the city. But I have a question. If we do manage to get in without being caught and killed—”

“We'll get in,” Jess said firmly.

“If we do, then how do we find Rimmah? He could be anywhere in the

castle.”

Jess was silent a moment. Then she said, “We’ll figure that out once we’re inside the city. I’ll come up with a plan. Don’t worry.”

“Okay,” Ben said again.

Ernie groaned. “We’ll figure that out? Then I’ll start preparing myself to beg for mercy. These last-minute plans never turn out right. It’ll be the death of us, I tell you.”

“Hush,” Jess turned back to look at the city before them. “We don’t need your grim prophecies of doom. We’ve survived this far, haven’t we?”

“In less than optimal manner.” Ernie harrumphed. “I call it near death the whole way. Murder and mayhem and—”

“But we made it. We’re here, and we’re going to get the rest of the way. If a bikalis can’t stop us, nothing can!”

“Maybe a head cold,” Ernie grumbled. “I feel a headache coming on already. I may be too sick to go through with this. Perhaps I’ll have to stay behind.”

“How are we going to sneak into the city?” Ben had been thinking about that question while Jess and Ernie argued. “Even if we could climb the walls without being seen, the horses can’t.”

“We’re not going to climb the city walls,” Jess said. “We’ll go right through the gate. We’ll sneak in, right in front of the guards.”

“How?”

“You.” Jess pointed at him. “You’ll sneak us through.”



A few hours later everything was prepared.

“But I’m not smart enough,” Ben protested.

“Nonsense,” Jess insisted briskly.

“That’s right,” Ernie said. “What does being smart have to do with it? The more stupid you are the better you’ll fit the role.”

“You’re plenty smart, Ben.” Jess glared at Ernie. “Don’t worry about it. You’ll do fine.”

“But I’m not brave enough.”

Jess finished harnessing up Mankiller to the cart and turned around to face him. “Not brave enough? Who fought and killed the bikalis? How can this be anything compared to that?”

“That was different.” Ben looked down at his boots. “It was kind of accidental. I was angry that it had hurt you and I wasn’t really thinking about what I was doing.”

“That part was obvious,” Ernie added, not helpfully.

“Besides,” Ben said, “there wasn’t any talking then. I didn’t have to say anything. I didn’t have to pretend I was anything.”

“There won't be that much talking this time, either. And there isn't much pretending. You've always wanted to be a bard. Now you get to be one. You're just bringing some supplies into the city to sell. There is nothing to make the guards suspicious.”

“Except if I look guilty.”

Jess rolled her eyes. “Then don't. Look, we need to go. We need to be in the city before sundown. Just relax, Ben. This won't be hard.”

Ben looked at the cart. It was a small thing Jess had bought—along with all of its supplies—for the price of Ernie and Ben's horses in one of the nearby villages. They had purchased all sorts of odd supplies to fill up the cart and make it appear as if some type of meaningful business was underway. Mankiller stood hooked up to the cart, dirtied and made as much as possible to not look like a sleek warhorse.

The plan was for Ben to ride the cart into Galdoron with Jess and Ernie—the two people Rimmah would have the guards watching for—hidden away in the supplies. It would be easy, Jess claimed. No matter how much she assured him and explained the simplicity, Ben still felt a sick uneasiness deep in his stomach. Fighting, certainly unpleasant, was so much more straightforward than sneaking and talking—whether it was goblins, thugs, grave hounds, or a bikalis. Riding on the cart and being responsible for them getting through and saying the right things . . . he could already feel the stuttering climbing up his throat.

“I—I—I suppose it is the only way,” he finally said, quite reluctantly.

“Great!” Jess started to climb into the wagon. “It'll all go just fine. You'll see.”

“Yeah. This was meant to be your part.” Ernie climb in after Jess and began to move sacks aside so he could get into his hiding spot. “The princess is supposed to keep us fed, I'm supposed to watch out for danger, and you're supposed to ride this cart into the city. Oh, and make sure you don't forget.” The wizard paused halfway through pulling the bundles back over him. “If you mess this up it'll be the death of us all. So don't be stupid. Got it?”

Ben nodded, feeling completely miserable. Ernie didn't need to remind him.

Trying to mutter encouraging things to himself, Ben climbed into the driver's seat and flicked the reins, giving a weak, tremulous—and rather guilty sounding, he thought—“Let's go!”

Mankiller wasn't happy about being harnessed to the cart and the horse gave him a sullen look before reluctantly plodding forward. It would be a slow journey with plenty of time for Ben to think as many terrible and doom-laden thoughts as he could imagine. Sometimes, a little part of him thought Ernie might be right. Whatever vacationing at the beach was like, it had to be better than this.

The road rolled slowly by, houses passing on either side, women working

in the yards, children playing. He was being foolish, Ben told himself. It was like Jess said. How could this be anything like fighting the bikalis? Sneaking into the city would be as easy as . . . as . . . and that was when his mind came up blank. He couldn't think of anything that was easy when it involved talking.

That, he admitted silently, was what had him terrified. It would all be fine if there was no talking. It would be easy if there was no talking. But if the guards talked to him . . . if he was questioned . . . Ben felt the reins grow slippery in his sweaty hands. What if he started babbling when they questioned him? What happened if he got all confused and then accidentally spit out the truth, confessing everything? What if he gave Jess and Ernie away? His mouth sometimes babbled all by itself. That was a nightmare he could all too easily imagine coming true.

Far in the distance on the rising road ahead he saw the gate. The white stone wall shone in the sunlight, but the raised iron gate bars looked like teeth ready to clamp down and swallow all who entered. How could it look so beautiful and dreadful at the same time?

Clearing his throat, Ben decided to try singing—to help him keep his mind off his nervousness and, maybe, he hoped, to help the appearance of innocence and unconcern. After all, he was supposed to be a bard coming to the city, and anything was better than sitting hunched beneath his cloak waiting for someone to shout at him.

“Along the road, along the road I wander,” he whispered. “Every day I wander this road, I wander the way it goes.”

As the cart drew nearer to the city gate the traffic increased. Carts pulled by horses and donkeys made their way along the road, mixing with the men and women traveling by foot with packages bundled across their backs. Ahead, he could just begin to make out the shape of four guards, two standing on either side of the gate, watching as the traffic passed through.

“This road is long, this road is wide, along this road is many a sight.” The song he sung was a long meandering tune about a man and the travels he went on. It ended with him getting married and living happily ever after. It was a good ending and easy to sing, but most of the song was rather dull and Ben found it difficult to concentrate on the words. Traffic of people and carts swarmed around him now, some going into the city, others coming out. His eyes darted around, taking in all the sights, the babble of voices and rumble of carts like an assault on his ears. He had never seen so many people on the road at one time. He felt the sudden fear that someone would see Jess and Ernie hiding in the cart. Someone would see, recognize the princess, and then everything would be over.

“It was a very fine day when I started down this road,” Ben made himself continue the song, pretending as if nothing were wrong, forcing himself to not look over his shoulder to see if anyone stared at his cart, pointing. “I

kissed my mother goodbye and I said, 'Dear mother I—'

“You there!”

Ben choked, nearly swallowing his tongue.



Chapter Twenty-Four

Poetry Under Question

He froze, panicked, but then hastily reminded himself the shout probably had nothing to do with him. It was all of no concern. Then he looked around and saw the guards staring at him.

“You there, you don't look like you're from around here.” One of the guards on the right—a bearded fellow—pointed at him.

Ben discovered his mouth wouldn't open. Worse, he didn't even know what to say if he could open his mouth. Argue with the guard, or agree? He settled for an indeterminate movement of his head, which he hoped could be taken either for a nod of agreement or, perhaps, a shake of denial.

“What's your business here in Galdoron?” The bearded guard advanced, the three others following him out into the traffic, their curiosity aroused.

Ben clutched at the reins, his heart hammering fast as the guards approached. His sword was stowed away among the baggage so as to not attract attention. He was unarmed. He could leap on the men and beat them with his hands but that would draw more attention. They were supposed to be sneaking in!

“Can't you speak?” The guard frowned at him. “You dumb or something? Answer my question! What is your business in Galdoron.”

“Er . . . Ju—Just—things. I mean, that is, I mean just business.” Ben tried to smile.

“What kind of business? Why are you looking at me like that? What are you doing with all that junk?”

“None of your—I mean, trying to rescue—traveling!” He nearly shouted. “Just traveling. Selling things. Doing interesting things. I mean, uninteresting things. Un-important things. Harmless things. Those sort of things.”

The guard was now looking at him peculiarly.

"He's a little small in the head, Nelson," one of the other guards said, a narrow bony fellow.

"Yeah, but what's a dim fellow like him doing here?" The bearded man took a step closer.

"Looks like all he's got is junk." A third guard poked his spear at the wagon contents.

"Don't do tha—that is, good guards, I must be moving along." Ben quickly flicked the reins.

"Whoa." Nelson grabbed Mankiller's harness, oblivious to the horse as Mankiller bared his teeth, threatening. "You still haven't answered my question, small head."

"No. Please, no, Mankiller," Ben whispered. Sweat beaded on his face. "Be nice. Jess doesn't want you to bite him. We don't want any trouble."

"What you say? Speak up!"

"I—I'm just a harmless traveler," Ben blurted out. Jess had told him to say something like that. Not those exact words. But something like that.

"Really? We've been given orders by Dougyal to watch out for any trouble coming in to the city. You could be trouble."

"Yes—I mean, no! I'm just a traveling bard. I've come to share a few wares in the city and sell some songs."

"Bard?" The guards shared a glance. "You're a bard?" Nelson said.

"The Stuttering Bard of York. From the upcountry."

"Never heard of such a bard." Nelson's eyes narrowed.

"Ah, who cares," the bony guard said. "Are we here to judge bards or watch for some wizard and the princess? This man isn't the wizard and he ain't no princess. We let him through, Nelson. Traffic is backing up."

"If he ain't a bard then he is here for mischief," Nelson said. "He could be some great warrior come to kill Rimmah."

"A great warrior with a small head?"

"Never know," Nelson said. "He sure don't look like a bard to me."

"Sometimes the best bards don't look like bards," Ben said, quickly.

"Huh?" The four guards gave him a puzzled look.

"Come on," Nelson said, goading. "Sing us a song. Let's hear what kind of bard material you've got."

"Er . . ." Ben's mind raced. It was as he feared. It was worse than he feared. More than talking, he had to sing. Jess and Ernie were depending on him—their very lives, the success of the mission, was at stake—and he was supposed to sing in front of these staring guards. It was impossible. He would ruin everything. He was a stuttering fool.

"This isn't really the best time. Traffic and all. Maybe this evening . . ."

"Sing." Nelson's face had gone ugly, his spear lowering to point at Ben. "If you're no bard, then you're coming to Galdoron for no good. Come on, York bard, or whatever you are. Sing us a song."

For a moment Ben considered snatching the spear out of Nelson's grasp and attacking the guards. In the confusion he could race the cart into the city . . . but then there would be a hunt for them and all their surprise and chance of reaching Rimmah would be gone.

"Okay." Ben licked his lips. "I'll be nice, since you're such a handsome fellow. One song." He opened his mouth . . . and nothing came out. His mind had gone completely blank. He couldn't remember a single song. Not even one.

"Ah . . . right. Right, now. Here's a new one." In desperation, his flailing mind grasped upon *Spring Under The Mountains*, his still unfinished song. It would have to do.

Standing, he closed his eyes and threw back his head. Pretend no one is there, he thought. Pretend he was all alone back home out in the field. Pretend Jess and Ernie weren't depending on him. Do it right. Quickly, his mind thought up the rest of the words to finish the end of *Spring Under The Mountains*. It would have to be good enough. He only wished Jess wasn't there to hear. But he would have to pretend she wasn't. He opened his mouth and sang, as clear as he could:

"Spring wind on the air, oh spring wind on the air
The sweet spring air makes me think of you.

Oh, I'm far from home and lost in this wide world
But still this spring wind makes me think of you.

Spring wind on the air, oh spring wind on the air
The sweet spring air makes me think of you.

The shadow of the mountain looms so cold,
but still my heart warms at the thought of you.

Spring wind on the air, oh spring wind on the air
The sweet spring air makes me think of you.

Everywhere I look 'tis you. Oh, the beauty of spring reminding me of you.
The grass is green, the flowers begun to bloom, still none compare with you.

Spring wind on the air, oh spring wind on the air
The sweet spring air makes me think of you.

If I could have one thing this spring, if only one thing
I would this spring spend my life with you.

Spring wind on the air, oh spring wind on the air
The sweet spring air makes me think of you."

It started out rather quavery and a little weak but Ben continued, feeling the sweat run down his face. As he went along his voice grew stronger, his mind blocking out the thought of the staring guards. He finished nearly bellowing.

"And that," he said, opening his eyes and looking down at them. "Is my latest song." Then, he couldn't help saying, "I've tweaked it a bit. Er . . . perhaps I'll refine it a little more. What do you think?"

"King's name." One of the guards took off his helmet and scratched at his head. "I didn't know bards sang like that. When old Wally is drunk he sometimes sounds like a bard I guess."

"Bard? I never heard such a stupid song," Nelson scoffed. "Such tripe. Do you have a pea for a brain, bard? Or are you really a bard at all?"

"Hey," the bony guard said. "It was good. The song nearly brought a tear to my eye. It was wonderful and sweet and lovely. You stop giving the bard trouble just because you don't know a good song when you hear one."

"Since when has moon-eyed babbling become good singing?"

"Since when have you become a judge of a good song?"

"Since I was smarter than you." Nelson cuffed the second guard.

"Hey!" The bony guard punched him back. "You don't know a good song from a pig's grunt."

The fight began in earnest, the four guards grappling and cursing, soon rolling about on the road. Ben took the moment to drop back into his seat and give the reins a snap. Mankiller jerked forward and they were inside the city, losing the guards behind them.

"What louts, speaking like that about you," Jess grumbled, poking her head up from hiding. "I'd teach them manners, if I got the chance. Tripe, he said! Why, the quality has gone down since Rimmah took over."

"I shall die. I shall die," Ben whispered, peering back. "The stress will kill me. On my gravestone say he died trying to sing for the crowd."

"Please, Princess, don't say that wizard's name," Ernie whispered. "Be quiet and stay hidden. There are eyes everywhere looking for us."

"That probably is best," Ben agreed, seeing the people crowding on the streets and coming out from the shops. "Um . . . but first, where are we going?"

"Someplace safe where we can plan on how to kill the wizard," Jess said from under her sack.

"Me?" Ernie squeaked. "I haven't done any—"

"No, Rimmah!"

"Don't say that name!"

"I wouldn't if you weren't so stupid as to not understand what I'm talking

about!"

"Right," Ben said, cutting off the budding argument. "But where is this safe place?"

"Someplace where they serve good food," Ernie said without hesitation.

"The Pauper's District," Jess said. "They ask fewer questions there."

"Where is the Pauper's District?" Ben mumbled out of the side of his mouth. The people passing him on the street were giving him strange looks as it appeared he was talking to himself. "All the streets look the same to me."

"To the west," Jess said. "Go to the western part of the city. There is an inn called the Wine Sop. We'll stay there."

"Wine Sop. West. Right. Stay down. People are looking." Ben turned the wagon down a side street and flicked the reins for Mankiller to pick up his pace.

The size of Galdoron was overwhelming. There were too many streets. Everywhere Ben looked there was another street heading off in a different direction and all the streets looked the same. It was enough to make his mind freeze with indecision. Too many choices. Instead, he ignored everything. West, Jess had said, and he focused on getting the cart to the western portion of the hill city, and paid no attention to the people, and all the roads.

Evening had arrived by the time they reached the western portion of Galdoron. Their progress wasn't helped by the several times Ben drove down a dead end street and was forced to retrace a portion of their journey. The sky was beginning to darken and the streets had emptied of much of their day traffic as Ben pulled the cart to the side of the road and stopped. They were most certainly in the western part of the city. Still, every building looked much like the last. He didn't see an inn, much less an inn with the sign Wine Sop.

"We're in the west." He turned around and lifted the sack slightly off Jess so he could whisper to her. "I don't see the inn."

"It's around here, somewhere. I don't remember which street it's on. You'll have to ask someone for directions to the Wine Sop."

"Directions. I think I can do that."

All the talking was beginning to wear on him. He wanted to go to bed and sleep for a very long time and wake up to discover that it had all been a dream and the goblins hadn't burned down his house. He wanted to wake up and eat eggs and bacon for breakfast and warm his toes before the kitchen fire. That was a happy thought. But then Jess would only be a dream too, and he wouldn't have really met her. That wasn't a happy thought. What could he wish for? That this had all been half a dream? But how could something be half a dream? It was all too confusing. He shook his head.

Further down the street a man walked along the side of the road carrying

a small barrel over his shoulder. Ben urged Mankiller forward until the cart pulled up beside the traveler.

"Excuse me, where is the Vine Hop Bin?"

The man stared at him blankly. "Whaa . . . ? Never heard of such place."

Ben sat a moment, thinking about what he had said.

"The Wine Sop?" He repeated, slowly, checking his words as he spoke.

"Oh, that. Why didn't you say so? Go straight ahead two blocks. Turn left and go one block. Turn right and go two more blocks. Then you'll be at a large intersection. You'll know because across the way you'll see this large building with five windows facing you on the second floor. The place is a bead shop. Sells all sorts of nice bead work. At the intersection you turn left and go on. The Wine Sop will be on your right. You'll know you're almost there when you see the shoemaker's shop. It's a few houses before the inn."

"Right . . . thanks." Ben watched the man walk off. When the figure disappeared around the corner of the street Ben turned back and removed the bundle from Jess. "What did he say? The Wine Sop is near some shoemaker and there is this house with five windows on the front that sells beads or something."

"Forget that bit," Jess said. "Everyone who gives directions always adds some useless bit of information that's no help at all."

"But there is all of this turning left and turning right." Ben scrubbed a hand through his hair, feeling exasperated. "There were enough turns in those directions to get anyone lost. In York there are only two streets. You don't have too—"

"Men and directions." Jess tisked. "Don't worry. I heard the directions. I'll give them to you one at a time. First, go straight ahead. Pass the first street on your left and take the second."

"Take the second. I got that. We'll be there in no time."

"We'd better," Jess said. "It's getting dark."



Chapter Twenty-Five

Ben in Charge

We're there," Ben mumbled. "What now? There are . . . people. Is that okay?"

Full night had nearly come. The cart was parked in front of the Wine Sop Inn. People regularly entered and left the building as Ben sat on the cart, watching. Of even greater concern, from the light of the lantern hung out in front of the Wine Sop he could see a group of men standing outside the entrance. They had collected there, not leaving. They seemed threatening. At least, it seemed that way to Ben. The place was surly looking, not bright and cheery. Not the place for a princess, he thought.

"People?" Ben heard the sound of packages shifting behind him as Jess peeked. "Drat, and all that. We can't risk it."

"Risk what?"

"That I can walk in and not be noticed. Everyone in Galdoron would recognize me if they got a good look. You'll have to sneak me inside and up to one of the rooms."

"Sneak you in?" Ben said out of the side of his mouth. "How? Everyone is standing there."

"I'll empty one of the bags back here and climb inside. You bring me in like I'm a bag of luggage."

"That's not very dignified for a princess."

"Forget that! We're fighting an evil and powerful wizard. We'll forget about being dignified. Just don't drop me."

"What about Ernie?"

"He can walk himself in so long as he promises to keep his mouth shut. He looks like any old man and nobody will suspect so long as he doesn't hang around."

"Hear that, Ernie?"

"I promise," the wizard whispered. "Do we get something to eat?"

"Later." Jess's whisper came muffled and Ben guessed she was climbing in the sack. "First we get a private room where no one will bother us. Okay, Ben. Ready. Be natural. Act like nothing is unusual."

"I'll try." His eyes flickered to the group of men gathered in front of the inn. It felt like they were taking a peculiar interest in him. "But I think I'm going to get Goblin Terror . . . just in case."

He buckled on the gold-gilded sword belt and then felt around in the shadows until he found the sack that contained Jess. Twisting the mouth of the sack shut, he lifted it out of the cart.

"Remember," Jess whispered through the sack. "Don't drop me."

"Right. Come on, Ernie. We'd better hurry."

Puffing and struggling, Ernie climb out from among the sacks and crates. The wizard straightened his hat, muttering about how he was stiff, sore, and too old for these sort of things.

Ben—as gently as he could—swung the sack that contained Jess over his shoulder and started toward the entrance to the inn. Act natural, Jess had told him, but it felt odd and completely unnatural to carry someone in a sack over his back. Particularly odd when he knew it was a princess. It didn't help that the crowd of large and rather hairy men standing beside the entrance were looking at him, hard. Studiously not meeting their gaze, Ben stepped up to the door.

"Nice sword you've got there."

He turned to face the growling voice. The group of men had moved from beside the door to form a half circle around him. They loomed large out of the night.

"Thanks." Ben gave a toothy smile which he hoped appeared confident and rested his free hand on the hilt. "I know how to use it."

"Nice sword." The largest man, now standing directly in front of Ben, edged forward. "Where did you get it?"

"A friend gave it to me." He elbowed Ernie and hissed, "Get inside!"

"Gave it?" The man chuckled, fingering at knife at his belt. "What lord did you persuade into giving? And the sack—more stuff you were *given*? Some gold from this same friend?"

"Not exactly." At that moment Ben wished Goblin Terror wasn't gilded in gold and jewels. It attracted far too much unpleasant attention. Any hope of escaping inside was gone. There would be a fight. He braced himself, thinking furiously, wishing he knew of some way to get Jess to safety.

"A runt like you doesn't need a nice sword like that. And I don't think you need that sack."

"Maybe. But you don't either. Take her, Ernie!" He tossed the sack with Jess toward Ernie, who was just inside the open door. Then he attacked.

It was one against a dozen, but the thugs only had daggers and clubs

while Ben had his sword. And he was mad.

“Thievery is wickedness!” he yelled, and Goblin Terror flashed in the lamplight.

He attacked wild—foolishly, he realized—as the flat of his sword came down squarely across the head of the largest thug. There was a satisfying thud, and the man went cross-eyed and fell to the ground. Jess would have yelled at him for using the flat instead of the edge again, he thought. Then the eleven remaining thieves leaped on Ben before he could raise the sword for a proper cutting swing.

A shower of hard blows beat Ben back. In the pack of bandits it was impossible to swing Goblin Terror. Someone broke a stick across his back. That made him more furious. He dropped the sword and plunged forward, swinging his fists with all his might. Men yelled, and there was a fair bit of howling as Ben bit, punched, and kicked everything he came in contact with. He ignored the knife that slashed across his ribs and kneeed the man in the face. Then he grabbed heads and began cracking them together, shouting, “Bad! Bad men! Very bad!” with every blow.

Screams rent the night air. Ben released the last two men he had head-cracked and looked up. Mankiller had waded into the fight, still attached to the cart, his big horse teeth chomping. The bandits fled, bleeding and bruised, staggering, most holding their heads, or some other broken body part.

“Wickedness!” Ben shouted after them. “The ways of wickedness hold no profit! If I catch you again I’ll . . . I’ll . . .” But he couldn’t think of what he’d do, so he stopped shouting.

“Thanks, Mankiller.” He took a breath, rubbing at a welt along his cheek. “I could have taken care of myself, but thanks.”

He walked back to the doorway and picked up Goblin terror, sheathing the weapon. He was glad Jess hadn’t witnessed his utter failure in using the sword. She was very particular about doing things the proper way.

“Ernie?” He turned to see the wizard sprawled across the floor just inside the inn door. Ernie hadn’t so much caught Jess and the sack as absorbed the impact as the princess came down.

“Could use a hand,” Ernie gasped. “She isn’t—”

“You were supposed to catch.” He hauled the sack off the wizard. The people in the room were staring—at Ben, and at the struggling sack. He bit off the rest of what he was going to say. A private room, Jess had said. That was what he was supposed to get.

Muttering at Ernie to follow, he walked up to the counter. “I—Ah—hope you can excuse the little thing that happened there,” he said. “They were dysfunctional—or whatever you call people who live in a city like this. Um—”

“No, I thank you, great sir.” The bartender squeezed his hands together. “They were a terror to this place. I thought we’d never be rid of them.”

“Rid of them? Why didn't you send for the town watch?”

“In days past, yes, but since Rimmah . . .” The bartender's eyes darted about. “Well, things are different. Are you in need of aid? Your wounds—”

“I've had worse.” Ben glanced down at himself, noticing the long rent in the side of his shirt where the knife wound bled freely. His right ear stung too, where someone had walloped him hard.

“It's no big deal,” he said. “Ernie can just—” A sharp jab through the sack made him stop.

“Listen.” The bartender leaned close. “Those type are friends of Rimmah. I thank you, but I warn you it won't go well with you, sir, if you trouble them. You must watch yourself.”

“I don't care. When I'm done with R—” He felt another sharp jab in his back through the sack. “Ahhhh—yes. Do you have a private dining area with some bedrooms?”

“One. Upstairs. It's expensive. Only for large parties.”

“Gosh. Really?” Ben was silent. He hadn't expected this. Then he felt another jab.

“No problem,” he said, loudly. “We'll take it.”

The bartender looked at him, then at the gilded Goblin Terror, then the sack on Ben's back.

“Er . . .” the man cleared his throat.

“Lead the way.” Ben shifted, putting himself between the bartender and the sack. “I've plenty of supplies I need to bring in before we'll be ready for supper.”

“Right, right. Top of the stairs, through the door on your left. Dining room and three bedrooms. You just call when you're ready for something to eat.”

“Not too long then,” Ernie said. “And make it a big meal!”

Ben was already hurrying up the stairs. He could feel the eyes of everyone in the room on him, and the oddly shaped sack over his back.

Soon as they were in the room he shut the door behind Ernie and lowered the sack to the floor. “King's name—I knew something would go wrong! It always does! Maybe the people of York were right. I'm cursed. You can get out, Jess. We're safe, I think.”

“Never again.” Jess pushed her way out of the sack, rubbing the small of her back. “We never do that again. I told you to not drop me!”

“I didn't. Ernie didn't catch you.”

“I did too,” Ernie said defensively. “If she weren't so fat—”

“I'm not fat,” Jess snapped.

“She's not fat,” Ben said. “She's light. Carrying a pig is more than twice as hard.”

“Well, I'm not a strapping young man who who throws people around in fights. Or expects old men to catch people in sacks.” Ernie folded his arms. “If you don't like how I catch then get someone else to do it when you decide

to have a barbaric fight.”

“What was that all about?” Jess looked at Ben. “I get into a sack for one minute and you get hurt. Wizard, heal him. He's bleeding.”

“If Ben were more polite we wouldn't have fights. I can't heal him.”

“Can't? You mean won't. You can—”

“It's not a good idea,” Ernie said. The wizard pulled one chair away from the table and sat.

“Don't tell my you're too tired. We're all tired. We still have to work even though we're tired.”

“We're too close to Rimmah.” Ernie glanced over his shoulder. It was only a blank wall behind him, but beyond that, beyond the inn, rose the castle. “Any flow of magic this close and he'd feel it. If Rimmah felt magic being used —”

“He'd be here in a minute.” Jess looked at the wall as if she too could see through it to the lurking presence of Rimmah. “I'm sorry, Ben. I'll bandage it as best I can.”

“Don't matter,” Ben said. “It'll stop bleeding and it doesn't hurt as much as the time I accidentally stuck myself with a hot poker. That really hurt. When my Ma heard me shouting she came running and—”

“What happened down there, anyhow?” Jess walked over to the window and peered out at the darkened street below. “I thought we'd slip inside. Instead I hear talking and then I'm flying through the air. Then I land hard on some bony thing—”

“That was me.” Ernie rubbed his ribs at the memory.

“And then I hear what sounds like a big fight. I try to get out to help but the sack wouldn't open—”

“That was me,” Ernie said proudly. “I held it shut. You were supposed to remain hidden.”

“Not when Ben was being killed!”

“He handled those thugs fine.” Ernie waved a hand airily. “A full dozen he sent running like beaten dogs.”

“A dozen?” She glanced back. “Honestly, Ben. Were you trying to get yourself killed? You're lucky you came off with only that cut.”

He scuffed the worn carpet with one boot. “They didn't give me a choice. I was okay. I just fought them like I fought with Manny our old bull that lived back on the farm. We ate him last fall but before that he was always getting out. When you fight a bull you fight with everything you got and don't let go. Seems nobody fights better than Manny so I don't worry. Except Dougyal,” he added, and winced. “He fights worse than Manny.”

Jess pushed back her hair. “Fight a bull? You are strange,” she murmured. “I suppose it's what they call hardy farmer stock, but you worry me so . . .” She turned to the window and was silent.

“I . . . should I go order supper?” Ben stood, feeling sheepish and not

entirely sure why. He was glad Jess had not seen him use the sword because he was certain that would have earned a lecture.

“Yes!” Ernie sat bolt upright, his tiredness forgotten. “And tell the cook double portions.”

“Things have changed,” Jess said, still staring out the window.

“What?” Ben looked at her, leaning at the window, then walked over to stand beside her. “What’s wrong?”

“Galdoron has changed.” Jess sounded sad, and maybe a little afraid. “It never used to be like this. People attacking you on the street. My father’s soldiers kept the order. The Wine Sop was always a place where the poor people went but that’s why I liked it. I know the barkeep. His name is Gregory. A nice, funny man, though he was always scared half to death when I was around. He would know me too, if he saw me. But I can’t let him see me because Rimmah’s spies are everywhere. The whole city is going black, Ben. It’s all because of Rimmah.”

“It’s no surprise, I suppose.” Ben looked out the window with her. Below they could see Mankiller still tied to the cart. Looking sideways out the window he could see the outline of the castle, now rimmed in moonlight. He wanted to think of something comforting to say, something that was nice and would make Jess smile. But he couldn’t think of anything. She was right. A darkness covered Galdoron.

“My Ma always said bad company ruins a good party. Of course she was always telling me that when I was supposed to be polite but I guess what applies to stuttering Ben applies to great evil wizards too.”

Jess did smile then, a bit.

“Supper, then?” he said.

“Yes. Look stern at Gregory and he won’t ask questions. Place an order for three. Then bring our stuff in,” Jess said. “Unhitch Mankiller and put him in the stables.”

“Mankiller . . . ah . . . I thought you would. You know, because he doesn’t like—”

“He likes you fine, Ben. It’s everyone else he’ll rip to shreds. Besides, you have to do it. I can’t go out. Ernie can’t either.”

“Can’t?”

She shook her head. “It’s too much risk. You’ll have to do everything in the city until we’re ready to sneak into the castle. You’re in charge, Ben.”

“In charge? No. I can’t be.”

“Why not?”

Ben felt his throat go dry. “Because . . . because I’m not an in charge-er kind of person. I’m not a wizard. I’m not a princess. I don’t know how to be in charge. Wizards and princesses are in charge. I’m just—”

“Stuttering Ben, the farmer. I know.” Jess met his gaze. “But you’re all we’ve got. You can do it. You must. We’re depending on you. The whole

kingdom of Tarn is depending on you.”



Chapter Twenty-Six

Honest Misunderstanding

The door slammed with such force the entire building trembled. Ernie and Jess startled, Ernie toppling over backward in his chair, landing with a crash.

“King's good name!” Jess stood, releasing her grip on the hilt of her sword. “Didn't anyone teach you to not slam doors? It's a wonder that one is still hanging on its hinges.”

“I quit. I give up. I've had it.” Ben slumped against the closed door, still breathing hard. “I'm not meant for the city life. I should never have come. It's enough. I'm done! I can't take it. I'm sorry I ever wanted to be a bard. I just want to go home and go back to farming.”

“Ben—”

“All this danger and excitement gives me indigestion. I wasn't meant for it!”

“What now?” Jess stepped quickly over to the window and peered out, as if she half expected to see a crowd advancing with pitchforks and torches.

“What now! Does it matter?”

Ben went over to the table and sank into one of the chairs, leaning forward onto the table and resting his head on his arms. It was the morning of their third day in Galdoron. So far, as Ernie had observed indelicately over breakfast, Ben's efforts had been disastrous. The first day he had nearly been the cause of a riot, the second he almost ended up clapped in irons. They were all misunderstandings—as Ben said—but that didn't help much.

The riot on the first day had started over his need to relieve himself. Nobody had told him that in the city latrines were available for public use. Back home if he was away from the farmhouse and “had to go”—as his mother said one spoke of the matter among refined company—he went and found a suitable bush. Without even thinking about the matter, he had tried

to do the same in Galdoron. There was the problem of a lack of bushes, but once he finally found one—and he had to go very bad by that point—he was interrupted upon discovery, with much shrieking by the female investigator, and much embarrassment on Ben's part. The gathered crowd had quickly informed him about the city use of latrines. Unfortunately, amongst all the yelling they failed to mention that there were separate latrines for men and women. Ben had used the first he came across and that attempt ended with more shrieking and embarrassment when he discovered it wasn't the right one.

At that point a mob had formed and gave chase, accusing him of lewdness, obscenity, molestation, and general bad conduct. The crowd went on a rampage, determined to hang or quarter him for immorality, or perhaps both. The town watch arrived at about that time and would have gladly appeased the popular sentiment except Ben escaped in the confusion and got himself lost elsewhere in the city.

The next day he had confused the value of the coins Jess had given him and in the course of the day was accused alternately of being a thief for not paying enough, and, later, of attempting bribery. It had been another near escape.

“So . . .” Jess sat down beside him. “What was it? Did you forget our talk about how the big coins are worth more than the small ones, and the gold ones are always worth more than the silver ones?”

“No. It wasn't that.” Ben was sick of money. He didn't care what people thought of little round shiny bits of metal. He wanted to go back to trading pigs for wheat flour and salt. Things that made sense.

“Then did you forget to use the right latrine?” Jess coughed. For some reason she found that funny, though Ben couldn't understand why.

“I didn't. I didn't dare use any of them after what's happened.” He flushed. “I was just crossing the street and I was nearly trampled by some maniac and his team of horses. Did you know everyone in this city is a maniac? It's been happening all the time, every day. No one watches where they're driving. Every cart driver is an inconsiderate clod in this city. A man can't cross the street without nearly being run down. I've been dodging all day. Makes me jumpy as a rabbit.”

Jess cleared her throat. “Well. I watched you leave this morning. I saw you cross the street and it did occur to me that I should mention something.”

“What?” Ben looked up, exasperation and weariness warring on his face. “Are alternate streets only for females and if a man dares to cross all carts attempt to trample him to death? That would explain much. There are so many stupid rules in this place! Is a city simply a place where people gather to make stupid rules about where a man can take a leak?”

“No.” Jess rubbed her mouth and Ben got the distinct feeling she was hiding a smile. “And about getting trampled . . . Probably it would help if you

looked both ways before you crossed the street.”

“What?”

“Look to check for traffic. The cart drivers don't expect you to step in front of them. They think you should let them pass.”

“Never was any traffic in York,” Ben mumbled. “And if a farmer was passing with a load he'd stop to talk, not try to run you over.”

“Things are different in the city,” Jess said.

“Yeah. That much I'm figuring out.” Ben stared bleakly across the room. “I want to go home.”

“Don't give up.” Jess rested a hand on his shoulder. “I know it's hard, but we need you, Ben. We still must take care of Rimmah. We need you to find out what Rimmah is doing. We need you going about the city listening and searching for information. You're the only one who can do it. Please.”

“Or not,” Ernie said, suddenly. “We can always give up. Don't forget that choice. I've always recommended skipping this whole idea and vacationing. What do you say, young man? We out-vote the princess and call this thing off?”

For a few minutes Ben lay with his head still resting on his arms. Then he looked up slowly. “No,” he said. “We don't. We must rescue Jess's parents. I'll manage, somehow. I'll try to remember to look before I cross the road. I'll be careful which latrines I use. And I'll try to remember which little metal coins are more important.”

“Thank you, Ben,” Jess said.

“But I still haven't learned anything about Rimmah,” he said, miserable. “Not anything important. What good is going around to the taverns buying drinks for people when they don't tell you anything?”

“They must tell you something,” Jess said. “Think. What have you heard these last days. It might not seem important, but we need some hint of what Rimmah plans. We need to act when he is weak. When he is exposed and not expecting it.”

“Mostly the men talk about spring planting and how they hope the summer won't be dry. Then some of them mutter about how their wife nags them too much.”

“That's it? Not a whisper in all the city about Rimmah?”

“Some people say Rimmah has ears in the walls. They whisper it and then say nothing more.” Ben sat up straight, looking thoughtful. “Then . . . but the rest is just talk.”

“What have you heard? Ben—”

“It's just things some men said when they're drunk. Rimmah, they say . . . the city fears him. Everyone hates the wizard, but they fear him more. They say there is nothing he won't do. There have been executions in the square. Some for nothing more than speaking out against Rimmah. And they say people have simply disappeared. At night you can hear screams coming from

the castle towers, or perhaps echoing up from the dungeons below. They say Rimmah rips out the souls of those who displease him.” Ben gave a weak smile. “It’s all just talk so I figured you didn’t need to hear such things because . . .”

Ernie had gone pale. “I told you, Princess,” the wizard said. “This isn’t a good idea. In fact, this is a very bad idea. If anyone wants to live a long, happy, and *healthy* life they shouldn’t meddle with evil wizards. I don’t want my soul ripped out, and if you were smart you wouldn’t either.”

“Maybe I’m not smart.” Jess gripped the hilt of her sword again, her eyes hard. “What this tells me is we must stop Rimmah—and soon. The whole city will thank us. Perhaps there are even those in the castle who would help us. Ben, you need to—”

“Go back out.” He rose. “I need to learn something. Something that will help us reach Rimmah. Maybe I will, this time. I’ll try.”



Ben walked up the the bar. A man sat on a stool there, hunched over. The man wore a blue cloak and armor that marked him out as some type of guardsman. After his experience the last several days that was enough to make Ben consider going elsewhere, but he decided a guardsman might know something farmers didn’t. He knew Jess would want him to try.

He checked Goblin Terror hanging at his side. The sword and scabbard were carefully wrapped in cloth so the weapon appeared to be nothing more than the poor tool many men might carry to defend themselves. Then he cleared his throat and took the stool next to the guard.

“How are things?”

“Push off,” the guard muttered.

“Having trouble?” He tried to sound what Jess had called congenial.

“What does it look like,” the man growled.

“Sorry. Life is rough. Could I buy you a drink?”

Jess had carefully taught him the speech. He still stuttered, but at least now he said all the right words. Once you have them drinking they’ll talk, Jess said. Ben had discovered it was true. They would talk until he was sick of listening. But it was the safest way of gaining information. No one ever suspected a nice fellow who bought you drinks.

The guardsman accepted the beer in silence. Ben waited, allowing the man to drink awhile before he spoke again.

“What kind of problems could a guard of the kingdom have?”

“Work.” The man thumped his mug down on the counter. “Working for the government is supposed to be easy.”

“I suppose,” Ben said, not really having any idea.

“You get into government work and you’re supposed to just sit around.

Do nothing. Good benefits. A retirement. Knock off work, easy labor—the whole nice life.”

“Sounds easy,” Ben agreed.

“It was. Until recently.”

“Ah. Want another drink?”

“Sure. You're a nice fellow.” The guard was beginning to get warmed up. “As I was saying, life was sweet until that wizard got appointed supreme whatever-you-call-it.”

“And?” Ben leaned closer.

“The union couldn't protect us. It's hard to muster bargaining power against a wizard who can fry you to a cinder. Job security, pensions—ha! The whole union caved. Without so much as a by-your-leave the wizard dumped most of the old crew and installed his own cronies. Nasty fellows.”

“That's . . . bad.”

“We tried to grieve it with the union but the representative only said being alive was more important. Then we took it to the king but he only said Rimmah knew what was best.”

“So you lost your job. That's horrible.”

“No. I still got my job. The wizard didn't have enough cronies to fill all the positions so a few of us stayed on. Worse happened.”

“What?”

“They made us work.” The guardsman turned to look at him with bleary eyes. “Been working these last several days like I've never worked before in my life. Working tires a man out. You have no idea what it's like. Work is not fun.”

“What kind of work are you doing?” Ben asked out of obligation to Jess, with no desire to know. He didn't care about union squabbles, whatever unions were. And he didn't care how much this man hated work.

“Hunting.”

“Hunting?” Ben looked at him, puzzled. He couldn't imagine there were many wild animals to hunt in the city.

“Yeah. We're searching the city for some people.”

It felt as if a cold hand had suddenly reached out and seized Ben's heart. He almost looked over his shoulder but caught himself and remained still. “R—Really? Who in the city would interest Rimmah?”

“Important people.” The guard lowered his voice. “Dangerous people.”

Ben managed a weak laugh. “How can anyone be dangerous to a powerful wizard like Rimmah? Couldn't he just find them and blast them himself?” He wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer to that question.

“It's some powerful wizard and Princess Mol'Jessel. Rimmah says this other wizard has bound the princess to his will and is trying to overthrow the kingdom.”

“That's not tru—” He stopped, coughing loudly, mentally kicking himself

for the near slip.

"Sounds bad," he managed to mutter.

"We've been sent combing through the city. We're searching inn by inn, looking for them. Rimmah has spent most of his time locked up in the highest tower. He's cooking up something terrible. Or has been. At night you can see great flashes of light around the tower and hear thunder. Some say he summons the dead, or foul beasts from the infernal regions. You think so?" The guard peered at him drunkenly.

"Seems likely," Ben said. He felt sick to his stomach. Foul beasts from the infernal regions indeed. What was coming after the bikalis? They had to destroy Rimmah before they found out.

The guard nodded. "Seems that Rimmah has determined by his secret arts that the wizard and princess are in the city, somewhere. We've been told that they've some warrior bandit with them. A brutal man that will stop at nothing."

Ben opened his mouth to tell the man that wasn't true at all—then snapped his jaw shut. He was learning—a little bit.

"You haven't seen them, have you? If I could find them quick I could stop working."

"Me? What makes you say that? Why would've I seen them? Seems like such a dangerous bunch would've killed me if I saw them."

"True." The guard nodded slowly. "Which is why I'm not much inclined to look, either. I don't care to be killed. Some of the others are looking hard, though. Rimmah has a reward out for the capture of the princess and the wizard. The bandit we can kill, Rimmah says."

"Right." Ben slid off his stool. "Ah—say, do you know where you and the rest of the guard will be looking next?"

"Not sure, exactly." The guard drained his mug. "We're working our way from east to west through the city. How about another drink?"

But Ben wasn't there. He had already left the tavern and was shouldering his way through the crowd, moving as fast as he could, not watching the road.



"What happened!" Jess rushed to the door to meet Ben, her eyes wide at his bloody and bruised appearance.

"I was finally run over." Ben staggered across the room until he reached the long table in the center of the room, leaning against the surface to keep himself erect. "Four horse hitch with a dung wagon. Every horse trampled me before the wagon got its chance at me. I thought it could've been worse. Then the load of dung fell out the back as the wagon passed. Buried in a whole heap of it."

“Ben, that's terrible. Sit down! Ernie, can't you do something? Just a little bit? Ben, I thought you were going to look before you crossed the road.”

“Forgot. Something more important I needed to tell you.”

“What is more important than staying alive? It could have waited—”

“We don't have much time. Rimmah knows we're in the city. He's hunting us.”



Chapter Twenty-Seven

Scheming and Screaming

The patter of rain on the roof came dimly to Ben's ears as he climbed up the stairs. Another day spent. He was exhausted. Today he was bone-tired, and soaked from the rain. He left puddles of water up the stairs as he climbed—but there was a bounce to his steps. At the door he gave four quick raps to let Jess and Ernie know it was him, and then he stepped into their rented dining room.

A fire burned in the hearth, casting an orange light across the room. The warm air washed over Ben's chilled skin like a friendly caress. He sighed, wiping the wet hair out of his eyes and closing the door behind him. The window across the room flashed bright for a moment and thunder rumbled.

Jess paced about the room. Stalking. If she were a cat, Ben thought, her tail would be lashing. Ernie sat near the fire, glowering.

"I'm back." He cleared his throat.

"Anything? Anything at all?" Jess stopped pacing to stand in front of the fire. "I'm sick of being stuck with this wizard. If I must spend another day with him I shall go mad! I'd rather have Rimmah find us. At least a fight would be better than this . . . this . . . waiting!"

"It won't. Young people always think so, but it won't." Ernie shifted in his chair. He had been working on his quilt but now the mass of fabric lay untouched in his lap. "Our time is running out and our doom draws near—unless we run for our lives. We must run!"

"Actually," Ben stood beside Jess at the fire and warmed his hands. "I did learn something. I don't know if it will be of any use—but I think maybe it will."

"Is Rimmah coming out of the castle?" Jess looked up eagerly, but Ernie shuddered at her words.

"No. But he will be coming down from his tower."

“How do you know?” Jess and Ernie said at the same time.

“The talk was all over the city. They say the complaints from the lords about the goblin trouble has reached the king's ear. The day after tomorrow the king will hold an audience and every lord troubled by the goblins may bring their grievances before the king. It's said the entire court will be there, including Rimmah.”

“The entire court? No good.” Ernie began shaking his head. “No good at all. Too many people for us to do anything.”

“Wait.” Jess spun around. “I have an idea. Perfect. This is perfect. I know how we can reach Rimmah and kill him.”

“How?” Ernie said. “By marching into a court filled with lords and guards ready to attack us at any minute? We march in there and attack Rimmah and kill him? Is that your idea?”

“Exactly.” Jess began pacing again. “We sneak in and take Rimmah by surprise. He won't be expecting an attack with all the people around.”

“He will!” Ernie's voice went shrill. “It's a trap.”

“Rimmah wouldn't expect us to be that insane.”

Ernie opened his mouth—and then shut it. “Then . . . that is a very good reason not to do it.”

“No. It's exactly the reason we must. It's the one thing he wouldn't be prepared to stop.”

“Reason with her!” Ernie hissed, tottering out of his chair to clutch at Ben's arm. “Do you hear what she is saying? Save us all from this madness!”

“So we go,” Ben said, ignoring Ernie. “What do we do?”

“No, no, no!” Ernie dropped to his knees, pounding feebly at the floor. “I refuse! We can't!”

“Hush, you old coward.” Jess turned to face Ben. “We sneak into the castle the night before. Rimmah will certainly have the gates watched on the day of the audience. Then, once the audience with the king has begun, I'll come in disguised as a minor lady. Our whining wizard will be my aged adviser and you'll be my . . . my . . . my personal guard. It should give us enough time to get close to Rimmah and strike.”

“Brilliant.” Ernie raised his head from where he had been wailing at the floor. “And once we're there amongst all of Rimmah's cronies with no way to escape, how, exactly, do you intend to kill this mighty wizard? Shall we wish him dead? Or hope that when he is laughing at us he chokes on his own spittle and dies?”

“No. And your sarcasm isn't helping.” Jess placed her fists on her hips. “I'll approach the throne with my petition. Rimmah will be standing behind my Da to his right. At the last moment I'll pretend I've stumbled and as I pitch forward I'll dash up and stab Rimmah with my dagger concealed in my dress. With Rimmah dead my Ma and Da will be free and all our troubles will be over in one quick blow.”

“A dagger? Just a dagger?” Ernie climbed back to his feet, staring at Jess and the dagger on her belt as if his eyes would pop from his head. “Ah, a dagger! Of course, we’ll kill the greatest and most evil wizard with a dagger. Why didn’t I think of that! Such a pathetic little bit of metal. I’d feel better—just a little—if we actually had something fitting for killing a wizard. Like a magical bow and arrow fashioned for the very job would be nice, thank you. Something where we can kill Rimmah from a distance instead of being so close we can smell his stinking breath! But no, a pathetic unmagical, very normal, dagger!” He ended nearly shrieking.

Jess watched Ernie, who had started going purple in the face as his tirade lengthened.

“Are you saying Rimmah might have some type of magical protection against being stabbed by this dagger?” She drew the blade, studying it as the polished metal reflected the firelight.

Ernie snorted through his mustache, his eyes narrowing. Then he paused a moment, seemed to think, and began twirling a strand of his beard, chewing on the end for a few minutes. “Probably not,” he finally said, grudgingly. “Rimmah probably spends all his time working on enchantments to protect him from being killed by magical wizard-killing arrows.”

“See then?” Jess sheathed the dagger. “We’re all set. Now all we need are our disguises. I’ll be going as a southern lady because they wear veils and I’ll need one if I’m to avoid recognition. But I don’t know how we’ll get our clothing made before tomorrow. There isn’t a seamstress in Galdoron who can make a southern lady’s dress in one day.”

Ernie’s face brightened. “I could.”

“You?”

“I can sew.” Ernie waved a hand at his massive quilt lying on the floor, as if that were evidence. “I’m good, and fast. I can have your dress made, and clothes for the young man, and myself, by evening tomorrow.”

“You could?” Jess nibbled at her lip. “A dress that would look like a southern dress, good enough for me to wear to court?”

“Of course. I’m up on all of the latest fashions.”

“I don’t know.” Her gaze flicked to the massive heap of quilt. “It’s important—”

“I can do it,” Ernie said, urgently. “Believe me. I can make the best dress you’ve ever seen.”

“Let him,” Ben said.

Jess looked at him, surprised. He shrugged.

“Give Ernie a chance. At least, that’s what I think.”

“A chance? Since when has . . . All right.” Jess nodded. “You can make our clothing. Wizard, I just hope . . .”

“Great!” Ernie nearly danced about for joy. “I love sewing. Dresses, they’re such fun. So intricate, so feminine.”

“Just make sure you make something I can wear.” Jess sounded a bit amused in spite of herself.

“Of course. But the color.” Ernie stopped dancing, his face becoming earnest. “What color? Pink, of course, with frills.”

“What?” Jess's mouth fell open. “No. Green. An all-green riding dress.”

“But pink is so much better.” Ernie held up his hands as if already showing a finished work. “Stylish, so fitting—”

“Every pampered ditz wears pink in the court. I hate pink. Make a green riding dress that fits so well I can sword fight in it if—if things go wrong.”

“How about a pink—”

“No pink!”

“Not even a little bit of accent pink?”

“With green? Ug. No.”

“Don't you think the princess would look good in pink?” Ernie appealed to Ben.

“I think she looks beautiful as she is,” Ben said, quickly.

“Even in pants?” Jess grinned.

He remembered their first encounter and gave a rueful grin as well. “It wouldn't matter what.”

“Yeah, well.” Ernie folded his arms. “You always agree with her. No one around here has taste.”

“Whine all you like, Wizard, but if you're making my dress it will be green.” Jess stopped her pacing and sat on the floor in front of the fire. Her mood seemed much improved at the prospect of soon reaching Rimmah. Ben even thought he saw a twinkle in her eye as she continued, “You can wear pink if you like. Perhaps it would fit our pacifist wizard well.”

It was some time before Ernie stopped spluttering with indignation.



As soon as the shops opened in the morning Ben was sent out with precise instructions from Ernie stating what fabric he should purchase from the cloth merchant. With their plans for conspiracy swirling through his head Ben left the inn exceptionally nervous. He almost forgot to check the street for traffic before he crossed. He moved fast, kept his head down, and hoped he didn't look like a conspirator who planned to kill the king's grand adviser the next day.

The trip was a harrowing journey. Keeping his head down meant he continually plowed into people. Instead of passing unnoticed it seemed like everyone stared at him. He began to imagine that he was followed, the crowds watching and waiting for his unknown pursuer to finally catch him. By the time he reached the cloth merchant's shop he was out of breath and nearly running.

He slammed the shop door and hurried over to the window, peering out from the dark interior. His hand rested on the hilt of Goblin Terror. If someone was following he would see them. If someone was coming he would be ready.

The early morning crowd of shoppers passed by the window, a sea of bored faces.

A throat cleared behind Ben and he whirled around, Goblin Terror coming half out of its scabbard. The merchant leaped back, raising his hands, his pudgy face going pale.

"Oh!" Ben hastily sheathed Goblin Terror. "You startled me. Sorry about that. I don't usually . . . do that." He felt his face coloring.

"Can I do something for you, sir?" The merchant rubbed his hands across the apron covering his prodigious waist. He eyed Ben uneasily, then glanced out the window as if trying to see what Ben had been looking at. "Are you, ah, looking for something?"

"Er . . . um . . . yes." Ben tried to smile in what he hoped was a disarming and innocent manner. "I've just come to buy some cloth. That's all. Nothing more. Nothing to be alarmed about. Not at all."

"I see. Yes. Of course." The merchant nodded quickly. "What, ah, cloth are you looking for, sir?"

"Let me see what you have."

The merchant led him through the store, keeping well ahead of Ben as if he were afraid whatever he had might be catching. Ben ignored the merchant, concentrating on remembering exactly what Ernie had told him to purchase. He carefully selected the bolts of cloth, several patterns of green for Jess, gray and brown for himself, and a blue for Ernie. He brought the arm load back to the counter.

"That is some selection of fabric, sir." The merchant looked at the heap and then at Ben as if he couldn't make the two facts fit.

"Yes . . ." Ben looked at the bolts. He hoped he had remembered everything. The veil! He went back and selected a length of gauzy cloth, then returned to the merchant. "This is all for . . . Things . . . you know."

The merchant didn't look like he knew, but gave Ben the price and asked no questions as Ben produced a handful of fat silver coins and set them on the table. For a moment Ben feared he had mixed up the value of coins again, but the merchant passed back a few coppers in what Jess had explained as "change" and gave wary thanks for the business.

Ben gathered up his bundles of cloth and hurried out of the shop. The return journey to the Wine Sop went no better than the trip out. Arms heaped with cloth, he couldn't see where he was going. The journey was a bumbling struggle in which going unnoticed was the last thing accomplished. Reaching the inn with great relief, he staggered up the stairs to the second floor of the Wine Sop and kicked the door for Jess to let him in.

“Back. I was beginning to worry.” Jess pulled him in the room. “Any trouble?”

“Not too much.” He dropped the heap of cloth on the table. “The merchant was suspicious but that was sort of my own fault. I left as fast as I could.”

“What’s with all this?” Ernie came out of his bedroom and walked over to the table, looking at the cloth.

“Cloth. The stuff. I—I thought I got what you wanted.” Ben looked woefully at the heap of fabric.

“It is what I wanted.” Ernie plucked at a corner of green cloth. “But not this much. The King’s good peace—you bought the entire bolt of each fabric. I don’t need that much.”

“Oh.” Ben scratched his head and stood there, feeling stupid. “I guess that was why the merchant looked at me funny.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Jess said briskly, picking up one bolt. “The extra doesn’t matter. Better than if there were too little. Now all we need is for you to make the clothing, Wizard. We need it by tonight. Got it? Otherwise, you’re going without any clothes.”

“Princess, there is no reason to worry.” Ernie drew himself up. “I am the best—the very best—and fastest sewer in all of Tarn.”

“I doubt both of those,” Jess mumble as she carried the bolt to Ernie’s bedroom. “When have you ever given me reason to not worry? But we’ve no choice. I hope you’re good enough. By tonight, wizard. Turn this straw into gold.”

“What?” Ernie said.

“Never mind. Just get in there and start working.”



The clock hanging over the fireplace struck nine. Jess paced about the room, alternately looking at the clock and glancing toward the darkened window. Ben sat at the table, only because if he also paced he would end up bumping into Jess or tripping over her. He sat, staring at his carefully arranged dozen eggs and tried to occupy himself with thoughts of how he could get Ned back with only a quarter of the original eggs.

The day had dragged slowly to its end. As soon as all the supplies were gathered Ernie had barred himself in his room with instructions for no one to disturb him until he was finished. There had been nothing for them to do but wait. Early in the day they had passed time swapping childhood stories. By mid afternoon Jess began to grow impatient. By evening she was nearly gnashing her teeth.

“That wizard.” Jess stopped, facing the door to Ernie’s room. “How long is it going to take him? He’s been in there all day and not a sound out of the room.”

"Maybe he works very quietly," Ben said. "He doesn't stay quiet most of the rest of the time."

"Maybe he's not working at all." Jess returned to pacing. "Maybe this was all a trick to make sure we didn't go and he's actually sitting in that room doing nothing. If that wizard tricked us, I'll—"

The door to Ernie's room swung open.

"Ladies and Lords. What you've all been waiting for." Ernie stepped out. His pointed hat was missing and his hair stood wild and awry, but the wizard looked pleased, garments draped across both of his outstretched arms. "The garment wizard! No job too complex, no job too hard. He—"

"Let me see that." Jess took the green dress that hung over Ernie's arm and held it up. "It . . . looks about right."

"Of course, of course. And you, young man." Ernie pressed a shirt and pants into Ben's arms. "Let's all try them on and see what a marvelous company we make." The wizard dashed back into his room, leaving Ben and Jess staring at each other.

When everyone reappeared in the dining room, dressed in their new garments, it was to some surprise.

"Why, Ben," Jess said. "You look—well, you could pass for a prince or something, if you just brushed your hair."

"I could?" He felt his hair. "Ha, I get it. You're joking. My hair is fine. The clothes aren't any different, either, except they don't have as many holes. I don't feel any different, either."

"Don't be silly. Clothes don't make you feel different. It's all appearances. How do I look?" She twirled around.

"You . . . uh . . ." Words deserted Ben. The dress fit her perfectly. She looked beautiful, but that word didn't seem enough. She looked beautiful all the time. "Uh . . . you look like a princess."

"Notice my brilliant design." Ernie skipped over. "The fabric, carefully crafted to accentuate the slim waist. And you, young man, tailored across the shoulders to draw the eyes to your broad shoulders. I really should have become a tailor. I really should have, but mother wanted me to be a wizard see, so I . . ."

"Shoulders?" Ben said, puzzled by Ernie's wild pointing.

"That blue, Wizard?" Jess stared at Ernie's vivid costume.

"My mother was very strict, you see. She wanted me to make a name for myself—Ah, yes. Me, the great adviser." Ernie looked down at himself. He was dressed in a blue robe, his quilt sack—now also vibrant blue—slung across his back. He still wore his same battered hat, but there was a blue ribbon tied around the top. "Think I look equal to Rimmah?"

"You're taking your quilt?"

"You think I'd leave it behind?"

"Wizard, we're sneaking into a castle. Don't you think—"

“Where I go, my quilt goes.” Ernie drew himself up haughtily. “It’s precious to me.”

“Whatever.” Jess sighed, seeming ready to give Ernie some slack after he had done such a surprising job with the clothing. “Wizard . . . you did a good job.” She gave a grudging shake of her head. “Your mother was wrong. You should have been a tailor.”



Chapter Twenty-Eight

Lecture in Physics

The castle was perched at the very top of the hill. To reach it, Ben, Jess, and Ernie were forced to travel through many back alleys, their path climbing ever upward. For the length of the journey they kept to the shadows and avoided the main streets—and the night watch—as much as possible. With the castle now rising before them they were forced to leave the cover of the buildings to cross the final street to stand at the bottom of the towering stone wall.

“We’ll be caught, we’ll be caught,” Ernie muttered as they hurried across the street. “And when they catch us we’ll be killed. Not fast, but slowly. Very slowly. We’ll be torn limb from limb, one at a time, slowly. Do you know what it feels like to have your limbs torn off? It hurts. We’ll scream and scream before we finally die. All because no one listened to me. No one listens to the wizard. Why doesn’t anyone listen to the wizard? Aren’t I supposed to be the wise one?”

“Ernie,” Jess whispered.

“What?”

“Shut up. If you don’t, I’ll take that pretty little ribbon on your hat and gag you with it. Which will it be?”

Silence.

“I’ll be quiet.”

“Good.” Jess adjusted the small pack on her back. It contained a few supplies, and her sword strapped to the back. “We need to decide where to climb the wall. I’m trying to remember how the watchmen walk . . . but maybe when Rimmah replaced the guard they changed their pattern.”

“I’ve thought of another problem,” Ben said quietly.

“What?”

“How are we going to find our way to the throne room tomorrow? This

castle is huge. We could walk around all day and not—”

“Ben!” Jess hissed. “I live here, remember? Do you know how to find your way in your house? Don’t worry about getting lost! Worry about us sneaking in without being found.”

“Sorry.” Worrying about being found was exactly what he didn’t want to think about. Ernie’s talk about being torn limb from limb wasn’t making him feel any better about the whole thing. He thought he would rather die fighting than screaming as his limbs were ripped off. Ernie could let them do that if he wanted. Of course, he preferred to not die at all.

“Okay. We’ll try here.” Jess smoothed her dress, eyeing the top of the wall through the darkness. “The rope?”

“Got it.” Ben took the coiled rope out of his small pack. At the end of the rope was a hook with many prongs.

“Make sure the rags are tied on the hook well. We don’t want it to clatter and bring the guards.”

“Everything is good.” Ben took a breath. He hoped everything was good. But then, if it wasn’t and the guards came they could call the whole thing off. Then he frowned. That was thinking like Ernie. They had to defeat Rimmah. There was no going back.

He swung the hook around over his head and heaved. It soared over the wall and into the night, dropping from sight beyond the other side. Ben pulled the rope back until he felt the hook catch.

“We’re ready.”

“Excellent throw,” Jess said. “Who goes up first?”

“I . . . um . . . there is this little thing,” Ernie said.

Jess froze. Then, slowly, she turned around. “This sounds like something you should have told us before we left the Wine Sop.”

“Well . . . I didn’t think of it exactly then.”

“Think of what?” Ben looked at the wizard.

“I’m a little afraid of heights.” Ernie looked up at the top of the wall, far above their heads. “Um. Actually, I—I’m terrified.”

“You won’t climb up.” Jess leaned against the wall with a faint groan.

“I can’t. I’m rigid with fear already.”

“I should have guessed,” Jess said through her teeth. “I should—have—guessed! All right. I’ll go up first and check to see if it’s clear. Ben, you’re strong—can you haul the wizard up with you?”

“I think so. Ernie isn’t as heavy as a grown pig, is he?”

“I watch my diet!”

“No, he isn’t.” Jess said. “Not unless he’s hiding a lot on those old bones.”

“Then I can do it.”

“Good. Saved from another wizard idiocy. Wait here until I call like an owl. That means the way is safe. If I bark like a dog that means I’ve been discovered.”

“Right—owl means I come up with Ernie. Dog means I come up without Ernie to rescue you.”

“No, it means you run away.” Jess took hold of the rope.

That Ben had no intention of doing. He didn't want to be torn limb from limb, screaming, as Ernie said. But he certainly wasn't going to run away and let that happen to Jess. He peered up at the wall, wishing there was some hint if any guard waited for them. This whole sneaking in idea was starting to make him sick to his stomach.

“Right, then.” Jess took a breath. “I go first. Be ready. And, Ben, don't you dare look up my dress when I'm climbing!”

Ben, who was still worrying about guards waiting for them at the top of the wall—and being torn limb from limb—started. Then he blushed, finally understanding what she said. He drew himself up. “I—I—I would nev—never never do su—su—that, your Highness.”

But Jess was already climbing, and said nothing.

“The female mind is peculiar,” Ernie remarked, watching Jess climb.

“What?” Ben looked at the wizard.

“It's so dark such concerns about modesty are rather unnecessary.”

“What's that supposed to mean? Do you think she's climbing wrong?”

Ernie sighed, faintly. “You are rather dense.”

“I am? You don't make much sense, Ernie. Are we talking about Jess?”

“You know, she likes you.”

“Of course. She likes everyone. Jess is nice and that's what nice people do.”

“That's not what I meant.” But the wizard said no more.

The faintly visible shape of Jess disappeared over the top of the wall. They waited. After what seemed like a long time an owl hooted.

“Thank our fortunes,” Ben whispered. “Up we go.”

“That remains to be seen,” Ernie whispered back. “It may be the sealing of our doom. I rather suspect. And then I won't get a chance to finish my quilt.”

“Climb on my back. You'll have to hang on tight. I need both my hands free to climb.”

“Just make sure you do. Climb good and don't think about letting go. I don't want us falling. In fact, are you sure your hands are feeling strong enough? Maybe a sudden sense of weakness has come? If so, we don't—”

“I'm fine. But you could leave your sack behind. It's extra weight that we don't—”

“Where I go, my quilt goes.” One hand firmly gripping sack and staff, Ernie scrambled up on Ben's back, wrapping his other bony arm around Ben's neck.

“Ready?”

“No. Are you sure you can do this? I hate heights. Do you know anything about physics?”

“What?”

“There is this rule: What goes up must come down. That means we fall. Stored energy is like your life's savings—it doesn't stay around long. Do you know the exponent for the increased speed of our descent if we should fall?”

“We're going up now,” Ben said, not bothering to try to make sense of Ernie. “Hang on, but please don't hang on too tight or I won't be able to breath and then we will fall.”

“What? Are you suggesting I hang on loosely? So that perhaps *I'll* fall?”

Rope grasped firmly in his hands, Ben began to climb, his feet braced against the wall. The rope was knotted along its length for easier climbing, but Ernie with his sack weighed twice as much as the wizard alone. It was a difficult climb. Ben focused on putting one hand in front of the other, pulling them upward, and tried to ignore Ernie.

“Did you know, it was once calculated that there are a thousand ways to die from a fall? Sometimes, when I'm having trouble sleeping at night, I try to decide which one I'd rather if I had to die from falling. I still haven't made up my mind, so I'm sure to die in the most unpleasant way when your hands finally do tire and we going plunging to our end. They say one should never look down when climbing. That is good advice, but not practical. Only the most optimistic among us can always remain with gaze fixed forward. The rest of us, being given to occasional bouts of reflection, cannot help but cast that infrequent glance backward which—urk.”

The wizard's voice died to a gurgle. Ben would have gasped if he had been able. The bony arm around his throat had tightened like a vise, cutting off all air. Ernie was rigid on his back. He wanted to scream at the wizard to stop looking back and loosen his grip but nothing came out except a thin whistle.

“No,” Ernie squeaked. “Hang on. Someone will come to rescue us. Eventually. Just hang on, you weakling. I'm sorry for every bad thing I've ever done. I'll be good. I promise. Just don't let me die.”

“Come on, Ben, you're almost there.” Jess's whisper came down from above. “Hurry.”

Sparks of light were beginning to float across his vision. He didn't dare let go with one hand to pry Ernie's arm loose, but with the wizard's grip he couldn't breath. Gritting his teeth and fighting against the blackness that encroached on his vision, Ben reached, pulling them up the rope. The world was shrinking, his grip weakening. The top of the wall seemed to grow further away, Jess's pale hand reaching out.

With a lunge he reached up and caught the lip of the wall.

“Come on, come on!” Jess grasped his wrist and pulled, but she lacked the strength. Her hands scraped ineffectually at Ben's rigid arms. “Ernie, climb up! Stop hanging there!”

“I can't! I can't! I want to live.”

“Don't let go, Ben! I'll—I'll do something.”

With the last of his strength Ben pulled his chest up onto the lip of the wall. He lay there rasping and drooling as Jess hauled Ernie off him.

Air—his throat was free again and he could breath. The world swam, slowly coming back into focus.

“Alive, alive! Never again!” Ernie crawled along the battlements, whispering and kissing the stone. “I won’t do that ever again! I almost died because some short-sighted lummox imagined himself an overly strong hero. And for that I almost died!”

“You almost died because you nearly killed Ben!” Jess hissed sharply. “Now keep your blubbering down, you incompetent wizard! Ben, are you all right?”

“I think I’m not permanently damaged.” He sat up, still breathing heavily as he felt his throat. “I didn’t think such an old wizard could be so strong. He could win the arm wrestling contest back at York. I don’t think Master Cendric could do a better neck lock.”

“Fear gives some people strength, but apparently not brains. Come on, we need to get off the wall. A watchman will be coming soon.”

Once Ben recovered he coiled up the rope and stored it away in his pack. Then, Jess leading, they hurried along the wall top in single file. Jess moved with the ease and familiarity of someone who knew where she was going. Ben and Ernie were a different matter, but they managed to not make too much noise.

They kept low against the wall. Below in the courtyard Ben saw lights moving and the shapes of three patrolling guards. He dimly saw the outline of another watchman on the wall ahead.

He was about to ask Jess what they were going to do, and how they would avoid the watchmen, when she paused, putting a hand on his arm to make him halt. “We take stairs here,” she whispered. “Be careful. They’re steep.”

At the bottom of the stairs Jess stopped again, standing at the edge of the paved courtyard. In the middle of the courtyard there rose a large stone statue of a man in armor. Across the way Ben could make out a row of buildings. The only sound was their harsh breathing and the faint click of the nearest watchman’s boots on the stones.

“I have this feeling we’re trapped,” he whispered.

“Not yet. I could slip through easily, alone. It’s harder when there are three of us and one is a wizard who doesn’t know the meaning of quiet.”

“Should we split up?”

“No. I know my way around. You don’t. I’ll get us through. Just be ready to cross the courtyard when I say. Drag the wizard if he doesn’t move fast enough.”

Ben waited, rubbing the hilt of Goblin Terror. He wished with all of his heart he was back home in bed and had nothing more to worry about

tomorrow besides what he would eat for breakfast.

“Okay, now. Go!” Jess sprinted across the courtyard, low to the ground like a flitting shadow. Ben followed. Ernie came last, tottering and bobbling.

They crammed into a narrow recess between two buildings, Ernie and his sack piled on top of Jess and Ben as the click of a watchman's boots approached. They could hear the man muttering to himself as he approached, a sigh that was followed by a grumble. The heap that was Ernie's sack sat right on Ben's head. He could only see a thin slit of the world beyond, but that dim slit brightened as the guard's lamp drew near. Ben held his breath.

An armor-clad figure walked in front of the narrow alcove and stopped. Ben felt his throat constrict. The man turned, his back to them, facing the stone wall across the courtyard. “Anything?” the guard shouted up to the wall. “Any disturbance tonight?”

“Not a thing,” a voice came back. “Not tonight, nor the last night, nor the one before. There's no need for night watchmen. With a wizard sleeping in the castle no one would dare cause any trouble.”

“Only a fool would, but there are plenty of fools in the world. Look sharp. Rimmah won't take any excuses.” The guard lowered his lamp and walked on.

Ben let out his breath.

“Why don't I keep company with smart people?” Ernie breathed. The wizard peered around the corner. “Of everyone in Tarn I throw my lot with the two people foolish enough to do this. That guard is right. We are fools. Soon to be dead fools.”

“We can't keep this up,” Ben whispered to Jess. “What are we going to do? We've got to find some place to hide for the night.”

“I know, I know. I'm trying to decide where. The food stores would be good, but that is just beyond the kennels. There is too much risk we might wake the dogs. I got it—the stables. Follow me.”

Leading them in the opposite direction as the watchman, Jess skirted around the corner and crossed another smaller courtyard. It was then Ben picked up the familiar warm smell of horses. The princess ducked through a large opening in the building ahead.

“Careful. It's a little tight. Don't spook the horses.”

He stopped beside Jess, waiting for Ernie to trundle in, the wizard muttering about how all the running was not helping his bad knees. The horses nickered, disturbed.

“Where?” Ben said.

“We find some good place in the hay. We'll be safe here until morning.”

“What is that snoring sound?” Ernie said. “How odd. I didn't think horses snored.”

Jess cocked her head. There it came—a long snore, soft but clear. “Drat,

and drat again. I forgot that the stable boy sleeps in the loft. We'll have to find someplace else."

"Some place with a decent bed, perhaps," Ernie said.

"No. The kitchen."

"The cook—" Ben said.

"Sleeps elsewhere. It's this way. Just be careful not to trip over the cat. One sleeps in the kitchen, usually in front of the fire."

Crossing several more courtyards, Jess lead them confidently to a small back door that hung crooked on its hinges. She nudged it open with one foot and slipped inside. Ben followed and found himself in a large, but crowded, room. In the center of the room there stood a large table with stools pushed around it, the table-top covered with various unwashed pots and platters. Across the room was a large hearth, the fire only warm glowing embers. A cat lay there, stretched out. In the far corner of the room were heaped bags of flour, ready for baking.

"Food," Ernie breathed. "Wonderful food." The wizard hurried over to the table and began licking out one of the pots, slurping nosily.

"Enough of that. We already ate tonight. In a minute you'll knock something over and there will be people coming. We need to find someplace to hide."

"Hide?" Ben looked around, half expecting to see some guard waiting, or sleeping, in some corner.

"In case. No one should come in here until early in the morning but if someone decides to sneak a midnight snack—"

"Right." Ben looked around again. "Where can we hide?"

"I can fit in the pantry. I used to hide there all the time when I was little. Not so easy a fit now, but I still can and neither of you could."

"I'll hide in with the sacks of flour," Ernie said. "A decent bed since no one thought of us hiding in an actual bedroom."

"I . . . I . . . I'll hide under the table," Ben said.

"The table?" Jess stopped, halfway into the pantry.

"Where else? I can't fit in the wash pot over in the corner. And . . . and . . . I'll stay very still."

"Well . . . I suppose. There really isn't much of a place to hide." She gripped the pantry door. "I just hope no one comes for a midnight snack."

Ben hoped so, too. Jess and Ernie made themselves as comfortable as they could and he crawled under the table. The floor was hard and filthy, and with all the stools around there wasn't much room. It wasn't comfortable. It didn't feel very brave, either. In fact, he thought, it felt completely stupid. This wasn't how he remembered the great stories working. When did anyone ever hide under a kitchen table while waiting to kill a powerful wizard? A great hero never hid under tables. It wasn't fitting. But maybe it was fitting for him, he thought bleakly. Maybe stuttering farmers

who thought they could be bards always ended up hiding under tables.

And maybe—it occurred to him now—all the stories the bards told were just lies. It made staying home seem an even better idea.



Chapter Twenty-Nine

A Band of Fools

It's crowded," Ben said.

"Not so crowded as it should be." Jess frowned. "As I thought it would be." She looked around the courtyard. It was morning. There were horsemen milling about and what looked like one lord and his servants climbing down from several carriages on the far side of the stone fountain.

"You're sure this was the correct day?"

"It's the day everyone in the city said." Ben gave a little shrug. "Maybe they were all wrong."

"No, no." Jess shook her head a fraction. "It's still early in the morning. That must be the reason there aren't more lords arriving yet."

"That, or no one else was so foolish as to bring any complaints to the king, understanding what Rimmah's reputation might mean," Ernie said. "Lords might be more astute than certain people I know."

Ben missed the verbal jab. He was too busy worrying about all the armed men. Through subtle maneuvering Jess had slipped them out of the kitchen and into the flow of life within the castle. No one had questioned why they were there, or asked them what they were doing. By all appearances everyone accepted them as another party waiting to see the king on this special day of petitions. Still, Ben couldn't help feeling uneasy with so many armed men everywhere. It seemed . . . too easy for things to go wrong.

"So," he said. "What do we do? Wait, or—"

"We start toward the throne room. I'd rather we had more lords and ladies to mingle among before we move, but if we stand around any longer we'll start to look suspicious. We follow that other lord. Remember, when they ask whom to announce you're supposed to tell them Lady Jessica, from the south."

"Jessica from the southland. I remember."

“And we hope they don't wonder why a southern lady is coming about goblin problems when all of the goblins are in the north,” Ernie said, dryly.

“They can ask whatever they like, so long as I get close enough to Rimmah. Then they'll have an answer. Let's go.” Jess led the way.

Ben hitched his shoulders, trying to chase away the strange niggling feeling that had settled down in the center of his back. His hand drifted to Goblin Terror at his side. Jess's face was wrapped up in the veil and Ernie was decked out in blue—wearing Jess's sword in case the princess should need it—but none of this felt like a proper disguise. It was as if, he thought, someone should turn around and start laughing at them and ask why they were dressed up in funny clothes.

“This is more like it,” Jess muttered as they were joined by several more groups of nobles coming from a separate path. Even Ben was comforted to see that the other lords, ladies, and their servants looked nervous. Perhaps, he decided, the feeling of imminent doom was part of visiting kings.

“Hm,” Ernie said. “Say. Have I seen that man ahead somewhere? He looks . . . familiar.”

“Drat.” Jess glanced ahead. “That's Missar directing the lords and ladies. Quick, look down. Don't meet his gaze.”

They advanced slowly with the crowd. Ahead, they could hear Missar's murmur as he spoke to each. Ben bit his lip and fidgeted.

“And who has come to see the king?”

It took Jess elbowing him in the side to realize they had reached the front of the line and Missar was speaking to them.

“Oh.” He straightened while trying to keep his head down at the same time. “Prince—Lady Jessica from the south, with her adviser, to see the king.”

“To see the king?” Missar's eyes flickered to Jess's veil-shrouded head.

“Matters of importance,” Ben mumbled. “Goblins and such.”

“Ah—yes. Of course. This way. Continue straight ahead.” Missar turned and waved them on.

They walked on alone.

On either side of the path there rose long stone colonnades supporting covered porches. Some distance ahead the path rose up in stairs that ended at a pair of large wooden doors. The path was empty and quiet, echoing their footfalls.

Ernie cleared his throat. “That . . . er . . . man didn't send everyone else this way. Rather odd, don't you think?”

“Maybe,” Jess said. Her gaze was fixed ahead. “But this *is* a direct path to the throne room. Through that door is a long hall. The hall ends at the throne room. I've gone this way many times. This certainly is the right direction. Maybe the other lords had less important business and Missar was instructed to send those with the more urgent business first.”

"I thought today was for everyone who had Goblin trouble," Ben said. "How could Missar know our trouble with the goblins was most urgent?"

Jess opened her mouth to answer, but before she could reply the large wooden doors ahead swung open with a great crash. Dougyal stood framed in the massive opening. After a suitably dramatic pause the giant man walked out to the head of the stairs and gave a laugh. Armed men came through the doorway, spreading out behind Dougyal.

"Drat all that." Jess reached back and drew her sword from where it was buckled at Ernie's waist. "We've got a little trouble."

"More than a little," Ben muttered. "I don't know if you want to look, but goblins have appeared among the colonnades. Seems they were hiding there, waiting for us."

"Indeed," Ernie croaked. "I sensed something amiss, but I thought it was just Rimmah."

"Well, well," Dougyal boomed. "The princess has come home at last. Things are a little different from when you left, Princess."

"So I've noticed," Jess said acidly, planting her feet wide and taking a firm grip on her sword.

Dougyal flexed his massive hairy arms, and cracked his huge hairy knuckles. He laughed again. "Sorry you didn't take me now, Princess?"

Jess only snorted.

Remembering what Dougyal had done to Jess before, the taunt rankled Ben. He took several steps forward until he stood in the front. "Yeah? Yeah?" He shouted, and then couldn't think of anything else.

Typical, he thought, gritting his teeth and matching Dougyal's glare. *An argument without a comeback*. Finally he said, "I'm surprised to see you here. I thought you'd be more concerned about the safety of your head."

In truth, he was surprised to see Dougyal still walking and breathing at all after the two solid hammer blows he had given the giant, but in retrospect he figured there was more skull than brains to Dougyal's top and so it probably had not been the most deadly place to strike.

"The crazy runt." Dougyal's brow darkened, one hand drifting up to the back of his skull as if remembering a distant pain. "I'll feed your ground meat to the dogs when I'm done with you. Then maybe the princess will marry me."

"Think so?" Ben favored the giant with a scornful glance, his mind racing in search of a witty reply. "Well . . . well . . . Maybe if you learn to say 'please' and 'thank you,' cover your mouth when you cough and take a bath occasionally she'll reconsider."

Dougyal appeared momentarily speechless, either stunned by Ben's verbal sally or still struggling for comprehension.

"Oh, dear." Ernie looked around fearfully, drawing closer to Jess. The goblins had advanced to the edge of the colonnades and were beginning to

drool with anticipation. "I told you these confrontational things never go well. Ben, you're not helping. Leave the talk to more sensible people. I say it's time we run up the flag of truce and parley. Perhaps we can get satisfactory terms for our surrender."

"Never!" Jess shouted, brandishing her sword. "Do we look like a company of cowards or a band of fools? It's a fight to the death!"

"Well . . . it does look bad." Ben glanced back. The goblins had closed off the way back. "I think I'd settle for being a survivor."

"Statistically speaking, we're already dead," Ernie said. "In light of our situation I suggest we find some alternative—"

"Skip the statistics! We'll beat the odds. We'll seize victory. You men!" Jess pointed to the mass of armored guards standing behind Dougyal. "Would you fight against your own princess? Would you fight against the heir to the throne of Tarn? What filthy gold has Rimmah promised you? What lies has he fed you? Would you rather serve a wizard and his goblins, or me? To me! To me, and we can rid this kingdom of all its blights!"

The men shift uncomfortably, looking at each other, wavering.

"And if you'd rather not join us," Ben said, "then please at least step aside so the odds are a little more even."

"Ben!" Jess said, exasperated.

"What?" He turned. "I just—"

In the moment of distraction Dougyal swooped down, covered the steps in two leaps and snatched Ben up. One massive hand around his neck, Dougyal dangled him at eye level.

"So this is your latest pick." Dougyal showed his crooked ugly teeth. "What did you see in him? Perhaps a court jester?"

"Dougyal—" Jess's voice was warning.

"The little runt. I'll enjoy crushing this puny fellow, and then doing you in, Princess. You'll be sorry for not taking me."

"Let him go, Dougie-boy," Jess took a step forward. "Let him go, or I'll unman you." Dougyal stood so high it was about the only vital organ she could reach.

"Ha!" Dougyal said. Even half-strangled, Ben thought it was a very good "Ha!" A good "Ha!" always blunted the worst things people said when you couldn't think up a good response.

Dougyal took a step back. "You move a foot, Princess, and I'll crush your little man flat!"

"Do that and you can forget ever having children!" Jess lifted her sword, menacing.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"What've I got to lose, Dougie-boy? Think you can run fast enough to escape me? Or do you want to be called Rimmah's Ox for the rest of your life?"

Dougyal hesitated. Ben thought he would have, too, if he were in the giant's place. The idea of being Rimmah's ox wasn't appealing; at least, he didn't think so. Jess's narrowed gaze said she was ready to do anything, and completely capable.

"Let Ben go, Dougyal, and you can stay in one piece. Set him down slowly."

Dougyal thought hard. "Wait . . . Princess. I'm in charge here. I . . . I say that if you put your sword down and come quietly I won't squash this runt. Come to Rimmah."

Ben was desperate. His arms were pinned to his sides and Dougyal's grip left him scarcely able to breath, much less speak. In the corner of his vision he could see Jess and Ernie. Behind them the goblins were creeping closer. Jess and Ernie, their attention fixed on Dougyal, were unaware of their danger. In a few more moments it would be too late.

He wanted to scream out in warning, but no sound came. He struggled to free his arms and draw Goblin Terror, but he couldn't move. There was only one chance. Mustering all his strength, he did the only thing he could, swinging both feet up to give Dougyal a terrific kick under his large and hairy chin.

The crack of teeth snapping together echoed round the long courtyard.

"Great shot, Ben!" Jess shouted. "I couldn't have done better myself!"

A small grunt of surprise escaped Dougyal's fat lips. His beady eyes went unfocused and the grip holding Ben loosened.

"Behind you!" Ben managed to shout, drawing a breath. "Look out—behind you!"

The goblins sprang forward, fangs bared, claws raised, and clubs swinging. Then Dougyal came crashing down, landing with a ground-shaking thud—Ben squarely beneath him.



Chapter Thirty

World Peace

He was flattened. The thought slipped back into Ben's battered mind. Dougyal must have . . . but no. He remembered landing the kick, the sound of Dougyal's giant teeth smashing together. But he was flattened, somehow.

As his consciousness continued to struggle back he realized he lay on a hard surface and some great weight pressed down on him. The weight, he discovered, was Dougyal. Then Ben remember falling, the giant man crashing on top of him.

That had hurt. In fact, he still hurt. The unmoving weight of Dougyal crushed him into the paving stones and the hilt of Goblin Terror dug painfully into his side. Wiggling his fingers, Ben managed to find his hands and pull them up to near his face. Then he began to push against the ground. Dougyal shifted slightly and Ben eased himself forward.

After a few more attempts he could see light ahead. The edge of Dougyal's shoulder rimmed a sliver of the outside world. Through the crack he could make out Jess, her sword flashing, surrounded by a mob of goblins. He heard her voice, coming as if from a great distance, shouting, "Blast them, Ernie! Do something! Blast them!"

Jess needed help. She couldn't hold the goblins back much longer.

With another heave Ben lifted Dougyal's shoulder and dragged himself free. He climbed to his knees, blinking in the daylight and wiping at the blood running from his nose.

A goblin noticed him and scampered over, its hideous belly protruding, crooked clawed fingers waving.

Ben was still dazed, but he didn't want the goblin to eat him. Staggering to his feet he managed a wild and clumsy draw of Goblin Terror that loped of the goblins head at the same time.

“I’m ready now!” he shouted. “And, goblins, I’m angry!”

He lifted his sword to attack, but at his shout the great mass of goblins turned. Drool dribbled and splattered on the paving stones. The goblins gathered to charge in an overwhelming stampede, but Goblin Terror flashed in the morning light and they stopped.

Goblin eyes widened. Every fanged mouth dropped open in one great scream. Without so much as a second look, goblins scattered in every direction.

“Not a moment too soon, Ben.” Jess stood, breathing hard, her shoulders heaving. Dead goblins lay sprawled around her. “That deals with them, but we’ve other problems.”

He turned and saw the crowd of armored guards. Behind them, tall and narrow, draped in a crimson robe was—Ben guessed—Rimmah. The wizard long white hair was slicked back, his cold face pinched and thin, small black eyes burning from the depths of their sockets.

“Ah, yes, Goblin Terror.” Rimmah ran a claw-like hand through his stringy beard, then folded his arms imperiously. “I wondered where Hadagrath had hidden it. I hardly expected him to put it into the hands of some bumbling idiot provincial. It’s a small problem, but easily remedied.”

“We are a problem not easily remedied,” Jess said. “Your end has come, Wizard.”

“Hardly. I haven’t even begun to fight. Well,” Rimmah snapped his fingers at the guards. “Stop staring at that imbecile giant lying there and fight! The goblins—I’ll make them fight.”

Rimmah raised his hands, fingers spread wide. “Ontoro!” he intoned.

Thin ribbons of blue fire fanned outward from Rimmah’s hands, lashing the fleeing goblins. Howling, the goblins turned around and began to regroup. The armed guards advanced down the steps.

“I’ll take the men, you take the goblins,” Jess said. “The first one to win helps the other.”

“Right.” Ben took a two-handed grip on his sword. “What about Ernie?”

“He isn’t helping at all, as usual. Don’t worry about him. He’s keeping himself out of the way.”

A second look round the courtyard showed Ernie, halfway up one of the stone pillars. The wizard, by some feat of desperation, had scaled the stone and was now hanging on for all he was worth, his large sack lying in a heap at the base of the pillar.

“Ernie,” Ben shouted, “if we lose, Rimmah will get you!”

“I’ll take the chance,” the wizard shouted back. “Thank you, but I’m not coming down! I don’t care to take part in these barbaric activities or end up eaten by a goblin! I’ll stay here and pray for world peace!”

“Suit yourself,” Ben said, and charged the goblins.

What once had been a quiet morning turned into a wild and fearsome

fight. The goblins and guardsmen vastly outnumbered Ben and Jess, but the goblins were terrified of Ben's sword, no matter how much Rimmah lashed them with lightning, and the guardsmen were no match for Jess who was quicker on her feet and more skilled with her blade.

"You pathetic pack of idiots," Rimmah scoffed from where he watched in the entranceway. "You call yourself men? She's only a woman! Only a princess! Can't you worthless lumps of flesh beat one pathetic weakling?"

The guardsmen had no answer as most of their breath was spent grunting in the effort of battle, or screaming in pain. If they had been able to surround Jess they could have overwhelmed her with their numbers, but the princess always danced away, keeping an escape open, and then darting forward to strike at another guard, slicing between armor plates.

Ben spent most of his time running. He chased goblins back and forth among the columns. When Rimmah lashed them with lightning or Ben cornered some, they would turn and fight, howling in fear and fury. It wasn't a quick battle. Goblins died here and there throughout the courtyard, but Ben spent more time chasing than fighting.

The morning grew late and Jess began to tire, her attacks growing less nimble, her parries more clumsy. Then, with another ominous intonation Rimmah summoned more goblins that came scampering out from some hidden passage. They were a great swarm of bodies. When Ben saw them he almost groaned. Too many. Far too many. The battle was lost. There was nothing to do but fight to the end.

"Hey, hey now," Ernie called out. "Those filthy little things are touching my stuff. Hey, stop those goblins!"

"Ernie, I'm busy," Ben shouted. Jess was too exhausted to even shout. "If you don't like it, stop them yourself."

"I can't do that!" Ernie said shrilly. "Hey—you, goblin! You monster there, stop! Stop touching that sack. Stop. I'm commanding you!"

The goblin ignored Ernie and continued to poke at the sack. Attracted by Ernie's shouting, several more goblins began to collect at the base of the pillar. They glanced up at the wizard and then began to gleefully paw at the sack.

"Hey! Hey now, you stop that!" Ernie glared down. "That's my quilt. I'm warning you . . . Stop I say! Stop or I'll blast you!"

The goblins continue to gleefully tear open the sack, shrieking the more Ernie shouted.

"That's my quilt! Hey! You've ripped it! Stop! Stop! You're ruining it! That's my masterpiece! It's supposed to win the guild championship! Look what you've done! Look at it! You were warned!"

Ernie squeezed his eyes shut and flung out his hand. "Kazaam!" he screamed.

A blast of lightning scattered the goblins at the base of the pillar. Ernie,

who had to let go with one hand to blast, fell and landed on the shredded remains of his quilt. The wizard staggered up, trembling with rage.

“Scum! Savages! Beasts! Look what you've done! You've ruined my quilt! Of all the crimes against humanity, this is the worst! There is no forgiveness! You'll pay!”

Goblins blinked at him, as if transfixed by the raging man.

“This will teach you to mess with my quilt! Kazaam! Kazaam! Kazaam!” Ernie went leaping about, hair flying wild, hat knocked to the ground as he blasted in every direction, his eyes screwed shut.

“Kazaam! You ruined my quilt! Kazaam!” The wizard shouted and screamed, dancing in a mad tirade. “You destroyed my quilt! Kazaam! Kazaam! My masterpiece! My life's work! My quilt! Kazaam!”

With Ernie's wild and furious blasting the tide of the battle began to turn. Guard and goblin alike were hit by the occasional lucky bolt from the blind wizard and beast or man went down just as fast. The air thickened with smoke and the stench of char, along with considerable dust from all the pulverized stone from Ernie's wild misses. Goblins and guardsmen began to retreat up the steps and Rimmah withdrew down the hall, the evil wizard's face twisting in displeasure.

“Prepare to meet your doom, Wizard,” Jess snarled. Her veil was lost long ago and now tendrils of her curly hair clung damply to her face. “You've ruined this kingdom enough and now you must pay!”

Rimmah pursed his lips. “Mol'Jessel. It seems I underestimated your skill with a witless piece of steel. You have, in the end, become an even greater irritant than you were at first. But, as you see, I still have a few men and beasts yet in your way, and you've not even yet begun to match your worthless skills against my great power!”

“Then get ready!” Jess said, and started forward.

Ben followed to join her in the charge, but found himself caught, rising into the air.

“You runt,” a voice growled from behind him. “I don't like you.”

Then Ben hurtled through the air. He smashed through the wall of goblins and guards and kept on flying, shooting down the hall until he smashed into a brightly colored wall hanging, and the stone wall behind it, with a loud crack. He slid to the ground, dragging the wall hanging with him into a heap.

“That's paying you back,” Dougyal said.

“Ben!” In his fading consciousness he heard Jess screamed. “Nooo! Ben! You've killed him, you savage brute!”

“I'll get the giant!” He heard Ernie's voice faintly, then there came a great crash and a boom, and all was darkness.



Chapter Thirty-One

The Last Battle

Ernies! You almost killed me! Watch out for the wall hangings! Watch where you're blasting! It's my house you're destroying!"

"Sorry! It's hard to blast accurately with your eyes closed."

"Then open your eyes when you blast them, you toad-eating fool!"

"I can't!"

Dimly, Ben felt the world swimming around him. Smashed twice in one day. Not good. Maybe I should just give up, he thought weakly.

"You! You I've saved for last." Jess was sobbing again, her voice savage at the same time. "You cowardly little bug! You animal! You attacked Ben from behind, like the sniveling weakling that you are, and you killed him. Now you must face me, and I'll more than unman you now, Dougie-boy!"

Ben tried to stir, but found he couldn't. Something weighed him down. Not Dougyal this time, because he could hear the giant man's labored breathing over the ring of clashing steel. It felt like his was buried in rubble. He couldn't speak, he couldn't tell Jess he was all right . . . well, not all right, but not quite entirely dead. Only almost dead.

He decided he shouldn't give up. He had to tell Jess he was still alive. With an effort he opened his eyes. All around he saw broken and scorched stone. A large slab of stone lay directly over him, but it was propped up by two smaller chunks so it hadn't squashed him flat.

"There." From somewhere nearby Jess sniffled. "So much for Dougyal. You're all alone, Rimmah. Where is your great horde of minions? Where is your brave talk now?"

By shifting his position back and forth Ben found he could pull his arm free. Pushing at the rubble in front of him he was able to open a small hole through which he could peer out at the castle hall. In front of him, on one side, were Jess and Ernie. On the other side was Rimmah, tall and arrogant.

Jess's shoulders were slumped, her face streaked with tears, her beautiful green dress torn and covered with dust. A fierce light burned in her eyes as she held up her bloody sword.

"Enough!" Rimmah raised his hands, ignoring the sprawled corpse of Dougyal as if it didn't exist. "I'm surrounded by incompetents!"

"Quite typical of government workers," Ernie said, waving a hand to clear the dust before him. "I've always heard it was the unions."

"I tried to get rid of that," Rimmah said icily. "I'm not stupid. But you wouldn't believe their determination. Fair wages and short hours! I had to threaten execution and torture. Of course, they weren't the only determined ones I had to deal with. Hadagrath, I confess I never expected it of you. How does it feel to fight, old friend? Sate your inner beast? Starting to see things my way? Perhaps you understand now why I say we must rule the world. Perhaps, even, you're ready to join me?"

"Well," Ernie tugged at his beard. "Blasting does relieve the stress, I confess. I don't think I've had such low blood pressure in years. And, I think, I shall feel even better after having dealt with you!"

"A pity." Rimmah's eyes narrowed, and—if possible—his face grew even harder. "Then I shall finish this all myself."

Rising up to his narrow full towering—and meancing—height, Rimmah lifted his arms high and thundered, "ONTORO!"

A great sheet of light blasted through the wide hall. If Jess and Ernie hadn't ducked they would have ended up in several pieces. As it was they bounced across the floor, tumbling like feathers in a wind until they came to rest, sprawled out like so many discarded dolls.

"Oh! Is that so?" Ernie staggered to his feet, eyes wobbling. "Think you're so good, eh Rimmah? Well, take this! Kazaam! Kazaam-wham-bam-bam!" Ernie hopped up and down in place like a little child in tantrum, hurling a great shower of flashing bolts at Rimmah until the castle shook and resounded with the noise. It was a great storm of light, blazing the entire hall to brilliant light. But for all of Ernie's shouting and the rain of lightning Rimmah seemed unfazed. The evil wizard stood with his arms crossed in front of him, a bored expression on his face as the bolts of light bounced and ricocheted off some invisible shield around him, crackling down around the invisible cage in electric spiderwebs.

Then Ernie stopped, shoulder stooped, panting for breath.

Rimmah gave a slow thin smile. "Quite finished?"

"No. Just catching my breath," Ernie rasped. "Not quite so young as I used to be. Give me a minute and I'll mix up something really nasty for you."

"I don't think so," Rimmah said coldly. Raising his hands in front of him, he spread his fingers out wide. "Now it's my turn."

Crackling webs of lightning arched out from his fingers, wrapping around Jess and Ernie where they stood. They were caught up, writhing in the

scorching energy. Screams came, ripped from them, twisted with agony.

“Die, you pathetic wretches,” Rimmah gloated, his face contorted in grotesque pleasure. “Oh, I take particular pleasure in destroying you, Mol’Jessel. You always irritated me so much! Die! Die slowly and realize what fools you were to challenge me!”

Ben scrambled in a panic. Jess and Ernie screamed, dying before his very eyes, and he could do nothing. Clawing through the rocks, he crawled out of the rubble. Rimmah’s attention remained fixed on the two agonized victims before him, and the wizard didn’t even notice Ben heaving himself up through the broken heap of stone. Ben looked around frantically, searching for some weapon, anything he could use to stop Rimmah.

His eyes came to rest on a tall overturned candle stand. The long stem of the candle holder ended in a round heavy lead base. It would have to do, Ben thought. He would make it work.

Picking up the stand, he stepped out of the dust and smoke, swinging the stand round his head, every battered muscle and bone in his body crying out in pain. Then he heaved. The heavy stand hurtled through the air, the base smacking Rimmah squarely in the head.

The wizard skidded across the floor and lay still.

The lightning stopped. There was . . . nothing.

“Oh,” Jess said faintly, and began to collapse.

“Jess, Jess! Are you all right?” Ben ran to her, and caught her in his arms before she hit the ground, picking her up gently, smoothing her scorched dress.

“Ohh,” Ernie staggered to his feet, singed, his robe smoking. “Look what you did to Rimmah! I think—I think I’m going to be sick.” Hands clamped over his mouth Ernie staggered to a corner and vomited noisily.

“I wanted to get him,” Jess said weakly, resting her head against Ben’s arm. “He’s hurt so many people and destroyed so much.”

“Well . . . sorry. I got him for you. I wasn’t important enough, so he wasn’t paying attention to me.”

“Thanks.” She smiled weakly. “You’re my hero.”

“I have one question.”

“What?” she said.

“What happens next?”

“Urm,” Ernie said. The wizard cleared his throat. “With Rimmah dead, the power of his spells should quickly dissipate. If the king and queen are not driven insane by their sudden release—the spell should vanish and they will return to their proper selves.”

Ernie had no sooner finished speaking then there came a great thunder clap and a gust of wind, followed by a swirling cloud of dust.



Chapter Thirty-Two

Ever After

The sound of coughing came through the thick cloud of dust. “Gertrude,” a male voice said. “Did the cook burn dinner again? What is with all this smoke? I swear, I shall fire him this time.”

“I rather don't think it's the cook this time, Harry.” A second, female, voice said.

Ben looked at Jess, who was still in his arms. He felt a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. The thought of meeting a king and queen suddenly seemed like the last thing he wanted to do. Especially after he just finished killing their grand adviser.

“Um,” he said. “Can you stand?”

“I suppose,” Jess said. “Though I rather like it here.”

He carefully set Jess on her feet and tried to brush some of the dust and soot from her dress. It was a rather hopeless task. He looked down at himself, realizing exactly how unpresentable he was. His shirt and pants were torn and spattered with blood—his own, he thought, but he couldn't be sure. One didn't appear before a king in this manner.

Then he looked around and saw all the damage wreaked upon the castle. Great chunks of stone were torn out of the walls, long scorched gashes marking everything from floor to ceiling. Shredded wall hangings smoldered and burned.

“Oh, dear,” Ben murmured and rubbed his hands together nervously. “Jess. Say, Jess. Why don't you go on ahead and meet your parents. I'll . . . I'll just head on back to the Wine Sop. If the king is up to seeing me a little later, well . . . you can always send someone to tell me.”

“No, you don't,” Jess caught his arm. “You stay here. My Da is going to thank you for all you've done.”

“More likely he'll behead me for all the damage.”

“Nonsense.”

It was too late. Two figures advanced through the dust, growing more distinct. The one of the left was a portly man with a bald spot on his head. The figure on the right was a woman of stern composure. She had the same nose as Jess, but they appeared to share nothing else.

“Ma! Da!” Jess took a step forward, holding out her arms.

“Hello, daughter.” The King adjusted the collar of his ornate jacket, glancing around. “Where have you been, and what’s happened? This all looks rather costly.”

“Tsk,” the queen adjusting her robes. “You’ve obviously not been acting lady-like, Mol. Look at you.”

“Ma.” Jess folded her arms. “You were held captive by Rimmah. We set you free.”

“Well,” the king frowned. “You’re sure? I do recall a rather strange . . . thing. It was most unpleasant. It felt rather like being stuck in the worst hour of court for eternity.” He looked around, blinking at the sight of all the destruction. “But did you really need to, ah, free us with such vigor?”

“Yes, Da. And we almost didn’t succeed.”

“Us? Who are these two?” The king peered, first at Ernie and then Ben.

“Hadagrath, your majesty.” Ernie stepped forward, beaming. “But please call me Ernie. I am now the most powerful wizard in the kingdom and currently unemployed, if you understand. I have great skill at being employed as a court adviser and wizard. Um . . . I would also mention that I wasn’t the one who bumped off your previous grand adviser. That was the young man over there. So if you have any questions about the whole procedure, ask him.”

“Him?”

It was an awkward moment. Ben thought he’d best get it all over with. “King!” He advanced. “King, I—I—the people of York . . . I mean, that is, the people of York have sent me. My Ma and Da, too, I guess. I—I’ve, that is, I’ve come, er, was sent by the people of York. Yes, I was sent by the people of York! I bring a big—no, I mean, large—actually, an important message.”

The king blinked, staring at him. “Gertrude,” he said. “Am I still dreaming?”

“It seems not, Harry. Unfortunately, he looks all too real.”

Ben tried to ignore them. He scratched at his head, hoping to collect his thoughts. Having a king and queen staring at him made it hard to remember his message. “I was bid come—come and do something. The something—I was told to say—to inform you that the goblin trouble grows worse. The village of York is in grave danger and we beg you to send your army and destroy the goblin threat, that we might live in peace and safety. My Ma don’t want my Da going off and trying to do it himself.”

“Really.” The king cleared his throat politely. “I’ll keep that in mind. You

realize there are all sorts of important matters of state that need my attention. I feel your pain, I really do, but we must be careful about these things. Haste is not good. Consult the advisers, you know, the political implications . . .” he trailed off.

“And exactly who is this commoner?” The queen stepped forward, eyeing Ben critically.

“Oh. Ma, Da—this is Ben.” Jess came up, talking his hand. “He is—”

“A new servant you’ve picked up?” The king scratched at his balding head. “Really, dear, couldn’t you exercise a little good judgment? He seems . . . a little low-class.”

“And filthy,” the queen added, wrinkling her nose.

“Ma! Da! He isn’t a servant!”

“Nope, but perhaps it wasn’t a bad guess,” Ben said, relieved he had gotten his message out, but unable to escape a feeling of disappointment. Somehow, the king’s response had not been what he had expected. Had he come all this way and suffered so much for a mumble? He had expected a trumpet blast, or at least a grand pronouncement. “I’m not sure what servants look like, but . . . See, I was a farmer, but I decided to try life as a bard. Then I was the Stuttering Bard of York, but I decided I’m not a good bard, so I’ve decided to be a farmer again.” He didn’t stutter too badly, though farmer came out sounding like “Barmer.” He paused a moment. “Mostly I stutter.”

The king and queen stared at him.

“Ma—”

“Well, I’m sure it’ll all be an interesting story.” The queen smiled with false brightness. “But never mind that. You’re back, Mol. Now we can get on with the marriage. I’ve been preparing in your absence.”

“Ma, I’m not marrying Elfonso.”

“Not? Then the big hairy fellow—”

“Dead. I killed him.”

“Mol! Really, that wasn’t necessary! Now what will all the other suitors think? Consider the difficulty of marriage when every man will think that death waits for them if they chance to displease you?”

“Then I’ll be suitably pleased.”

“Be serious! You should think about these things. Who do you intend to marry then?”

“Well . . .” Jess cleared her throat delicately. “Ben has something to tell you.”

“I do?” Ben looked at her in surprise.

“Yes, you do,” Jess said meaningfully.

“I do.” Ben scratched his head again. “I thought I said everything the mayor told me to say. I must have forgot something. Hang on a moment . . . I’ll think of it.”

“What about me?” Jess stepped near him, taking his other hand.

“You?” He looked into her eyes and promptly forgot everything he might have been about to say. He had never, he realized, had a chance to study her eyes properly. He was sorry he hadn't because they were beautiful . . . so large and clear . . . he squeezed his eyes shut, blocking out the sight so he wouldn't reach up to touch her face.

“Well,” he said with an effort, trying to remember where he was, and what was going on, without opening his eyes. “I . . . since I'm not going to be a bard I'll be going back to my Ma and Da to farm. I guess that means I'm leaving you Jess. I'm terribly, awfully, sorry. I wish . . . I just wish . . .”

“You don't wish,” she whispered. “You ask! You say, 'Will you marry me?’”

“What?” His eyes snapped open. “I can't do that!”

“Why not? Don't you love me?”

“More than anything! But you can't marry me. To marry a princess you must be rich and famous and brave and handsome and . . . not me,” he finished, ticking them off on one hand. “I would never want to bother you with something you couldn't do, but I do wish—”

“Who says?” Her hands were on her hips now. “Who says you have to be handsome and brave and famous and rich? Maybe you are handsome and brave, and maybe rich and famous doesn't matter. Maybe what matters most is that you are you. Maybe I don't care what somebody says I can't do. Why don't you try for once, and ask?”

“You think?” He scrubbed at his hairy chin. “You're sure it wouldn't bother you? I don't want to bother you.”

“No, it wouldn't bother me.” Her exasperated expression gave way to a smile.

“You won't be disowned by your parents, criminalized, running from the law, disinherited—”

“Don't be silly. That wouldn't happen!” She laughed. “Besides, even if it did I wouldn't mind if I was with you.”

She reached up and put her arms around his neck. “So . . . what do you say?”

“Um . . . will you marry me?”

“Yes, Ben. Even if you don't know how to ask a straight question without help.”

“Yeah, well . . .” He leaned close and whispered, “I don't think I can be a prince. Or anything in a court or a castle. See, it's something I've figured out on this adventure.”

“I don't care, Ben,” she whispered back. “Don't worry. It won't be so hard. You'll see. And even if you couldn't, I'd be a farmer's wife for you!”

“Wait!” The queen said shrilly. “Mol! I—we—weren't consulted on this. These kind of decisions can't be made without mature consulting and many visits to a certified marriage counselor. You—”

Ben and Jess didn't hear her. It's hard to pay attention when you're kissing.



About the Author

R. Purdy was born in November 1981 and homeschooled until graduation from high school. He has told stories since before he could write, but didn't sit down to begin writing his first novel until he was fifteen years old. When not writing, he enjoys reading, designing websites, painting and drawing, bicycling, spending time outside, taking photographs, building things and putzing around—not necessarily in that order. He revels in his eccentricities, and presently lives in upstate New York. He can be found on the web at www.Creative-Vapors.com.

