

## MATHEMATICAL MAGIC...

Ernie stopped in front of the inn, right in the middle of the road, and began hurriedly drawing various lines and diagrams in the dirt with his staff, muttering to himself. After several short minutes he paused and cocked his head, listening to the continuous goblin shriek, which was growing louder. “Oooh, I hope I get this right. I’m not very good at doing math under pressure.”

“What are you doing?” Jess snapped. “We need to be on the wall—now!”

“Math.” Ernie squinted at his lines in the dirt. “Constructing a shielding ward requires all sorts of math. You know, pi times the radius squared. A squared plus B squared equals C squared. Tangents, hypotenuses, and all the sort of stuff.”

“You lunatic!” Jess looked around wildly. “You can’t stop the goblins by scratching lines on the ground!”

Ernie squinted critically at his markings in the dirt. “I think that is the right number of decimal points. But maybe I should double-check my parallel lines.”

He glanced up at the walls, noticing the frightened crowd of villagers gathered on the walkway, staring transfixed at the charging horde. He licked his lips. “Eh. Perhaps I don’t have the time. We’re either cinders or saved, as my old applied mathematics professor used to say.”



THE STUTTERING

DUKE OF YORK



THE STUTTERING  
DUKE OF YORK

RUNDY PURDY



Wild Jot Press

## THE STUTTERING DUKE OF YORK

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

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For my family

Who suffer with me through every book

Also by Rundy Purdy

*The Stuttering Bard of York*



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# CHAPTER ONE

## PARADE

A victory must be celebrated, even if it's one you didn't expect, and maybe didn't even really want. The best way to make up for a less than desired victory is to celebrate it extravagantly, as if it were exactly what you wanted. King Harry and Queen Gertrude understood this rule, and followed it to the letter.

Bennelzor Transom didn't know this rule, and even if he did he probably wouldn't have recognized the present application to his accomplishment. He was too busy struggling to survive in all the post-victory bustle.

Yesterday had ended in a blur. After the awkward introduction to the newly liberated king and queen, Jess had ordered Ernie to heal Ben's injuries. After the wizard had done his work, a command from the king had Ben promptly swept off, alone, to a private bedroom in the back of the castle. A few hours later a servant brought him supper. When he had inquired about Jess, the servant had brusquely told him that the king and queen wished to inform him that the princess was in the midst of a joyful reunion with her parents—and he need not concern himself about her. If Ben had been good at picking up hints, he would have understood Their Majesties' opinion of their daughter's dearly beloved. But he wasn't, and he didn't.

It had felt a little odd being all alone in some small silent bedroom in the far end of the castle, especially after the recent battle. Ben reminded himself that both Rimmah and Dougyal were dead, and tried to not worry about Jess...or anything else that happened to pop into his mind that evening.

As it turned out, nothing did happen that evening. But he woke the next morning to pounding on the door. He leaped out of bed, startled to wakefulness. Snatching Goblin Terror from its scabbard beside the bed, he flung the door open to face the unknown in a rather befuddled and disheveled state. When his senses came to better order he realized that—rather than some pack of foul creatures or evil minions of the now-dead wizard Rimmah—it was Jess standing in the doorway. She wore a deep green dress, which complimented the clear green of her eyes. Her long curly black hair was held back by a small crown of diamonds, and she looked every bit the princess with her pale features, strong proud lips, high cheekbones, and sharp chin. To Ben she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

She smiled at him, and he went immediately from battle ready to fumbling with embarrassment.

“Nugh,” he said, trying to make his mouth work. He quickly lowering the sword. “I—uh—thought—Are you under attack?”

She appeared at ease and in good spirits, but he leaned out the doorway and glanced up and down the hall just to be sure. Yesterday was still very fresh in his mind.

“Not that I’m aware of,” she said. “Everything is fine. I’ve just come to fetch you. It’s going to be a busy day, and we must get started.”

“Right. Busy. I suppose living in a castle is like that.” He sheathed Goblin Terror and stepped out in the hall, absently buckling the scabbard around his waist. He wished he felt more prepared and sure of himself. “Well. I guess I’m ready. Lead the way and tell me what to do, because I’ve never done this courtly stuff.”

“Right,” Jess said, still grinning. “First I would say it’s considered proper to be attired in more than your underwear while attending court. Unless you wish to cause a scandal I suggest—”

Uttering a strangled bleat, Ben leaped back into the bedroom, slamming the door. He was dressed in a few minutes, but didn’t stop blushing for an hour.

Jess told him a lot more about what they would do that day, but he didn’t really understand anything beyond the parts about getting dressed and having a busy day. He ended up following Jess around most of the morning, going places and doing things without having any idea where he was going, or what he was doing. Mostly, he was glad to be with Jess.

Finally, as the morning waned late he said, "Tell me again, exactly what are we doing?"

"Why, we're getting ready for the parade," she said, and sent off a lady-in-waiting with instructions about garments, or something.

"A parade?" Ben said.

"Yes," she said. "You know, where we all get on our horses and ride through the city with everyone lining the streets and cheering. At noon. So we've only a little more than an hour left to get ready."

"Oh." He thought about that a little bit. "Cheering?"

"Yes. Cheering and screaming. Crowds like to do that."

"Oh," he said again. It was a very unhappy oh. "But, like, you don't need me for that, right? I mean, I'm not one of those important kind of people, so I'll just go back to my room and wait there quietly until you finish your parade."

"Don't be silly." She laughed. "You've got to be there."

"I do?" he said, sounding as if that was *quite* dreadful news.

"Of course you do," she said. "This parade is all about you. You killed the evil wizard Rimmah and saved my parents from captivity to his will. It's a victory parade, Ben, and you're the hero. You're the center of the show. Everyone wants to see the man who saved the kingdom."

"Um, right." He felt the sudden urge to start chewing on his fingernails, something he hadn't done since when he was a little child and had spent long nights keeping vigil against the monster under his bed. "Couldn't you just go on the parade and tell people anything they might need to know about me?"

"Impossible," she said, quite firmly. "I'm princess Mol'Jessel, light of the kingdom, heir to the throne of Tarn. You rescued my parents from their evil advisor, the wizard Rimmah. You're my soon-to-be husband. Everyone is curious to see you. They must see their future king. Don't worry, Ben. It'll be fun. In a parade you just get all dressed up and ride down the street with everyone crowding around shouting and screaming at you."

"I got the shouting and screaming part," Ben said. It might all be fine to a princess, he thought, but to Stuttering Ben, the farmer from the small and distant village of York, this was all shaping up to be very grim indeed. He thought he'd rather go back to fighting the battle of yesterday than ahead to facing a crowd of shouting and screaming people. But then he thought of Jess, and how happy she was. She said it would be fun, so he said nothing more.

“But, do I have to do anything?” he asked, a bit hesitantly.

“Oh, no,” she said. “Not at the parade. Just sit up on your horse and look like someone who could be a king. You don’t have to do anything until after the parade, at the feast.”

“The feast?” Ben felt his stomach plunge even lower.

“Yes, and then the feast after that, and the one after that. There are always feasts at the court, especially after a great victory. Now come on, we need to get you dressed for the parade.”

Jess started down the hall again, leaving Ben staring after her, starting to chew on one of his nails.



“Why are we doing this?” Ben asked as the servants helped him into the suit of armor.

“Like I said, we must show the populace the man who won the great victory.” Jess spoke from where she sat on a bench, watching.

“But I didn’t win the battle wearing all this armor,” Ben said. “I’ve never worn armor before in my life. Besides, I didn’t win the battle. You and Ernie fought Rimmah more than I did. I look stupid and I feel stupid,” he finished.

“Oh, it’s not so bad as that,” Jess said. “I do like my Ben in his simple clothes, but you don’t look half bad. And there is custom to consider. And you *were* the one who killed Rimmah.”

The servants settled the helmet on Ben’s head and led him to the mirror. He stared at his reflection. Dressed in simple farmer clothes, he had never cut a dashing figure. Dressed in a full suit of gleaming mail armor with breastplate and helmet, he thought he still didn’t. He was perhaps a little tall if one looked at him right, but his chin wasn’t jutting or chiseled in anything like a kingly manner and there was only a bit of hair sprouting there which he hoped would turn into a decent beard. All the armor had changed about him, Ben thought, was to make him look like an over-sized and exceptionally polished spoon.

“Well,” he said grudgingly. “I can hope nobody in the city will recognize me.”

“You’ll be fine. You’ll be unforgettable,” Jess insisted, and hurried off for her own last minute preparations.

The entire entourage of King Harry, Queen Gertrude, Jess, Ben, Ernie the wizard, royal guards, and a few other notable nobles all met up outside the stables. Once everyone was mounted and arranged in the right order they exited the castle grounds through a small rear doorway and slipped down a narrow back street, leaving the city. Jess had explained to Ben that the rules of a victory parade required everyone to ride *into* the city. You couldn't have everyone see you riding out and then riding back in again. Those were the rules. So they slipped out of the city and circled around the walls to the main gate.

The ride to the beginning of the parade was a rather quiet one. Ben noticed the smile fixed on Jess's face was now wide and stiff and he wondered if she didn't care for screaming crowds so very much herself. Ernie, however, appeared in his element. The wizard constantly adjusted his battered hat and stroked his beard, murmuring, "How do I look? How do I look? Adorable? Exquisitely adorable? The perfect image of the next grand advisor? Will they love me? Do I look like the picture of wisdom and sagacity?"

"Perfectly," Jess finally said, her voice dripping with sweetness. "*A prima donna par excellence.*"

"Good, good." Ernie said, patting his beard a few more times. "One must impress the masses, you know."

The king and queen remained quiet, and spoke not a word the entire journey. They kept sharing glances that ended with both of them looking back quickly at Jess, then Ben. Jess didn't notice because she was too busy fixing a very wide smile on her face while shooting Ernie dirty looks as the wizard continued to primp himself and croon, "Must look good for the paper. Never know who might be there. Let the Council of Wizards see where old Ernie has got himself." And Ben didn't notice the quick glances because he was too busy struggling against his dread, and discovering that when one broke out in a cold sweat armor really did get a chill dampness about it.

Then they were at the gate, and it opened to a great blast of trumpet fanfare. They rode through the arch, and Ben saw no more.

The streets were packed. Men, women, and children crowded on every side, held back only by the guards lining both sides of the road. Everyone wanted a glimpse of the returning princess and her companions—the wizard and that other fellow. But it was that other fellow they were most interested

in. Rumors swirled about the city thick as snowflakes in a midwinter blizzard. The most prevalent was that the princess Mol'Jessel would marry him. Of the rest, half the rumors flatly contradicted the other half, but that only seemed to add to the interest and excitement. Some had heard that he was a fierce giant of a man, who slaughtered everyone who came in his path. The rest heard he was a bumbling provincial idiot. All of them had heard that he was somehow involved in the demise of the feared wizard Rimmah, though no one was entirely sure how. So everyone strained for a glance of the figure mostly obscured in armor, screaming and waving at him for all they were worth.

King Harry, Queen Gertrude, and Princess Jess all rode and waved with royal dignity. Ernie simpered and preened so much he nearly fell off his horse. Ben simply rode. When Jess glanced back out of the corner of her eye she was glad to see that Ben seemed to be taking it well enough, riding like some stoic figure. At least nothing drastic had happened, she thought, and then felt a little guilty for having the thought.

"Well," she said when they were all back inside the castle stable yard. "Quite the parade, wasn't it, Ben? All the banners, bright and colorful, flapping in the air. All the people cheering and throwing flowers. Quite the sight, huh?"

"It was?" Ben said. He sounded a little dazed. "That's good, I guess."

"What do you mean?" Jess ignored the ladies that had come to help her from the horse and hopped down unaided. "You didn't like it?"

"I don't know." He dismounted and took off his helmet. "I didn't see any of it."

"Didn't?" Jess stared at him blankly.

"Yeah, I had my eyes closed." Ben scratched his head with a mailed hand. "It wasn't so bad that way. I just pretended I was back home on the farm and I was imagining it all in my head and it wasn't really happening."

"Ah," Jess said.

"How did I do? Did I look like kingly material, or something?"

"Wonderfully, Ben. Everyone who saw you saw a future king riding in proud acknowledgment of his great victory. You did great. Just don't tell anyone you rode with your eyes closed." Her lips quivered on the edge of a laugh.

Before Ben could say anything more, the king approached them, the queen trailing close behind. King Harry was a portly man, with a balding spot on the



top of his head. He had watery blue eyes, a mustache, and pudgy cheeks that had a tendency to quiver, especially when agitated. Queen Gertrude was equally portly, but of stern composure, with sharp calculating hazel eyes and lips that seemed to constantly hover on the edge of a sour pucker. She shared her daughter's sharp nose and slim hands, but appeared to have nothing else in common.

"Wonderful day," King Harry said quickly, and licked his lips. "Fine day for a parade. Yes, indeed, fine day. I always said it was a fine day for a parade. Fine day. Wonderful day. So...ahem...we must get down to business."

"Uh...business," Ben repeated.

He had managed to almost entirely avoid talking to the king and queen since he had rescued them, and delivered his message from the people of York. That message delivery hadn't gone particularly well, given Ben's stuttering problem, and he was desirous of avoiding any more conversation. But the king's mention of business reminded him that, stutter or not, the people of York had given him the duty of bringing help from the king to save them from the goblins.

"Yes," the king said.

"B-B-Business!" Ben said loudly. "Yes, the goblins." Unfortunately, goblins came out sounding more like bobbins, but the king seemed to catch the drift.

There was an awkward pause. The king shifted, then said, "Yes, the goblins are a concern. A grave concern. It is high on our list of things that must be dealt with. Very high. But I have something far more important to discuss with you. The business I want to talk with you about now is regarding the coming feasts."

"F-feasts?" Ben said.

"This first one will be your introduction to the court," Jess said quickly. "It's especially important since you saved the kingdom and are going to marry me."

"Indeed," the king said stiffly. "But there are matters of protocol."

Ben nodded politely, having no idea what a protocol was, much less what might be wrong with it.

"First there is the issue of how you will be announced."

Ben nodded again, then realized the king was looking at him expectantly. Apparently an answer was expected. Panic set in, and he scrubbed at his chin trying to look thoughtful and considering while his mind made a wild attempt

to figure out what was the proper answer. Finally, after a little too long a pause he said, "Hmmm. How about quietly?"

The king's face sagged. The queen's eyes twitched.

"They mean what title should you have," Jess said kindly.

"Oh." Ben brightened. "Back home everyone called me Stuttering Ben."

The king grimaced. "Indeed. But I was looking for a title more suitable for one courting the hand of the princess. A more suitable title for one who might inherit the kingdom." His voice rose a little, his cheeks quivering.

"How about, 'Bennelzor Transom, Warrior of the North Lands, Defender of the Kingdom,'" Jess offered.

"Ah." The king seemed to regain some of his composure, his face brightening. "Very good. Yes, we'll use that. Just remember to wear that big fancy sword of yours and maybe we can pull it off."

"And regarding the feasts," the queen prompted.

"The feasts...er, will be delayed," the king said.

"Delayed? What for?" Jess protested. "We need to introduce Ben to the court so the marriage can proceed as soon as possible."

"Yes, yes, of course," the king said hastily. "But there is the damage to the castle to consider. All the scorched wall hangings, the curtains that need to be replaced..."

"We must look our best, Mol," the queen said.

"Indeed," the king gave a forced chuckle. "So, the first feast will be delayed several days. You know, there is so much expense and effort required to replace curtains. So, for tonight, you will dine privately with us."

"If that's what Jess wants," Ben said absently.

Jess frowned. "For tonight, okay," she said. "The battle did trash the castle. But tomorrow there must be a feast honoring Ben, a small one at the very least. The court will expect you to reward him for defeating Rimmah, Da. If you delay it will look like you lack class."

"True, true," the king said quickly. "A small feast then. Very small. Just the most trusted members of the court." If there was anything the king hated it was to be thought lacking in class.

"And at that time you'll reward Ben, for everyone to see," Jess said.

"Reward?" The king gave her a vague look.

"For his great service to the crown. For freeing you from Rimmah's mind control. I think the court would consider a ducal title appropriate, don't you?"

she prompted.

“Er...um. Yes,” the king mumbled. “I’ll be sure to make him a duke of something.”

The king and queen exchanged an odd meaningful glance, which Jess didn’t notice because she was staring at Ben in a love-struck sort of way, and which Ben didn’t notice because he was staring off into space and wondering if he was supposed to apologize for the singed wall hangings.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE FEAST

Jess informed Ben that for the feast he would need to look the part of a prince, dressed up in the finest clothes. The evening of the feast, he found out exactly what that meant. By the time the servants were finished with him, Ben wasn't sure he would recognize himself. He was decked out extravagantly in purple, crimson, and gold. A very frilly shirt made him look like some ruffled bird, his purple cape made him look like he wasn't sure what, and the purple hat—set at a jaunty angle—had a rather large purple feather Ben wasn't too sure about. As a last touch, he was shod in large boots with large buckles, the top of the boots turned down in the most swashbuckling manner. They jingled and jangled when he walked. Jess wasn't around to see the wardrobe results, and Ben wasn't too sure about them. Somehow 'ridiculous' kept coming to mind whenever he saw himself.

"But, sir," the chief wardrobe officer said with the most indignant airs when Ben expressed his doubtfulness. That is, the person Ben thought of as the chief wardrobe officer. He couldn't keep all the servants and their titles straight, but this man with the thin mustache and haughty airs was certainly the man in charge of choosing the clothes, so chief wardrobe officer he was, in Ben's mind. "This is the latest fashion. I assure you, the darling of the fashion critics. So hip, so *expressive*. So trendy. One must obey the fashion trends. The fashion critics are always right."

"Well, I dunno. It doesn't look like me." Ben said. "I suppose that *does* make it dashing. I just...dunno. I never thought I'd wear something like this. I think my Da would have a fit if he saw me. This kinda looks like putting on

airs, like he was always talking about. I guess maybe I'm just not very good at being dashing."

"Well, if the sir would like his provincial clothes," the man said distastefully, glancing over at the plain clothing that had been stripped from Ben and tossed over a chair.

"No, not today," Ben said bravely. "I must look like a prince today. Thank you very much," he added with a last look around the room at the servants. "I'm off to the feast."

Except, Ben wasn't directly off to the feast because he got lost looking for the private dining chamber. It was Jess who found him wandering down a hall, hesitantly opening various doors and peering into the rooms.

"There you are!" she said, making Ben jump guiltily—he was consumed with the fear that instead of the king's dining room he would accidentally stumble across a woman's bathroom behind one of the randomly opened doors. Last time he had nearly been lynched, though it had been no fault of his. Still, the experience had left a deep impression.

"I've been looking all over for you. Good heavens," she finished, registering his dress. "What *is* that?"

"The latest fashion, apparently," Ben said, trying to get his cape unstuck from the door he had just shut it in, while at the same time trying to keep the hat from falling down over his eyes. He had come to discover that if the hat wasn't kept precisely perched at a precariously jaunty angle it didn't fit at all and sank down to around his nose, making it impossible to see anything. He hated the hat already.

"Ah. Yes. I guess maximalist is the latest rage. I..um...hadn't really envisioned that, but I suppose my Da might appreciate it. Come on, you're late."

She dragged him down the hall, jingling and jangling, hitching and hiking his various garments as he went.

"Here we are," she said, bringing him to a stop in front of a door that looked very much like any other door. "Good luck. Since this feast is honoring you, you have to sit on my Da's right. I can't sit beside you, because I'm supposed to sit on my Ma's left. But if you need to do anything, I'll signal you."

"Uh...right." He actually thought that was a bad idea, but Jess had already slipped into the room, so he had no choice but to follow.

He moved to enter the room, but as he stepped forward his hat fell down over his eyes again and rather than gracefully entering he walked square into the jam. There was a loud crack and Ben rebounded from the impact, careening sideways and tearing off some of the ornate molding before he landed sprawled on the floor.

The king leaped up at the sound, exclaiming, “Mercy!” in a rather girlish way, because he was feeling a bit uneasy over Ben and the prospect of the unfolding feast.

All conversation stopped, every gaze turned to Ben.

“Gosh, I dunno. They don’t make door jams like they used to.” Ben scrambled to his feet and carefully set the bit of molding in the corner, apologizing, stuttering, and feeling his face go red. “I’m sure with a few nails I could fix that up proper like. I’ll get right on that after the feast.”

“Nonsense, nonsense. Quite all right.” The king hurried over, giving him a jovial slap on the back. “Happens all the time, I’m sure. Come, come to the table.”

Holding his hat up with one hand and his pants with the other, Ben joined the king. It was a lengthy table, a sumptuous feast laid out across the entire expanse. There were finely cooked meats, breads of every type, sugar pastries, and several types of pudding. For all that it was the finest feast Ben had ever seen, only a select few members of the court were present—about a dozen or so lords and ladies, though Ben was too self-conscious to actually count the people around the table.

“Where is your mother?” the queen whispered to the king, loud enough that Ben heard.

“Not coming—I didn’t mention the feast to her,” the king whispered back. “With her delicate constitution...if something should happen...best for her health.” The king rolled his eyes in Ben’s direction.

“Is everyone here?” Jess inquired. “Shall we begin?”

“Um...yes.” The king stood, and arranged his face in the fixed smile a man might wear when about to undertake an unpleasant task. He gave a tiny chuckle, fingering a very ornate chalice beside his plate.

“If you need any help just let me know,” Ben said politely, trying to remember all the manners his mother had ever taught him, or even mentioned in passing. “I can hurry down to the kitchen if we run out of anything, and I’m very good at passing food around.”

The king stared at him. The smile, if anything, grew even wider and his eyeballs began to twitch.

“Greetings, honored guests,” the king said, raising his voice so all could hear. “I...I’d like to make a toast.”

The words came with some difficulty. Ben found the king looking at him, some expectant hint in the monarch’s eye. Ben peered around the room for some hint at what was going on, and finally glancing at Jess, two chairs to his left. She was making some kind of motion at him, which told Ben he was indeed supposed to do *something*. But he still couldn’t figure out what.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have any toast,” Ben said. “It’s all fresh bread on the table. But maybe if we ask real nice the cook will let us go down to the kitchen and toast some of the bread.”

There was a tiny titter somewhere around the table.

“A toast to the great hero!” the king said, sounding a little choked as he tried to get back to his script. “A toast to Bennelzor Transom, Warrior of the North Lands, Defender of the Kingdom, for his great victory over the evil wizard Rimmah!”

“Huzzah!” Ernie shouted loudly and pounded the table. “Now can we eat? I’m hungry.”

The rest of the guests gave refined murmurs of *faux* agreement with the toast and delicately clinked their glasses together.

“Yes, and now, to begin the meal,” the king blurted out, dropping back into his seat.

“The reward,” Jess hissed. “You forgot the reward!”

The king hesitated.

“What my father means to say,” Jess said, “is that he has one more thing to do before we begin.”

“Er, yes...” The king slowly climbed back to his feet, as if dragged by some great force. “Arise, Ben Transom. Give me your sword, and kneel.”

“For keeps?” Ben looked at him, surprised. “I don’t know—Ernie gave Goblin Terror to me. He might not like me giving it away—”

“Just give me the sword for a minute,” the king sputtered, his face growing red. Ben was giving him the nearly irrepressible urge to scream and gnaw on wall hangings.

Ben was still uncertain, but he caught sight of Jess’s frenzied nodding, and decided that meant it was okay. He rose, carefully drawing the large sword

and handing it to the king, then knelt. Everyone was watching with the expression of someone examining a curious bug, and Ben was beginning to wish that the stone floor would swallow him up.

The king took a steadying breath. “Bennelzor Transom, for your great service to the kingdom of Tarn I hereby make you duke...”

The king paused, his face blank. In his effort to avoid considering this painful act, he had never once thought about how he would conclude it.

“What do I make him duke of?” he whispered to his wife.

“I don’t know! York,” she whispered back. “He is from there, and it’s the most miserable worthless little place in existence, far from Galdoron.”

The king nodded quickly, his cheeks quivering. Solemnly, with difficulty, he raised the sword.

“Sir Ben, as reward for your great service to the crown, and by the power vested in me as king of Tarn, I hereby appoint you as...as...Duke of York.” The king touched the sword to Ben’s shoulder, then let the blade drop, his breath labored, as if the effort had taken all of his strength—which, in a way, it had.

There was silence.

“Hooray for Ben, The Stuttering Duke of York!” Ernie shouted. “I always knew he’d turn out to be something—I practically taught him everything he knows!”

The gathered members of the court gave a smattering of reluctant applause.

“Oh, and in case anyone was wondering,” Ernie said after the applause had died away. “I did lots to help, too. Not that I need to be made a duke or anything—but the Council of Wizards would certainly be impressed if I did—but if it weren’t for me—”

“Now a few words from our new duke,” the king finished in a rush, and collapsed back into his chair.

Ben—having just finished climbing back to his feet and sheathing the sword—froze, caught completely unprepared. If he had been a man of the court he would have known some words would have been expected of him; flowery phrases and extolling praises of the king. But he wasn’t a man of the court, wouldn’t have known a flowery phrase if it fell from the ceiling and hit him on the head, and in short was completely ambushed by the announcement.

In the silence that followed the only sound was the faint scrape of



silverware coming to rest on a plate.

Ben felt blood rushing hotly to his face, fierce enough that he thought his hat would catch fire. Everyone watched.

“Um, hi,” he managed to croak. He gave a feeble little wave.

“N-n-nice to m-m-meet you all,” he stuttered. It felt like his tongue was tied in a knot. A roaring sound filled his ears, growing louder. “I—I—I’m sure we’ll get to know each other while we take care of the goblin trouble. There is nothing like the bonds of battle to forge strong friendships, or so I’ve been told.” At least, that is what he tried to say. He wasn’t entirely sure what was coming out of his mouth, some rambling random string of sounds.

If anything, the staring eyes bugged out even further. A few mouths dropped open.

“Yes, the goblins.” Ben stuttered. “They’re bothering York, see. And I was sent to get help, and especially I should since I’m duke now. We’ll kill the goblins and—I gotta go.”

He couldn’t stand it any longer, all of the strange faces looking at him, the vague expressions of shock, horror, and disapproval. It felt as if his world has shrunk to one small torturous circle of existence, and he had to get out *now*. He whirled, knocking over his chair, and made a break for the door.

His flight was foiled by his hat. Not two steps from the table and the monstrous hat fell back over his eyes, and he couldn’t see where he was going. Still Ben ran, hands frantically clawing for the door handle. Then he hit something, and he was falling.

The fall stopped with a jerk and his hat flew off, bright sunlight bursting in. He found himself dangling in midair, an open courtyard swinging some distance beneath his feet. It took him a moment to realize he had missed the door and instead had blindly fallen out a window. He was now hanging like laundry set out to dry, the end of his cape caught on the horns of a window gargoyle.

“What? Did he commit suicide?” Ben heard the king’s voice coming distantly from inside. “Gracious me! I mean, madmen are known to do such things, but I didn’t really expect...I mean, it must have made quite a mess on the pavement. Uungh...I feel a little faint. Someone...someone go check.”

A gasp of murmurs came from above Ben’s head. Dangling for all the world to see, he thought death would be a mercy, but then—looking at the distant ground—he wasn’t so sure. He swung back and forth on the end of his

cap, and the world spun in such a way that made his stomach do very odd somersaults.

“Ben!” Jess’s voice called down, concerned. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Everything is fine,” he stammered. “Everyone can go back to the feast. Don’t mind me. I think I’ll just take a break here. I’ll get myself back up in just a min—” Then his cape tore with a rather satisfying rip and he went plunging toward the earth below.

He had been dangling three stories up, so it would have been a nasty fall except he landed in the large goldfish fountain. As it was he made a terrific splash. Ben lay there, momentarily stunned, before scrambling up, spitting out a goldfish and coughing up water.

Jumping from the fountain, he hazarded a guess as to some path of escape and started sloshing across the courtyard as quickly as he could, his boots full of water, his clothes sopped.



Jess finally found Ben hiding in a broom closet in a back hall in the rear part of the castle. The puddle of water seeping out from under the door gave him away. She sat down outside the door, her back against the wall.

“It’s okay, Ben,” she said. “You can come out.”

“No, I can’t. I ruined everything.” Even muffled by the closet door he sounded wet and miserable.

“I’m not mad at you.”

“I’m no good at this. I’m nothing but an embarrassment to you. I should just go away before something worse happens.”

“Never!” Jess put her mouth near the door. “You’re not an embarrassment to me. Why should you go away? What bad thing could possibly happen?”

There was a stretch of silence.

“Well. Before I met you, Jess...early in my adventure I stopped at an inn one night and offered to sing for my bed.”

“And?”

“It was stupid to think I could. I got all embarrassed, and my tongue stopped working. I stuttered and stuff.”

“So what? That could happen to anybody.”

“Then I was run out of town.”

It was Jess's turn to be quiet.

"You just need some practice, that's all." She watched the spreading puddle of water. "Nobody said you had to sing for the court. And nobody is going to run you out of Galdoron."

"I'll never be any good, Jess. I can't be a king, or prince, or duke, or anything. I'm just Stuttering Ben, and that's all I'll ever be."

"That's not true. You can be something—You can learn. I'll teach you."

There was no answer from the other side of the door.

"Don't you think I can?"

The closet door opened a crack. "Maybe."

"Good."

"But I'm still not ready to come out."

"Take your time. I don't think the court will have any need of you for the rest of the day."

Sitting alone in the hall, Jess sighed. She had put on a confident face to cheer Ben, but to herself she had to admit the nibble of worry in her mind. It was only when Ben was in the midst of the court that she realize *how* different he was. Ben would need a lot of coaching, and she knew the court wouldn't be the kindest of audiences. This wasn't going to be easy, but she hoped she could do it. She had to.



That night, when the king and queen had retired to bed, they did what all rulers do—they plotted and conspired.

King Harry, being a talkative and self-pitying sort of man, did most of the talking.

"Gertrude, Gertrude," he moaned, crushing his pillow over his head and kicking his feet under the blankets. "What are we going to do? What? This is turning into a disaster. That...that...person isn't fit to rule a pig-pen, much less a kingdom."

"He is the most base and ignorant character," the queen agreed.

"Worse," the king said, pausing in his tantrum and removing the pillow from his head. "I think our daughter actually has a *smidgen* of affection for the fellow. It makes the situation all the more difficult."

"And dangerous," the queen said.

“What she sees in him I don’t know.” The king sighed wearily. “I mean, he’s nothing like me. Worse, he is going to give me a fit! I feel a fit coming on already!” He wadded up his pillow, face contorted. “Such a bone-headed, backward, blithering bean, I’ve never met!”

“Oh, you know Jess,” the queen said. “She has a soft spot for pathetic things. She was always taking in baby birds and stray kittens when she was little. She probably found this fool in the same condition and took pity on him. It was only the stress of the past few weeks that has made him become more meaningful to her. The strain on her mental capacities has made her impressionable, and the creature, seeing his chance, worked his way into her affections. The fiend!”

“Hey...that’s pretty sharp.” The king stopped mauling his pillow to look at her. “How do you know so much about this sort of thing?”

“Unlike you, Harry, I desire to understand how people work.” The queen sniffed. “I keep up on all of the latest news in psychology. Anthony Agnew is at the forefront in the study of relationship development, and I read his latest piece in *The Handmaiden’s Daily* about ‘Forty-two Ways a Man Will Ensnare You.’ It was very insightful.”

“Yeah, well...I’ve more important things I must deal with, more important things to read.” The king smoothed down his thinning hair, patting it in place. He spent most of his free time poring over books on mental illness, as he had a particular hypochondria about insanity, and specifically kings losing their minds.

He waited a moment, then said, “So...what do we do?”

“Knock the cretin off,” the queen said. She was a practical lady.

“What?” the king said. “Anthony Agnew said that?”

“Not exactly. He said one should encourage a sense of detachment. But knocking off this idiot is the quickest way to create that detachment, and we don’t have much time. Anthony Agnew says the woman will have a week of copious grieving and then she will realize the man was only a passing fad and will move on in her life. Then I’ll get Mol’Jessel hitched with that prince Elfonso.”

“Gertrude, I’m a *civilized* tyrant.” The king drew himself up in bed, and laid a hand on the front of his nightshirt in what he imagined was a refined gesture. “I don’t go about bopping people off. It’s our job as rulers to appear progressive, moderate, and humane. We must find some sly way of getting rid

of this fellow.”

“The other way will be more painful for us,” the queen warned.

“What’s that?”

“Put the fool out in front of all the court. Let him make a spectacle of himself in front of everyone. When he humiliates Mol she’ll come to despise him. Then she will turn against him, and we won’t need to do a thing.”

There was a pause as both of them considered what had already gone down that day at the feast.

“Well, that’s better, I guess. Yes, very good.” The king nodded, smoothing out his pillow. “That demonstrates the spirit of an enlightened age. I just... wish there was someone other than Elfonso for Jess to marry. He’s so...so foppish.”

“He’s a good little fellow, with a nice chin and charming blue eyes. He is the perfect prince: He does what he is told.” The queen lay down, closing her eyes.

“I suppose,” the king said. “But I always wanted Mol to have a manly fellow with chest hair that spilled out from the front of his shirt.” He pulled at the front of his nightshirt as if demonstrating, except he didn’t have that profuse chest hair he so envied.

“Mol killed Dougyal,” the queen said. “So that’s out. Go to sleep.”

“I know,” the king said. “We’ll need to hush that little incident up, or Elfonso might get nervous.”

And, since the king was a reasonable fellow who knew he couldn’t get everything he wanted in life, he plumped up his pillow and lay back to join his wife in the contented sleep of rulers who have settled on their intrigue.



## CHAPTER THREE

### CHARLEZ THE ELOQUENT

Several days passed, the castle bustling with activity, but Ben very much at loose ends. He was accustomed to spending his days out in the fields working with his plow horse, Ned. Here in the castle it was all rooms and halls, walkways and walls. People were everywhere, and there seemed no place you could escape them. Wherever he went there were always people looking at him and whispering. Being around them felt more tiresome than spending all day hauling boulders out of a new field.

He tried to put it all from his mind and bury what he felt deep inside himself. He told himself he should be happy because he had Jess, and that was what he wanted more than anything in the world. He told himself he shouldn't feel unhappy about all the rooms closed in around him and the whispering people because Jess was happy and he didn't want her to become unhappy because he was unhappy.

But it was hard. Back in the village of York everyone knew he stuttered and so most people didn't bother to talk with him. Here, it seemed everyone tried to accost him for conversation. So he sweated and stuttered each day away, tortured in attempted conversation with various dignitaries. The more important the person, the more he stuttered. He ended up spraying a grand duke of some south country with spit when trying to say a simple, "How do you do?"

After two days, most people avoided conversation with him, passing quickly with a polite nod, a fixed smile, and averted eyes. He felt sorry because he thought he had let Jess down, but a part of him felt glad, too. It

was a bit better to be left alone.

Except, he wasn't left entirely alone. The king made regular appearances, coming seemingly out of nowhere to chat with Ben for a few moments before disappearing again as quickly as he had come. It was strange, and a little disconcerting. The king's continual sudden appearances made Ben wonder if he was always hiding nearby, watching him.

The sense of being watched would have been bad enough, but the conversations with the king were worse. Awkward didn't begin to describe them.

The king would appear, and after a quick salutation would inquire, "Everything chum-chum, eh, chum?" and finish with a little nervous laugh.

Ben, having no idea what the nature of "chum-chum" was, would answer the affirmative, finding it the safest answer, being both brief and no cause for argument.

Then, with the admonishment of "Keep it chummy, chum," the king would disappear again, looking a little more sweaty than when he had come, his smile a little more fixed.

Whenever Jess was busy with some duty of a princess, Ben wandered about the castle alone. His only break from the monotony was when he happened to run into Ernie. The wizard had been appointed as the king's new grand advisor to replace Rimmah and had taken to the job with vigor. So far his application to his duties seemed to consist in wandering aimlessly about the castle, strutting whenever someone came into view, adjusting his battered pointed hat, and clearing his throat importantly. If anyone should happen to stop at that point Ernie would make a comment about the hard labors and mentally taxing nature of his job. He would continue by making strong declarations about the present weather, usually something involving the heat, humidity, or sunshine, and then would opine, with some beard stroking, about the likelihood of what the weather would be tomorrow.

Whether this was all part of Ernie's attempt to avoid more serious labor, or whether the wizard truly thought this was the nature and substance of his employment, Ben wasn't sure. In any case the conversation didn't vary much, but Ben could at least understand what Ernie was talking about, and the wizard was a familiar face, so he was pleased whenever his wandering path crossed Ernie's.

On the afternoon of the fourth day since the victory parade Ben was

wandering the castle halls, feeling particularly bored, when he met Ernie for what was the fifth time that afternoon.

“Hello, Ernie,” he said.

“Harrummm—huummp,” Ernie said, adjusting his hat. In spite of the ornate robes that came with the office of grand advisor, the tall bony wizard had the perpetual appearance of slovenly disorder; his long scraggly gray beard awry, battered hat—which he refused to give up for something newer—constantly sliding down to nearly cover his eyes. He still insisted on carrying around his huge dirty sack wherever he went, the object stuffed with the monstrous quilt he was making, and various other oddities.

“Seen Jess lately?”

“No.” Ernie set down his sack and adjusted the shoulders of his robe, then stroked his beard importantly. “I’ve been lost in deep contemplation. Deep thought. Considering the problems of the kingdom. It’s hard to notice people in that state.”

“The goblin trouble?” Ben said.

“Heavens, no!” Ernie paled slightly. “I expect the king is of the same mind as myself about that, and in any case I hope to keep that matter swept under the rug. And, maybe since Rimmah is dead the goblins will lose interest in invading the kingdom.”

“Is that likely?” Ben said.

“I’m an optimistic man.” Ernie adjusted his collar again. “Besides, there are more important things than a goblin invasion for the king’s grand advisor to worry about. Like the weather. We seem to be in serious danger of a drought. Did you notice how warm it is today? And it doesn’t look like rain for tomorrow, either. We could be facing a very dangerous situation here.” The wizard tapped his staff on the stone floor meaningfully and glanced around as if observing some corroborating weather signs in the castle walls.

“Oh, well, I suppose,” Ben said. It had rained not too long ago, so he wasn’t worried. “How is the work going with your masterpiece quilt? Those goblins tore it up a bit in that battle with Rimmah.”

Ernie’s face became stricken.

“My quilt,” he said tremulously. “I’ve tried to not think about it. My precious quilt. It has been so neglected since I took up my new employment. I must get back to it soon, it’s in such sore need of attention.”

The wizard took off his hat, his pale blue eyes brimming with tears. “That



was the greatest loss of the battle, you know. The damage to my quilt was a travesty against the world of art. A mark of such savage barbarity. Oh, to think of it! To think of the damage that must be tenderly repaired!" And Ernie began bawling into his hat.

"I'm sure there is no one better than you to make it like new again," Ben said, trying to sound encouraging as he awkwardly patted the wizard's shoulder.

But Ernie seemed rather caught up in his blubbering, face pressed into his hat, overwhelmed by the memory of his damaged quilt. So Ben wandered on.

A little later the king appeared again, zipping out of a side corridor to meet Ben.

"Hello, chum," the king said, and gave a little strained chuckle. "Things still going chummy?"

"As they say," Ben agreed vaguely.

"Good. Keep it chum-chum, and all that. Say, have you seen my grand advisor? I've been looking for him all day."

"Back that way," Ben said, pointing. "Last I saw he was crying into his hat."

"Well, if you see him before me, let him know there is a feast tomorrow. You...er...are expected as well."

"Ahhh, right," Ben said, feeling his stomach make a sickening drop. It was becoming a familiar sensation.

The king hurried off, presumably in search of Ernie.

Ben, feeling much more miserable at the news of a feast, decided to head out to the palace gardens in the hopes that the slightly more pleasant environment would take his mind, at least momentarily, off his troubles.

Outside, Ben discovered it was a sunny, pleasant, summer day, a perfect afternoon to spend in some quiet patch of shade. In the gardens he found the gardener had recently cut the grass, so there was a sweet green smell on the air as he walked among the bushes and flowers. As he walked his thoughts wandered back over the miles to the distant village of York where his Ma and Da and all the villagers were waiting for him to return with help from the king. He hoped they weren't in any trouble. He wondered, guiltily, how much longer he could delay his return.

"Hey. *Hey!*"

A sharp whisper made Ben stop, his mind snapping back to the present.

“Psst. Up here!”

He glanced up to the top of the castle wall, and saw a face peering down from the wrong side of the battlements. About all he could see was a mop of pale yellow hair, a narrow face, and pale blue eyes.

“Hello,” Ben said, surprised and a little alarmed. “Have you fallen over the wall and need help?”

“No. I’m sneaking into the castle. Are there any guards around, or anyone else who might give me away?”

“Uh, no.” Ben took a careful look around, just to be sure.

“Excellent. You’d better not give me away, either, or...or...or I’ll do something horrible to you.”

The figure scrambled over the battlements and onto the walkway, then tossed his rope down into the garden and climbed to the ground. The man—for Ben saw it was a man—had a refined appearance, in a flamboyant sort of way. He was short, and slender in build—scrawny in truth, though the man would have undoubtedly taken offense at such a description. He looked immaculate, from his perfectly shaved face, to his pointed chin, pointed nose, and luxurious wavy blond hair that he now swept behind his ears and carefully patted into place. He was dressed in shiny black pointed boots, well cut burgundy pants, and a frilly white shirt over which he wore a tooled leather vest, unbuttoned in an attempt at a dashing air. A large pack was strapped over the man’s back, which led Ben to suppose the fellow was on some type of journey.

“Why are you sneaking into the castle?” he asked.

“Because that’s what bards do. I’m a bard. Charlez the Eloquent.” The man laid a hand grandly against his chest.

“You’re a real bard?” Ben said, starting to get excited.

“Real as they come. A real *real* bard.” Charlez pulled himself proudly up to his full height—which meant he was still a good bit shorter than Ben. “I’m a certified bard, certified by the international board of bards. I’ve taken all the tests. I’m freshly graduated from bard college, set to make a name for myself in fame, fortune, and with women. Would you like to see my diploma?”

Not waiting for an answer, Charlez removed a scroll from inside his vest. It unrolled from his hand, almost all the way to the ground. The parchment was covered with lots of important looking writing, in a flourishing script. At the very bottom it was signed by innumerable people, stamped with a very

official looking stamp, and affixed with a very large and colorful ribbon.

“Nice ribbon,” Ben said, impressed. “I didn’t realize there was so much to becoming a bard.”

“Oh, yes,” Charlez said loftily, rolling the scroll up. “I have all sorts of vital, specialized skills, like speaking the innumerable languages of animals. I know eighteen animal languages—including five bird tongues, dog speech, snake, and dragon. Want to hear me speak in dragon?”

“Uh...sure,” Ben said.

Charlez contorted up his face, then began uttering guttural, rumbling noises that one might imagine came from a dragon, or else a choking lion. “There,” he said, finishing. “I just said, ‘Nice to meet you’ in dragon speech. Pretty cool, huh?”

“You sure know a lot,” Ben said, feeling a bit overwhelmed by Charlez’s rapid-fire speech.

“Well, I don’t like to brag,” Charlez said, “but one must learn all sorts of obscure ancient lore to be a bard. One must be trained in multicultural truths to create broad horizons. Being a true bard is nothing like what hacks who pretend they are bards think.”

“I always wanted to be a bard,” Ben said. In fact, he had tried for a little while, but he thought maybe it wouldn’t be a good idea to mention that to a real bard, especially after the talk of pretending hacks. He hadn’t understood anything Charlez had said about multicultural truths or broad horizons, but it did all sound very important. It was, he thought, a good thing he had decided to give up trying to be a bard himself. Bard college and all that other stuff sounded too complicated, and he never would have managed it all. He was better suited for being a regular farmer.

“Don’t strain yourself trying,” Charlez said absently, peering around the garden. “Only the best can succeed. The schoolwork is brutal, the testing vigorous...” he trailed off, his gaze returning to Ben. “So, uh...so what are you, anyhow? A servant or something?”

“Not exactly,” he said. It was a little hard to explain that he was a farmer who had his farm burned down by raiding goblins and whose town had sent him to the king to ask for help and along the way he had met the princess Jess and the wizard Ernie who had given him a magical sword and in the end they had defeated the evil wizard Rimmah who had held the king and queen captive and now he was going to marry Jess. That was a lot to say when you

stuttered all the time, so he just said “Not exactly” instead.

“A gardener’s assistant then,” Charlez said. “Well. Perhaps you can still help me.”

“Maybe,” Ben said. “But why do bards sneak into castles?”

“For the drama,” Charlez said, sounding as if it were obvious. “To meet beautiful princesses who will fall in love with them. Because, you see, kings never want their daughters to marry a bard—bards are always cast out, estranged from society—the misunderstood genius, artist, and hero. They must sneak into the castle and win the heart of the princess and then prove themselves worthy to king and country.”

“Really?”

“Sure. A lot of people come out of bard college thinking you must start at the bottom and work your way up, slowly gaining fame and recognition.” Charlez shook his head in pity. “They just don’t read the right books. I understand how it’s really done—strike at the top and gain fame, fortune, and beautiful women, all at once. Capture the heart of a princess and you have it made!”

“So...uh...are there many princesses in a castle?” Ben asked hesitantly. Having spent a number of days in the castle of Galdoron, he still wasn’t entirely sure about this himself. He was afraid there was only Jess, in which case he would have to tell Charlez that his journey and sneaking were wasted because Jess was already going to marry him.

“Oh, tons, I’m sure.” Charlez waved a hand dismissively. “Every other woman you see must be a princess of some sort—I was kind of expecting to find one lingering in the garden, just waiting for a strange and handsome adventurer to come climbing over the wall.”

“Well, that’s good, I guess,” Ben said, feeling much relieved. He didn’t want Charlez to have come all the way for nothing. If there were tons of princesses he was sure Charlez would find lots that he liked besides Jess.

“The thing to do is get the very best,” Charlez confided.

“Best?”

“Yes. The most rich, famous, and beautiful.”

“Oh.” Ben thought about that for a bit, then asked, “What happens then?”

“Then they worship you and you have a fulfilled life. You get all sorts of riches and fame, and everyone envies you. It’s all in the stories.”

“I didn’t realize life was so simple,” Ben said, still feeling a bit perplexed.

“It is if you understand how things work. So...do you happen to know when the next dance is?”

“There will be a feast tomorrow,” Ben said, pleased that he actually knew something helpful. “I think all of the court will be there.”

“That won’t work.” Charlez lifted an admonishing finger. “It must be a dance.”

“How come?”

“Because that is how I must make my appearance. Haven’t you read *That Passionate Kiss*, *The Fire of Love*, *The Mighty Bard*, and such books? They’re always at the top of *The Handmaiden’s Daily* bestseller list. All good stuff—explains how a bard’s life will go if he does things properly. Making an appearance at the dance is what the hero-bard always does. I will enter the ballroom and, as I do, suddenly the music will change—filled with drama and mystery. Slowly, everyone will start noticing me as I cross the room, the dancers one by one coming to a stop to watch. And then I will see the princess, and she will see me, and her heart will start fluttering and she will wonder, ‘Who is this handsome stranger? Where has he come from?’ And I will loiter around for a bit, making her wonder, making her wish that I would come over and talk to her. Then I will come and introduce myself, and she will be captivated, and we will dance. And that will be the beginning—the beginning of a wondrous adventure!”

“Then what happens?” Ben asked breathlessly. Charlez had given a dramatic rendition of the imagined events, prancing and dancing his way across the garden clearing as he verbally painted the scene, and Ben found himself entranced by the unfolding story.

“It varies a bit from book to book, but generally lots of passionate kissing and stuff like that. The ancient bardic tales don’t have all the passionate kissing, which is why I’m modeling my life after the modern bestsellers. The old ones have all of this morbid death stuff. So, anyhow, when is the next dance?”

“Gee, I dunno,” Ben said, and for a moment wished he did, forgetting that he would be expected to attend as well. “Jess said they’re having dances all the time so I’m sure there will be one pretty soon. I’d be glad to tell you when I hear about the next dance.”

“That would be great.” Charlez adjusted his pack. “In the meantime, I’ll need some place to hide. I must avoid discovery by the forces of the king until

after the princess has already formed an attachment to me. Do you know of a good place? You can be my trusty assistant who helps me on my adventure.”

“Yeah, I do know of a good place,” Ben said. “There is this broom closet that nobody uses. You could hide there for weeks and not be found.”

Charlez hesitated for a bit. “I guess that will work,” he said. “I was hoping maybe the armory, so that if I was discovered there would be lots of weapons at hand for me to use as I valiantly fend off the attackers. But I supposed a broom closet will be good enough. You just remember to bring me food, and keep me informed of all the goings-on in the castle, like a good assistant.”

“Sure, I can do that,” Ben said agreeably. “I don’t have anything else to do.” Anything was better than wandering around the castle, and he thought it would be fun to help Charlez. The bard told the most interesting stories, and he already wondered how it would all turn out.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE OTHER SUITOR

I don't care about it, Ben. The only reason we're doing this is to make my parents happy, okay? You're supposed to appease the in-laws."

"Right." Ben rubbed his hands together nervously. "And if I muck it all up? I don't know about this court stuff, Jess."

"Then they'll get over it. Don't worry. Just remember everything I told you, and do your best. I'm sure it will be good enough."

They were in the back antechamber behind the throne room, waiting to be announced to the entire court. It was hard to know which of them was more nervous, though Jess was hiding it better.

"I dunno." Ben plucked at his chin hairs. "Do you think they'll want me to make another grand speech or something?"

"You'll just bow politely to each person when they approach the throne and say, 'greetings, mistress,' or 'greetings, madam' or 'greetings, sir.' You can say that much, right?"

"I hope."

"Well, time to go!" she said brightly. "I just heard them announce us. Take my arm, my hero, and let us face this trial bravely." She gave him such a smile that Ben momentarily forgot everything he was worrying about, his stomach suddenly feeling so full of happy butterflies that he thought he might float away. Jess dragged him through the doorway.

The feast passed without Ben messing up in any spectacular fashion. The meal came before the formal court sitting, so he had plenty of time to fret about his conduct in the coming introductions while the meal was underway.

Consequently, he found he had very little appetite. Instead of eating he stared at his plate and contemplated the many ways he could disappoint and embarrass Jess. The dinner felt as if it took an interminable amount of time, but at last it was finished and the court seated.

Then the formal introductions began. Ben stuttered no less and no more than usual, which was to say quite a lot. But by this time most of the court had already spoken with him informally over the past several days, so the majority of nobility were well prepared. They bowed and curtsied with their fixed smiles while he fumbled through his lines. He didn't do too badly. He only said, "Greetings, Miss Priss," instead of "Greetings, Mistress," once, and the lady didn't bat an eye. Nonetheless, it all felt like a form of torture to Ben. He thought being dragged slowly over a bed of hot coals couldn't possibly be worse.

About halfway through the formal introductions the queen looked around the court and said, "Goodness, but I don't see Elfonso. The dear must be deliberating about what outfit he will wear today. He has such a fashion taste. Always dashing." The last was said with an edge, her gaze very carefully not directed at Ben, who, though dressed in a clean and new set of clothes, wasn't wearing anything close to dashing or fashionable today.

"I hope he doesn't show," Jess grumbled. "He is like a festering, oozing sore on one's face—the only thing worse than its existence is looking at it."

"Mol! Your language—"

"Why didn't you tell him not to come? A better man beat him to the bargain. I'm unavailable."

"The least you can do is bid him a fond farewell. Besides, you're not married yet."

Jess shot her mother a narrow-eyed look, but said nothing.

The formal introductions continued. Finally, a last elderly lady rose from the far back of the room and began to advance, thumping her cane smartly on the floor with every step. She had a slight stoop, but held herself with the bearing of one who stood rigidly erect, defying the weight of years. She maintained a steely gaze fixed on the four thrones, and in particular on Ben, as she advanced. He sensed Jess tensing beside him.

"Who is that?" he whispered from the side of his mouth.

"Her Graciousness, the Madam Dowager," Jess whispered back. "She's Agatha, my Da's Ma. She's a tough piece. My Da says I've a lot of her in me."



“Then I’ll get along with her splendidly,” Ben said.

“Not like that, Ben,” she hissed. “Take every ounce of my hard-nosed, pig-headed, caustic personality, and you have that in her fourfold. She’s not like the rest of the court. She doesn’t hold to all of the nambly-pambly stuff like everyone else. She could cause a lot of trouble, so try to make a good impression.”

“Er...right,” he said, wondering how exactly one made a good impression on such a person.

“Presenting, Her Graciousness, the Madam Dowager,” the herald intoned. “Sir Bennelzor Transom, Duke of York, Warrior of the North Lands, Defender of the Kingdom.”

The dowager snorted so loudly that Ben nearly jumped halfway through his attempt at a courtly bow.

“Greetings, Madam,” he said and then straightened. The dowager was giving him a piercing stare, leaning on her cane, fingering the knobby top. She wore a rumpled blue dress, and had her steel gray hair held up tightly in barrettes. Ben stared back frankly, trying to think of something more to say with which to make an especially good impression.

“You’re welcome at my house for tea any time,” he finally said.

The dowager snorted again, but Ben thought this time it was to cover a laugh.

“We shall see,” she said at last. “We shall see, Mol’Jessel. He is honest, at least. As to the rest...I’ll watch him. And we’ll see.”

With a sharp nod that seemed directed mostly at Jess, the dowager turned and walked slowly out of the room, not returning to her seat. Ben looked at Jess, not sure if he’d done well, or badly. She might have been a bit crabby, he thought, but he liked the dowager better than the rest of the court. At least she didn’t give him the very odd smile that everyone else in the court presented, a smile that always made Ben feel bad in his stomach.

He returned to his seat and Jess gave him an encouraging wink.

“Well...well,” the king said, and cleared his throat. “What do you think, Advisor?”

“Your Majesty is quite right,” Ernie said promptly, not looking up from his work. He had brought his damaged quilt to the court session, the massive multi-colored monstrosity spilling over from his lap to pool in a heap on the dais floor, to the evident irritation of both the king and queen. Ernie had

remained oblivious to the royal displeasure, and to everyone else throughout the court proceeding. His small spectacles had slipped low down on his nose as he worked with great concentration on his quilt, tongue caught between his lips as he carefully snipped out the pieces of his project that had been slashed or torn by the goblins.

"Indeed," Ernie continued absently, tossing aside another small scrap of cloth. "I have always been impressed by Your Majesty's insight. I agree completely with what you said. You have such understanding that one could entrust himself totally into your hands."

The king blinked, looking confused, but mildly pleased. "I knew I hired you as my advisor for a reason," he said firmly. "But...er...exactly what are you referring to?"

Ernie looked up, scissors in hand, a blank expression on his face. He was saved from trying to figure out what he had been referring to when the great paneled doors of the throne room opened and a figure entered.

"His Royal Excellence, Prince Elfonso," the herald intoned, and then gave a blast on his trumpet. The herald was not unaware of the opinions of the queen, and he knew on which side his bread was buttered.

The prince was tall and skinny, with a pale complexion and the sallow face of a man who spent far too much time indoors. His hair was sickly blond, thin, and hung across his face in what must have been considered a stylish arrangement. Elfonso glanced across the room, his nose slightly in the air, a superior and disinterested expression on his face.

"Elfonso dear!" The queen cooed. "How nice of you to show up. How charming you are today. You remember our ravishing daughter, who yet remains available?"

"Yes, yes." Elfonso waved a hand, airily. "Charming, my love. I look so well today, don't I?"

"Quite," Jess said through gritted teeth. "Except, my mother is having a bout of delusion. I became unavailable to you some time ago. I'm quite pleased to introduce my soon-to-be *husband*, Ben Transom."

"Really?" Elfonso sounded bored, but noticed the chair he had intended to take was occupied by Ben. "I shouldn't be surprised when you change your mind, Love. He is so beneath your class."

"You're mistaken," Jess said, with a smile so wide that Ben would have feared for his head if he had been in Elfonso's place. "He is very much above

my class, and I don't know how I managed to convince him that anyone among the nobility was worthy of his love and affection. But—though I am an infinitely patient person—I advise you to guard your words around my future husband, for he is a fierce and violent warrior, and has a remarkably short temper. You wouldn't want him to take offense at anything you might say, or do. The possibility of having your head ripped off is generally considered unpleasant," she finished, her eyes flashing.

"Mol—" the queen said.

"You do know that he was the one who defeated the great wizard Rimmah, don't you?" Jess continued. "Do you know what he did? He smashed the wizard to bits. Crushed him to a bloody pulp."

"Ah...really. That's...nice." If possible, Elfonso went paler, glancing quickly at Ben again.

"Hello," Ben said, waving cheerily. "Chum-chum, and all that." It seemed the best thing to say. He was beginning to feel sorry for the spindly man, who didn't look in good health.

Elfonso gave a crooked and very uncertain smile.

"What my daughter means to say," the queen interjected smoothly, "is that she feels a debt to this barbarian, so now is not an appropriate time to speak further about her relationship with you. But in a few days—"

"Never!" Jess shouted and slammed her fist into her throne's armrest, causing Elfonso to jump. "Perhaps Elfonso isn't aware of what happened to the last suitor."

"Excuse me?" Elfonso said.

"Dougyl displeased me, and angered my Ben," Jess said, leaning forward and showing her teeth again in a very menacing smile. "Do you know what he got?"

"Ah...a fond farewell?" Elfonso looked at the king and queen.

"Death. He screamed and screamed and thrashed about on the floor. Lots of blood. All nasty," she said meaningfully.

Elfonso gave Ben a terrified look—for Jess, in desiring to give Ben a certain aura, had conveniently omitted the fact that she had been the one who killed Dougyl. In fact, her description wasn't quite how Ben remembered the whole thing turning out. As best he could recall Jess had dispatched Dougyl with one quick sword thrust in a silent and efficient manner. There hadn't been any screaming or thrashing, or anything like that, as best he could recall,

but he supposed that since he had been lying under a pile of rubble at the time maybe he had missed something.

“And as it happens,” Jess continued, “I’ve found my husband, so any further suitors are only an annoyance to me—and him—and you wouldn’t want to be an annoyance, would you?”

“N-n-no.” Elfonso took a step back.

“Good. Since we are both agreed, I trust that you have enough concern for your highly polished hide to take it somewhere else, before my future husband becomes displeased. Yes?” She rose.

“Yes!” Elfonso squealed. “Almighty sir, I’ve no interest whatsoever in your wife! In fact, I’ve already become engaged to someone else! I’m no longer available! I’ll be moving to the south country immediately! It was nice knowing you, Princess! Best in your future life! Must be going!” The prince whirled, tripped over his own feet, and fell flat on his face. Scrambling wildly up, he took off at a run, not looking back.

“Gee,” Ben said. “He didn’t have to run off like that. I could have told him he wouldn’t displease me if he stayed around.”

Jess stared after Elfonso, then shook her head. “Should have done that a long time ago,” she said under her breath.

“The court is adjourned,” the queen said stiffly.

Everyone got the hint. The room emptied, leaving only the king, queen, Jess, Ben, and Ernie—who was still oblivious to what was going on, quietly humming to himself.

“I didn’t think I was a fierce and violent warrior.” Ben said. “I always try to be polite and agreeable like my Ma told me.”

“Sure you’re fierce,” Jess said. “In the right circumstances.”

“I am?”

“Who bit Dougyal?”

“Uh, me.”

“Who clobbered him over the head, who fought him in the fog?”

“Well...me.”

“Who thrashed Missar and his band of men? Who killed the bikalis? You abandon your gentle disposition only when forced by great duress, but necessity does make you a fierce and violent warrior—the very best: one who will defend his friends to his death.”

“Maybe, I guess.” Ben scratched at his head. “But I wouldn’t have ripped

that poor man's head off."

"Poetic license." Jess grinned. "You can't say things straight out in the court. I was just telling him to scam in a courtly sort of way."

"Mol." The queen turned to her daughter. "What you did was *completely* inappropriate. You must remember to keep your options open."

"It was completely appropriate." Jess set her jaw. "Otherwise, the poor man would have continued to be led along by your delusions. I've finished with options. I've chosen. Elfonso needs to get on with his life and find some ditz who will love him as much as he loves himself."

"But—"

"I won't marry him, mother!" Jess shouted. "I won't! Never! I'd rather be hung naked from the castle walls, flayed alive, and then torn in pieces!"

"Shocking. Utterly shocking. Such shocking words from my own daughter." The queen put her hands to her cheeks in faux horror. "Listen, dearie. He needs you. Can't you see it? You'll be the light of his life."

"I'll be his hand maiden, his servant, his very slave. I'll be there to hold his brush while he combs his hair. The sap is besotted with himself and I've no intention of wasting away my life being his encore choir! I'm done discussing this. Nobody will make me marry Elfonso, and that is final."



The king sat with his back against the ornate bed headboard, pillow in his lap, looking glum.

"Elfonso is out," he said. "What a setback. This isn't going as I expected, Gertrude."

"He isn't dead. And until he is dead he isn't out for good," the queen said with determination.

"He is out for good," the king declared. "He won't stop running until he is well south of the border, and you won't be able to drag him back to this court with a team of horses. As far as we're concerned he is as good as dead."

"Maybe so." The queen gave a small sigh. "But who can blame him when there is that barbarian sitting next to Jess? That man even makes me want to run to the south lands—at least there people are refined, civilized, and intelligent."

"He makes me want to have a fit." The king absently plucked at his pillow.

“But what are we going to do? Will we have to give up and accept our fate?”

“Certainly not.” The queen sniffed. “There are still plenty of options. Perhaps we should take the alternate approach. Instead of turning Mol’s attention back to Elfonso, we should turn that peasant’s attention to some other woman. There are plenty of beautiful women in the court.”

“True. But would he be interested in them?” the king said. “We don’t even know what he likes.”

“Nonsense,” the queen said. “Don’t play dense, Harry. As you well know, the only thing a man cares about is that a woman be well endowed, in every sense of the word. There must be at least a dozen minor princesses that would fit that description.”

“But how are we going to make even one of them agree to get close to the man, much less fall in love with him?”

“Being in love is highly over-rated.” The queen folded her arms confidently. “We just need to convince some lady that it is in her best interest to pursue the relationship. Money and fame are great tools.”

“In general I would agree with you, dear, but greater than that man? I’m already starting to feel like I’m going to need some therapy—could some delicate young princess survive five minutes with him?”

The queen tisked. “Don’t be so doom and gloom. We’ll give it a try, and if it doesn’t work, well, then, things are going better for us than you might think. The court already dislikes the man—if no woman is even willing to pretend interest, it means they all hate him. That man already doesn’t like the court. If we make life unbearable for him, he will decide Jess isn’t worth the suffering. If we make him humiliate Jess in front of the court, Jess will decide he isn’t worth it. We must simply continue on the course we have started, and keep this man in front of the court, in the very thick of things. Far from being defeated, we are well on our way to victory.”

“I suppose. I just...find his presence so painful.”

“There is always the option of removing him in a more permanent fashion.”

“Nope.” The king lifted his chin. “I am a man of ethics. I have the strength and moral fortitude to persevere through to the end. I just...hope he doesn’t last long.”

“Not to fear,” the queen said confidently. “I predict that by the end of the first ball Jess will turn against him, and he against her. The entire court will

rise up against him, and he will be gone, like a bad dream. We should put him from our minds this very minute, and start considering more important matters—like who Jess will marry now that Elfonso is gone.”

“That reminds me—I think I may have seen a replacement for Elfonso.”

“Really?” The queen brightened. “When? Where?”

“In the castle. I was—ah—trying to keep an eye on our man when I came across this dashing, civilized, and sophisticated looking fellow. It sort of seemed like he was sneaking around but he took off before I could offer him the kingdom.”

“Where did he go? Who is he? Did he look very fashionable?”

“I’m not sure. I tried to follow him, but I lost him. I thought he hid in a broom closet, but I decided I must have been mistaken. Anyhow, if I see him again I will ask if he is interested in marrying our daughter. He’s not quite the same kind of man as Dougyal, but he is certainly better than Elfonso. He has a little more of a flair about himself. A little more lively.”

“There is no one quite so dear as Elfonso,” the queen said sulkily, still put out that her chosen man had been frightened away, never to return. “But if you say he is dashing, civilized, and sophisticated, then he will certainly be better than the man we’re currently dealing with.”



## CHAPTER FIVE

### UUG-LUKK'S THREAT

**A**fter his introduction, Ben hoped to escape the court for a while. But the next morning Jess found him up on the castle wall, and had a request.

“Would you come to the court session today?” she said.

“Okay,” he said, before he rightly realized what he was agreeing too. “Uh...but why?” he added, when his brain caught up with his mouth.

“We hardly get to see each other anymore,” Jess said. “I always have something with the court that keeps me busy and...and I miss you. Besides, if you come people will see that you can run a kingdom.”

“Okay,” he said again, after a long pause. “You just tell me what to do.”

He missed his time with Jess very much, but he also had a very bad feeling about this idea of running the kingdom. He suspected it was one of those things his Ma would have told him were better not messed with.

The king and queen were surprised when Ben showed up with Jess at the seating of the court. They hid their surprise well, and, after a whispered consultation, even appeared pleased.

“Your man has decided to show himself,” the queen observed.

“It is time he began taking part in running the kingdom, since he will be doing it by himself eventually,” Jess said.

“Indeed.” The king gave a too-wide grin. “I’ll certainly ask his opinion on matters of state, so that we all might come to understand the depth of his knowledge and capabilities.”

“Well, I dunno about all of this fancy stuff,” Ben said, taking his seat



beside Jess and nervously rubbing his hands together. "I'm used to doing things simply."

"If you take away all the foolishness, running a kingdom is just about like running a farm," Jess said. "A level head is the most important attribute, and you have that, Ben."

"A level head, and keen insight. One must be able to read the times," the king added, and cleared his throat importantly. "Now, what was on the agenda today? Ah, a consideration of taxes. I believe the Chancellor of Exchequer will be arriving shortly. I'm sure today will be a most fascinating —"

The great throne room doors burst open and a man staggered in, half supported by two guards. The man was gaunt, wearing only tattered rags for clothes, and covered in dust from a long journey. Even more startling was the branded scar on his forehead, shaped like a clawed hand.

"Goodness, the chancellor doesn't look quite how I imagined," Ben said. "I'd say his job is rather rough."

"That isn't the chancellor," Jess murmured, her gaze fixed intently on the man. "That is...someone else."

The herald came running through the doorway, clearly caught unprepared, and quickly declared, "Presenting a—uh—messenger for the king." He gave a little toot on his horn, which died away to an awkward silence.

"What is this?" the king said, sounding both a little peeved and uncertain.

"Your Majesty." The man fell to his knees before the throne. "I am a slave of the mighty Uug-lukk. I bring you a message from him."

"From whom?" the king demanded. "Who would send such a distasteful messenger?"

"Uug-lukk, the great goblin chieftain." The man closed his eyes, fingers touching the branding mark on his forehead. "Uug-lukk says, 'Though you have killed the great wizard Rimmah, you will not stop the mighty goblin horde. I, Uug-lukk, am chief over all the goblins, and I will lead them to conquer the kingdom of Tarn, and all the world of men. You have stopped Rimmah, but you shall not stop me. So now, I challenge you, send out your best army led by your greatest champion, and we will see who has the better warriors, and the greater strength. Or else come to me on your knees, begging for your lives. Only then I will spare you, and make you my slaves. But be

sure of this, whatever you choose, the days of your freedom have come to an end. The doom of Tarn is at hand.”

The messenger let out a shuddering breath and opened his eyes. “I was commanded to take back whatever answer you will give.”

“That was highly insulting, quite undiplomatic, and...” The king trailed off. “Great goblin chieftain, you say? I find that highly unlikely. I mean, how can we be sure he really exists?”

“Believe me.” The messenger swallowed, and it seemed his face went even paler. “He is a giant goblin, three times bigger than any normal goblin. He is more evil, and far craftier than any goblin in his horde. His mouth is large enough to bite off a man’s head, his hands strong enough to rip off—”

“I see, yes, I get the picture. Very clearly. No need to elaborate further. The women and all.” The king gave a nervous chuckle, then looked at Ben. “So, what reply would you give to this Uug-lukk?”

“Uh...I’m not very good at replies, and talking, and that sort of thing,” Ben said, once again caught completely unprepared.

“Then you wouldn’t send a reply?” The king raised his eyebrows. “You would just let this trouble fester to the detriment of the kingdom? What kind of kingly material does that show?”

“I don’t know anything about that stuff,” Ben said. “But I’d just go to Uug-lukk and kill him. It would save a lot of talking, and message sending, and it would fix the problem.”

The king—unable to come up with a more kingly suggestion—was left momentarily without a reply. The queen quickly filled the space. “An excellent idea!” she said cheerily. “We heartily approve. In fact, you can do that for us. After all, you are the great warrior of the north lands, and you did defeat the wizard Rimmah. We’ll give you the choice of the best weapons and armor of the kingdom, supply you with plenty of food and gold, and have you on your way in two days!”

“Oh, we will go all right,” Jess said. “*After* Ben and I are married. And I trust the two of us will be leading a *very large* army.”

“Preposterous, daughter,” the queen said briskly. “A princess never leads an army. You will be staying in the court, with all the army staying behind to defend you while your brave man goes off to preform his single-handed heroic feat. And if he somehow happens to fail at the task—which of course he won’t—then we will give him a grand funeral, and somehow find strength

to keep living after such a great tragedy.”

“I’ll be going with him,” Jess said loudly. “And since the army will be going wherever I am going, it will be going with me.”

“Now wait a minute,” the king sputtered. “We haven’t got all our advice yet. We must hear what my grand advisor has to say. Advisor, what should we do?”

“Me? Uh, let’s not be hasty, that’s what I always say,” Ernie said, sounding no less flustered than Ben. “Let’s not assume the worst. This goblin chieftain could just be bluffing. There might not be a goblin army at all. We can certainly hope so.”

“The words of Uug-lukk are no empty threat,” the messenger said. “He showed me his great horde before he sent me to deliver this message. He has marshaled more goblins than were ever seen in the last great war.”

“Hm.” Ernie twirled a strand of his beard. “But maybe he will get distracted before he reaches Galdoron. It is a long way to this city, and goblins are easily distracted. In any case, we’re far better off waiting for him here. After all, this is a much more defensible position.”

“An excellent suggestion!” The king straightened in his chair. “My Grand Advisor is very wise. We must do what is reasonable and prudent. So, we will gather a great army, and wait to see if this Uug-lukk is all he claims to be. If he actually comes, we will show him what the forces of civilization are made of.”

“That’s all well and fine for the court, sitting comfortable in this castle, but what about everyone else?” Jess rose from her throne, her hands clenched. “You’ll just give up everyone in the northern lands to the goblins?”

“Mol, sacrifices must be made,” the king said. “People must learn to make sacrifices for the good of the kingdom.”

“What about us making sacrifices for the good of the kingdom?” Her eyes flashed.

“We will, if it comes to that. But other people first. We’re the rulers, after all.”

“And that’s it?” Jess looked at her parents. “You’re going to send this man back to tell Uug-lukk that you’re going to hide in the castle waiting for him to come?”

“We’re not hiding,” the king said indignantly. “We’ll be preparing our defensive position, so that the safety of the kingdom might be preserved.”

“Not if I can help it,” Jess said, and stormed out of the throne room.



That afternoon found Ben heading back to Charlez’s broom closet. He thought the bard would like to hear the latest news. When he opened the closet door, he discovered Charlez wasn’t alone. Ernie had joined the bard in the closet, and the two of them were drinking tea by candle light.

“Hello,” Ben said. “What’s going on?”

“Hello, Ben,” Charlez said. “Come on, join us. We’re having a grand party.”

“Uh...that’s nice. What are you doing here, Ernie?” Ben asked.

“Having tea,” the wizard said.

“I thought Charlez was hiding and nobody in the castle knew where.”

“I met Ernie while lurking around in the castle halls,” Charlez said.

“Lurking?” Ben said. That didn’t sound like a good way to stay hidden.

“It’s boring in here, and anyhow Ernie swore himself to secrecy, so I figured we could have a bit of fun.”

“Exactly,” Ernie said. He took a delicate sip of his tea.

“That’s nice,” Ben said. “Did Ernie tell you about what happened in the court today?”

“No, we were talking about college life, and the grand excitement of parties. What happened in the court?” Charlez’s face brightened.

And so Ben found himself sitting in a back hall of the castle beside the broom closet, retelling the events of the court to Charlez. The bard listened with rapt attention as Ben unfolded the messenger’s appearance, and the grim news he brought.

“So, there is this giant, evil, goblin chieftain who says he is going to destroy Tarn,” Ben continued, “and the messenger asks the king what reply he will send. And the king says—”

“I fear not the foul machinations of such a fell beast,” Charlez intoned.

“Uh, no,” Ben said.

“That’s what the king said in *The Warrior King*. It’s a great book. He was a brave and handsome king and his wife had died some years ago in a tragic accident, and the kingdom was in crisis, being threatened by many foul creatures, and there were many beautiful women pining after the king. It was

all very exciting. I was hoping Penelope would get the king, but Sapphira did in the end because she was a redhead. I should have realized, because everyone knows if there is an exotic redhead in the story they will get the man.”

“Oh,” Ben said, now completely derailed from telling his story.

“But I suppose since I am here, the events will more closely follow *A Song of Victory*,” Charlez mused. “In that story this poor farmer boy finds a harp and goes on to become a bard who is also a great warrior. But since he was very poor he was despised by everyone, even the princess. But eventually he saves the kingdom and everyone loves him, and the princess marries him.”

“That’s nice,” Ben said. “But sometimes things don’t go like they do in the stories. See, I found that out when—”

“Nonsense. This turn of events is excellent. Excellent indeed.” Charlez rubbed his hands together gleefully. “This means I will be able to prove myself to the king by leading his vastly outnumbered army against the goblin horde and winning a great victory.”

“You know how to lead an army?” Ben said, surprised.

“Sure.” Charlez spread his hands wide. “It’s easy if you have an education. You just exude leadership qualities and then do some hack’n’slash. I can see it now: I’ll stride out in front of the army, fearlessly facing the great goblin chieftain and his minions. Behind me there will be the princess, and all of the court, gazing with wonder and awe at my great bravery,” Charlez finished, his eyes shimmering.

“Yeah, that would be neat, I guess,” Ben agreed. “Myself, I’d rather there not be any goblins. I wish they would just all go away. I always want to pee or throw up when I see a lot of goblins.”

“That’s why you’ll be my assistant,” Charlez said. “The assistant always stands by while the hero does his great deeds and—”

“Someone is coming!” Ben squeaked, the sound of footfalls reaching his ears.

“It’s probably the king, or some lover of the princess, looking to throw in prison anyone who might steal her heart away. But they’ll never find me!” So saying, Charlez leaped back into the broom closet and shut the door just before the king walked around the corner, leaving Ben sitting in the hall all by himself.

“Er...hello,” the king said, looking around. “Chummy day isn’t it, chum?”

“One might say,” Ben said, trying very hard to look innocent.

“I say, was there some talking around here? I thought I heard talking.”

“Oh, that was just me,” Ben said quickly.

“You? Talking to thin air?”

“I was talking to Charlez.” He pointed to the broom closet door, his instinctive honesty obliterating all thoughts of conspiracy.

“Charlez...right.” The king gave a very uncertain smile. His gaze flickered to the door, then Ben. “You, uh, can keep doing just that. I’m sure its a very nice...door. I just *happened* by and thought to mention to you that there is a dance tomorrow, so...look your best and...I’ll see you there.”

“Can Charlez come too?” Ben asked.

“No! I mean—Yes! I’m sure everyone would be glad to meet him!” The king gave a shrill, rather wild, and perhaps slightly hysterical laugh. “Must be going now!”

The king left at a run.

The closet door opened a crack. “What are you doing?” Charlez hissed. “Are you trying to blow my cover?”

“It kind of just popped out. I mean, what was I going to tell him? Besides, I thought it would help if you got invited to the dance and didn’t have to sneak in. I wasn’t going to tell him that you wanted a princess to fall in love with you.”

“Yeah, but kings are really good about putting these sort of things together. You can’t be too careful. Besides, it’s more romantic if I sneak in.”

“If you say so.” Ben had his own opinion about how sneaking in always made one feel all nervous and sick to one’s stomach, but he kept his opinion to himself. He supposed sneaking into a dance was different than sneaking into a castle controlled by an evil wizard.

The closet door opened the rest of the way and Charlez stuck his head out. “Also, you should pretend you don’t know me at the dance.”

“Pretend I don’t know you?”

“It adds to the drama and interest. Keep an eye out for me, and when you see me at the dance come up to the best princess, all subtle like, and point to me and say, ‘Who is that handsome strange man?’ Then the princess will be captivated by me, because princesses love handsome strangers.”

“Oh.” Ben thought about this new revelation for a bit. He was quite convinced now that Jess was not a normal princess, because she was never

like what Charlez said a princess would be. But he thought that was a good thing, because he liked her how she was.

“How will I know which is the best princess?” Ben said. “There will be lots of women at the dance.”

“The richest, for starters.”

“How will I know which is richest?”

“The one that wears the most jewelry.”

“Right.” Ben took a breath. Helping Charlez around the castle was one thing, talking to someone for him was something else entirely. He *really* didn't want to do that. But he was a helpful sort, and it seemed Charlez needed some help. So he hoped he wouldn't stutter very badly at the worst moment, and ruin everything.



## CHAPTER SIX

### AT THE BALL

Is this the last one?" Ben shifted on his feet, trying to loosen the collar of his formal coat. It was bright red—garishly so, he thought—and too tight in just about every place, but most particularly around his throat. He wasn't sure how the servants had managed to stuff him into it.

"Last one?" Jess said distractedly.

They were standing in the corner of a very large ballroom, apparently waiting for things to proceed, though Ben wasn't sure what those things were. Jess was scoping out the crowd, occasionally rising on tip-toes as she surveyed the people. Ben was hoping things wouldn't proceed, whatever they were, and that he could spend the rest of the evening standing in the corner with Jess. She was dressed in an ornate ball gown, still in her favored color of green, her hair held up in jeweled pins that seemed to accent her high cheekbones. Ben didn't much care for the pins because he liked it better when her hair was let down, but he found the frilly ball dress to his advantage, as he was trying to unobtrusively hide behind Jess and the wider profile gave him more cover. Unfortunately, his bright red jacket was making it hard to blend in.

"Last one I have to attend. Party, or whatever you call this thing," he said.

"Goodness, no," she said. "This is court life. Feasting and dancing is most of court life. You're tired of it already?" She stopped scanning the crowd to look at him.

"The last one was enough," he admitted.

"I last about five before I'm ready to snap," she said. "I hate prancing



around in these awful clothes.”

“Yeah, well, you’re better at it than me.”

“Poor Ben.” She looked very sorry. “I know it’s hard on you.”

“Couldn’t I just go back to my room and read a book, or something? I’ll be very quiet.”

“No, you’re supposed to show your face and socialize. It’s the way life in Galdoron works. It’s called life in the court.”

“Why?” he said. “Most people don’t really like me, anyhow.”

“Who said that?” Fire leaped into Jess’s eyes. “What did they say?”

“Nobody says anything,” Ben said. “But they all walk around with this smile—” and he mimicked the stiff smile plastered on people’s faces, “—and it kind of makes me feel sick in my stomach. I didn’t know a smile could look so ugly.”

Jess gave a muffled grunt that sounded like she had been hit in the stomach. “Sometimes a bit of honest observation will see things some of us are trying to not see,” she said. Then she muttered under her breath something that sounded like, “I’ll have them flayed! Flayed!”

“What?” Ben said.

“Nothing. Nothing of importance,” she said stiffly. “It looks like we should be going. Things are about to get under way.”

They worked their way through the milling crowd of lords, ladies, courtiers, ladies-in-waiting, and servants, heading toward the dais where the thrones were set, overlooking the room.

“Uh, are there many princesses at this dance?” Ben asked, remembering—rather unhappily at the moment—his agreement to help Charlez on his grand adventure.

“Yes, a few I suppose,” Jess said. “From some minor kingdoms, principalities, and duchies.”

“Oh. That’s good, I guess.”

“Thinking about checking out the competition?” she teased.

“No,” he said seriously. “But someone else might need help picking the right princess. I wanted to make sure they had options.”

She gave him an odd look.

“What are we supposed to do at this party, anyhow?” he asked.

“It’s a ball. It’s what we could call my courting dance party. My suitor is introduced to the court and all the ladies of the court dance with him.”

“Who is he?”

“You, silly.”

“Oh...yeah.” He had never thought of himself as a suitor before.

“It’s supposed to start with my mother dancing with you, and finish with me dancing with you, after you’ve danced once with all the ladies. It’s *supposed* to open with some beautiful music and everyone stands around while you dance with my Ma. Then it breaks down into something a little more informal. After you’ve danced with my mother you work your way through the rest of the ladies. They’re not allowed to dance with anyone until you’ve danced with them. Then, once you’ve danced with all the ladies, everything stops and they all stand around while some beautiful music is played and you dance with me.”

“Sounds like a lot of rules,” Ben mumbled. His head felt like it was spinning.

“Oh, you get used to it,” Jess said. “Anyhow, you won’t be doing the opening dance with my mother because she says a pain in her ankle has been acting up so she can’t dance this evening.” A small edge came into Jess’s voice. “It makes the opening a bit awkward, but you’ll manage. Everyone is going to be standing around until you start the dancing. There is no fixed order for who you dance with, but try to do it with the more important ladies first, or someone will get offended. But don’t go looking for the most important lady, because if it looks like you’re deliberately skipping over other ladies who are almost as important they’ll get offended.”

“But-but-but, how will I know who is more important?” Ben stuttered.

“You can tell by how many jewels they’re wearing, and their fancy dress.”

“Gosh, that’s what everyone says. I dunno,” he said, “it might take me a while to count jewels. And all the dresses look alike to me.” He was beginning to feel very sweaty. He could feel it trickling down his back beneath his coat. He wiped his hands on his pants, wondering why they had to make the coat so confounded hot.

“Don’t worry. You’ll be able to figure it out.”

“Well...okay...even if maybe I could, there is still one problem,” he whispered, gripping her arm tight and leaning close.

“What’s that?” Jess said.

“I don’t know how to dance!”

“Oh.” Her face became thoughtful. “I kind of forgot to think about that.

Everyone else here knows so I...you don't know any at all? They don't do any dancing in York?"

"When there is a celebration or something people do. But I never did. I mean nobody asked me, and it looked kind of embarrassing...All I did was give the little kids in the village spin-a-rounds."

"Hm. That's sort of the same thing." Jess tapped her lips thoughtfully with a finger. "When you take all of the fancy stuff out of it, dancing is basically going round and round in a circle with someone. If you can give spin-a-rounds then you can dance."

"It is? I can?" He looked a little uncertain.

"Sure," she said. "Just go out there and pretend you're giving everyone a spin-a-round. You'll do fine."

"Okay," he said doubtfully. "I guess. It always looked like there was a lot more in it to me."

"Don't worry. You'll do great," she said, and gave his hand a squeeze for encouragement. "Just remember to save some of your energy because the last dance is for me!"

"Yeah, but, I just thought..."

"The less you think about it, the easier it will be. Trust me."

"If you say so. I just thought courts were more dignified, or something."

They parted ways at the dais, Ben squaring his shoulders and going off to do his dancing duty, muttering something about how Charlez should really be the one doing this. Jess squared her shoulders and went to sit with her parents, too preoccupied to wonder what Ben meant by that comment.

"Evening, daughter," the king said as she took her seat. "A fine evening, isn't it?"

"Better spent out in the fresh air," she said.

The king couldn't think of a response and was left plucking at his mustache in what he hoped was a thoughtful pose.

"How is the man doing?" the queen said, studiously looking at her fingernails.

"Charmingly," Jess said, her voice so pleasant it fairly oozed. "Wonderfully. I never could have dreamed he'd do this well. I couldn't ask for better."

"That's not what I hear," the queen said, and picked at a tiny speck on the front of her dress.

“Really,” Jess said flatly.

“Yes. It seems that, after seeing his conduct, many in the court are concerned about that man’s mental cognizance. They wonder if his mother dropped him on his head a few too many times as a child. That is to say, the word going round is that he is a dunce.”

“Really.”

If Jess had been wearing her sword she would have been gripping the hilt. Her eyes blazed with such fierceness that the king, watching, cleared his throat uneasily.

“Yes,” the queen said, and returned to examining her nails. “The court is concerned about the security of the throne. The job needs a man of intelligence and ability.”

“And just *whose* word is going around about these things?” Jess snapped.

“Oh...people. You know I can’t betray a trust, Mol.”

“Well, I’ve some words for *them*,” Jess said through her teeth. “Just because someone doesn’t have the moral vapidity to stick a knife in the back of someone else, doesn’t mean they’re stupid.”

“Perhaps,” the queen said blandly. “But we must think about the qualities necessary in a king to run a kingdom.”

“Necessary qualities? And what do you think that is?” Jess half rose from her throne. “In my experience—”

“In my experience everything turns out all right in the end,” the king interrupted, wiping at his sweating brow with a gold fringed handkerchief. Much as the king wanted a hairy-chested son-in-law, he disliked confrontation and thought it best to end things judiciously for the moment. “So, we can just enjoy today and look forward happily to tomorrow, knowing everything turns out just chummy. Right? Right?”

Nobody answered, but the king was saved from scrambling for anything more to say by Ernie’s appearance. The wizard staggered away from the crowd and approached under the voluminous load of his massive over-sized sack. He took a seat on the dais.

“My compliments to the cook,” Ernie said, smacking his lips and rubbing his hands together. “Compliments indeed. Have you sampled the wares out on the tables, Princess?”

“The cooking is most excellent,” the king quickly agreed.

“Wonderful stuff. Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful.” Ernie unfolded his

quilt, spreading it out across his knees, the chair, and a good deal of floorspace besides. The quilt was far bigger than any bed, and didn't appear anywhere near completion.

"I pay that cook well." The king gave a forced chuckle.

"I especially liked the crusty little mint tart thingies." Ernie held up two fingers, demonstrating the size.

"Mmmmm—scrumptious little things." He stretched out his feet and wiggled his toes with pleasure. "I ate half the platter. I would have eaten more, but some pigs had already eaten the rest. I must remember to go back later and see if a new platter is put out. Or else sneak into the kitchen and find the source of all this mint goodness." Ernie hiccuped, and pulled out a pair of scissors from a large pocket in his robes and set to work on his quilt.

Ernie nattered on about how the best thing about feasts was the food, and how he could walk around the entire room and find new things to eat. "Anyhow," he said. "One can tell how well a kingdom is run by the food they have, and this is one well-run kingdom. Now, if the king should like some wise advice on such important matters, I'm ready to assist him from my storehouse of knowledge."

"What do you think of my advisor, daughter?" the king said, making another attempt at breaking the silence.

"He is a fitting contribution to the kingdom," Jess said.

Having elicited a reply, the king continued the strained conversation, for if there was one thing he prided himself in it was making conversation. So it continued, in such a manner that Jess thought Ben couldn't possibly be having a more painful time.

"I say," the king said at one point. "Have you noticed the tipsy ladies?"

"It hadn't escaped my attention," Jess said. And it hadn't. She had been wondering for several minutes over the appearance of disheveled ladies, staggering across the ballroom floor, noblemen and servants hovering near at hand to support them, distressed expressions on their faces. The sight had made her thoughts immediately leap to Ben, but she quickly crushed the fear. A few tipsy ladies had nothing to do with Ben. It couldn't.

"I really wouldn't have expected them to hit the punch bowl so early, or so hard," the king shook his head.

"Disgraceful, really, for ladies to allow themselves to get like that in public," the queen agreed.

“They must be feeling festive,” Jess said absently, her eyes scanning the crowd. It was rather odd.

A steady stream of tipsy women were passing in front of them now, some who Jess had never known to be much for drinking. A rather over-dressed Her Ladyship, Miss Gloriana was just now vomiting into a punch bowl hastily offered by her soon-to-be-husband who gingerly supported her. Two more young women passed, giggling and leaning on each other as if the mutual support was all that kept them on their feet. They were followed by another woman who was bent over and ashen faced as she staggered along, looking as if she were ready to follow Miss Gloriana on the path of projectile vomiting. The next woman was so tipsy she landed flat on her bottom in a pile of skirts. She sat there for several minutes giggling hysterically to herself before staggering back to her feet and lurching unsteadily away.

“Disgraceful,” the queen tisked again. “Such lack of dignity. The only explanation is that some person is driving them to drink.”

“Mother—” Jess began hotly, but any further response to the insinuation was interrupted by the approach of the dowager. She appeared a little unsteady herself, keeping upright with some difficulty. Jess tensed, relaxing only a little when she caught the merry twinkle in the dowager’s eye.

“Well. Well, indeed. You did good, my dear.” The dowager kept a straight face, lips quivering, but couldn’t maintain it and gave way to wheezing laughter. It was a few minutes before she regained control of herself, coughed primly into her hand, and straightened. “I approve. I much approve. Some good strong stock you have there. They make some real old fashioned kings from those hardy types.”

“Thank you,” Jess said, still uncertain.

“They don’t make them like that around here anymore. Hehehe.” She rocked a little, leaning on her cane. “No, they don’t. That boy knows how to dance. The most unique interpretation of dancing. *That* was what I call dancing. I don’t know how he can keep it up. Haven’t had that much fun since I was twelve years old. He nearly killed me, nearly did my heart in, but makes a woman wish she was young again so she could steal him for herself, he’s so much fun. Congratulations on your future son-in-law, Harry.” Chortling to herself, the dowager staggered off.

There was a stunned silence.

“Was she drunk?” the queen finally asked.

“No. No, I don’t believe so,” the king said, sounding numb. “Perhaps she had some sort of fit and lost her mind.”

“Whatever the case,” the queen hissed in an undertone, “it seems she has decided—”

Jess didn’t hear the rest. Topsy ladies were a little odd, projectile vomiting in the punch bowl rare, but a giddy dowager meant it was time to find Ben.

“Excuse me,” she said, and left her chair in a hurry.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### DANCING WITH BEN

**I**t wasn't hard to find Ben. Jess only had to locate where the largest crowd was gathered and—feeling her stomach plunge with dismay—noticed the steady line of staggering and ashen-faced ladies departing from the circle. Jess picked up her pace, wishing she could run in the gown. Drawing closer, she thought she could make out what sounded like a high-pitched gurgling scream coming from the center of the crowd.

Hoisting up her dress, she ran.

She pushed and shoved in the most unladylike manner, thrusting her way to the front of the crowd. Catching sight of Ben, she didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He had just released the most recent lady from the “dance,” her steps taking her in a looping circle until she managed to collapse in the arms of some waiting men. The next lady took a hesitant step forward and Ben, bowing gravely, said in the most stately manner, “Madam, shall we dance?” The only reply was a tiny whimper as the lady—compelled by custom and longstanding tradition—took the final step forward. The next instant the two of them became a whirling blur, a scream ripped from the lady's lips as her breath was snatched away.

It was the most consternated crowd Jess had ever seen. Everyone stared. The gathered men seemed divided between outrage that their women were being treated in such a manner, and rather awed respect at the strength and stamina displayed in sending so many women spinning at such velocity. Among the women there was a general sense of horror and dread as they lined up like those awaiting execution, compelled by courtly tradition to take



part in what was perhaps the most terrifying experience in the lives. Only a few of the younger and more daring women appeared to wait in line with a look of anticipating glee in their eyes, like one might expect to see in children waiting to undertake an exciting ride.

*It looks like the court is getting its just desserts*, was Jess's first bitter thought on seeing the general misery. *They all have a chance to suffer for once*. That was quickly followed by an overwhelming sense of despair as she realized she was looking at what was probably the worst court disaster in recent history. Last to come was a sharp pang of envy over the other ladies with Ben as she thought, *Golly, that sure looks like fun*.

The cyclone of movement that was Ben slowed to a stop and he released the woman and gave a slight awkward bow. The lady, gasping as if she hadn't breathed during the entire ride, staggered away.

"Madam." Ben dutifully held out his hand to the next woman. Jess moved quickly to intervene.

"You've exercised the most studious faithfulness in your duty, Ben," she said. "But I think the entire court will agree that you've done more than necessary. You can stop now."

"Oh, hello, Jess." He turned around. She noticed he looked a little gray in the face, and had a clammy sheen of sweat on his brow. "I must say, you have the strangest traditions at court. It seems most people don't like dancing. I guess we're all supposed to be miserable, is that it?"

"Er...yes, one might say that." She clamped a hand over her mouth, fighting the urge of wild laughter. "Ah...are you all right?" she managed in a strangled voice.

"I...will be." He swallowed with an effort. "I...haven't...given that many spin-a-rounds before in my life. There are so many ladies." He took her arm, almost as if he wanted to lean on her, but kept himself standing upright. "Did I...did I do good?"

"Wonderfully," she said, and meant it. Seeing him now, she felt such a swell of pride she thought she might burst. She didn't care what anyone else thought. She saw he was trying hard, so hard, to please her.

"Good...good." He cleared his throat. "I hope I don't have to do too many more court dances," he added, and leaned close to whisper, "because I might throw up."

"I don't think you will." She bit her lip against the urge to laugh again. She

wanted to squeeze him tight in a hug. He must have a stomach like iron, she thought, to have given that many spin-a-rounds and *not* thrown up.

“But Ben,” she finally burst out. “After you rest a bit, do you think you can do one more?” She had decided, in that reckless moment, that there was no way she was going to miss out.

“Of course,” he said. “I didn’t forget what you said. I saved the best dance for you.”

“Good,” she said, though she wasn’t sure how good that was.

*I’m not going to scream*, she told herself as he took her hand, his other arm around her waist, gripping her firmly. *I’m not going to be like the rest and scream. And I won’t throw up.*

But she couldn’t help it. When the world lurched and she left the ground with enough force to nearly take her breath away—airborne in an instant, her stomach left somewhere behind—she shrieked. It was half terror, half thrilling glee. The wind whipped around her, the world a blur of colors. It felt as if she were being sucked into a maelstrom. She had never moved so fast in her life. She couldn’t hang on with her free hand, and was left grasping futilely at Ben’s arm around her waist as she continued to pick up speed.

In an instant the memory came back to her, the figure of Ben small on the road far behind, the large smith’s hammer whirling, a blur in his hands as he faced the huge winged shape of the bikalis darkening the sky above him. The hammer had shot through the air, a streak that smashed into one of the bikalis’s two heads, crushing the skull. *He’s strong*, she thought, remembering as the blur of colors that was the world began running together in one multicolored streak of light. *So strong*. Her next thought as her speed continued to increase was, *I’m going to die*. She imagined breaking free from his grasp, hurtling through the crowd of people until she smashed into the ballroom wall like some flattened pancake of a princess. She would have shrieked for Ben to stop, but all the breath had been sucked out of her. He held her, his arms like some iron vise, and the speed increased.

*I’m going to throw up*, she thought. *I’m going to throw up and spray the entire court with my vomit.*

Somehow, that thought seemed worse than dying.

Her jeweled hairpins came loose, snatched away by the centrifugal force of the spin. Distantly, she heard the crack as they ricocheted off the ballroom floor. Her hair blew out, a dark fan around her. Now it felt as if her head was

about to be sucked from her shoulders to go pinwheeling off into some far corner, or perhaps sailing out of some high window to land in a distant part of the city.

Then, when it felt she could survive no longer, the speed lessened, the spin slowing until she came into a sliding graceful stop.

“There you go,” Ben said, sounding just a little out of breath. “I saved the best for you.”

She had stopped spinning, but the world sloshed around her, the staring faces of the court tipping this way and that as everything threatened to tumbled end over end. She sagged against Ben, gasping for breath and clutching at him feebly as the only solid and steady object. Her first coherent thought was an inordinate sense of pride that she *hadn't* thrown up.

“That...that...that was some dance,” she said between gasps. “Except...it... wasn't...exactly...a dance.”

“Oh.” Ben looked crestfallen. “I'm sorry. I tried my best.”

She collapsed then, the ballroom floor taking the most unusual swing to meet her.

“It's all right,” she managed to say. Then she began giggling. She knew her head was wobbling in the most undignified manner, but it was worth it. The court stared at her, gaping, slack-jawed. “It's my fault for not being a little more precise in what I meant. Besides, it's not so bad once you get used to it. And the dowager loves you now.”

“Is that good?” he asked uncertainly.

“Yes. Oh, save me,” she said, reduced to giggles again. “I can't seem to stand. Help me up, Ben.”

He gently hoisted her back to her feet and draped her arm around his neck, supporting her around the waist with his other arm.

“I thought it was a little odd that dancing was just like a spin-a-round except you just held the person a little different.”

“Yes, well, at least not in the present age, though the dowager may try to change that.” As the world began to steady a bit, she managed to pull herself a little more erect, still hanging on to Ben. Then she took another look at the gathered court and laughed. She leaned against Ben and laughed and laughed and laughed. She didn't care what they thought.

Finally the laughter finished, her sides aching. She straightened, pushing her now wild hair out of her face.

“Life is so delightfully exciting with you, Ben. But I suppose we should get back to my parents before they come looking for us. You sure you won’t barf?” she added, seeing his face was still a little green.

“I don’t think so,” he said with the slow care of someone who was trying very hard not to.

“Well, if you do, aim for my Ma,” she said wickedly, and led him away.

By the time they neared the throne dais Jess felt steady enough to walk unsupported, though she was still quite disheveled and flushed when they joined the king and queen.

“What’s going on?” the queen demanded, eying them suspiciously.

“Oh, Ben and I were...dancing,” Jess said, and collapsed into her throne.

“Just dancing?” The queen raised her eyebrows. “What about a bit of hanky-panky? Dancing has never made you breathless, Mol.”

“Ma!” Jess squawked indignantly.

“Right here. I have a hanky,” Ben said. With grave politeness he carefully removed a pressed handkerchief from his pocket and offered it to the queen. “I’m not sure what a panky is, but somebody probably has one, if you’d like me to ask around.”

The queen glared at him murderously, her eyes bulging. “You—you—you —” Spluttering, she rose from her chair and swept away, leaving Ben to look in befuddlement at his handkerchief.

“But I didn’t even blow my nose on it,” he said to the empty air.

Once again Jess found herself trying very hard not to laugh. In his own innocent way, Ben seemed so exquisitely able to put everyone in their place.

“Now I’ll have to go calm your mother.” The king gave a disapproving frown. “You should teach that boy some manners. Watch over the ball while I’m gone, and make sure nothing disastrous happens.” With a final, overdramatic sigh, he left.

Jess rolled her eyes at her departing father’s back.

“I’m very sorry,” Ben said. “I was just trying—”

“Forget it, Ben.” Jess waved for him to take his seat. “If you’re going to spend much time in the court you have to get accustomed to histrionics, and people generally making a scene. Really, you did good. You got rid of them, so we can have some peace. Though I suspect they were already looking for the first opportunity to exit stage left,” she added under her breath.

“Oh.” Ben perched himself uncomfortably on his throne. It felt very

awkward to be placed on display in the middle of the crowd. “So what do we do now?”

“Rest for a few minutes. Then we’ll have to mingle with the guests.” Jess leaned back in her throne, running a hand through her tangled hair.

“Mingle with the guests?”

“Yes. Talk, be sociable. Show everyone that we—” Jess caught sight of Ben’s stricken expression. “On the other hand, you’ve done quite enough for tonight. I’ll go mingle with the crowd, you find yourself something to eat. I’m sure you’re hungry after all that exercising.”

“Thank you,” he said, sounding inordinately relieved.

“I’m sorry it has been so hard.” She rose, giving him a quick peck on the cheek, turning to join the crowd. “I wish somebody would be your friend.”

“Charlez!” Ben choked. “I forgot all about him! I’m sure he’s been waiting and waiting!”

He leaped from his chair and disappeared into the crowd before Jess could ask who Charlez was.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE GRAND ANNOUNCEMENT

**B**en spent nearly an hour looking for Charlez in the ballroom. First he wandered through the room, looking for the bard among the crowds. It was easy searching, as everyone gave Ben a wide berth, but there was no Charlez. Then it occurred to him that Charlez might be hiding somewhere in the ballroom, waiting for the right moment, or some signal from Ben. That thought made him feel guilty, as it meant Charlez would have been waiting for a long time. Ben began looking behind all the curtains and wall hangings in the ball room. Still, there was no Charlez.

It was after Ben had looked under all the tables—and received not a few strange looks in the process—that he concluded Charlez was not in the ball room. He then checked the broom closet to see if Charlez was still waiting there—but the closet was empty. Next he thought to ask Ernie if he had seen the bard, but on returning to the throne dais he found the wizard, and his quilt, were also missing. But in this case Ben had a good idea where to find Ernie.

He headed toward the kitchen.

The kitchen was a mess, and in what seemed complete chaos. Servants rushed this way and that, carrying out full platters and returning with empty ones while various cooks throughout the kitchen worked in a frenzy of food preparation. Ben tried to thread his way through the bustle, looking for the wizard's battered pointed hat.

“Ernie? Hey Ernie!”

“Over here, young man,” a muffled voice said.

Ben found Ernie in a far corner, stuffing his face with mint pastries under the fond eye of a large cook. Charlez was there too, stuffing his face with a gusto to match the wizard.

“There you are,” Ben said on seeing the bard. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“Should have looked in the kitchen first,” the bard said around the mouthful of pastry. “Everyone knows the kitchen is the perfect place to hide. There are so many people, and so much activity, you blend right in.”

Ben looked at the wizard and bard. They didn’t seem to be blending in very much, especially with the amused looks everyone was giving them. “So... what are you doing?” he finally asked.

“Enjoying culinary delights,” Ernie said, mint cream oozing down his beard. “Charlez and I have so much in common, you know. We both think these mint pastry thingies are the most wonderful thing in the world. Care to try one?”

“Maybe in a while. Charlez, it’s starting to get a late. You really should go out—”

“I’ve been discovered and you’ve come to warn me!” Charlez yelled. “I’ll make a break for it!”

The bard would have took off, except Ben caught him by the collar.

“No, you haven’t,” he said calmly. “I was just saying that it’s getting late. Do you still want to make your appearance at the ball?”

“Uh—I do! I mean, I am!” Charlez said loudly. “That is, I was! I was...I was just waiting for the right moment.”

“The right moment?” Ben looked at him.

“Yeah, you know—the dramatic synergy. Everything has to be perfect. It’s my dramatic entrance after all. You gotta do these things right. Make a good impression. I mean, people need to be paying attention, it can’t be too noisy, and if your clothes are all messed up...”

“You’re nervous,” Ben said.

“Not at all,” Charlez sputtered. “I just want things to be perfect. We have an entire adventure riding on this entrance. And—and—uh...how pretty are the women?”

“Very dressed up,” Ben said. “Do you want to come out?”

“Did any of them mention pining for a hero?”

“Haven’t a clue,” Ben said. “I could introduce you.”

“Well. Hm.” Charlez plucked at his lip. “What about the king? Is he anywhere he might spot me? I want some time to get the court on my side before I confront the king.”

“He and the queen left. And I don’t know why you’re so worried about confronting him. He’s not that crabby.”

“All right, you can introduce me,” Charlez said, reluctantly. “But remember how we talked about this whole dramatic flair thing. We need to make sure—”

“Right, right.” Ben dragged the bard by the arm, heading for the door. “Don’t worry. It’ll be fine. I’ve discovered that—so long as nobody is trying to kill you—then usually you don’t die. Sometimes you just have to be embarrassed, and get it over with.”

“Ernie! How do I look?” Charlez called over his shoulder.

The wizard pantomimed wiping his mouth, and Charlez had just enough time to wipe a mint cream mustache from his lip before Ben hauled him out into the bright lights and music of the ball room.

“Wow,” Charlez breathed. “It’s just how I imagined it. Right out of the stories.”

“Do you know how to dance?” Ben said. “They do a lot of that here and—”

“Of course!” Charlez drew himself up. “Everyone knows how to dance.”

“Except me,” Ben mumbled. “But at least we don’t have to worry about that. Now, let’s see if we can find some princesses.”

Ben had not even begun to properly look for a rich and beautiful princess—or what he hoped would be a princess—when he felt a hand on his arm. He turned to see a short, slightly plump, and blond young lady looking at him.

“May—may I have a word with you, sir?” she said hesitantly.

“Well . . . um. That is, uh, that is,” Ben said, stuttering in his usual fashion. “You want another dance?”

“No!” Her voice went a little shrill. “I mean, no, not at this moment, but I would...love to, later. Much later. You give such...such *wonderful* dances,” she finished, with an effort. Swallowing hard, she continued, “Right now I just want to spend some time with you, and...and...*talk*. You’re so handsome, and attractive,” she finished in a rush. A slight sheen of sweat had broken out on her forehead, the hint of a wild and panicked light in her eyes.

“I’m not very good with the talking thing,” Ben said, missing the innuendo, and just about everything else. “But are you a princess?”



“Yes. Why, yes I am!” the lady said brightly. “I am Clarissa, princess of—”

“Great,” Ben said quickly, stumbling over the word. “Then I know someone very good at talking, who you would be glad to meet. This is Charlez the Eloquent. He is a bard, and a very nice guy.” He pushed Charlez forward, interposing the bard between him and the lady, who Ben found was getting a little too close.

Charlez bowed. “A pleasure, lady. I am an adventurer, one seeking—”

“Do you think you could fall in love with him?” Ben whispered to the princess. “Or do I have to introduce him to some more princesses? I really don’t like this whole introducing thing and—”

“Clarissa! What are you doing!” A tall angular woman appeared, grabbing Clarissa by the arm. “The king promised me I’d be the most famous—”

“No you won’t, Bernice!” Clarissa jerked her arm free. “Because I’m going to make *my* family wealthy by—”

“You can’t!” A third woman, buxom and raven-haired, bustled forward. “I promised the king first! He said—”

“No, he made an offer to whomever—”

“Well, don’t think you can beat me,” Bernice said, trying to elbow Clarissa away. “That man is *mine*.”

“I take it you all must be princesses,” Ben stammered. “So I—I’d like to introduce you all to Charlez who...” He trailed off, as it was clear none of the princesses were paying attention. They were preoccupied with pinching, scratching, and pushing each other.

“Wow.” Charlez adjusted his jacket. “They’re having a cat fight over me already.”

“It looks very rude,” Ben said. “Gosh, this isn’t going to be as easy as I thought. At this rate introducing you is going to take all night. I think we’d better speed this up and do it all at once.”

“What?” Charlez said.

“Make a general announcement.”

Charlez’s eyes widen. “No, don’t do that—”

But it was too late.

Ben didn’t like speaking, and he *really* didn’t like public speaking. But he was a good and faithful friend, and he wanted Charlez to have the best chance to meet his princess, and sometimes friends had to make sacrifices for their friends. So he steeled himself to make the sacrifice, and gathered up his

courage.

Cupping his mouth in his hands, Ben bellowed, “HEY EVERYBODY!”

Silence descended upon the ball room. People turned.

“Oh no,” Charlez croaked, hands going to his face in horror.

Ignoring everyone, Ben pressed on.

“I HAVE AN IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT TO MAKE! MY FRIEND CHARLEZ IS HERE! HE IS VERY NICE! IF YOU ARE A PRINCESS I THINK YOU WOULD LIKE TO MEET HIM AND—” at this point Ben’s efforts failed him, and he began to stutter again. “—and, and, and—THANK YOU!” he finished in a final bellow.

Everyone stared.

Charlez looked as if he wished he could melt through the floor in his mortification. He looked ready to die a thousand deaths. He looked as if he saw his every dream lying shattered before him on the floor.

Then a strange thing happened. To the eyes of Charlez his grand entrance had been destroyed, his chance at high standing in the court irrevocably ruined. But in the eyes of the court they saw Ben engaged in another nefarious act of fiendish torture, intent on humiliating and ostracizing some poor, innocent—and undoubtedly courtly—individual. And so in a rare act of unanimity the entire court spontaneously decided to thwart Ben’s perceived plan, and welcome Charlez as their most treasured own.

So it was in the moment that Charlez closed his eyes, seeing his every dream dashed, that he found many hands grabbing him, voices greeting him, complimenting him on his entrance, his clothes, his intellect, and anything else the members of the court could think to apply to Charlez, which they found Ben lacking.

Ben walked away from the crowd, feeling exceedingly pleased with the success of his introduction, having unwittingly demonstrated the fact that there are those rare occasions when everyone can be pleased with an outcome. Having thus fulfilled his moral obligation, Ben took the opportunity to finally visit the buffet table and get himself something to eat.

He was in the process of looking over various exotic and ornate dishes, hoping to find something that looked remotely familiar—and thus edible—when he met Jess.

“Just finally getting something to eat?” she asked.

“Yeah, I was busy,” he said. “I had to do something first.”

“No trouble, I hope.” Jess looked at him closely. “I heard some type of shouting—”

“That was me introducing Charlez to the court. He wanted a grand announcement, or something like that. It went pretty well. Better than I expected, actually.”

“I see.” Jess picked up a stuffed clam shell, looking as if she couldn’t decide which question she wanted to ask next. “So...who is this Charlez?”

“A new friend. He’s very nice, and has all sorts of interesting stories. But he talks a lot, really fast.”

“You’ve made a friend! That’s great, Ben. Soon the whole court will like you.” Jess paused. “I don’t remember anyone in the court with the name of Charlez. Is this some servant or assistant that you’ve met?”

“No. He’s a bard.” Ben took a piece of some fancy looking bread, thinking that—as bread—no matter how exotic it looked it probably couldn’t taste too bad. “He went to bard college and everything.”

“That’s nice. Except, I don’t recall us having any bards in the court.”

“Oh, he just arrived,” Ben said. He wished there were some mint pastries out for him to try, but it seemed none were making it past the kitchen doors anymore.

“You’ll have to introduce me sometime.” Jess took a punch glass. “Now, how about we go sit down. I think we’ve both fulfilled our social obligations for the evening, and deserve a bit of peace and quiet.”



## CHAPTER NINE

### THE DUEL

For Ben and Jess the rest of the evening passed in delightful quiet. The court, being quite sick of Ben—and preoccupied with Charlez—left the couple to enjoy each other’s company. Time passed quickly as they talked about their coming marriage, defeating the goblin threat, and their future together. They could have talked all night, except Jess glanced up and noticed the large golden clock hanging over the main arched window showed it was getting very late.

“Goodness!” she exclaimed. “We have to wrap this ball up, Ben. By decorum nobody is supposed to leave until we’ve officially dismissed the gathering, and if we don’t do that soon someone is sure to get sore. Hello—what’s this?”

The last comment was directed toward the large crowd that was moving across the ballroom, headed in their direction.

“Maybe a bunch of people got sore,” Ben said.

“No, they don’t look sore,” Jess said “This is something else.”

By this time the crowd had reached the throne dais and they could hear people murmuring excitedly.

“Somehow, I think our peaceful evening is over,” Jess said.

Then Charlez stepped out from the crowd and gave his grandest bow.

“O glorious and most beautiful Princess, I have come!” he declared. “Urged on by your faithful subjects, I have found the courage and bravery to come and present myself before you.”

“Oh no, not this.” Jess groaned, covering her face with one hand. “It’s late,

and I'm tired, and I just don't feel like dealing with another—”

“O Princess, your great attributes are known throughout this court, and your loyal subjects have assured me that you are ever interested in those—oh!” Charlez caught sight of Ben, seated next to Jess. “I see Ben is already here to introduce me. Excellent!”

“Who is this?” Jess glanced at Ben, her face saying she could already guess.

“This is my friend, Charlez the Eloquent.” Ben hopped out of his throne to make the introduction. “I am helping him with his adventure, and finding a princess to fall in love with him. Charlez, this is my betrothed, Jess.”

Charlez went into another dramatic bow. “Beautiful one, it warms my heart to—What!” The bard ended in a squawk, whipping around to look at Ben. “Don't you mean *my* soon-to-be betrothed?”

“No, we're already engaged,” Ben said agreeably, missing Charlez's implication.

“You—you—” Charlez gaped, speechless.

Jess sighed. “Ben, I have a feeling you didn't quite grasp your friend's intentions.”

“He wanted me to find him a princess,” Ben said. “And I found him lots. There are all sorts of princesses at this ball.”

“I've been betrayed,” Charlez gasped, finally regaining his voice. “And with all you've done for me—I should have guessed! Don't all the adventures have some cruel twist? This is just like how *A Betrayal of Love* turned out! You, Ben, are just like Barthamus!”

“What?” Ben said.

“This is either going to be really good, or really bad,” Jess said. “I can't decide which.”

“You fiend!” Charlez said. “You stole my princess!”

“No, I didn't,” Ben said, utterly befuddled. “They're all still there.” He pointed back at the crowd.

“No, *that one!*” Charlez shouted, pointing at Jess. “I wanted the best, and you double-crossed me.”

“Oh.” Ben finally understood. “But you said you wanted the one who wore the most jewels, and Jess wears hardly any.”

“But—But—But—” Charlez was reduced to sputtering again, as Ben was indeed right. “That doesn't matter,” he finally managed. “Everyone knows she is the princess of this kingdom. That's the whole reason I came!”

"I'm very sorry," Ben said, earnestly. "But, you see, I didn't steal her from you. We were already engaged when you arrived."

"Contrary to what my court no doubt intimated, I'm not available," Jess said.

"I see it all clearly now." Charlez's face grew red. "They said you were burdened with a great trouble that you needed to be delivered from, but I didn't guess it was *this*. I thought it was an oppressive tyrannical father, a cruel stepmother, or even some creepy count who was pressing his affections on you—but never this!"

"You're still misinformed," Jess said with forced patience, her fingers tapping the throne armrests. "The only thing I am burdened with is the court, with all of its insanity, which right now feels like quite a lot."

"Trapped in an arranged marriage to a dastardly backstabber!" Charlez declared. "I will save you. 'Your love is my greatest care' as De'Janus said, before he struck down the vile dog. I demand a duel!"

An approving gasp went through the crowd.

Jess gave them all an irritated glance. She could see this outcome had not been far from the minds of many. She knew the conspiring of the court well, even if Ben and Charlez did not.

"Okay, fine," she said. "You want a duel, you can have a duel."

"You're not going to duel him, are you?" Ben said, alarmed.

"No, Ben. You are."

"I challenge you for the hand of the princess!" Charlez stepped forward.

The court cheered, and there was some vigorous hand clapping.

"Me?" Ben said, completely surprised. "But I don't like dueling."

"I'm afraid it comes up from time to time," Jess said. "A minor annoyance. Just dispatch him quickly."

"I don't want to kill him," Ben protested. "He's my friend!"

"I didn't say you had to kill him. Just take him out of commission," Jess said.

"Well, gee." Ben scratched his head, feeling out of sorts. The evening had taken a very unexpected turn. "I'm afraid I might hurt him."

"Come, coward," Charlez said. "Fight me!"

"Go, Bard! Destroy the impostor!" Several voices called from the crowd

"Don't worry about it," Jess said, leaning close to Ben and speaking through clenched teeth. "This is just one of those things you have to do. And

if you don't do it soon, I'm going to leap out of this chair and do it for you, just to shut them up!"

"Waste the man, Young Ben!" the reedy voice of the dowager called. She stood off to the side, waving her cane. "Show them what you're made of!"

"Well...okay," Ben said reluctantly. "I really don't like this, and I think it's terribly unsafe, but since you all insist I suppose I should be agreeable."

So saying, he stepped down from the dais and loosened Goblin Terror in its scabbard at his side.

"Ha!" Charlez said. "You think you can intimidate me with your big sword? Well, you can't! I'm a master of blades, and my sword is better than yours!"

"Is it magical?" Ben asked.

"It's the sword of a skilled man. In my hands it's a thing to be feared." Charlez drew his blade with a flourish and held up the weapon grandly. The blade was thin and light, and looked very sharp. The court gave an approving murmur.

"That's...nice," Ben said politely. He didn't mention that he thought it wouldn't last two minutes against a goblin attack, not to mention grave hounds. He thought it a rather peculiar sword, but that was because he had never seen a dueling sword before in his life.

"It's name is Wit and the wise fear it. I was the champion of the fencing club at college."

"A rapier wit, eh?" Jess said. She looked a bit amused. "Very clever, but get on with it—you're starting to bore me."

"Fear me, Ben. Your doom is at hand! None can stand against me." Charlez made a few passes at an invisible enemy, clearly relishing the attention of the court as much as anything else.

"Okay," Ben said, very much wishing to be done with the duel, and the attention of the court. "Are you ready?"

"To your places!" Jess command.

Charlez took up position opposite Ben. "Don't worry, we can be friends again after this," he said. "That happens in the stories sometimes. After being defeated the evil character sees the error of his ways, and becomes a good guy. Why, in *The Eternal War* Carrandon actually became a hero in the end—"

"On your guard!" Jess declared. "Let the fight begin."

Charlez went into the ready stance, sword point poised. “I’ll make quick work of you! I’ll destroy you. I’ll cut you to ribbons. I’ll leave you a bloody pulp—”

Ben drew his sword and brought it around in a swift arch, the broad flat of Goblin’s Terror’s mighty blade landing atop Charlez’s head with a resounding “*Wang!*”

The bard pitched forward like a felled tree, landing flat on his face, out cold.

A shocked intake of breath went up from the gathered court.

The dowager cackled.

“Ben! You used the flat of the blade,” Jess reproved.

“I didn’t want to hurt him.” Ben peered at the prostrate Charlez. “But gee, I didn’t realize he would go down so easy.”

“Humph. You could have drawn a little blood at least. Give him something to remember you by,” the dowager said. She looked slightly disappointed.

“I tried to hit as gently as possible.” Ben squatted down beside the unmoving Charlez. “Do you think he’s all right? I forgot he was such a frail little man.”

“Apart from being out stone cold, he’s fine,” Jess said. “I don’t know why you’re so worried. It was you he was trying to impale.”

“Oh, that was all just what Charlez calls literary flair,” Ben said kindly. “He didn’t mean anything by it. But he did want a princess very badly.”

“It looks like there are plenty willing to give him their tender sympathy. I think he’ll manage just fine.” Jess looked at the grumbling crowd of courtiers—who appeared unable to grasp the fact that their chosen champion had been dispatched so quickly—and couldn’t entirely mask her gleeful triumph.

“Charlez, wake up,” Ben called out, shaking the bard’s shoulder. “Someone bring me some water. Charlez, are you okay?”

A servant quickly appeared with a bucket of water, which Ben promptly upended over Charlez. He was a very practical fellow.

“Whaa—?” Charlez lifted his head in a wobbly sort of way, and sputtered weakly.

“Ah, good,” Ben said, sounding much relieved. “It doesn’t look like anything is permanently broken.”

“What happened?” Charlez said groggily, pawing about in search of his sword. “There was this great flash of light.”



“I hit you,” Ben said.

“What!” Charlez looked up.

“You wanted to duel.” Ben shrugged.

“Impossible. You cheated!” Charlez tried to scramble up, weaving like a drunkard. “You used some vile underhanded trick, I know you did. You didn’t follow the rules! Don’t you know the rules of dueling? I had the right of way. It was first attack for me—your blow was a foul, it doesn’t count!”

Loudly protesting Ben’s cruelty, the court swooped in around Charlez. Several ladies dabbed at his brow with handkerchiefs, cooing and clucking.

Ben opened his mouth. Then he closed it.

“Never mind them.” Jess took his hand. “They got what they wanted—leave them to their games. We’re free, so let’s get out of here.”



That night found the king in bed, wringing his blankets.

“We’re getting nowhere,” he panted, growing quite red in the face as he throttled the bed cover. “I’m going to have a fit! It’s coming, I can just feel it! We must do something. Our name is being disgraced, and our daughter can’t even see it!”

“It was...quite something, today,” the queen said. Her face sagged and weariness touched her voice. “Even I...couldn’t have imagined such an outcome.”

“*Something!* Something doesn’t begin to describe it.” The king ground his molars. “I don’t know if I should have stayed and attempted some control of the situation, or if leaving the ball early was all that saved me from a fit. The stories that have come back are enough! The humiliation! The condescending looks! If this keeps up we won’t even *have* a throne!”

“Perhaps in more ways than one,” the queen said. “Half the court fears him as a lunatic, the other half as a cruel fiend who can dream up all kinds of torture.”

“And my mother is taken with him,” the king said, momentarily lapsing out of his tantrum in puzzlement. “I knew she was getting senile, but I hadn’t thought it was that bad. It was a most unexpected betrayal.”

“So now you see how we must bop him off, before things get worse,” the queen said.

“No, no. I still won’t have it. I am a man of principle. There must be some other way.”

“Well, we must speed the matter along. I know—since that *thing* is such an ignorant fool, take him aside and make up some story about how it is impossible for him to marry Mol because of some impediment to the marriage.”

“What impediment?”

“I don’t know, Harry! Make something up,” she snapped. “It just needs to be something a gullible bumpkin would believe. Then you tell him, so as to not hurt the princess’s feelings anymore by staying around when it’s impossible for him to marry her, that he should slip away quietly and never come back. Then we tell Mol that he never really loved her and he left with some other beautiful lady.”

“But all the princesses came back in tears. I only got a few to even agree to try to woo him, and after the events of the ball, even they won’t anymore.”

“It’s a fiction, Harry!” the queen hissed. “The woman could just be some beautiful barmaid, for all that it matters!”

“Hmmm. Yes, I like that.” The king stroked his mustache. “Devious. That is devious like a king should be.”

“Thank you. It’s also how the stories always turn out in the *The Handmaiden’s Daily* which means Mol will find it believable.”

“Perfect. I’ll get started on that tomorrow.” The king plumped up his pillow and lay back.

There was a long silence, and in the darkness the queen started to drift off to sleep.

“Um...there is one other thing.”

“What’s that?” The queen’s eyes snapped open, her ears having picked up some dreadful hesitancy in her husband’s voice.

“One of my sources from the ball said there was some kind of violence. Something about that man having a duel with some dashing fellow that was seeking Mol’s hand. Dashing and sophisticated, they called him.”

“And?”

“Well, the word going around is that the provincial barbarian defeated this fine fellow by some cruel underhanded means,” the king blurted out.

“Excellent,” the queen said, sitting up again. “Then we have a chance for Jess to fall in love with someone else, to see what a monster she is currently

engaged too. We must find this man, and cultivate him for the throne.”

“Yes, but if that provincial peasant is becoming violent, we could all be in danger. Who knows when he could finally become completely unhinged? I know something about mental illness, Gertrude—it can strike at any moment!”

“Nonsense. He’s just a brute, not a mental case.”

“No, he is definitely mentally deranged.” The king let out an unsteady breath. “He talks to closet doors. He called it Charlez. He wanted to know if it could come to the dance.”

“What did you say?”

“I said yes, of course! You never deny a lunatic. He might get violent. You don’t think he will get violent if I tell him there is an impediment to the marriage, do you?”

“Not if you tell him those are the rules. He might be insane, but he is a lunatic that follows the rules.”

“Right. I must remember that. A lunatic who follows the rules,” the king repeated.

The queen was soon asleep, but the king stayed awake for several hours longer, staring up at the darkened ceiling. He kept telling himself he had really seen Ben talking to the closet door, but he couldn’t be entirely sure he hadn’t just imagined the whole thing. What kind of madness involved broom closets, he wondered, just before falling asleep.



## CHAPTER TEN

### AN IMPEDIMENT TO MARRIAGE

The next morning Ben insisted that he check on Charlez, to make sure the bard was okay. Jess tried to convince him that it really wasn't necessary, and in any case Charlez was probably mad at him so it would be better to stay away until the bard had some time to cool down. But Ben was adamant, so Jess decided to go along.

When Ben opened the broom closet door, he found the space was again occupied by both Charlez and Ernie. Somehow, Ernie had managed to get his entire gigantic quilt stuffed in the small space, though it appeared the wizard had been distracted from his work, and was now reading magazines by candlelight with Charlez. Charlez was laid out in the pose of a wounded warrior, his head excessively bandaged. He was perusing his magazines with interest.

"I should have figured we'd find the wizard here, too," Jess said. "Any place where he can shirk his duties."

"We're becoming educated," Ernie sniffed. "Enriching our minds."

"How are you doing?" Ben looked at Charlez.

"Better." Charlez gingerly touched his head. "I think I'll make a full recovery. Why'd you hit me so hard, anyhow? Were you trying to kill me, or something? I was going to go easy on you, seeing how I thought we were friends. What'd you use hit me with, anyway? It feels like a tree fell on me."

"I just whacked you with the flat of my sword. And I'm really sorry," he added. "If you want we can arrange another duel, and this time I promise I'll follow the rules."

“No, completely unnecessary,” Charlez said quickly. “I’m a forgiving sort of fellow, and ready to let bygones be bygones.”

“Then you’re not still mad at me?” Ben said.

“Not at all!” Charlez said. “We’re the best of buddies. I was thinking about it, and this sort of thing happens in the stories sometimes. Two good friends have some sort of tragic fight, but it all turns out for the better. And sometimes the great hero loses a fight early in the story, and it is then that the princess tenderly nurses him back to health. *A Sword for Brothers* was like that.”

“Well, uh, good.” Ben said.

“Yes, that duel may have been the best thing that ever happened to me. It brought me to the attention of the women of the court, you know. They think I’m so brave.”

“How wonderful,” Jess said.

“Yes,” Charlez said, missing her sarcasm. “Beulah is particularly fond of me. I think we have a budding romance.”

“Beulah?” Ben said.

“She is a southern princess.” Charlez sighed dreamily. “She comes from a very large family. She has five older brothers, and is the youngest of seven sisters.”

“So you’re not mad anymore about me having Jess?”

“Of course not!” Charlez waved a hand, as if brushing away some inconsequential crumb. “You’re my trusty assistant. You need to have a princess too.”

“Good,” Ben said, feeling much relieved.

“Besides,” Charlez added, “how can I be mad when my princess is richer than yours, more famous than yours, and with a powerful kingdom hers to inherit!”

“Hers to inherit?” Ben rubbed his chin, feeling confused. “I thought you said she was the seventh daughter. And there are five sons. How can she inherit the kingdom when there are five brothers and six sisters who will inherit the kingdom before her?”

“Because,” Charlez said, sounding as if he were explaining something to a simpleton, “she will inherit the kingdom when all of her siblings tragically die. Some vile and foul person will attempt to usurp the throne, and Beulah will be the only heir who escapes. And I will ride in and rescue her and her

kingdom—unimagined victory snatched from the jaws of defeat. That last despised princess—suddenly heir to the throne. It always works out that way. What books do you read, anyhow?”

“Um, old ones,” Ben said.

“That explains it,” Charlez said. “Old stories are always so morbid and serious. You need to read great literature, like what you find on *The Handmaiden’s Daily* bestseller list.” Charlez held up the magazine he was reading.

Jess snorted. “Can’t you find anything better to read than that magazine trash?”

“What do you mean?” Charlez turned another page. “I have to keep up on what’s happening in the news.”

“I’d rather think there is more important news happening right here in the castle, seeing as we’re preparing to defeat the next great goblin invasion,” Jess said dryly.

“I get all my war info from Ben,” Charlez said. “Besides, this is gripping stuff. Anyone who wants to keep up on the news reads *The Handmaiden’s Daily*.”

“Gossip and speculation is news?”

“Sure, the best kind.”

“What kind of news is that?” Ben asked.

“Oh, what hot babe has broken up with the latest loser and needs a new man.” Charlez licked a finger and then flipped a page. “*The Handmaiden’s Daily* is a veritable treasure-trove of knowledge—the cutting edge. You learn all sorts of things reading this. Want a copy?”

Charlez held out a spare magazine. Ben looked at it curiously. His entire reading collection consisted of old books, and he had never seen a magazine before in his life, having never left York until very recently. The cover was an ink drawing of a skinny man wearing small glasses, a voluptuous woman hanging over his shoulder. The cover screamed: ANTHONY AGNEW SPEAKS OUT.

“Most certainly not!” Jess snatched the magazine away and tossed it on the ground. “Those things contain the most salacious and indecent stories. Ben doesn’t need that kind of education. And what are you finding so fascinating?” she snapped at Ernie. “I thought you hated Anthony Agnew for his cruel mistreatment of the wizard psyche.”

“Anthony Agnew knows nothing about wizards, but he is an expert on love,” Ernie said, not looking up from his magazine. “This issue contains a special article, ‘The True Qualities of Love.’ I’m trying to figure out my romantic possibilities.”

“Yeah, this issue came out just in time for me,” Charlez agreed. “I want to get my relationship with Beulah started right.”

“Anthony Agnew says here that love is a biochemical feeling,” Ernie said. “Love is feeling wonderful—It’s all about feelings.”

“What is he writing about love for?” Jess said, peevishly. “I thought he was a child psychologist.”

“Yes,” Ernie said. “But he is a very learned man. Doubtless he is knowledgeable on many subjects.”

“Like the damaged psyche of wizards,” Jess said.

“No, no, that is his one weakness,” Ernie said. “You have to be a wizard to know how a wizard thinks.”

“So who would you fall in love with?” Charlez asked Ernie. “The article has that biochemical love chart listing compatibilities. It says that if you follow the chart you’re guaranteed the perfect mix for great love.”

“I still haven’t quite figured out my place yet,” Ernie said, leaning close to the candlelight to studiously examine the chart. “Hmmm. It looks like I’m leaning toward ‘cow’ whatever that means.”

“And thus we witness the decline of civilization.” Jess snorted. “You wouldn’t believe what my mother gets from those magazines. When I become queen I’m going to have that publication permanently banned. Come on, Ben. We have things to do.” With that she turned around and walked straight into her father.

“Da!”

“Daughter!” The king jumped. He had come looking for Ben, and was quite surprised to find an entire party.

“The king!” Charlez squeaked. “I’ve been found out at last!”

The bard made an attempt at escape, but discovered that the small confines of the closet—not to mention Ernie’s quilt—made a quick extraction impossible. Instead, he settled for climbing to his feet and striking a dramatic pose, demanding, “Are you on the side of justice and truth?”

“Oh, you’re the dashing fellow who was cruelly abused last night at the ball,” the king said, seeing Charlez’s over-sized head bandage.

“Why, yes,” Charlez said, momentarily put out of his stride. “You heard about that?”

“Would you by any chance be interested in a princess?” the king inquired.

“Indeed I am,” Charlez said, his chest swelling visibly. “A good word on my account subtly dropped in the hearing of my beloved wouldn’t be amiss, if you know what I mean.”

“Excellent!” The king clapped his hands together. He looked happy enough to dance a jig. “I’m so glad I ran into you here. Everything is coming together. How about dining privately with me and the queen this evening?”

Charlez looked ready to fall over. His dreams of glory were coming true faster than even he imagined. “I—I—certainly,” he managed to get out.

“Soooo.” Jess paused. “Did you want something, Da, or were you just curious about Charlez? I didn’t realize you had cultivated the habit of inviting a complete stranger to supper when you have a soon-to-be son-in-law that you could be socializing with.”

“That too, that too,” the king said quickly. “I actually came looking for the man—that is, Ben,” he said, articulating Ben’s name as if it caused him great difficulty. “I have a matter of some importance that I need to discuss with him, privately. I would like to meet with you in my private audience chamber before lunch.”

“Couldn’t you just tell me now?” Ben said.

“No...quite impossible. Social conventions and—” the king waggled his fingers delicately. “It...It is in regards to the wedding. There are matters of... importance. Important matters. You’ll understand. Daughter, I expect to see you at supper.” With a quick nod to the entire group, the king hurried off, humming to himself.

“What about Ben?” Jess called down the empty hall. “Aren’t you going to invite him to supper too?”

“Oh, I don’t need that,” Ben said hastily. “I wouldn’t want anyone to go to any trouble, and besides...” he trailed off. It was hard to explain.

“But it isn’t proper,” Jess said. She frowned. “Inviting Charlez and not you...I wonder what they are up to now.”



It was exactly a half hour before lunch when Ben knocked on the door to



the king's private audience chamber.

"Come in," the king said, trying to sound extra kingly.

Ben entered to find the monarch seated in his padded chair, face set in an expression of somber concern.

"We have some important matters to discuss," the king said before Ben had even finished crossing the room. "It seems there is a grave, a very grave, problem."

"There is?" Ben said. His mind immediately went back over everything he had recently done, trying to think if there were any laws he had broken, or anything even remotely naughty that he had done or might have done. But all he could think of were things the king already knew about.

"Yes," the king said, and stroked his mustache. "Regarding your ah... intended marriage to my daughter."

"A problem?" Ben wanted to ask what sort of problem, but he was afraid that would sound too ignorant.

"Yes. An impediment. A grave impediment. You see, it's customary in these parts that if a man is going to marry a lady of any standing—such as a princess—that he is expected to offer a bride price commensurate with her worth."

There was a long silence.

"Uh..." Ben finally said. "What's a bride price?"

The king grimaced.

"A sum of money or gift. Something to compensate me for the eternal value of my daughter."

"Oh." Ben thought about that for a bit. "So you're saying I'm sort of buying Jess."

"Something like that," the king said through his teeth. "And you must come up with something for her eternal worth. If you can't, sadly, the wedding just won't be able to go forward. In that case I suggest—"

"That is a very odd tradition," he said, interrupting the king's rushed conclusion. He thought it was a little insulting to sell your daughter, but mindful that Jess wanted him to get along with her parents, he kept the opinion to himself.

"However odd you might think our refined traditions," the king lifted his chin haughtily, "it is still expected that—"

"Well, you say something of eternal worth...I think I might have

something. It'll take me about an hour to fetch it. Can you wait?"

"I—I—I...er, certainly," the king stammered.

"Great!" Ben hurried out of the room.

The king stared after him, perplexed. He hadn't the faintest idea what thing of eternal worth a penniless country bumpkin could have, and wished he did. In fact, he didn't know what anyone had that was of eternal worth—he had thought that requirement the brilliant little catch to his whole scheme. He had been rattled by Ben's quick assurance, and now was a bit on the edge of his seat with curiosity.

His first thought had been that perhaps the object of eternal worth was Ben's gold gilded and jewel encrusted sword, and with that thought he had begun considering that maybe it would be an acceptable swap in exchange for Jess. Like all kings, he had sword envy, and couldn't stand someone else having a better sword than him. Goblin Terror would make a fine accessory to his kingly regalia, he thought. Only, Ben had been wearing Goblin Terror and it seemed rather odd that he couldn't just give it right away, so the king was left to speculate on what else the object of eternal worth might possibly be. This wasn't going as planned, and if there was anything the king didn't like it was when things didn't go as planned.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### ETERNAL VALUE

**B**en hurried. He hoped his effort wasn't wasted.

When he had left York those many days ago to bring his message to the king he had accidentally sold his plow horse Ned for three dozen chicken eggs. Over the course of his journey to Galdoron two dozen of the eggs had been destroyed by various foul means, but he still had a dozen left. Before sneaking into the castle to kill the evil wizard Rimmah, Ben, Jess, and Ernie had stayed in the *Wine Sop Inn*, and Ben had left his eggs there, not wanting to risk losing the last of them during any unforeseen disasters while killing Rimmah and rescuing the king and queen. However, with all that had happened after the death of Rimmah, he had forgotten to go back to the inn and retrieve his eggs. He hoped they were still there, because they were the only thing he had that might be close to eternal worth.

Somehow—whether it was luck, or determination springing from pure desperation—Ben managed to find his way through the city and to the *Wine Sop Inn*. It felt like a heroic feat.

It was running late in the lunch hour when he arrived, and there was a medium sized crowd filling the inn as he made his way to the counter. The bartender was a rotund, rather harried looking man with a pronounced comb-over.

“Hello. I, er...excuse me.” Ben managed, with an effort, to not stutter too much as he tried to catch the bartender's attention. “I would like to know—”

“Ah, greetings, sir.” The bartender turned from his previous customer and wiped his hands on a rag. “What can I do for—you!” The man stared.

“Yes, I was wondering if you remembered when I was staying here, because I left—”

“You! It is you, isn’t it? You are him!”

“Yes, I’m me,” Ben said, getting a little flustered and forgetting everything he had meant to say. “And—and—and—I was wondering if I could—I mean, I want—that is, I was wondering—” He felt his face turning red, and thought maybe he had better leave before he found himself thrown into prison.

“Most worshipful lord!” The bartender rushed around the counter, snatching up Ben’s hand and kissing it profusely. “So kind of you to come back! So wonderful of you to remember poor old Gregory!”

“I—I—I—” Ben said. It seemed he wouldn’t be thrown in prison, but he wasn’t sure about this either.

“Everyone!” the bartender shouted, finally releasing Ben’s hand. “This is the great warrior Bennelzor Transom! The mighty, wonderful, hero! He *actually* stayed here before he went to kill the evil wizard Rimmah!”

There was a great commotion as people scrambled from their chairs, quickly gathering around.

Ben stuttered incoherently, put completely out of sorts, and now entirely uncertain what was happening, or what he was supposed to do.

“The first night he came here, he beat off twelve thugs single-handedly,” the bartender told the breathless crowd. “I knew right then he was a hero, a real warrior. I knew he was the one who could stop Rimmah, and I gave him all the help I could!”

There were murmurs of approval from the crowd.

“I—I—I’ve come for my eggs!” Ben said loudly, looking for an escape route.

“Ah...your stuff. Right. I knew you’d come for it. This way.” The bartender led Ben across the room and the crowd followed.

“As soon as I heard what happened in the castle, I knew,” the bartender continued. “I said to myself, ‘Gregory, you must keep those things safe. They will come back for them one day, and thank you for it.’ So, I’ve kept them safe. And to everyone who came here I said, ‘Look, that belongs to the great warrior Bennelzor Transom, and he slept here!’”

They stopped in front of a shelf that was mounted prominently on the wall. The shelf was bracketed by two candles as one might illuminate a holy relic. On the shelf sat a nondescript sack.

“Right. Uh...thanks.” Ben tried ignore the staring eyes that watched from

every side as he took down the sack and peered inside. His dozen eggs were still there.

“Good. I...uh...you have my great, that is my profound and biggest...er thanks. I’ll...ah...I’ll be going now.” He started edging along the wall.

“Why not stay for a bit? Have a meal with us,” the bartender said. “Old Gregory is a good friend. You can tell us of some of your great adventures. Let these people know what kind of man you are!”

“Some other day,” Ben said, the words tripping over each other in the hurry to get out his mouth. I’ve got an appointment, so I can’t stay, and I’ll, ah, I’ll see you all around!” He dashed for the door and took off down the street at a run.

He reached the castle breathless and wide-eyed, clutching his bundle of eggs.

“King’s good name,” he said, glancing over his shoulder as he passed through the gate, half afraid he would see a crowd in pursuit. “I don’t know what that was all about. A man can’t even go about his private business anymore.”

He thought it would be a good idea if he put the eggs in a more beautiful package, but then he considered how the king was waiting for him, and decided he had better just hurry.

“Sorry it took me so long,” he said on entering the private audience chamber. “I was delayed by the crowd.”

“The crowd?” The king straightened in his chair.

“Yes, they wanted me to stay, but it all seemed a little improper and indecent, or something. So I escaped.”

“Uh...really. That’s good...I guess.” The king gave him a most peculiar look.

“Yes, well, anyhow...Here is the bride price for Jess.” Ben finished with as much bold pronouncement as he could manage, and held out the sack to the king.

“Well, my, my, my—” the king hurriedly opened the sack, unable to restrain his eagerness. “I never expected you...” he trailed off.

Ben waited with bated breath.

“Eggs?” The king finally said.

“A dozen chicken eggs,” Ben stepped up beside the throne. “They’re all I have left from what I got for my horse, Ned. See, you hatch those eggs and

you have a dozen chickens. Some of them will be hens, and they will lay more eggs and you can hatch them, and have more chickens, and more chickens, and more chickens!” He threw up his arms, starting to get excited. “Soon, you’ll have as many chickens as you could possibly want. It’s something like eternal value.”

“Eggs,” the king said again, his voice dull and now a little strangled sounding. A *very* strange expression was coming over his face—his small eyes starting out of his pudgy cheeks, lips twitching, mustache quivering. His countenance had, in general, become an unusual shade of scarlet.

“Yes,” Ben agreed. “A full dozen. They’re good eggs. Why, I was going to —”

“Eggs!” The king screamed, and Ben jumped.

“Eggs!” The king leaped from his chair, tossing the egg sack aside, Ben’s quick reaction the only thing that saved them from shattering on the floor.

“I can’t stand it! I suffered all other things in silence, but this!—This is too much! I can’t take it anymore!” The king raced around the room, grasping at his head as if he thought it might explode.

“Too much?” Ben gaped at the king, not sure what to make of the scene. “Well, I—I—I didn’t realize the chickens would be so much of an issue. I thought you’d have plenty of space, having a castle and all, but I could give you only six eggs.”

“Eggs! Eggs!” the king said, the first a shout, the second a scream. He snatched at his throne as if to hurtle it across the room in a fit of rage, but he wasn’t strong enough and so was limited to rocking it back and forth in place in a rather pathetic manner while gasping and snarling in impotent frustration.

“If you want to move that,” Ben offered, “I could do it—”

“Eggs! He is tormenting me! *Tormenting!*” The king’s face had gone beyond red and was now a rather startling shade of purple. “I shall die! Die! What did I do to deserve this! Why? Why? Why must I be afflicted! It’s too much to bear!” He threw himself back into his chair, stomping his feet on the floor and pounding his fists on the armrests in a royal tantrum.

“I don’t know,” Ben said. “You said that you needed something of—”

“Eggs!” the king shrieked a final time.

“I know,” Ben said. “They’re mine and I will give them to you as that bride thingie you talked about so that—”

“Get out! Out, now! Out! Out, and I never want to see you again! Out before—before you kill me!” The king began tearing at his mustache and hair, clumps flying as he gurgled and gibbered, spasming in his chair.

Ben got out.

He passed Jess in the hall, not even noticing her in his state of agitated confusion.

“I don’t understand,” he mumbled, moving blindly forward. “I don’t understand what went wrong. If he said he wanted money...but he said eternal value.”

“Money? Eternal value?” Jess stared after him. “Eh. This doesn’t sound good.” She drew a breath and started toward the private audience chamber.



When Jess slipped into the private audience chamber she found the king silent and still, ashen faced, slumped in his chair.

“Hello, Da,” she said carefully. “Everything settled with Ben?”

“Eggs,” the king burbled. He stared vacantly ahead.

“Excuse me?” Jess looked around the room.

“Eggs.” The king hiccuped. His face twitched.

“What eggs?” Jess said, an uneasy edge coming to her voice, as if she thought she might be now talking to an idiot.

“I’ve had a fit, daughter. A terrible fit. It’s just like I’ve read in the books—just like I knew it would happen. The mental strain became too much. That—that—creature.” The king waved a hand weakly toward the door, slowly coming back to himself. “He almost killed me. He—I told him he needed to present me a bride price for you.”

“Bride price?” A suspicious glint came into Jess’s eyes. “That isn’t traditional. By tradition you would be providing a dowry.”

“Yes...yes...traditionally.” The king struggled upright, fumbling for his handkerchief and dabbing at his face. “But under the circumstances we thought it wise to reverse the situation. It was expedient.”

“I see,” Jess said. And it sounded like she *did* see.

“I told him...I told him he had to provide a bride price worthy of you. It’s only right, Mol,” he said defensively, seeing her accusing look.

“And?” Her lips thinned.

“And he brought me eggs!” The king said, his voice going shrill again. “A dozen eggs! I thought it might be—I thought it would—what cruel idiotic joke —”

Her face broke into a smile. “Oh! The eggs he got for Ned. They’re his most precious possession. And he was going to give them up for me? How sweet!”

“Nothing of the sort!” The king said, growing red again and trembling. “Eggs! A miserable dozen good-for-nothing-rotten-little-eggs! What does he think this is, a barnyard? What does he think you are, a chicken? What does he think I am, a chicken farmer? As many chickens as I could possibly want, he says! Eggs! Eggs for a bride price—I’ve never heard of it! Not in the most savage of nations! Not in my life! It’s enough to bring on a fit! I’m going to have another fit, I can feel it!” He threw himself back in his chair.

Jess took a deep breath. “I can see how this would have surprised you. Ben is different.”

“Different? He’s insane!” The king threw up his hands.

“But I love him,” Jess said firmly. “You just have to understand what he means by something. In any case, it is best if we just forget this ever happened.”

“Not in the least!” The king straightened in his chair. “The entire court needs to hear about this. The entire kingdom! People should know that he is unfit to rule. Eggs! He would have the kingdom ruined in a week.”

“Unfit to rule?” Jess shook her head. “Da, what will they think if they hear you’ve had a fit over eggs? What will the people think when they hear that Ben has reduced you to such a state? If word of this gets around, soon there will be whispers about how madness is taking you, and how unfit you are to rule.”

A look of horror came over the king’s face. This was *exactly* what he lay awake worrying about.

“Daughter—” the king croaked. “Mol, we can’t let that happen. We must do something!”

“Not a word that this happened.” Jess held up a finger to her lips. “Besides, a bride price isn’t traditional, and we wouldn’t want anyone to think we’ve broken with tradition.”

“No. Certainly not.” The king nodded. “Not a word, then. This didn’t happen. Hush-hush, and all that. Very good. Exactly.”



The king mopped his brow again. “Thank you, daughter. I feel much better now. We can all just—get back to our regular lives.”

Jess gave the slightest hint of a curtsy. “I’ll have the list of wedding guests ready in a few days.”

When she left the room she could still hear the king muttering to himself, “Eggs...I mean, really, who would have thought? Eggs...”



Ben wandered the castle halls for hours, his thoughts confounded. He didn’t understand what had happened, and couldn’t figure out what had gone wrong. What more did the king want?

He reached the end of another hall and turned to follow the next passage. As he turned, a flicker of movement caught his eye and he stopped. He looked again and saw Charlez ahead, back to him, scurrying down the hall on tip-toes.

“Charlez!” Ben called out. “I wondered where you had gone!”

“Eeek!” Charlez leaped into the air and whirled around, nearly falling over backward. “Oh! It’s you,” he gasped, laying a hand to his chest.

“What are you doing?” Ben asked. “I checked on your broom closet earlier, and everything was cleaned out.”

“The king gave me my own room. A huge room. It has a plush bed, and everything.”

“So you’re not hiding anymore?”

“Why would I? The king and I are friends. Now it is my job to look out for danger to the kingdom.”

“Is that what you were doing?”

“Yep. Looking for conspirators in the halls. Conspirators are always lurking about in back halls of castles, making plans for assassinations and abductions. I’ll leap out on them unawares.”

“Ah.” Ben thought about it for a bit. “I wonder if that is why the king and Ernie spend so much time in the halls.”

“Exactly.” Charlez peered around the corner. “Everyone lurks about in castle halls, conspiring. It’s what people do in castles. So, if you see any unsavory characters acting strange, you’ll let me know, right? I need some adventure, or a great deed, to impress Beulah.”

“Sure,” Ben said.

“Everything all right with you?” Charlez looked at him. “You seem a little down.”

“Oh, it’s nothing much, I suppose,” Ben said. “I’ve had a bad day, that’s all. I hope it was all just a misunderstanding.”

“Ah. Yes, misunderstandings are fashionable nowadays,” Charlez agreed.

“I suppose. But I’m afraid I’m going to mess up bringing help back to York. My village sent me to bring the king to save them from the goblins. If I make the king too mad, he might decide not to come, and then I will have failed the village.”

“That would be bad,” Charlez said. Ben now had his full attention. “They’re in danger from goblins, you say?”

“Yes. The goblins burned down my farm.”

“That sounds just like an adventure story.” Charlez paused. “Tell you what: I’ll talk with the king about it this evening. I can be a really persuasive fellow. I’ll get you an entire army to rescue your village, Ben.”

“That would be great,” Ben said. “You can talk so much better than me.”



As it turned out, the king was still feeling too ill from his fit and so was forced to excuse himself from supper. Instead he went to bed early and burned the late night candles poring over his books on mental illness. Jess also refused to attend, because Ben was not invited. Supper became a meal for two, the queen and Charlez alone in their attendance.

Charlez went to the meal fully intending to lay out a persuasive case for rescuing Ben’s village. The queen went to the meal fully intending to convince Charlez of the glories of marrying her daughter. While Charlez was still trying to formulate what he felt was the perfect opening—and most moving argument—the queen promptly launched into her discussion of womanly attributes. Fifteen minutes later, all thoughts of the goblins had been driven from the bard’s mind, his muse caught up in the perfection of princesses, and the excitement of romance.

The queen and Charlez talked late into the night, and both left the table feeling very satisfied with themselves. However, the conversation was nowhere near as profitable as either imagined, because they managed to pass

the entire evening with the queen presuming they were talking about Jess, and Charlez imagining they were talking about his beloved Beulah. All their points of agreement were, as a result, very confused.

And no mention had been made of York, or the goblins.

Later, the king and queen lay in their large bed, both of them staring up at the ceiling. The candles were still burning, though the hour had grown very late.

“So,” the king said. “I think the stress of dealing with that man is...er... straining my mind.”

“You mean the fit you had today?”

“Yes...yes. I’ve been reading a book this evening, and all of the mental strain I’ve been experiencing is very dangerous. There is this chapter on the descent into madness. It’s horrible, Gertrude. We must get rid of that man before I succumb completely! It’s a matter of my sanity, my very life or death!”

“Then you finally see we must make plans,” the queen said.

“But what?” The king rested his head in his hands. “I don’t even *dare* to plot killing him now. The way things go with that man, such a scheme would rebound on me, to horrible effect. I feel like I’ve already been defeated. Those eggs...”

“We don’t need to kill him now. I’ve come up with a better plan.” The queen folded her hands. “It’s clear that our daughter has completely lost her mind—”

“Don’t say that!”

“I’m speaking in the romantic sense, Harry. If there had been any doubt about her state, the fact that she wasn’t moved by the recent disastrous events proves she is utterly and foolishly besotted, to the point of complete blindness. There are rare times when this happens. So we must save her from herself! It is our moral duty. She will thank us in the end.”

“Yes, well—I think the same thing. But how do we do it safely? I’m not going to risk my life for the good of the kingdom. Or even the good of our family name, if it comes down to it. I’d rather be alive. And sane. I want my sanity back.”

“Don’t worry. I have it all figured out.” She leaned close, her eyes gleaming with anticipated victory. “I spent the evening talking with the brilliant Charlez, and while we were talking a most wonderful idea came to

me: we should go deal with the goblin threat!”

“Goblins?” The king’s cheeks quivered. “I thought we had agreed that the threat from them was just the product of people’s overactive imaginations.”

“There isn’t really a goblin threat,” the queen said. “But it is the perfect pretense! We can use an *imagined* one to our ends. Invite this...this person to a private meeting. Tell him that you’ve concluded that the threat to his village must be dealt with immediately, without delay. Our daughter has been convinced that there is a goblin threat. So we show her that she is wrong. We take the entire court out—when everyone sees that there is no goblin threat, and what a filthy provincial village that man comes from, the entire court will revile him, and even Jess will be ashamed of him. If we show her that this man has deluded her, then she will hate him.”

“But what if there actually are a few goblins?” the king said.

“Even better! If there are a few goblins, we should be able to send that man off to find them and get himself killed, and Charlez can swoop in and comfort our daughter. Or else the court will see how incompetent that barbarian is at dealing with the situation, and Charlez can step in and prove his genius. Charlez was telling me what a great warrior he is—the court will love him, and so will Jess. Harry, this way we can’t lose! One way or another, this little adventure will rid us of that man.”

“Yeah...yeah, that’s true.” The king looked first thoughtful, then increasingly eager. “Brilliant, in fact, my dear. I knew there was a reason I married you. So it’s off to rid ourselves of this man—and get ourselves a decent son-in-law!”



# CHAPTER TWELVE

## MATTERS OF STATE

The brisk mid-morning breeze cut across the top of the castle walls, keeping the air cool ahead of the approaching thunderclouds that Ernie *hadn't* foreseen the day before. Ben and Jess were on the battlements, enjoying the brisk air while they engaged in some sword practice. The clash of their blades had, at first, caused quite a stir on the castle grounds below. A small crowd gathered as people thought the princess had finally snapped and was attempting to do in her erstwhile betrothed. Then everyone realized that, rather than seeing the error of her ways, the princess was acting very unladylike and joining her suitor in martial training in the most scandalous manner. So everyone went back to what they were doing.

They had been practicing since early morning, and at last Jess said, "That's all for today. I must save some energy for other responsibilities."

"And I have another meeting I must attend," Ben said regretfully, sheathing Goblin Terror. "I wish we could do more."

"Says the man who not so long ago thought he was so bumbling with a sword that he didn't want me to teach him at all, for fear he would kill me."

"That was before...I still don't care about swords, but I like the time with you."

"That's very sweet. I doubt many men engage in martial training so they can spend more time with their beloved." Jess sheathed her sword and leaned against the top of the wall beside him, staring out over the spreading roofs of the city Galdoron. Ben turned to look with her, his gaze going further to the distant horizon, and the storm clouds hovering there.

“We’ll be leaving as soon as we can after the wedding,” she said, abruptly. “I know you’re worried about York.”

Ben said nothing.

She sighed, leaning her head against his shoulder. “Do you miss your parents?”

“Yes,” he said, absently playing with her hair as he watched the distant hills. He would have been very embarrassed if he had realized what he was doing, being a very proper sort of fellow, but Jess didn’t seem to mind.

“Would they be glad that we’re getting married?”

“My Ma would.”

“And your Da?”

“I dunno. He’s funny that way,” Ben said truthfully. “If he liked you he would be glad. I think he’d like you.”

“We’ll make my parents send an army with us.”

“I hope so. Charlez said he would talk to the king and queen about sending an army.” The army wasn’t Ben’s primary concern—simply getting back to York would have been good in his opinion. In a vague sort of way he knew an army was supposed to be a good idea when going against a goblin horde with a giant goblin chieftain, but somehow he still had a hard time liking the idea of leading an army. Every time he thought about it, he got an achy, worried feeling in his stomach. He still preferred his idea of going back all by himself and killing Uug-lukk. It seemed...so much simpler.

“Charlez is going to speak with my parents about getting an army? Well...” Jess was about to say that Charlez couldn’t persuade a flea of anything, but then remembered the bard was Ben’s friend and decided to let it go. “In any case, we’ll speak persuasively,” she said. “You have that meeting with my Da today. He probably just wants to fret at you about the wedding, but explain to him why it is necessary and imperative that we deal with the goblin threat. Then, later, I’ll speak with him. Together we’ll make him see what must be done. You will speak to him about it at the luncheon, won’t you? It’s going to be the two of you, talking about matters of state. It would be the perfect chance.”

“Certainly, I’ll speak with him,” Ben said, with as much vigor as he could manage. He tried to ignore the growing sick feeling in his stomach. “I just hope it all goes...right.”

“Of course it will,” Jess said firmly. “Why wouldn’t it?”

“Well, there is that time I fell out the window, and yesterday...the eggs...”

“Oh, that,” Jess laughed. “Don’t worry about *that*. I straightened it all out.”

“You did? I thought I made such a mess that—”

“It’s just how things are spun, that’s all. It was easy to convince my Da to see the situation in a different light. You did wonderful.”

“You got him to accept the eggs?” Ben said, amazed. “I thought—”

“No,” Jess said. Then she saw Ben’s expression, and realized a gift spurned was still a gift spurned, no matter if the marriage went forward. The eggs *were* the most precious thing Ben had and he *had* offered them for her. “He’s not getting the eggs,” she continued quickly. “It is most insulting to be bought. But I’d like it very much, Ben, if you gave me the eggs as a wedding gift.”

“You would?” His face brightened. “And hatch them? And have lots of chickens?”

“They would be very precious to me.” She had never raised chickens before in her life, but Ben had given them to her, and she thought she wouldn’t mind being called the chicken princess.

“Then I’m glad,” he said, and he looked it, too. “I’ll get them now.”



The king had scheduled his meeting with Ben for directly after lunch. He hoped a full stomach would fortify him for the meeting. The meeting place was a balcony on the side of one of the high towers. The king thought perhaps the fresh air would keep his mind clear, and ward off another fit. At least, one of his books had told him that was the case. “Fresh air is the key to all good health,” Dr. Blanworthy had written. “A daily walk strengthens the spirit and drives away bad draughts known to affect every bodily function.” It sounded encouraging, but the king wasn’t sure what Dr. Blanworthy would have said about rain—and if the sky was any indication, they would have rain shortly.

The far horizon was a sheet of darkness. Lightening flickered among the clouds, followed by the distant rumble of thunder. The wind blew steadily, snapping the tower pennants, leaping in sudden fierce gusts. The air carried the smell of rain, and if one looked carefully it could be seen, falling like a gray curtain from the distant clouds.

“Looks like rain,” the king said, grasping to start the conversation. After the formal greeting, the two of them hadn’t spoken for the last three minutes.

“Did I ever tell you about the day I first met Jess,” Ben blurted out.

“Not at all,” the king said, his tone implying that he would rather be dragged through a barnyard naked than hear the story.

Ben wasn’t very good at picking up hints.

“It was a night, actually,” he said. “I had just been thrown out of town, and it was raining. Pouring, like that storm coming this way. I was walking along, miserable, with no idea where I was going, or what I was doing. Then Jess leaped out from the darkness, knocked me down in the mud, and put a sword to my throat. I didn’t realize it then, but I wouldn’t have made it here without her. I think maybe I fell in love with her that night. She was so fierce and beautiful...and kind.”

The king cleared his throat, loudly.

“So, anyhow, this is a nice place to have a meeting,” Ben said. “Except, sometimes it can be dangerous to do stuff high up.” He was trying to work himself up to talking about dealing with the goblin threat, but any time he got ready, he felt stuttering gathering in his throat. Important things made him stutter worse.

“Really. How so?” the king said, with forced politeness.

“You might fall. Or jump. Have you ever looked down from a high place, and wondered what it would be like if you jumped, and then felt the urge to jump, just to find out? See, I look down from here and wonder how long I could scream before I hit the ground.”

“Not at all! Completely inappropriate.” The king fidgeted. He wasn’t sure if that was some veiled threat, or just the babbling of an insane man, but he didn’t like where the conversation was going. It was time to get the conversation on the right track. “So, about this meeting...” he said.

“Right.” Ben straightened, gripping the rail with determination. “What I need to tell you is that the goblin threat must be dealt with, and an army might be a good idea.” That was what Ben meant to say. What actually came out was,

“WhatIneedtotellyouisthatthegoblinthreatmutsbedealtwithandanarmymightbeagoodidea.”

The king didn’t understand a word, but was unnerved by the sudden thought that throwing himself from the balcony to escape the conversation



might be a good idea. He took a hasty step back. Clearly, the meeting needed a speedy end.

“Duke of York, I called this meeting to discuss matters of state. We have important matters of state to discuss. That is, to inform you that I have concluded that the threat to your village is very grave, and must be dealt with immediately.”

“I know I don’t talk very good, but it really is important and—what?” Ben said, finally grasping what the king said—or what he thought the king said.

“Immediately, before the wedding,” the king added, not listening to anything Ben had said, or stuttered. He needed to escape, quickly. “We’ll be leaving in a few days. Make sure you are prepared. That will be all.”

Ben opened his mouth, but before he could say anything the king was gone.

“I—thank you. I guess.” He looked around the empty balcony. “That was a little easier than I thought. I guess speaking persuasively isn’t quite what I thought. Jess will be happy when she hears this.”



When Ben called Jess and Charlez together to tell them the news of his success, Jess was pleased, but puzzled too.

“That was a little easier than I expected,” she said. “I anticipated I would need to do some follow up persuasion.”

“It must be Charlez did such a good job that the king didn’t need much more persuading,” Ben said.

“The influence of my demeanor is quite strong,” Charlez said. “I didn’t even have to say anything. By simply being there, I changed the queen’s thoughts on the matter.”

“Possibly not in the manner anyone imagines.” Jess frowned to herself. “This didn’t just *happen*. I wonder what scheming they are up to.” Whatever it was, she felt certain it had something to do with usurping Ben’s position. Events would need watching.

“At least we got what we wanted, right?” Ben said, hopefully.

“Sort of,” Jess said. “I wasn’t exactly looking to take the entire court along. And I was planning on enough time to muster a large army, not just take the castle guard. I never thought I would be the one complaining of recklessness,

but this really seems hasty.” She shook her head. “I’m starting to think like that confounded wizard. You have Goblin Terror—we can make it work.”

“That’s good. I was supposed to bring back help from the king, so the people of York should be happy.”

“It’s for the best.” Jess nodded to herself, as if reaching a conclusion. “When you defeat the goblins, the court will see how good you are. Then they will accept you. It will make everything better.”

“Then I guess that is good, too.” Ben looked down at his boots. Somehow, he didn’t feel as happy as he thought he should.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### WORRIES

**A**dvisor! Advisor!" the king panted. "I need your advice!" Ernie—who had caught wind that *something* was up and had been trying to keep out of sight all day—nervously turned around. "Always a pleasure to see you, my king," he said, not very truthfully. "How can I assist you today?"

"I need you to start planning," the king said, trying to catch his breath. He had been running around in a tizzy since breakfast, trying to prepare the court for the northern expedition.

"Planning for what?" Ernie said cautiously.

"A little excursion," the king said. "The entire court is going. We'll be leaving by the end of the week. I need you to do whatever planning and preparation a grand advisor does. I don't want anything forgotten."

"Plan—" Ernie said.

"Everything! Omit no detail." With an admonishing wave of his finger, the king left as quickly as he had come.

"An excursion?" Ernie's face brightened. "I thought it would be work—but I know what excursion means: A vacation to the beach. We're going to the beach! Finally!" The wizard did a little happy dance, right in the middle of the hall, then caught himself. "I must pack! There is so much packing I must do. I'll need to pack lots of food, a few good books, and—oh yes—my favorite beach towel. We'll need maps in case we get lost, and spare pillows in case we're not comfortable. Then we can't forget about—"

"What are you so excited about, Ernie?" Ben said, coming around the

corner.

“I’m going to the beach!” Ernie seized Ben by the shoulders. “It was all in my plan! Become a grand advisor to the king and get invited on a lavish vacation to the beach! I’m going to the beach!”

The wizard danced off down the hall.

“He’s going to the beach?” Ben spoke to the empty hall. “That’s odd. With the rest of us going north I would have thought—well, I suppose the king knew how much Ernie hates dealing with goblins, and decided to be extra nice to him.” That made sense to him.

Putting the matter from his mind, Ben continued on his way to Charlez’s bedroom. The bard was also packing. Books were scattered over the plush canopy bed, and more were stacked on the floor. Charlez muttered to himself as he tried to cram more into a sack.

“Are you going to the beach, too?” Ben said.

“Heck, no.” Charlez stepped back from his work and wiped his brow. “I’m going with you on a real adventure. As I thought, the king asked me to come and help deal with the goblin trouble. I’m going to take care of your problem for you, Ben.”

“I’m glad you get to come,” Ben said. “I had come to tell you that I would have to leave—but now you get to come with me!”

“Yeah, I’ll be able to show you all sorts of cool things.” Charlez returned to sorting through the books on the bed, tossing some aside and attempting to add others to the sack.

“What are you doing?” Ben finally asked.

“Packing,” Charlez said.

“Books?” It wasn’t exactly what came to Ben’s mind when he thought of defeating goblins.

“I picked up all the discard books from the castle library. I want to take as many as I can. They make for good consultation.”

“How is that?” Ben watched curiously.

“Well, say we’re surrounded by a horde of foul creatures. I take up *Eternal Blood* and I see that the hero Angirk challenged the leader of the foul ogres to single combat. While the ogres were distracted by this battle, Angirk sent most of his warriors around to surprise the ogres from behind. So, if we’re attacked I’ll know one possible course of action.”

“That’s a lot of books. I hope we don’t need to make that many decisions.”

"I doubt it," Charlez said. "I'm just being prepared. Besides, it will give me stuff to read, so I won't get bored on the long ride."

"Good idea," Ben said. "I'll let you get back to packing...and go pack myself."

Back in his room, Ben realized he didn't have anything to pack. He had been sent out from York with three dozen eggs, a small amount of bread and cheese, and a massive hammer. What bread and cheese he hadn't eaten had been ruined, and what eggs hadn't been destroyed he had just given to Jess. The hammer had been broken when he killed the bikalis. All he had now was Goblin Terror, which Ernie had given to him during the journey. Since the magical sword struck terror into the heart of any goblin when it was drawn, it was very important for this adventure. But it didn't require much packing.

He sat down in the chair beside his bed and stared at the wall on the other side of the room. Ben didn't know what to do with himself, but he wished he could shake the apprehensive feeling that bubbled in his stomach. Help was coming to York. He had done his job. Everything would be wonderful.

Ben told himself this, but found he wasn't believing it. A voice whispered in the back of his mind that disaster was coming.

"There you are," Jess said, opening the door. "What are you doing?"

"Packing," he said. It sounded better than saying he was hiding from the court.

"Packing what?" Jess looked around the room.

Ben shrugged. "I don't have anything to pack."

"Exactly. We need to get you some proper clothes for traveling. I'll have a talk with your wardrobe servants. I'll do that later—come on, you can keep me company while I pack."



By the end of the week the entire court was prepared for the journey north—or, as prepared as they thought they needed to be. The king had packed his entire collection of mental health literature, the queen had packed plenty of soap, and the entire court had packed whatever comforts they thought they would need for a few short weeks out in uncivilized country. Ernie—still oblivious to the true intentions of the journey—had three mules packed with supplies for a beach vacation.

Amidst all the hubbub, Jess had made sure all the fighting men that could be gathered were well equipped for battle.

At the end of the week the entire court rode down the main street of Galdoron, dressed in full regalia, cheering crowds lining the way. It was a beautiful morning. Drizzle had lingered through the night, but with dawn the clouds had broken up and now the sky stretched out in a clear blue, the sun shining on the sparkling wet roofs of the city.

The king and queen waved to the people with a royal dignity. Charlez rode directly behind the king and queen, waving wildly to the crowd, grinning fit to burst. The wizard rode beside him, munching on a bag of nuts, and blowing kisses at the mass of people. “Look at how happy they are for us,” Ernie said. “I knew a vacation to the beach was a good idea!”

Jess didn’t hear Ernie’s comment, and even if she had she wouldn’t have paid it any mind. She tried—as much as possible—to ignore the wizard. This morning she was preoccupied, and simply lifted one hand in acknowledgment of the crowd. Ben rode beside her, sitting very still on his horse. Without even looking, Jess knew he was riding with his eyes closed. Much as he didn’t like wearing armor, she thought maybe she should have got him a helmet with a visor.

A fanfare of trumpets heralded their approach to the gates. As they passed through the massive gateway Ernie began humming, “We’re going to the beach, we’re going to the beach.”

Nobody heard him.

They made slow progress that day. The court didn’t believe in riding quickly. The noblemen were concerned about putting on a good show, and the women were concerned about becoming saddle sore—and besides, the countryside was beautiful, the day lovely, and there was so much to see. Jess ground her teeth in frustration for most of the day. A few hours was enough to convince her that the journey was going to be excruciating, and sure to feel five times longer than it actually was, and be ten times longer than necessary. The first day was enough to remind her why she had run away from the court the last time she had decided to deal with the goblin problem.

Ben was happy to be going home. The fact that he was finally on the way back to York—and his parents—was enough to enable him to put all the gnawing worries out of his mind, at least temporarily. He ignored the court, and enjoyed the open air and sunshine. When he wasn’t lost in his own

thoughts, he listened to Charlez tell stories.

As evening approached the caravan stopped and set up camp. A field of brightly colored tents spread out on either side of the road. Ben had his own tent—it was absolutely huge in his opinion, and too gaudy with its red and white stripes. But Jess said the man set to marry the princess of the kingdom needed a tent to suit his role. Ben didn't know anything about all of that, but he did know it was very hard to set up a tent that large by yourself. This problem was made worse by a strange absence of servants in his vicinity. The only thing that saved him from complete disaster was Ernie and Charlez offering to help.

"That is one fancy tent you have," Charlez said, as they pounded in the last ten pegs. "It's a lot better than my tent."

"You can share it with me," Ben said. "It's too big just for me."

"What about me?" Ernie said. "I thought we were going to stay in some lavish inn, so I didn't pack any tent."

"Sure, you can stay too," Ben said. "It's more tent than I need."

With the tent prepared for the night, Ben started a fire and cooked supper for the threesome. He wondered where Jess had gone—she had been called away by some courtier shortly after the court began to set up camp—but decided against looking for her. She was surely occupied with court business, and as much as he wanted to see her, the idea of putting himself in a crowd of well-polished people who looked down their noses at him was enough to give him pause.

After supper Charlez announced that he was going to speak with the king, and consult on matters of importance. "And if I happen to see Beulah—well, it will just happen. I mean, she'll just happen to notice that I'm a man of action." So saying, the bard marched off into the maze of tents.

Ben watched him go, feeling a small pang of envy. A part of him wished he could get along with the court like Charlez did. It seemed everyone liked the bard.

"This is the life," Ernie announced, pulling out his quilt and threading a needle for some evening work. "Didn't I tell you a beach vacation is where we all needed to go?"

"Many times," Ben said, politely understating Ernie's whining insistence the entire previous adventure. "Maybe some day I'll go with you."

"Some day?" Ernie shook his head. "We should be there in a few days."

“Ernie, I’m not going to the beach. I’m going to fight goblins.” Ben poked at the fire with a stick. He was thinking of looking for Jess in spite of the court officials.

“Of course you’re going to the beach,” Ernie insisted happily. “You’ve been misinformed. We’re all going to the beach.”

“Not right away,” Ben said, vaguely. He never saw much point in arguing with the wizard. “Say, Ernie, I’m going to look for Jess. If she comes back here, let her know I’m out looking for her.”

“Certainly,” the wizard said. “And if you find her, ask her how soon we’ll be at the beach.”

Ben discovered it was difficult to navigate camp. The field of tents reminded him of the time he had rescued Ernie from Dougyal’s camp, only to become turned around and forget the way out. Except, this camp was even bigger. Ben became turned around twice before he finally made it to the king and queen’s royal tent. There he found Charlez talking excitedly with the king and queen, but Jess was nowhere in sight. Everyone else ignored him.

“Where is Jess?” Ben asked at the first moment he could insert a comment in the story Charlez was telling about an essay quiz he had aced.

“She left some time ago,” the queen said, curtly. “If you haven’t seen her, perhaps she doesn’t wish to be seen. She may be tiring of you.”

Ben left. He hoped Jess hadn’t become lost, but on thinking it over he decided that was impossible. Jess was never lost. Then he thought she might be in some kind of trouble. He couldn’t imagine exactly what kind of trouble she might find in the middle of the camp, but that very fact made him worry.

After a half hour of increasingly frantic searching, he found Jess outside the camp. She was standing on the rise at the edge of the camp, staring toward the distant Shiddow Mountains, lost in thought.

“I found you at last,” Ben said, feeling much relieved. He came to stand beside her.

“You were looking for me?” She stirred.

“A bit. You were gone a long time.”

Jess gave a small shake of her head, then ran a hand through her hair. “Has it really been that long? I guess I lost track of time.”

“What’s the matter?” He looked closely at her face, noticing her furrowed brow, and troubled eyes. “You’re worried.”

“A little. Maybe more than a little,” she admitted.



“I thought this was what we wanted,” Ben said, glancing back at the camp.

“We were supposed to have more of an army. I thought maybe we could at least rally people from the countryside. But my Da is determined that we don’t. They don’t realize how serious this is. To them it’s...it’s a game!”

“And you’re worried about something,” he said.

“The goblins,” she said. “I’m afraid we don’t have much time before they move in force, and instead of an army prepared to meet them, we have a party out for a lark.”

“We have Goblin Terror.” He rested a hand on the hilt of the sword at his side.

“We do,” she agreed. “But is that really enough to defeat an entire goblin invasion? The sword doesn’t make you invincible, Ben. And who knows what could come up—who knows what the goblins might have. We have a lot of people with us on this journey, Ben, but make no mistake: The two of us are very much alone in facing the goblins.”



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### MALICIOUS SHADOW DEMONS

**M**uch of the morning was already lost by the time the camp was packed and the court had returned to the road. However, the court had also grown bored of marveling over the countryside, and many were of the opinion that this little adventure was best finished as soon as possible so everyone could return to feasting and dancing in Galdoron. As a result, the party made good progress through the remainder of the morning and the early afternoon.

It was late afternoon when they entered the outskirts of a town, proclaimed by a battered sign as Avvin.

“This is good,” the king said. “We should be able to get a comfortable place to sleep and a hot meal tonight.”

“I agree. We should stop,” the queen said. “I need a decent bath. It’s been far too long since I had a decent bath.”

“A warm bed and a hot meal are the only things that make life worth living,” Ernie opined sagely.

A murmur of agreement began to work through the mounted court.

Jess groaned under her breath, a sound only Ben heard.

“Is it really so wise to stop here?” she said, raising her voice so more could hear. “Imagine how uncivilized the people are in this town. When was the last time they washed the sheets on their beds? Think about all the fleas, and bedbugs. And what about how the people will smell? All of those coarse, unwashed—”

“On the other hand, we can still get a good bit more travel in today,” the

queen said hastily. “No point in stopping early, Harry.”

“Very true,” the king said, not sounding quite so certain. “A little more fresh air will do us all some good, I suppose. We push on!”

The queen mumbled something about avoiding the fleas.

Jess looked at Ben, and a slight smile flitted across her face.

After that, the court settled into a routine of travel. There was some grumbling about why they had even bothered to leave Galdoron, but the next several days passed uneventfully. The king and queen bided their time, Jess fretted, and Ben spent a lot of time listening to Charlez carrying on a rather one-sided conversation with Ernie about an amazingly large selection of trashy novels. With the fine summer weather they made good progress northward. One morning as they were saddling up their horses Jess commented to Ben that they were getting close to York, and they must keep an extra sharp lookout for goblins.

“How close to York?” Ben said. “We’re taking a different road than the one I traveled to Galdoron, so I don’t recognize our path.”

“This is a better road.” Jess cinched her saddle tight. Much to the distress of her parents, she had insisted on wearing her choice of traveling garb—a white shirt with puffy sleeves, a deep green sleeveless jacket along with a green cloak, her sword, black pants, and pointed black boots. It was a great scandal, but all of the pleading of the king and queen and all of the disapproval of the court couldn’t move her. “You’ll know we’re almost to York when we reach roads you recognize. As of today, we’re about two or three days from the village.”

Close to mid-afternoon the riders came upon a small village. Ben was very happy to see that it wasn’t ransacked, burned, or showing any other signs of goblin destruction. But the greeting from the townspeople was very odd.

When the travelers first entered the village they found the street deserted, the houses quiet and still along the dirt road. As they started down the street—Ben fingering the hilt of *Goblin Terror* uneasily—faces started appearing in windows, timid eyes peering out before disappearing quickly. Then, hesitantly, people began to appear in doorways, a few slowly making their way out onto the street, more following. Soon, an entire crowd had gathered. The faces stared at the travelers with a strange mixture of relief, hope, and fear.

“Hello, good folk,” Ben said, trying to sound cheerful.

“Why the long faces?” Jess said, being more direct. Her eyes scanned the crowd, her voice guarded and slightly uncertain.

“You all look like you just woke up from a bad dream and aren’t sure if it was real or not,” Ben said.

“Then you don’t know?” an old man at the front of the crowd said.

“Well, sometimes when I have nightmares I’m not sure at first, but I figure it out after a bit,” Ben said.

“O king, didn’t you receive our message?” The old man’s lined face seemed to sag even more. “Aren’t you here to save us?”

“What’s the problem?” Jess said. “Is there anything we can do to help?”

“I can tell you the nightmare wasn’t real,” Ben said helpfully. “It might have been something you ate before you went to bed, or because you told each other scary bedtime stories. But whatever the reason, it was all just in your imagination. My Ma always said to not think of scary stories before going to bed.”

“No, this is real,” the old man insisted, stepping forward. “We’ve seen it with our own eyes.”

“Goblins?” Jess said.

“Worse,” the man rasped, his eyes flickering to one side then the other.

“This is going to get good,” Charlez said, urging his horse to the front of the crowd. “In *Fangs of Revenge* there are these demented creatures that are terrorizing a town, just like this. It was very exciting.”

“Yes, but as I remember in the story a lot of people were dismembered in the process—something I don’t look forward to. Let’s just move along. The beach is waiting for us, you know.” Ernie nervously fingered his staff, eying the townspeople as if they had something that might be catching.

“Were they rats?” Ben said. “When I was growing up I sometimes heard rats in my bedroom at night and I would think they were monsters.”

“No, they were these multi-limbed slaving bestial creatures,” Charlez said. “I think they came up out of a graveyard or something. I can’t remember that part.”

“Hold on,” Jess said. “Start at the beginning, grandfather. We got no message at the court. Did you send someone?”

“A week ago,” the old man said. “We sent one of our young men to the king to beg him to come with an army and save us. We’ve been waiting.”

“My town had problems with the goblins, and they sent me to the king,”

Ben said. "We're going back now."

"We're going to fix every problem," the king pronounced.

"If there really is a problem," the queen added, "this young man is going to show us how he can do it."

"But you say your problem is worse than goblins." Jess ignored her mother, watching the old man and the crowd with a skeptical expression.

"It started about a month ago," the man said hoarsely. "There were strange noises at night. People saw...they saw unnatural things in the dark. Animals began to disappear. Houses were mysteriously damaged. Then people began to disappear. The night swallowed them."

"Were there strange guttural screams?" Charlez asked.

The old man shook his head.

"And you're sure it wasn't goblins?" Jess said.

"I saw goblins in the last goblin war, mistress," the old man said. "Goblins are fat, short, black, and hairy—clawed creatures with bulbous noses, crooked sharp teeth, and black beady eyes. We have heard reports of goblins troubling nearby towns, but these...these aren't goblins. These are shadows."

"A shadow can't do anything," Jess said patiently.

"Demons." The old man shivered and wrapped himself in his arms. "Dark things from the infernal regions. Living shadows of horror. We cannot stop them. Every night is a terror."

"But soon, we'll be safe," someone piped up from back in the crowd. "The king will save us! We've heard he has a powerful wizard in his service."

"Exactly! We'll take care of any problem you might have," the king said, expanding his chest.

"I advise that we don't trouble ourselves with such trifles," Ernie said quickly. "It's likely nothing, and besides, we have those reservations at the beach waiting for us. We wouldn't want any delay."

"The beach?" The king gave Ernie a puzzled look.

"Yes. Our little excursion to the beach," the wizard prompted.

"We're not going to the beach," the king said. "We're going north. Though, the beach does sound like an excellent idea."

Ernie looked confounded.

"Back to the matter at hand," Jess said. "Do these creatures come every night?"

"I...they don't seem to," the man said. "But we don't venture out. They are

shadows, and deadly malice.”

Jess pressed her lips together, thinking.

“I could save them,” Charlez piped up. “I know how to kill these demon shadow things. You slit their throats. I read the book.”

“Yes, Charlez is a great warrior,” the queen said loudly. “The perfect man to lead an army in troubled times.”

“We’ll keep that in mind,” Jess said, sounding *very* long-suffering. She turned back to the old man. “We have an urgent journey northward. “Tell me, do you think we will meet this trouble if we continue north?”

“Certainly.” The old man paled. “And they would suck away all of your beauty, and shorten your life by ten years at the very sight.”

“That’s right,” Ernie declared. “We’ll be turning about immediately!”

“Nothing of the sort,” Jess said firmly. An uncertain murmur had begun to spread among the women of the court. “If that trouble bothers us, we’ll deal with it. We’re heading north, and nothing is going to stop us.”

Ernie gurgled and gave a small squeak, pawing at Jess’s sleeve. She ignored him and nudged Mankiller forward.

“Never fear, people!” Charlez declared as they rode through the town. “Your troubles are over! Victory rides with us!”

The queen looked pleased.

“Didn’t you hear the old man?” Ernie finally managed to splutter. “What are you doing? We must go back. We’ll surely perish!”

“And what exactly is going to make us perish?” Jess asked patiently.

“The malicious shadow demon thingie,” Ernie said shrilly. “Weren’t you listening to anything?”

“Apparently more closely than you.”

“It does sound like we’ll have a tough fight on our hands,” Ben commented.

“I don’t know,” Jess said. “I’m thinking you might have been right in the first place, Ben—these people sound like they have a large dose of over-active imaginations. People get like that about seeing things in the dark. Shadows? It seems about all they really know is that something is going bump in the night. It likely is nothing more than some goblins, or thieving, murdering bandits. Even so, we’ll keep a sharp eye out.”

“I hope it is some malicious shadow demon,” Charlez said, and gripped the hilt of his sword. “They hold no fear for me. I laugh in the face of shadow

demons. I'm rather surprised that a wizard of the third order would concern himself about such trifling things."

"Because this wizard of the third order wishes to remain a live wizard," Ernie snapped. "You, Mister Big-Mouth, don't know a shadow demon from your own shadow. If you actually saw one you'd fall over in a dead faint!"

"I know all about them!" Charlez retorted hotly. "Fantastic creatures was one of my areas of expertise in college!"

"I was dealing with beasts from the infernal regions before you were out of diapers," Ernie shouted.

"I am—"

"All right, all right," Jess said. "That's enough. If we're attacked by some malicious shadow demon, Charlez will defend Ernie. If Charlez thrashes this supposed creature, then Ernie must admit he was wrong. If Charlez is devoured, Ernie will have the satisfaction of knowing he was right."

"Fine," Ernie said. "At least then I'll get a head start running away. But I still say we forget all this and head somewhere else, like, say, the coast lands. There is no point in us going off and being heroes or something. Better we leave that to someone else."

"Ha! Northward, I say!" Charlez drew his sword with a flourish that nearly took off Ben's ear in the process. "I hope we meet this foul creature, so I can prove my worth!"



Evening found Ben and Jess at work pitching Ben's tent. They were alone—or as alone as anyone could be in the bustle of the camp. Charlez was off wooing Beulah, and last Ben had seen Ernie had been begging some cook for a few treats.

"Thanks for helping," Ben said once the last tent peg was in place.

"Don't thank me—I was glad for the chance to get away." Jess stepped back to examine the tent. "I'm completely sick of hearing my mother talk about Charlez. To hear her go on, you'd think he was going to be her fabulous new son-in-law."

"Charlez is nice, and he does tell good stories," Ben said.

"Maybe." Jess sounded as if she didn't want to grant anything to her mother's account. "But I need some peace and quiet."

“Ah, there you are—I’m glad I found you,” Ernie said, coming around the corner of the tent. “It’s time to straighten a few things out.”

“There goes my peace and quiet,” Jess grumbled.

“Yes.” Ernie brushed pastry crumbs from his beard, a smear of white frosting clinging to his mustache. “Somehow, everyone has become turned around and we’re heading north instead of heading south to the beach.”

“Nobody ever intended to go to the beach,” Jess said, exasperated. “Except perhaps one delusional wizard.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Ernie adjusted his hat irritably. “Why would anyone want to go north? The only thing there besides trees and mountains are goblins.”

“Exactly,” Jess said.

“It’s completely stupid to vacation where goblins are on the loose, because you never know when you might run into one, and have it completely ruin your day. Doesn’t anyone else think about these sort of things? Everyone is going to regret this,” Ernie declared. “But since when has anyone listened to me? No, we all have to go off and vacation in the North.”

“Ernie, we’re not vacationing anywhere,” Jess finally burst out, losing all patience.

“Not—er...then what are we doing?” The wizard peered at her.

“Haven’t you been paying attention to anything?” Jess said. “We’re going to defeat the goblins.”

“To kill Uug-lukk,” Ben added.

“Defeat the goblins?” Ernie repeated stupidly.

“That’s why we’re heading north,” Ben said.

“All by yourselves?” Ernie looked at Ben. Then he looked at Jess.

“We have the court along too,” Ben said. Even to him that didn’t sound encouraging.

“I thought...it was supposed to be a vacation,” the wizard mumbled. “I never guessed you would be so rash as to—have you lost your minds?”

“Less so than you.” Jess gave him an annoyed look, and began arranging wood for a fire.

“This is insanity. Gibbering insanity!” Ernie followed after her, flapping his arms like some over-sized indignant bird attempting to take flight. “Do you hear me? Nonsense. Foolishness. Fanaticism! Don’t they teach math where you come from? Don’t they teach logic? How about just common



sense!”

“Apparently they only teach cowardice where you come from,” Jess said.

“Cowardice!” Ernie’s voice rose an octave. “Since when has the virtue of prudence become the crime of cowardice? Don’t you remember how badly it all turned out last time? After our previous poorly executed adventure—”

“Poorly executed?” Jess said indignantly. “Rimmah died. We won!”

“We nearly died,” Ernie corrected, waving an admonishing finger. “And my poor quilt suffered grievous damage from which it may never recover.”

“Don’t be a defeatist.” Jess carefully fed kindling into her small fire. “You never know until you’ve tried.”

“And how exactly does one try?” Ernie pushed back his hat and glared at her. “I seem to recall we had some sort of discussion like this last time, and I was completely vindicated then. You have some trick up your sleeve? Perhaps some pet I haven’t noticed, who has an amazing appetite for goblins?”

“We have a magical sword called Goblin Terror that was given to us by *certain* wizard, capable of striking utter terror into the hearts of goblins when drawn from its sheath,” Jess said. “And since you said we would all die last time, and we appear to be presently living now, I hardly call that your vindication.”

Ernie seemed to lose some of his steam. “That...all that was a statistically improbable success. Ever heard of not tempting fate? And...And I gave Ben that sword to keep me safe, not to throw us all into the deepest danger imaginable. What happens if the sword is lost? Poof! Then we’re in real trouble. See, I think about these sort of things.”

“You want to run away, go ahead.”

“I want you to finance our vacation!” Ernie said shrilly.

“You’re welcome to go do what you want, Wizard,” Jess said sharply. “Nobody made you come along. Go on—head on back to Galdoron, or whatever beach you favor.”

Ernie didn’t move.

“Well?” Jess said.

“I have a certain sense of loyalty,” Ernie flustered. “And I don’t exactly want to lose my job as grand advisor. There is the pay, you know. And it might get me back into the Council of Wizards.”

“Ah,” Jess said knowingly. “So nice to know your loyalty runs deep.”

“Sure,” Ernie said, quite unperturbed by Jess’s sarcasm. “But do we really

need to do this? The beach would be so much easier.”

“Not going to happen,” Jess said.

“I should have guessed it was all too good to be true. I’ll begin composing my obituary tonight,” Ernie said mournfully. “I expect I’ll have just enough time before we’re annihilated.”

With that last melodramatic declaration, the wizard stomped away.

“He’s very disappointed,” Ben said, watching the wizard leave.

“I think I’d be afraid if he *wasn’t* disappointed. Don’t worry about him,” Jess said. “He’ll get over it, eventually. And he is the least of our problems. Let’s have some supper.”



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### NUR'GALI

**B**en and Jess were still eating supper when Charlez returned. The bard was in a rapturous mood, and went on for several long minutes describing the fine attributes of his beloved Beulah. Ben listened politely, Jess with barely concealed impatience.

“All that remains is for me to prove myself,” Charlez said.

“Why?” Ben asked. “I thought she liked you already.”

“She does. But it’s what you have to do if you’re an unknown stranger coming to the court,” Charlez explained. “You have to prove that you’re worthy. If I become commander of the army and defeat all our enemies Beulah will see my greatness, and not be ashamed to bring me before her father.”

“You’re nervous about meeting her family,” Ben said. He was getting the knack for reading between Charlez’s flowery words.

“Well, it needs to be done right. I must make a good impression.” Charlez smoothed out his jacket. “You see, it’s not every day that—”

“Don’t worry—you’ll do fine,” Jess said. “If you focus on the task at hand and survive the war with the goblins I think everyone—not to mention Beulah’s father—will consider you a worthy man.”

“You think so? Well, that’s good. I mean, if a princess says it then—Right,” Charlez collected himself. “So, to focus on the task at hand—we have vile fiends that threaten our camp. We should walk the perimeter to make sure everything is prepared for a possible attack.”

“I was going to suggest the same thing.” Jess looked mildly impressed by

the bard. “I doubt the danger is anything real, but in any case we should start preparing for the coming goblin trouble.”

Ben had never checked the perimeter of a military camp before, but he agreed it seemed a wise idea. The three of them set out, soon reaching the edge of the encampment and beginning their circuit. Jess had already given standing orders for the defense of the camp—something the king had neglected to consider—and she was pleased to see her instructions were followed. Watch fires were built at regular intervals, and guards were stationed. Everything appeared in order.

Halfway around the camp, they came upon Ernie making his way around the camp, massive sack slung across his back, staff in hand. The wizard was preoccupied, and didn’t notice them as he walked along, poking the ground with his staff and muttering to himself.

“Hello again, Ernie,” Ben said. “Are you inspecting the perimeter too?”

“Better than that,” Ernie said, still grumpy. “I’m *creating* a perimeter.”

“Excuse me?” Jess said.

“I’m setting up a warning ward around this camp. If some vile creature so much as crosses the line, I’ll know where they did it.”

“Very nifty,” Jess said. “If you then had the stomach to blast the vile creature to pieces you’d be all set.”

“As for that, I hope there are enough armed men in the camp which I can convince to take care of any problem,” Ernie said. “I will simply direct them toward any trouble.”

“And in lieu of that you could always try your typical recourse of screaming like a girl,” Jess said.

“What are you talking about?” Ernie straightened, holding his staff like a man of importance. “I never scream. I may shout instructions, or bellow an occasional warning, but I never scream. Wizards don’t scream. And besides, it isn’t fair that I should have to carry all the burden of destroying foul creatures. This wasn’t *my* idea of an adventure.”

The three of them walked on, leaving Ernie grumbling to himself as he trundled along setting up his ward.

“He screams?” Charlez said.

“Like the best.” Jess rolled her eyes.

“It’s understandable,” Ben said charitably. “Ernie only screams for very scary situations.”

“How strange,” Charles said. “I already figured he wasn’t exactly like the fearsome wizard in *A Mystical Fury* but I never imagined a screaming wizard. I don’t think that is in the stories.”

“I’m sure a pacifist wizard isn’t in the story either,” Jess said dryly. “Ernie is a class unto himself. Trust me, you don’t want to depend on him for—”

“Aaaaaiieeeguuuaah!”

The high pitched scream cut the night air, coming from the direction they had left Ernie.

“He’s been attacked!” Charlez gasped.

The three of them rushed back, drawing their swords as they ran.

They found Ernie wild and wide-eyed, frantically hurling wood onto the nearest watch fire.

“Help! Help!” he screamed. “A malicious shadow demon thingie tried to bite my butt! Build up the fire, keep the darkness at bay!”

Three guards stood a short distance from the fire, looking at the wizard uncertainly.

“Well?” Jess glanced at the darkness. “I take it there was a particularly frightening shadow.”

“This is no joke!” Ernie shrieked, “I was out there in the darkness working on my ward and I think I hear this rustling sound and I look back and see—I see—I see this *monstrosity!*” Ernie madly threw more wood on the fire and then collapsed to his knees, staff clutched in his hands, wheezing and staring out at the illuminated wall of bushes.

“I think you’re safe,” Ben said.

“A shadow demon, if such a thing exists, would not want to bite your butt,” Jess said scornfully. “Honestly, you just about scared a year’s health out of us, screaming like that. At the very least it could have been for a good reason.”

“They were glistening fangs, I tell you! I heard a little rustle and I says to myself, ‘It’s nothing. Just a little sound.’ But I just happened to look and I saw glistening fangs advancing! There are too many horrible creatures with pale glimmering eyes and fangs. I knew this was a bad idea! I knew something like this would happen. I *knew* it! This is why I don’t like adventures. There is nothing so stupid as doing dangerous things without an insurance policy. Heck, nothing like doing dangerous things without a guarantee that it will all turn out right in the end. Nobody smart does those sort of things, and look

where we are now!”

Jess put her fits on her hips. “You have an overactive imagination that—”

There came a faint rustle and Ben turned in time to see a flash of glimmering pale eyes in the darkness followed by a blur of movement.

Ernie screamed again.

Ben’s sword came out, followed immediately by the flash of Jess’s blade. Snakes slithered forward out of the darkness. They were huge, their silver-gray scales eerily similar to the color of a bloodless corpse, their eyes a glimmering milky white. The snakes flexed their jaws, showing mouths large enough to swallow a man, surrounded by serrated fangs.

“Nur’gali,” Charlez squeaked. “Those aren’t shadow demons!”

“They have eyes like grave hounds,” Ben said. “This is bad.”

“Snakes want to bite my butt.” Ernie’s eyes bulged at the snakes. “We’re going to be dead.” He looked ready to faint.

“They’re dangerous.” Charlez licked his lips, and belatedly drew his sword. “The stuff of real stories. I studied them in bard college—I aced the language test. They live deep in the Shiddow Mountains at the very edge of the infernal regions.”

“Poisonous?” Jess said. The snakes were forming a half circle at the very edge of the firelight, eying the defenders.

“Not fatal, but it will quickly paralyze a man. The snake then swallows its immobilized prey. But they can be defeated!” Charlez added, rallying some conviction. “In *Fangs of Vile Darkness* the survivors of the nur’gali invasion discovered a way—”

“Skip the novel recitation,” Jess snapped. “Give me some real facts! Can we hold out until help arrives?” There were over a dozen snakes, and they looked ready to attack.

“Did someone hear Ernie scream?” Ben asked. “If nobody heard—”

One of the snakes rose up and gave a long hiss.

“Is that snake saying something?” Jess demanded.

Charlez gave an uncertain laugh. “They want us to surrender.”

“Or what?” Ben said.

“So they can eat us? Not likely,” Jess said.

“A bad idea,” Charlez agreed, shifting his grip on his sword. “In the stories anyone who makes deals with the nur’gali always lives to regret it—or not. The nur’gali are very crafty. They hate to suffers causalities, and if they can’t

take their enemy unawares, they prefer to deceive them by craft and avoid a bloody fight. Why, in *Deep Runs the Poison* they tricked—”

“Right, Bard say something to stall them. Ernie, run like mad for the camp and warn everyone. I don’t think anyone heard you scream—or else they thought it was just some wildcat screaming in the forest.”

“Mommy,” Ernie bumbled.

“Too late!” Ben shouted. “Here they come!”

“Do something! Save us, save us! This is the end!” Ernie howled, tearing up clumps of grass in some sort of terror induced frenzy before coming back to his senses enough to put himself as close to the fire as possible and well behind Charlez, not to mention Ben and Jess.

“Valor is my shield!” Charlez squawked the declaration, taking a step forward. “As Ganrard say in *Noble Sunset*, here I stand and sell my life dearly, like a true warrior.”

A long sibilant hiss echoed round the edge of the clearing as the nur’gali surged forward.

“Ben, guard my back!” Jess said.

Two swords flashed in the firelight as Ben and Jess moved together, ready to meet their attackers.

“They’re coming!” Charlez said shrilly, seeming unable to decide if he was terrified or thrilled. “Here it goes! My great battle! My great fight! Are you going to back me up, Wizard?”

“I can’t, I’m a pacifist!” Ernie managed to gasp through his fright. “You wanted to be the warrior—you defend me, you incompetent overly educated pin wielder!”

“The king’s good name, I hope I do this right,” Charlez said, inching backward as the snake advanced. “The books make it sound easier. I can’t remember how the snake fight went in *The Vile Scales*. My mind is going blank, I—”

“It’s going to bite you!” Ernie squealed.

Ben saw the snakes were too many, and too fast, and there was no way three swords could hold them off. As the nur’gali moved in to strike, Ben knew what he had to do. He had to thwart the snakes, and there was only one way. He pivoted and leaped, sword flashing. His blade sliced through Ernie’s sack and his hand plunged inside. Heaving with all his might, he pulled Ernie’s massive quilt out and flung it toward the advancing snakes like one

would fling a net. The huge quilt spread out like a gigantic sail and settled down on top of the snakes.

“Attack!” Ben shouted. “Attack, while the quilt keeps them from striking!”

“Brilliant, Ben!” Jess cried, and charged.

“No!” Ernie gasped. “You can’t!”

Beneath the quilt the snakes could neither see, or strike with their fangs. Ben, Jess, and Charlez attacked, slashing and stabbing through the quilt at the bulging shape of the snakes.

“My quilt!” Ernie screamed, tottering forward. “Stop! Stop! You’re desecrating art! Sacrilege! Blasphemy!”

But none of them stopped until all of the snakes were dead, the shapes limp beneath the tattered quilt, blood seeping into the fabric.

Ernie gaped. His face hung slack, arms held out to the quilt like a mother beholding her dead child.

“Victory!” Charlez crowed. “A great victory for the forces of light. I think I killed two of the nur’gali. I knew I had the blood of a warrior in me!”

“That quick thinking saved us, Ben,” Jess said, cleaning her sword on an edge of Ernie’s quilt. “Using the quilt like a net to trap them—it was absolute genius!”

“Genius!” Ernie shrieked, finally finding his voice. “That’s not genius—it’s a travesty! A war crime! I can’t believe you would do such a thing to my quilt. My glorious quilt. You—Bennelzor Transom—of all people!”

“I’m sorry,” Ben said earnestly. “I know how much the quilt means to you, but I had to do it. There were too many of them.”

“Criminal! Murder! Quilt killer!” Snarling and frothing, Ernie rushed at Ben and began wildly pawing at him in a frenzied and futile attempt to throttle him.

“But your pacifism!” Ben protested, trying to fend off Ernie’s clawing hands. “If you kill me it will destroy your pacifistic principles.”

“I’m sure there is an exception in there for quilt defilers,” Ernie gurgled, his eyes bulging. “I’ll make one!”

“Get over it.” Jess grabbed the wizard by the collar and hauled back. Ernie refused to give, but the collar of his robe cut off his breath and soon he was driven to his knees, wheezing and hacking.

“I’m sorry your quilt got damaged, Ernie, but it was far better than the alternative,” Jess said firmly.



"The alternative?" Ernie looked up, grasping his beard like a man ready to start pulling it out in chunks.

"Being dead?" Jess pointed at the limp snake shapes beneath the quilt. "You prefer that? I recall a few minutes ago that was your greatest concern."

Ernie stared for a long moment, as if realizing for the first time what had actually transpired. "Well, I'd rather be dead than see my quilt damaged." He climbed back to his feet, drew himself up regally, straightening the collar of his robes. "In fact, I wish I were dead now so that I would no longer have to witness the damage to my glorious, most precious, quilt. Oh! If only someone would put me out of my misery!"

Jess sighed. "Very well, I can accommodate your wish..." She drew her sword and stepped toward Ernie.

"I've changed my mind!" the wizard squeaked, scrambling backward. "You don't need to be so hasty. The horror is becoming bearable. Yes, I think it best if I went on living so that I can repair the quilt. Someone must carry on!"

"So nice to hear." Jess sheathed her sword.

The wizard wiped his brow and edged behind Ben, muttering something about a deranged madwoman—his fear of Jess fulfilling her offer momentarily making him forget Ben was the object of his wrath.

"Okay, we've wasted enough time," Jess said, becoming brisk. "Wizard, run back and warn the camp that we've been attacked."

"Right. Then the quilt. The poor, poor, quilt." The wizard scurried over to the three immobilized men.

"Charlez—what are you doing?" She looked at the bard, who was gingerly lifting one edge of the quilt.

"Checking for any survivors," Charlez said. "They do that in the books, you know. Sometimes, if you're lucky, you can find an enemy who will give some horrible last gasping confession before he dies."

"Right. Fine," Jess said dismissively. "But what can you tell me about these nur'gali that you actually learned in class and not one of your fantastic novels?"

"Not much." Charlez shrugged. "They're not studied much. I learned how to speak the language from the old master bard Butchin. He captured a nur'gali over fifty years ago, and kept it in captivity until it died."

"Anything useful?" Jess waved at the still lumps beneath the quilt. "Was that part about them being crafty and avoiding causalities another thing you

culled from some trashy story?”

“They’re literature, not trash,” Charlez said absently, too engrossed in what he was doing to get offended. “Ben, give me a hand rolling back this quilt. It’s all icky. And no, that bit was from *Stratagem’s of the Nur’gali*. It’s a textbook, and very dull. You can learn more from a good reading of the Handmaiden’s Daily bestseller list.”

“I’ll take the textbook.” Jess studied the bloody snake corpses. “So they have one weakness at least. But they seem more dangerous than goblins.”

“They are.” Charlez said. “They’re far more intelligent and crafty than goblins, far more dangerous in battle. But since they are also cautious and unwilling to suffer many casualties in a fight they never ventured out into open conflict with men—until now.”

“That’s a bad change,” Ben said.

“Yes, something is amiss,” Jess said, frowning.

“Ah—I found a live one! Right here!” Charlez danced in place excitedly. “Oh, he looks pretty dead. Not going to last much longer. What did I tell you?”

“So ask it a question before it gasps it’s last breath,” Jess said.

“Right. Here it goes.” Collecting himself, Charlez spoke in a rasping hiss to the nur’gali. There was a short delay, and Ben began to think the wounded snake wouldn’t answer. Then it spoke, a gurgling hiss.

“What did it say?” Jess asked, leaning close.”

“I asked it why they were here, and if they are working with the goblins.”

“Good question. And it said?”

“He said yes.” Charlez looked up, his eyes shining with excitement. “It’s just like the great stories. He said Uug-lukk has made a pact with them. The goblin chieftain promised them all the man flesh they could want to eat if they joined him in this battle. The snake told me, ‘Though you have won this battle, you have lost the war. The great Narkliss will destroy you all.’”

“Who is Narkliss?” Ben said.

“Their leader.” Charlez laid a hand grandly on the hilt of his sword. “I’m going to kill him in single combat. This is only the beginning of my fight with the nur’gali. The stories go like that, you know.”

“Ask it—” Jess began, but Ben shook his head.

“We can’t ask it anything more,” he said.

“Why not—”

“Dead.” Ben pointed. The nur’gali had gone still.

“Well.” Jess let out her breath slowly. “At least we know something.” She tried to put on a cheerful tone, but she couldn’t hide the edge of worry in her voice.

Charlez was caught up in the drama of his own mind, but the truth was, a bad situation had become much worse. The goblins had allies.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### THE COMPETITION

**N**ews of the attack quickly spread, spurred on by Ernie's racing feet. The wizard perhaps told an exaggerated tale about what had transpired, and certainly it was a muddled story. Soon the entire court was astir, and after a large contingent of guards had secured the battle sight the king, queen, and a good many members of the court came to see what had happened. Not a few were under the mistaken impression that there was an invasion of shadow demons. Once word spread that the camp was safe, the gawkers began to flood to the battle site.

Most of the ladies made sounds of fright and disgust on seeing the dead nur'gali, and not a few fainted. Even many of the knights and nobles turned pale. Jess faced the crowd, watching them with a certain grim satisfaction as if to say, "See, I told you so—there *is* a problem."

Nobody in the court—not even the king and queen—seemed to know what to say, and so the silence may have gone on for a very long time except the dowager finally shouldered her way through the crowd. She marched forward and examined the carcasses with a critical eye.

After a moment she tapped the ground with her cane and announced, "Yep, they are giant dead snakes. So whom should we thank for this neat little job?"

This question shook the queen free from her stupor. "Charlez, dear! What a great victory you've won for us!" she cooed, bustling forward to drag the bard into the center of the court's attention. "Tell us what you did!"

"Well, I fought," Charlez said. "I thrust and stabbed, and stabbed and

thrust. There was lots of blood, and I killed at least two of the nur'gali. It was a dangerous fight—very close, even touch and go there for a bit. It was sort of like *Valor at Night*, except the heroic party was facing trolls in that story. It was quite the bloody battle, and if you wouldn't mind mentioning that to—"

"Charlez—such a fighter! Such a man! A real warrior, a hero, a leader! We had nothing to fear with you defending us." The queen was nearly falling over herself with fawning over the bard. She laid a hand delicately on the bard's arm. "You've shown yourself *most* capable once again."

"Thank you. It was a violent battle, my lady. I would have given my life to defend the camp." Charlez pulled himself up and gripped his sword hilt in what he imagined was a striking pose. "We were hard pressed, but I held my ground. If you would be so kind, a good word with my beloved wouldn't be amiss."

"I can do better than that," the queen trilled. "Surely, the court and the king agree that the mighty Charlez deserves to be rewarded for his great act of valor, and his service in saving the kingdom, and defeating this vile menace."

There was a loud murmur of agreement from the court, and a few even clapped.

"Certainly, certainly," the king agreed, not really paying attention. He was still too busy staring at the dead nur'gali.

"Now wait a minute," Jess protested. "Ben fought too—in fact, he fought more! It was his idea to foil the snakes with the quilt. Without him—"

"I'm sure he helped as best he could," the queen said breezily, "but we must recognize those who showed the greatest skill. Everyone has seen what great bravery, and what capability our Charlez has demonstrated today," she continued. "In this time of national testing, we need a man of his quality leading this army. Harry, we must make him field marshal, and commander of the army."

"Exactly," the king said, snapping to attention as the queen elbowed him in the stomach.

"Now wait a minute." Jess stepped forward. "Aren't we forgetting something? Ben—"

"No, no, that's okay," Ben said quickly. "I don't mind. Charlez can be captain of the army."

"There, you see?" The queen gave her daughter a broad smile. "Everyone

can see who is more suited for this task.”

“Kneel, Sir Charlez and give me your sword!” The king took the bard’s sword as Charlez knelt. “By the power vested in me as king of Tarn, I hereby name you Field Marshal, and commander of the armies of Tarn. Now rise!”

“Hurrah!” the court shouted.

Charlez rose, his face shining with euphoria.

“I..I’m honored,” Charlez choked out. “I never believed it would come so soon—this is like a dream come true. I know my beloved’s heart will lift with pride when she sees me here. Whether it be shadow demon, or nur’gali, I will stand bravely in defense of this kingdom. If they think to destroy us—I’d like to see them try. I’ll teach them what a real warrior is made of!”

There was a round of applause.

“Charlez, what more can we do for you?” the queen asked. “Whatever your heart desires—tell us!”

Charlez lifted his sword. “We face a grim time. These recent events appear rather like *The Kingdom of Night*. A very grim story, that was. I would have preferred events to have taken a little different literary turn. Too many good guys died in that story, and there were a lot of snakes.”

That was all Ben heard before Jess dragged him away. She didn’t stop dragging him until they were away from the crowd, hidden in a private corner behind a tent.

“Ben, what are you doing?” She looked at him, her eyes flashing.

“What?” he said.

“You just gave up being commander of the army! You practically gave the whole proceeding your blessing!”

“Yeah, it’s good how that worked out, isn’t it?” he said. “Charlez likes to be in charge of stuff, and I don’t. He’s so good at talking, and telling people stuff, and he doesn’t mind having everyone stare at him. So he can be in charge of the army and I’ll just take care of the goblin trouble.”

“It doesn’t work that way, Ben,” Jess said, exasperated. “Aren’t you mad about what they just did to you?”

Ben looked at her blankly. “Who did what to me? I’m okay with Charlez being commander of the army.”

“Okay? It’s not okay. It’s bad.” Jess ran her hands through her hair, frustrated.

“But Charlez needs to prove his worth to Beulah. This is the perfect

opportunity—”

“Forget about the bard’s delusional love plans for a moment! He can get along fine without being commander of the army, and we have more important things to prove. Don’t you understand? We need to beat more than the goblins. We need to defeat my Ma and Da—We need to beat this entire court at its own game. Charlez is your enemy—they’re using him against you, to try to make you look bad. We’re trying to win! We must stop them, and make them see how good you are, and what you can do!”

“Charlez isn’t my enemy,” Ben protested. “He is my friend!”

“They’re using him as competition. You have to realize that!” Jess took a deep breath. “Ben, he might be your friend, but he is their unwitting pawn, and you can’t let them use a to pawn beat you. You need to step up and defend what is yours, and take what is yours.”

“What’s mine?”

“The kingdom!”

“Oh. I suppose.” Ben looked down at his boots. “It’s just...I don’t really *want* to lead the army. I was supposed to bring back help for York, but nobody said I had to lead the army. It’s all this talking and smiling—and it makes me feel bad in my stomach. Charlez is better at that sort of thing, and the court likes him. I figure I can just help him lead the army.”

Jess closed her eyes for a minute. “I...Okay. You can help Charlez.” She looked as if she had swallowed back whatever she had wanted to say. “Look—I know it’s hard, Ben. I really do. I don’t like it either. But sometimes you have to do what’s hard. You need to remember to show everyone who Ben Transom really is.”

“I’ll try to remember,” he said. “But how do I show them who Ben Transom really is? I don’t know if I know who Ben Transom really is.”

“Ben Transom is the man who is kind, faithful, quiet, and just. He is the man best suited to run this kingdom.”

“But what if the court doesn’t want to see me?”

“They will, Ben, they will!” she said fiercely. “You just show them.”

“Okay,” he said doubtfully.

“Good.” Jess took his arms, looking up at him. “I’m proud of you, Ben, and everything you’ve done. It’s just that...I want everyone else to be proud of you, too. And we need to win. It’s how things work around here.”



Charlez came back to the tent very late. Ernie had been snoring loudly for some time, but Ben was still awake. The bard was flushed with the excitement, having spent hours with the court celebrating his great rise. Ben had lain awake thinking about all the things Jess had said, and so was treated to a discourse from the exuberant bard.

“Beulah is so impressed that I’m a hardened war veteran now. She was nearly overwhelmed when she heard about my great deeds.” This was followed by a love-sick sigh. “I’m going to make a great leader for this army.” Charlez climbed under his blankets. “I can already imagine all the stories that will be written about me.”

“Jess says I’m supposed to help you,” Ben said. He figured there was no point in mentioning the rest of what Jess said.

“Yeah, she said the same thing to me. I told her that of course you would help. You’re the helpful sort of guy, and my faithful side-kick. She took that kinda funny. Anyhow, with us in charge, this war is as good as won.”

“That would be good.” Ben didn’t sound nearly so confident.

“Yes.” Charlez settled back contentedly, folding his arms behind his head. “This is when things get really exciting.”

“How can it get exciting if we’ve won?” Ben said, not really paying attention.

“I’m talking about *romance*, Ben. With my new-found fame and glory, all sorts of women might start finding me attractive. *A Life of Regrets* went kind of like that.” Charlez paused, growing thoughtful. “I cried through the whole second half of that book. Very sad. Poor Amethyst and her bad decisions. But all I’m trying to say,” he continued, “is that there is the terrible danger of a love triangle.”

“Love triangle?”

“It often becomes a triangle, especially on adventures,” Charlez explained. “It has all sorts of literary tension and angst. People are supposed to wonder which woman will get the man in the end. We have the budding dangers of a love triangle here—I might have to start making hard decisions soon. *The Sharpened Sword* went like that—very gripping story. Anyhow, I hope I don’t end up in too many duels with men wracked with jealousy. I wouldn’t want Beulah to worry too much.”



"I suppose that might be bad," Ben said. He thought Charlez worried about the most peculiar things.

A few minutes later Charlez's breathing settled into the soft rhythm that said the bard was sleeping. Ben continued to stare at the darkened ceiling of the tent. He was finding things were not having quite the happy ending he imagined, and he didn't know what to think. He wished he could ask Charlez for advice, but he had a feeling the bard wouldn't really understand.

Sometime in the middle of the night he heard the rain begin to fall, pattering on the canopy above. When the storm arrived it came up quickly, the rain soon falling in torrential sheets. Later, Ben drifted into a troubled sleep and dreamed that the court was laughing at him, Jess was crying, and Charlez was admonishing him on the need to avoid literary disaster.

Toward dawn the rain stopped. Ben woke early and lay listening to water dripping from the trees around the camp, finding the sound oddly very annoying. He thought about how troublesome people, giant snakes trying to kill you, and soaking rain were all reminders of why he really didn't like adventuring. It was so much better to have nobody bothering you, and your own familiar, warm, comfortable bed to come home to every night.

Most of the camp was still asleep when Ben rose. He walked around the camp for awhile, looking over the remains of the battle. Finally, he decided to go see if Jess was up. When he came to the profusion of tents which were the quarters of the king and queen, Jess was just coming out, freshly cleaned and dressed for the day.

"Hello, Jess," he said, a little uncertainly, not quite sure how things were between them after the previous night.

"Well. You don't look rested," she said, stopping to give him a second look.

"I was...thinking a lot last night."

"Oh. Don't worry too much, Ben. It can be fixed. We'll take care of everything."

"I'll do whatever you say," he said.

"Then for right now I say we have breakfast. There is plenty of time after that to deal with the irritations of the court."

They were finishing off a breakfast of eggs with toast and jam, when Ernie and Charlez made an appearance."

"Good morning," Ben said cheerfully. "Have some breakfast with us."

"There is no good morning for quilter murders. I'm still not talking to

you.” Ernie pursed his lips in attempted severe expression that came off more a pout. “After what you did to my quilt, we’re no longer friends.”

“I am truly very sorry,” Ben said. “It seemed like the best thing to do.”

“So you say.” Ernie threw down his sack and began slowly pulling out his quilt, making wretched moaning sounds as he came across every fresh cut.

“Oh, shut up,” Jess finally said. “It’s not like that thing can feel anything.”

“And how would you know anything about what a quilt feels?” Ernie heaved a mournful sigh. “But at least I can comfort myself in one thing. The horror of this desecration will have a good effect. I can console myself in that.”

“A good effect?” Ben said.

“Faced with this travesty, now everyone sees that it’s madness to continue northward when there is this hideous alliance between the goblins and the nur’gali. If my quilt was damaged in this way at the beginning of the adventure, what does this portend? There is no chance of success, the country is doomed, and we’ll go someplace more pleasant and reasonable—preferably the coast land.”

“No we won’t,” Jess said.

“You want to risk another night like that?” Ernie’s beard bristled as he held up a portion of the quilt, looking at them through the rent. “You want more of this?”

“If we must,” Jess said. “Some of us aren’t cowards.”

“Besides, we won.” Ben filled a plate and handed it to Charlez. “And we’ll be ready for them next time.”

“Yep.” Charlez tucked his hair behind his ear. “Those snakes know when they’ve been beaten.”

“They’re not beaten!” Ernie threw down his quilt. “Remember that little mention of a great Narkliss? We keep this up, and we’ll all end up dead. It’s my job to give sage advice, and I’ve been giving *tons* of it. If my sage advice had been followed we would have escaped the nur’gali entirely and my quilt would still be whole!”

“I’m not worried about Narkliss, and you shouldn’t be either. You could have blasted all of the snakes to cinders in an instant,” Charlez said coolly. “That’s what real high class wizards would do.”

“Certainly not.” Ernie folded his arms and lifted his chin. “I’m a pacifist, like all good intellectuals. We don’t partake of such nasty stuff. You should

know that.”

“What are you talking about?” Charlez gave the wizard a scornful glance.

“Violence is not for the educated,” Ernie sniffed.

“Sure it is,” Charlez said. “Educated people just do it with flair and sophistication.”

“Like how?” Jess said. She watched the two arguing men with a look of amusement.

“Like quoting poetry while you do it.” Charlez drew his sword. “Such as:

“Blood is red  
Black eyes are blue  
I’m gonna win  
And you’re gonna lose!

“And then you finish him off with the artful thrust,” Charlez said, demonstrating on an imaginary opponent.

“I see.” Jess sounded like she was trying very hard to not burst out laughing. “Not exactly poetry to make you a laureate.”

“You never know.” Charlez sheathed his rapier. “Stranger things have happened. Then I’d be a warrior poet. You don’t see one of them every day.”

Finding no one receptive to his logic, or his grief over his quilt, Ernie gave up and resigned himself to eating a large breakfast while giving Ben the occasional dire glare. As Ernie had a demonstrated inability to carry through any threat, Ben found nothing fearsome in the wizard’s evil eye. Even so, Ernie’s ill humor put him in a sad line of thought. Between defeating the goblins and leading the court, he was beginning to worry that this adventure might cost him all of his friends.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### THE RETURN TO YORK

After the court broke camp and was on the road again, Jess had time to reflect that there were some advantages to having Charlez nominally in charge of the army. They were very minor, she told herself, still feeling peeved that Ben had not ended up in his rightful position. But Charlez *did* have the confidence of the court. The courtly fear that came with the realization that this wasn't just a country jaunt—and there was danger—was assuaged by the fact that most people believed Charlez could handle any problem. This meant a lot of grumbling was stifled which would have otherwise been given loud airing, had Ben held the position of leadership.

The party made good progress that morning. After the storm of the previous night the world was washed bright and clean. The trees and grass glistened wetly while small puffy white clouds sailed across the sky. The summer was passing along, Ben realized, as he looked around at the rolling, forested hills. In a few weeks they would begin to see the first hints of fall color.

They continued to make progress, and as the morning passed into afternoon the land around them grew more heavily forested. The ancient trees of old forest growth were soon towering near the road, shadowing out most of the sunlight. The air was cool here, the world quiet and muffled beneath the canopy of leaves. Ben found it peaceful.

He was very pleased to discover they had entered territory he recognized. They were getting very close to York, and would certainly arrive the next day.

But as much as this pleased him, Ben was equally distressed by the signs of goblin trouble. The countryside became increasingly desolate the more progress they made throughout the day. Fields lay untended and empty of crops or animals, the houses and barns vacant. The abandoned farm houses either stood with windows as dark gaping openings, and doors hanging half off their hinges, or else burned to the ground completely.

The court didn't stop at any of the small villages they passed through. Fearful villagers watched as the riders passed, and no one needed to ask what they rode to face. As the day grew late Jess noticed much of the court was sitting uneasily in their saddles in spite of Charlez's assuring presence at the front. She couldn't help feeling a touch of glee. *Goblin trouble is a little more real than you imagined, isn't it*, she thought to herself.

But Jess didn't feel any glee when she saw Ben's worried expression that night at the camp fire.

"We'll be at York tomorrow," she said.

"I know," he said. "I hope we'll still find it there."

"It'll be okay." Jess touched his knee.

"York is small." Ben stared at the fire. "And most of the villagers are not very brave. If the nur'gali—"

"If York were completely destroyed, we would have heard something," Jess said. "It's still there, Ben. We're going to rescue it."

He nodded, but it wasn't a very certain nod.

The next morning the court broke camp early, everyone in a hurry to reach the end of their journey. The day started sunny, with a light breeze and the temperature at perfect moderation, but the morning pleasantness didn't last. An hour on the road brought them to a small hamlet, burned completely to the ground. Ashes, and forlorn chimneys standing bereft of their houses, were all that remained of the tiny village. The entire court stopped at the sight. Everyone stared.

"Look at that," Charlez said, his usual bravado gone. "That's bad. It's the worst I've seen."

Ben looked around, feeling very glum. He could too easily imagine York looking exactly the same. The blackened chimneys had a sad and foreboding feeling about them.

"Maybe it was the undead." Charlez's eyes brightened. "There was something like this in *The Hungry Dead*. In that story the undead apparently

had a particular taste for beautiful young women, because they were always chasing after them, and the hero Asban had to keep rescuing them. The undead also like to burn down houses. There was a lot of screaming, and burning, in that story.”

“Nur’gali and goblins. Goblins like to burn things.” Jess ignored the bard, resting her hands on her saddle pommel, frowning at ruins.

“This is serious,” the king said, voicing what the entire court was thinking. “With the goblins such a threat, perhaps we should withdraw to Galdoron, and make more preparations.”

“Exactly!” Ernie piped up. “A very wise suggestion. Now we’re starting to talk sense. In fact, as grand advisor I suggest—”

“And become the laughingstock of the kingdom?” Jess spoke loudly. “What will the people think if they see us turn tail and run like frightened rabbit?”

“That’s right,” the king said, not sounding very convincing, but not wanting to be a laughingstock, either. “We’re better than a few worthless goblins. They can’t scare us.”

“Nonetheless, we should be prudent—” Ernie began.

“We destroyed the first nur’gali attack, and we can beat anything that comes against us.” Jess spoke over the wizard, her face saying she dearly would have liked to give Ernie a kick.

“I hope they do come! Goblins, I am ready!” Charlez drew his sword and held it aloft, shouting at the ash heaps. “I am your scourge! I, Charlez, have come to destroy you and liberate the northlands! Fear me, for your end is near! Show yourselves, that we might fight!”

“Stop your shouting, you big ninny. There aren’t any goblins here, now.” Jess rose up in her stirrups, staring ahead. “Besides, if there were Ben could deal with them.”

“Him?” Charlez lowered his sword, looking at Ben. “Sure, he can help. We make a great team.”

“There doesn’t need to be a team. Ben could do it all by himself,” Jess said, snappishly. “Ben is quite capable to do everything by himself. His sword is magical, and when drawn instills utter terror in the heart of goblins. Nobody needs to fear,” she added, directing the last comment at the surrounding court.

“I guess I do remember you saying something about that sword.” Charlez gave Ben’s sword a fresh appraising look. “Yes...the jewels and gold work...

Well. That's good to know. Wouldn't mind having a sword like that myself. It's certainly very literary. Maybe I can steal one from a dragon's lair. There is a dragon's lair in this vicinity, you know."

"Let's go," Ben said. "York might be in danger."

They moved out with Ben in the lead, looking very determined.

For another several hours they made good progress, accompanied by the trill and chirrup of birds deep within the canopy of trees. Everything seemed peaceful, until Jess noticed the birds had stopped singing.

"I don't hear anything," she said, interrupting Ben's worried thoughts.

"Uh, that's true." He looked around at the wall of trees rising on either side of the road, puzzled.

Jess drew her sword, shifting in her saddle. "What happened the last time the birds went silent?"

"The last time? I guess that was when the bikalis attack—"

A black arrow shot from the leafy cover on the right side of the road, narrowly missing the dowager, and taking off Ernie's hat. The wizard promptly screamed and pulled his massive sack in front of him for cover. "Ambush! Ambush!" he squealed. "Form a perimeter! Take defensive positions! Prepare to retreat!"

A great gurgling, gibbering, shriek went up as goblins burst from the forest on either side of the road. The ambush consisted of some two dozen goblins; short, black, fat, hairy, and armed with various crude swords, axes, clubs, and a few bows. Snorting and slavering, they charged.

The company from Galdoron had many more fighting men, but the attack caught them completely unprepared. The entire court froze, transfixed by the horror that had leaped out upon them.

"Your death has come, vile beasts!" Charlez drew his sword and shouted, "Chaaaarge!"

With that suitably dramatic command, Charlez spurred his mounted forward. A few knights and a dozen guards followed. It was a pitiful showing from the court, but enough to make the goblins—who were not very bright—realize that even a dozen men were too many for them to handle. Squealing and yammering, the goblins broke into a retreat. Charlez and his men followed, the bard shouting what was probably lines from various novels.

"Don't bother—ah, whatever," Jess shook her head, watching the bard disappear among the trees.

“Maybe we’d better follow him,” Ben said. “There could be more goblins out there, and he could get in trouble.”

“Yes, somehow I don’t trust him to do much unsupervised,” Jess agreed.

“We should follow, and see what a great victory Charlez will win for us,” the queen said. “This is the kind of man who could be king!”

Jess gave her mother a look that seemed capable of shooting arrows, but the queen serenely ignored her. The entire court started after Charlez, a jolly atmosphere permeating the crowd as they saw their preferred hero in the process of pulling off what appeared a dashing victory.

It was not hard to follow Charlez’s smashed path through the forest, and for awhile they could hear Charlez’s shouted threats echoing through the trees. This earned several glowing comments from ladies and noblemen about what a brave fellow Charlez was.

Jess ground her teeth.

Then Charlez’s shouting stopped.

“Something has gone wrong,” Ben said, having paid fretful attention to the sounds. “I can’t hear him anymore.”

“Nonsense,” the queen said breezily. “That man isn’t like you. I’m sure he’s just finished the battle. Wait up, Charlez! We’re coming!”

Not reassured in the least by the queen, Ben urged his horse faster. Not wanting to be left behind, the rest of the court followed. So it was they broke out of the forest and into a clearing, nearly colliding with Charlez and his companions in their haste.

“You’ve slaughtered them,” the queen declared.

“Not yet,” Charlez said, his gaze fixed on the other side of the clearing. “We’ve a bit of a problem.”

A hundred yards distant, nearly five hundred goblins seethed among the trees on the far side of the clearing.

“Oh my,” the queen whispered.

“Oops,” the king said.

Several ladies in the court screamed.

A hungry snarl went up from the goblin horde. This goblin force was bigger than the court, and they smelled easy meat.

“A little different literary turn,” Charlez said, edging his horse back. “We’ve been lured into a trap. It’s going to be a bloody fight!”

“Nobody panic, I’ve got the situation under control,” the king said shrilly.



“Wizard, do something about this—blast them to smithereens!”

There was silence.

“M-m-me?” Ernie pointed a wavering finger at his chest.

Jess rolled her eyes. “There doesn’t appear to be another wizard in the vicinity.”

“Ah—hem. This doesn’t really seem to be the appropriate moment,” Ernie protested weakly. “I’m feeling all quavery inside, and the situation is less than ideal...”

The king looked at Ernie. “Blast them!”

“Well, ah, about that...” Ernie coughed delicately into his hand. “I was hoping this wouldn’t come up, but...You know, fact is, I don’t do that sort of thing. You see, I’m a firm believer in meditation, arbitration, and generally talking things through.”

“What?” The king looked uncomprehending.

“Blasting is a horrible, nasty sort of thing.” Ernie waved a hand delicately. “Very icky. I don’t do that sort of thing. Not possible.”

“Not possible!” The king’s face turned red. “I’m commanding you!”

“Completely out of the question.” Ernie lifted his nose. “It’s against my pacifist principles. I’m a conscientious objector. I simply cannot do it.”

The king was now purple in the face. “Not blast them to smithereens?” he shouted. “What kind of worthless wizard are you? When else do we need a wizard for if not when surrounded by goblins? What do you think you are, extra baggage? You’re fired! You’re turned out! You’re stripped of your rank—you—you—you worthless clod!”

“I say...” Ernie looked hurt. “I’ve been giving great advice—just nobody has been listening. If you had followed my advice we wouldn’t even be here.”

The goblins kept coming.

The court drew back, swords nervously sliding from their sheaths.

“I don’t see why we need to argue,” Ben said. “We just fight them and get this done with.” So saying, he rode forward into the clearing until he was well in front of the court, and then drew Goblin Terror.

The moment Goblin Terror left its sheath goblins screamed in terror, making the king and queen, much of the court, and Charlez, jump. In one breath the goblins vanished as fast as they had come, disappearing into the forest, leaving their weapons scattered in their wake.

The court goggled. Charlez tried to cover his surprise. “Ha!” he said,

lowering his sword. "Did you see that?"

"I told you it was a magical sword." Jess returned her sword to its scabbard.

"Well—um. A magic sword it does have some advantages, but they'll still come back to fight another day." Charlez sheathed his sword importantly. "If I'd fought them they'd all be dead."

"Charlez is such a decisive man," the queen cooed. "He really knows how to lead this army."

Jess snorted, and turned away, failing to notice how fixedly her mother stared at Ben's sword. If she had, she might have felt a small twinge of unease.

"We really need to go," Ben said, turning his horse around. "We've lost time chasing these goblins, and with goblins here, York could be in danger. We must reach the village before dark."

The mention of the coming night reminded the court that being stuck in the middle of the forest in the dark was something *they* greatly wished to avoid. Everyone hurried back to the road, and from that point on the party picked up the pace, and the miles slipped by quickly. So it was the company arrived at York sooner than Ben expected, the horses coming in at a canter, the village suddenly appearing around the last bend in the road.

The first thing Ben noticed was the stockade wall of rough-hewn logs, and the wooden gate shut before them.

"Those weren't here before," he said.

"Someone has been preparing for the goblins, then," Jess said. "That's a good sign. This wall probably saved York from destruction."

"Indeed," Ernie said. "I'd prefer very tall stone walls with towers, catapults, and lots of boiling oil. But at least this gives me something to work with."

"I guess." It struck Ben as a little odd. He was glad to see the town was still standing, and looked undamaged, but something almost didn't feel right. He couldn't imagine the villagers of York building a stockade, however good the idea.

"Hm. Well." The king plucked at his pudgy cheek, appearing uncertain as to what he was supposed to do. "I guess we need a fanfare of trumpets to announce us. We should always be announced by trumpets. Herald, proceed!"

The guard gave a loud blast that nearly deafened Ben. Still, nobody stirred

atop the wall.

"It appears the gate is barred from within." Jess swung down from her saddle, looking up at the vacant wall-top. "So there is the question of how we gain entrance."

"Hello, everyone!" Ben shouted to the wall. "I'm home! It's me, Ben! I'm back! Let us in!"

No reply came from the wall.

"Hmmm, that's strange," Ben said. "I kind of thought they'd have a welcoming party all ready by now."

"They didn't know what day you'd be back," Jess said. "You never sent them a message."

"That's true," he said. "I hadn't thought about that. Well, anyhow, this is York—the closest thing to my home until you get out to the farm, which everyone has surely helped my parents rebuild in my absence. I hope they did a good job."

"It all looks very rustic," Jess said. "I expect it's much quieter and more sane than court life. I like it...Uh, what is that sound?"

The last comment was directed toward a distant "*Clang-clang-clang-clang*" that Ben immediately recognized.

"It's the village warning bell," he said. "Someone rings it when York is in danger."

"I wonder why they're ringing it now," Jess said. "More goblins?"

At that point Ben managed to pick up the faint sound of screaming intermingled with the ringing of the bell.

"We're being invaded! We're being invaded!" went the screaming. "Insane animals are invading the town! We're being invaded by animals from the deepest pits of the infernal regions!"

Ben was pretty sure the screamer was Donn, one of York's four village bums.

A second voice joined in with, "Man the defenses! Save the beer!" and Ben was certain that was Loi howling.

"Uh, the bums are ringing the bell," he said. "They usually are the ones who do it. But...they seem to think they're being invaded. Listen."

"Save us! Save us! Somebody save us!" Donn shrieked.

"Mommy! I'm scared!" Loi bawled.

*Clang-clang-clang-clang* went the bell.

Everyone stared at Ben.

“Just...ah...don’t mind them.” He cleared his throat. “I’ll just—the villagers are kind of easily alarmed, the bums especially. I’ll just—ah—explain that they don’t need to worry about anything.”

“Such fear is very understandable,” Charlez said. “We are a fearsome company.”

“But somebody does need to open the gate,” the king added, looking increasingly flustered and out of sorts by the failure of all protocol.

A pair of eyes—mounted in a very scruffy head—slowly appeared over the top of the wall. Ben recognized the hairy visage as Terry, the leader of the four bums.

“Who—who is there?” Terry shrilled. “Identify yourselves, you invaders!”

“It’s me, Ben,” Ben said. “I’ve come back.”

“I’m not talking to you—Can’t you see I’m busy saving York? I’m asking—hey, what are you doing here, Ben?” Terry did a double-take, peering down at Ben. “I thought you’d gone off and lost yourself in the infernal regions or something. Nobody expected you back.”

“Well, I’m back,” Ben said.

“And you’re being chased by a bunch of wild and insane animals from the deepest pits of the infernal regions.” Buddle’s head appeared over the wall beside Terry. If anything he looked more filthy. “I knew you were cursed. You’ve brought the invasion on us!”

“You’re not being invaded,” Ben said. “I’m just coming home.”

“Then who are they?” Terry demanded, pointing a finger at Jess, Ernie, Charlez, and the rest of the court. “They look like foreigners. They’re foreigners if I’ve ever seen them, strangers come to take over our country!”

“They’re—uh—they’re—uh—they’re...friends,” he finished weakly. It was rather difficult to explain under the best of circumstances, and the bums didn’t make an ideal audience.

“Well, I dunno,” Terry said. “I’m not sure what Androbobel will think of this. You was supposed to bring the king to save us, not a bunch of foreign invaders.”

“I *am* the king,” the king sputtered.

“Androbobel?” Charlez looked at Ben.

“He is a professor who came to York. He’s been helping the mayor,” Ben said.

“Well,” Jess said briskly. “I’m sure we’ll all get to meet this Androbobel soon enough and get everything straightened out. Who is currently in charge of the gate?”

“I am.” Terry pointed a finger at himself. “We were left in charge because everyone else is at a meeting.”

“A meeting?” Ben said.

“Yes, they’re meeting to vote on whether—”

“That is all fine and good,” Jess said, a touch impatiently, “but we’d like to be allowed in.”

“I can’t make that decision. All foreigners are suspect. Androbobel must—” Then Terry saw Jess’s glare and hastily added, “—but I’m sure they won’t mind interrupting their meeting.”

“Hey everybody!” Buddle bellowed toward the village. “Maybe we’re not being invaded after all! It was just Ben coming back with a bunch of weird friends! They look like strange foreigners. He wants to know if he can come in!”

“You certainly live in a peculiar neighborhood,” Charlez commented. “Not particularly on social up and up are they?”

“Such crass people.” The queen sniffed. “Ignorant and dirty. Scarcely better than goblins themselves.”

“Perhaps if the kingdom spent more time defending its land the inhabitants would recognize their sovereign,” the Jess said sharply. “We’re nearly good as foreigners here.”

“All that matters is how well the wall can anchor” Ernie said, climbing down from his horse and leaning on his staff while peering up at the stockade. “I’ll have to walk the perimeter of the wall to get a dimensional fix.”

The king gave him an odd look, but nobody else was listening to the wizard.

“It wasn’t like this before,” Ben said, feeling embarrassed about the still inhospitably shut gate. “Things have changed.”

“So I gather,” Jess said thoughtfully. “I’ll be interested to meet this Professor Androbobel.”

“Yes, allies must consult,” Charlez said. “They always have big meetings in the books. In *The Last Great War* the great council gathered and—”

Further discussion was halted as there came the clatter and thump of more people scrambling up onto the stockade, and additional heads began

appearing over the wall.

“What in the king’s good name, Ben,” Jorg the carpenter shouted down from the wall. “What are you doing back?”

“Wasn’t I supposed to come back?” Ben said, a bit bewildered by the repeated question.

“Nobody expected it,” Jorg said.

A crowd of heads had gathered, but Ben still didn’t see the faces of either Horace the mayor, or Androbobel. The collection of villagers pressed against the wall, people murmuring and staring.

“Where are the goblins?” said Josline. She was wife of Bib the tanner and a short, fat woman. She gripped a large stirring spoon as if she supposed it were a deadly weapon. “Where are the wild beasts? The infernal savages?”

“It’s just Ben!” Drasel, the mayor’s wife screeched, sticking her head out over the wall. “It wasn’t the big one! We’ve still got time. The ruckus was Ben coming back with some strange foreigners!”

“We’re not foreigners,” the king insisted, starting to grow red. “I am the king!”

Nobody heard him.

The crowd of villagers continued to grow.

“How did you get back?” Josline demanded. “You get turned around and come wandering back?”

“No, I followed the directions,” Ben said, not quite sure what Josline meant.

“He did what he was supposed to do,” Jess added, an edge coming to her voice. “Now, if someone doesn’t open this gate promptly, I am going to have our wizard blast it off its hinges! So, which will it be?”

There were several squeaks and a number of gasps from atop the wall, and everyone scattered. Almost immediately there came a rattle from the other side of the gate and the massive doors swung open.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL

**N**ow, let's get this started right," the king said. He cleared his throat. "I want the guard to sound on their trumpets again, and the herald is to step forward and announce—"

"Ben, Ben!" Cendric boomed. The big blacksmith burst through the crowd, his arms held out in greeting. "You're back!"

The king hastily pulled his horse back to avoid the dirty smith and Ben found himself engulfed in a pair of hairy arms, his back pounded as if it were an anvil.

"It's very nice to see you too, Master Cendric," he managed to croak.

"Now wait a minute," the king said. "Just wait a minute—"

The villagers crowded around, talking noisily among themselves and pointing at Jess, Ernie, Charlez, and the rest of the court. Both Ernie and Charlez were preening under the attention, but the king and queen—as well as the rest of the court—looked flummoxed. The villagers of York had never seen royalty before, and had no idea whom they beheld, or how they ought to conduct themselves in the presence of such. This meant the villagers were currently wandering around the gathering, curiously fingering the ornate clothing of various noble people and poking their mounts as if inspecting an animal for sale. Without a clue as to what was going on, it seemed the villagers were waiting for someone official to begin the inquisition of Ben, and neither Androbobel or the mayor had shown themselves.

Finally Drasel wormed her way to the front of the crowd. As wife of the mayor, she often decided to make herself in charge. Now her narrow face was

screwed up, her long bony fingers flexing as if she thought to pick Ben apart.

“So, what do we have here?” she said in her high whiny voice. “Quiet everyone!”

The murmuring of the crowd died away.

“Very good,” the king said, adjusting his robes. “It’s nice to have proper order restored. Now—”

Drasel looked over the court, her face lighting up. “I see. Just as I thought. An incompetent failure yet again. Stuttering Ben hasn’t returned with help from the king—he’s been captured by a band of dangerous foreigners who have made him their slave, and have brought him back to us for a ransom.”

The king blinked. The queen’s lips thinned, and she looked ready to speak in spite of not wishing to stoop to such a state as conversing with the dirty savages of York.

“They don’t look like bandits to me,” Cendric said.

“I wondered why he didn’t bring back help,” Bib the tanner said.

“A ransom?” someone squawked. “Why are we supposed to buy him back?”

“Ben’s cursed,” Josline shrieked, elbowing her way up beside Drasel. “Cursed with bad luck, goblins, and a lot of other things. I think a pixie hexed him when he was a baby. Must’ve not liked the way he looked, or something. First sign was his stutter. I know all about these things, see.”

“Ben wasn’t captured by foreigners. Not hardly.” Jess looked irritated. “If you knew who he had brought, you wouldn’t speak like that about him.”

“My pardon...uh...Lady.” Drasel took a quick look at Jess and bowed low. “I didn’t realize you had taken him on as your lowly servant. I’m sure Ben is very good at menial tasks, and I assure you everyone in York thanks you for finally giving him some meaning in his life. We only ask that you take good care of him into his old age because he is a little ‘touched’ as we say and will need someone to look after him all his life.”

“I’m touched?” Ben said. He was getting *very* confused. First he was captured, then he was cursed, and now he was touched—whatever that meant.

“Ben doesn’t need to be looked after.” Jess bared her teeth, causing Drasel to quickly back up. “And he never has been, nor ever will be, my servant!”

Drasel—accustomed to being a woman feared and respected—found herself stammering beneath the weight of Jess’s ire. She was quite relieved when



Androbobel and the mayor made their appearance at that moment.

Horace came bowling through the crowd, Androbobel following in his wake. The mayor was a short, rotund, and balding man who kept himself in fastidious neatness. But Ben thought that today he looked a little less neat than normal—his shirt and jacket ruffled and his thin hair awry. His normally plump face was haggard and he appeared to have lost some weight.

By contrast the professor looked unchanged since the last time Ben had seen him before leaving York. Androbobel was a tall, thin man with an equally thin mustache which hung down around his mouth and appeared well oiled. He wore a finely embroidered purple robe which put him at stark odds with the rough clothing of the villagers. A gold rimmed eye-piece perched precariously on his narrow cheek—something it seemed he had to constantly adjust so that it wouldn't fall off.

The mayor gave a small start, apparently having only heard that Ben had returned, and not the fact that he was accompanied by strangers. Horace cleared his throat and hastily straightened his jacket, doing his best to look official.

"Greetings," he said. "You are all welcome to York. We are a humble and generous people, always welcoming of strangers."

"We're all with Ben," Jess said, cutting him off.

Drasel gave her husband a meaningful jab with her elbow.

"Oh. Ah..." By the look on the mayor's face he was attempting to do some quick figuring of the situation, but apparently couldn't make sense of it, for in the end he turned to Ben with a puzzled expression and said, "So, how did it go?"

"Go?" Ben said.

"Yes," the mayor prompted. "We sent you with a message to the king, to bring help."

"Well, I got there," Ben said, trying to think of some way to explain it all without stuttering a lot.

"And?"

"It was a complete success," Jess said. "For his great service to the crown Ben was made Duke of York. The king has come to assist Ben in destroying the scourge of goblins from the kingdom of Tarn."

There were some amazed murmurs, the entire crowd of villagers leaned forward, listening.

“So where’s the king now?” Josline demanded in her shrill voice. “I don’t see him hear. I’ve heard that the king is twice as big as an ordinary man, strong as a giant, and the most handsome man you’ve ever seen. I know it’s true, ‘cause the king ain’t no ordinary man.”

The king looked as if he didn’t know what to make of this appellation, and settled for a perplexed but slightly pleased expression. To be imagined as the most handsome man wasn’t a bad idea.

“Silence, Josline,” the mayor said stiffly. “I am the one speaking for York now. We don’t want anyone thinking that we’re ignorant.”

The mayor turned back to Jess. “Duke? Ben is a duke now, you say? Well... really, I don’t know as we needed a duke, but I suppose that’s...nice.” The mayor sounded less than convincing. “So, the king is here?”

The herald quickly scrambled down from his horse and stepped forward. Giving a blast on his horn he announced, “Presenting Their Royal Majesties, the king and queen of Tarn! And also Charlez, Field Marshal and Commander of the armies of Tarn!” The herald was always careful to please the queen.

“Greetings.” The king lifted a hand. “Gentle subjects, you have nothing to fear.” After Josline’s description of him, he was inclined to a more favorable mood toward these rustic villagers. A lot of ignorance could be forgiven on the account of people thinking him the greatest man alive.

The mayor gave a small bow, looking out of sorts.

“You expected something else?” Charlez said, for once attentive enough to notice the mayor’s expression.

“An army that stretched as far as the eye can see, I guess,” the mayor said, so flustered that he said exactly what he had been thinking.

Androbobel laid a hand on the mayor’s shoulder, cutting him short. “Don’t be too quick, my good friend.” The professor’s gaze went from the king to Ernie, and then to Goblin Terror, hanging prominently at Ben’s side.

“Greetings, greetings!” Androbobel stepped forward, lifting his arms majestically. “O great and glorious king and queen, esteemed marshal, most excellent wizard, and her majesty, Mol’Jessel, light of the kingdom. It is an honor.”

He bowed low.

The villagers took their cue from the professor. A gasp went through the crowd, everyone falling back and making some attempt at a bow or curtsy, most of them simply stumbling over their own feet. The mayor began

babbling apologies.

“You forgot to greet your own duke,” Jess said, pointedly.

“Your pardon.” Androbobel showed a smile of many teeth. “A fine greeting to...Ben. The Duke of York.” Androbobel gave the smallest fraction of a bow. The effort seemed to cause him great difficulty.

“You must excuse these simple villagers,” the professor continued, turning back to the king and queen. “They haven’t seen the light of education. But I can speak for all of them in saying it is so wonderful to see you all. I am so... glad that our young resident, the poor Bennelzor Transom managed to reach you. I deeply regret that we couldn’t send one more capable—such as myself—but there were such grave matters to attend at York that Ben was the only one we could spare.”

“He seems to have been the best,” Jess said, her voice like ice.

“Yes, yes,” Androbobel said smoothly. “And I have been working tirelessly in preparation for your sure arrival, and I stand ready to help you in any need. All of us here in York are eager to assist you, whatever your need. Allow me to introduce Horace, the mayor of York and my capable assistant.”

“A pleasure, dear sir,” the queen said. If she recoiled at the thought of speaking with the villagers, Androbobel was a different matter entirely. She looked pleased with what she saw in the professor.

“And as for myself, O King and Queen, I am most knowledgeable on all matters of state,” Androbobel concluded, folding his hands. “I can help and guide you in every manner of governing. With the assistance of myself—and the mayor, of course—you shall have all the help you need. We all are so honored that you have come to deliver this humble village. With you and the great army you have mustered I am confident that, together, we shall drive the goblins back into the mountains.”

“Most excellent.” The queen beamed. “With a quick consultation with Charlez here I am sure—”

“And Ben,” Jess said.

“Ben?” The queen turned toward her daughter, her face carefully arranged in polite puzzlement. “But, dear, Charlez is commander of the army.”

“And Ben is duke of these lands,” Jess said, just as politely. “It is absolutely necessary that he be consulted. Court decorum requires it. And as the man most familiar with these lands, I am certain he has the best idea of how to defeat the goblins.”

“I see.” The queen wore a fixed smile that said she saw she had been out-manuevered.

“That is how it goes in the stories,” Charlez agreed. “The fellow who brought back the help tells the council what needs to be done, and he gives them all sorts of good plans.”

The professor blinked. “Well. Ah. Very...good.” He looked as if he had just swallowed a very large lemon, whole.

“So nice that we’ve straightened that out,” Jess said. “All right, Ben. What next?”

“First I’m going to see my Ma and Da,” he said. “They’ve surely been worrying about me, and I want to see what the new house looks like.”

Ben started to march down the road, but Jess—who had been carefully watching the villagers—caught his arm. Having long experience with the court, where sophistication and guile ran somewhat deeper, she already had a good feel for what schemes were on the air.

“Just one second,” she said to Ben, and turned to the villagers. “There is a house—right?”

“Not completed,” the mayor mumbled, looking at his feet.

“Not begun,” Cendric said, more truthfully. He was the only villager not studiously avoiding Jess’s gaze. “Androbobel convinced everyone that we needed to build a stockade instead. He said Abern was capable of fending for himself.”

“And where are Ben’s parents now?” Jess said, her voice hard.

“At the inn.” Cendric jabbed a meaty thumb over his shoulder. “Abern and Jemima came to York, eventually. They’ve been here a number of days, actually. Abern has been spending most of his time on the walls, fending off the goblin raids with his bow. I don’t know what we’d do without him. The mayor and the professor were just holding at meeting to have them voted out of the village when you all showed up.”

“Vote them out of the village?” Ben said indignantly.

“We had to!” the mayor burst out. “It was our solemn duty, required by law! They were disturbing the peace—Abern is like that! Wouldn’t do what he was told, always arguing with rightly instituted authorities!”

“He threatened to shoot me,” Androbobel said, severely. “I bore with his troublesome nature as long as possible, but he is a menace to society.”

Without a word, Ben started toward the inn. Jess followed, with Ernie,

Charlez, the king, the queen, and a few curious members of the court bringing up the rear. The crowd of villagers trailed after, but the mayor kept pace with Ben, babbling about how Androbobel told him he *had* to call the vote, it wasn't anything personal, and Abern was the best of friends.

The inn was the largest building in York, constructed of rough stone and situated halfway down the street. When Ben stepped into the common room he saw the tables and chairs had been pushed back and arranged in a circle around a clear space in the middle of the room. In the center of that clear space sat Ben's mother, Jemima, securely tied to a chair. Abern was also securely trussed to a chair, but he was halfway across the room, headed for the back exit as fast as he could hop his chair.

"Come on, wifey," Abern called as Ben opened the door. "We might be able to escape before they return."

Abern Transom was scrawny, hairy, and about as disheveled and dirty as his wife would allow him to be. What he lacked in size he made up for in temperament, general irascibility, and socially inappropriate behavior. Jemima was as plump as her husband was skinny, and placid as he was excitable. She had vast patience, which verged on saintly where her husband was concerned.

"Ben!" Jemima said, her face breaking into a smile as she saw her son.

"Ain't no use waiting for him," Abern said, between gasps as he hopped his chair, his back to the front entrance and unaware of the watching crowd. "Something happened to him. No doubt foully betrayed, or otherwise done in. Why, when I'm done here I'll go hunt down whoever's done it and fix them good."

"You don't need to," Ben said. "I'm back."

"What!" Abern's head whipped around, his chair nearly falling over. "Run for it, boy! Before they catch you, too! We've been betrayed!"

"I don't know anything about that," Ben said, "but I've come to set you free."

He crossed the room, and, drawing Goblin Terror, quickly cut away Jemima's bonds.

"I'm sorry I didn't come back sooner, Ma. I missed you both."

"Nonsense." Jemima laid a hand on his cheek. "I worried about you, but you shouldn't have come at all. The goblins are a terrible danger, worse than before. You didn't do anything dangerous while you were away, did you?"

“Well, I..” He cringed at some of the memories, glad his mother couldn’t read his mind. “I guess I’m not dead,” he said as evasively as he could.

“Look at that sword!” Abern’s eyes lit up as Ben approached, Goblin Terror in hand. “That’s what I call a real chopper. A man could chop an’ hack with that thing. How about putting it to a little use over here and set me free. We’ve got some war and destruction to make around this here village.”

By this time Jess, Ernie, Charlez, the rest of the attending crowd was packed into the room. Soon as Abern was free, all the villagers began speaking at once, everyone pointing fingers and shouting about how it was someone else’s idea. The noise was deafening, the clamor incomprehensible.

The shouting may have gone on for a very long time, except Jess managed to pull Ernie aside and said something in his ear. The wizard nodded, and adjusted his hat importantly. Taking his staff in the crook of his arm, he sighted down the length at the ceiling like someone about to blast away.

Which, in fact, he was.

There came a thunderous “*Bang!*” that shook the building and a violent explosion blew a gaping hole in the ceiling, blasting a cloud of dust across the room. People screamed, and threw themselves to the floor. Ernie flew backward as if kicked by a mule, landing in a heap in the far corner.

In the silence that followed the only sound was the faint rattle and clatter of falling bits of pulverized debris from the gaping hole into the second story. The cloud of thick dust slowly settled on the prostrate townspeople. Someone coughed faintly.

“Amazing,” the king said shakily, raising his head. “Now why wouldn’t he do that on the goblins?”

“How’d he do that?” Abern shouted. “I want a stick like that! I want to go bang and—”

“I thought,” Jess said, “that I told you to make a loud *noise* so we could get some order. I don’t think I said anything about blowing a large hole in the ceiling and nearly killing us all.”

“I kind of forgot to leave the explosive part out of the spell. I was rushed, you know.” Ernie staggered back to his feet, dusting off his battered hat and trying to straighten himself out. “Anyhow, it...er...was a good blast, if I may say so myself. And order has been restored. That’s what you wanted.”

Jess gave a long-suffering sigh, and turned from the wizard to face the mayor, and Androbobel. “I think,” she said, “that we need to straighten some

things out.”

“It wasn’t my idea,” the mayor quavered, nearly falling to his knees. “I’m innocent! I was just doing my job!”

“It was a very distasteful business,” Androbobel said loftily. “If only it could have been avoided. But the law is the law, and Abern was threatening an official.”

“Then he gets a royal pardon,” Jess snapped. “We have bigger problems, like goblins and giant snakes. What about them?”

“Terrible! We’re about to be overwhelmed.” The mayor clapped his hands to his cheeks. “We thought every day was going to be our last. It’s good that you finally arrived, or we surely would have been doomed!”

“We were hard pressed, but bravely defending ourselves,” Androbobel corrected.

“You mean *I* was defending you all,” Abern said, poking the professor in the front of his robes. “Your flowery words weren’t much good when the goblins came calling, were they? If it weren’t for me and Cendric, who knows what a pickle you and your scared villagers would be in, eh?”

“I was rallying the inhabitants.” Androbobel straightened his robes and pointedly ignored Abern, turning his attention back to the king and queen. “We have bravely faced, and fought, goblin raiding parties. The main goblin army has not come against us yet, but they will soon.”

“Exactly,” the mayor said, wiping his brow with a handkerchief. “A terrible situation.”

“Then we’re all agreed that we must decide what to do about the goblins,” Jess said.

“A council of war!” Charlez raised his arm, almost jumping up and down with excitement. “We’ll make battle plans.”

“A brilliant suggestion,” the queen said. “Charlez, I’m sure you can tell us exactly what needs to be done—unless Ben has some thoughts?” She finished with a taunting edge.

“Yes, Ben has a *lot* of suggestions,” Jess shot back. “He’ll tell us exactly what needs to be done. Everyone gather round—Ben is going to present his plan for dealing with the goblins.”



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### PLANS

Get all those tables and chairs around,” the mayor instructed the crowd. “Ben is going to tell us his plan.”  
“What am I supposed to tell them?” Ben whispered to Jess. “I don’t have any plan.”

“Sure you do,” Jess said cheerfully.

“I do?”

“To kill the goblins.”

“Yeah.” He thought a bit. “But is that enough of a plan?”

“It’s further than they’ve ever thought.”

“But don’t we need something more official? Like step-by-step instructions?”

“Trust me, the less they know the happier they’ll be. People don’t want to know the odds for victory, or how dangerous it will be, or how uncertain you might be. They just want a brave and decisive leader who will make them all feel good.”

“If you say so.” Ben rubbed his chin uncertainly.

“Everyone outside,” Jess commanded. “Forget the chairs. There isn’t enough room in here for the entire court, and we’re not going to sit in the middle of the debris from Ernie’s blasting.”

Ben felt stuttering rise up inside him, and he hadn’t even begun to speak. He thought about talking in front of all the people, trying to tell them what he thought, and he felt himself go sweaty and start trembling a little. He wasn’t sure if it was a good thing there was no nearby window he could fall out, or if



he was sorry there wasn't one available for him to make a hasty exit.

"Maybe you could just tell them," he whispered to Jess.

"I couldn't do that." Jess looked shocked.

"Why not?"

"We're supposed to be showing them how good *you* are, remember? You're the Duke of York, and someday you'll be king. I *want* you to be in charge. I want them to see who you really are."

"I can't do it!"

"You can." Jess looked at him sternly. "You must. Remember what we talked about, Ben."

"I'm still not sure this is a good idea. But I'll try," Ben said gamely. He remembered telling Charlez something about just going and doing what needed to be done, no matter how embarrassing—but he was finding his own advice difficult to follow. Presenting a plan to defeat the goblins was much worse than introducing someone to the court.

Once everyone was gathered outside the tavern—most of the villagers seated on the ground, the court ladies seated on blankets and cushions, the noblemen standing importantly—the mayor moved to the front of the crowd. He positioned himself beside Ben like an actor taking center stage, or a conductor preparing to direct the orchestra. Unlike Ben, he was in his element.

"I trust your heart has been warmed by the loving and enthusiastic welcome of York." The mayor leaned toward Ben with a fatherly air. "I just want you to know—I want to be the one to personally tell you—that we had unquestioning trust in your ability to accomplish your mission. There isn't anyone we could possibly trust more than you."

"Besides the king, and perhaps just about any other nobleman," someone muttered.

The mayor whipped around, his face rigid as he searched out the offender, but the crowd was so large it was impossible to see who had spoke—and there was the risk it had been some important noble whom the mayor wouldn't want to chastise. Instead, the mayor settled for straightening his jacket with a quick jerk and turned back to Ben. "As I was saying, as mayor of York, I want to take this time to officially welcome you home. We were all gravely concerned that you might not make it back, and words can't describe how happy we are to see you. And I also would like to say how much I am looking forward to your great leadership as Duke of York. We in York have always

wanted to have a stuttering duke—I mean stalwart!—yes, stalwart! A stalwart duke to defend us. I have struggled valiantly to protect this village against the goblins, to look after everyone’s interests, and to prepare everyone for any possible contingency. I have labored day and night, losing food and sleep in my concern for the well-being of our people—”

“Oh, get on with it, Horace,” Cal the farmer shouted. “The day is nearly over.”

“Right, right.” The mayor shot Cal a sharp look. “As I was saying, tell us what you intend to do to defeat the goblin threat.”

“Well...uh...we’re—First we’re going to find the goblins,” Ben said. That part came out fairly well, though he thought his heart was pounding loud enough for everyone to hear.

There was a moment of silence.

“And then what?” the queen said, far too sweetly.

“Then we kill the goblins,” Ben said. It came out sounding like he intended to bill the goblins, but he thought everyone knew what he meant. He certainly wasn’t going to try saying it again.

“How?” the king said.

“With swords and stuff,” Ben said, mindful of what Jess had told him about being decisive, and not getting too much into details.

“You said ‘we,’” the mayor gave a little nervous chuckle that died away. “By ‘we’ do you mean you and a sizable force of the king’s men?”

“It should be everybody,” Ben said firmly. “It is only fair that we should all help.”

“I see.” The mayor rubbed his hands together and licked his lips, looking to Androbobel. “I...ahhh...so then, *exactly* what did you mean by ‘we’ as in ‘we’re going to kill the goblins?’”

“I meant all of us.”

“Hooray,” Abern shouted. “I taught my own son well. We’re all going off to war!”

The mayor tried to give another chuckle, but it came out a teeny, *squeak—squeak—squeak*, like something was caught in the back of his throat.

“That plan seems a little simple. A little trite,” the queen said, folding her arms.

“I find simple is best,” Ben said. “It keeps things from having confusing com—compli—problems,” he finished, giving up on trying to stutter out

“complications.”

“What about contingency planning?” The queen’s eyes narrowed. “What if things go wrong? A true king is prepared for every possible outcome.”

“Nobody can prepare for every possible outcome,” Jess protested. “Or is Da going to explain a hundred different contingency plans to us?”

The king looked alarmed.

“Killing the goblins covers most contingencies, I think,” Ben said. “Right now they’re not dead, and we’re going to make them dead.”

“Hooray!” Abern shouted again.

“And what are you *personally* going to do?” the queen pressed.

Ben looked at the crowd for a minute, not sure how he was supposed to answer that.

“Well, I’ll lead the fight,” he finally said. “I promise to be wherever the fighting is the worst—to be the first to go out, and the last to come in.”

“Spoken like a true king!” the dowager said, and thumped the ground with her cane. “I say it’s the perfect plan!”

“And I’ll be right out there with Ben, leading the army,” Charlez declared. “We will win this fight!”

The queen opened her mouth—then closed it. In her scheme Charlez was supposed to offer an alternate strategy which the queen would praise while heaping scorn on Ben. That didn’t work too well when nobody the bard had just agreed with Ben’s plan. The planned humiliation cut short, the queen returned to her chair, glowering.

“There we have it,” Jess said. “The plan of battle is set. Further instructions will be given tomorrow. The court is dismissed to set up camp.”



Jak the innkeeper insisted that the royal party use his inn. There were just enough rooms for the king and queen, Jess, Ben, Ernie, and Charlez—with one room out of commission as the result of Ernie’s wild blasting. The rest of the court had to set up camp within York, which meant the confines within the stockade was crammed to bursting, tents and baggage filling up every street—all two of them—and every other free space. The villagers were thrilled by all of the bustle and excitement. A more exciting occasion in York had not occurred in living memory

Everyone was excited, that is, except the mayor. At the first possible moment the mayor took Ben aside for a drink at the bar, and for a few private questions. Jess, Ernie, and Charlez came along.

“So, Ben...about all this fighting. You really think this army is big enough?” The mayor turned his mug round and round in his hands, looking distraught. “I mean, I’m guessing—I’m pretty sure there are a lot more goblins.”

“That’s okay,” Ben said. “We have stuff better than the goblins.”

“Really?” The mayor looked hopeful.

“We have experts, for starters,” he said. “There is Charlez and Ernie. They’re both very educated, and Ernie’s a wizard.”

“Of the third order,” Ernie said proudly.

“There is also Jess, and she’s the best,” Ben added.

“Thanks, Ben.” Jess smiled at him.

“Right. That’s good.” The mayor gave Jess a sideways look, fidgeting with his mug of beer. “So. You’re a princess.”

“I am.”

“Good, very good.” The mayor pursed his lips, then ruined the pose with a hiccup. “So. Wizards are good. Wizards can blast things—” the mayor’s gaze flickered to the gaping hole in the ceiling, “—but as a princess, do you have any special powers?”

“Special powers?”

“I don’t know...” the mayor looked down at his mug. “Maybe your presence gives a bravery bonus to all surrounding troops, or something.”

“Nope. At least, not officially. But I’m really good with a sword,” Jess said.

“She is,” Ben agreed. “Really good.”

“Erm. Good. Very good.” The mayor eyed Jess’s sword uneasily. The idea of a sword wielding princess clearly unnerved him even further.

“I just wondered—not that I in any way doubt the vast skill gathered here —” the mayor coughed nervously, “but our numbers still seem a little thin for fending off a goblin invasion.”

“They would be,” Jess agreed, “except we have a secret weapon.”

“A secret weapon?” the mayor’s eyes widened.

“Yes,” Jess said. “Ben has a magical sword. Show it to him, Ben.”

“It’s nothing much, really.” Ben drew out his sword, the long, broad blade glimmering in the light, the jewels in the hilt flashing.

The mayor gasped.

“That sword is Goblin Terror,” Jess said. “When the blade is drawn it strikes utter terror into the hearts of all goblins. They won’t be able to stand against us.”

“That’s wonderful,” the mayor said. “York can rest easy, then. Except... does it have a warranty?”

“What?” Jess said.

“You know, when you purchased it did it come with a warranty? Is it still under warranty, guaranteed to work? I mean, the entire village is depending on this thing, it wouldn’t do to have it suddenly fail at the most inopportune time. Any prudent shopper would want some assurances.”

Jess frowned. “It was given to Ben by a very powerful wizard, not bought, and it has worked for a very long time. And I *assure* you,” she said, an edge coming to her voice, “it will work!”

“I’ll have you know that Goblin Terror has the Good Wizarding Seal of Approval, certified to be a one hundred percent genuine magical artifact,” Ernie added importantly.

“Good.” The mayor hiccuped again. “Just wanted to be sure. Due diligence and all that.”

“We can handle the goblins,” Ben said. “I’m more worried about the nur’gali.”

“What’s that?” The mayor gripped his mug.

“Giant snakes.” Charlez leaned close so he could whisper in dramatic fashion. “Ghastly creatures. The stuff of legends and nightmares. Enough to give the strongest men chills. Have you seen them?”

“Never.” The mayor looked ready to fall off his stool. “When do they come? Where?”

“Typically at night,” Charlez said cheerily. “I imagine your stockade walls have kept them out...for now. But they may try to burrow in under the walls. So always listen for strange sounds, especially at night. And if you have to go out after dark you’d best stick close to me, because I know how to kill them.”

“Right—right!” Now the mayor was stuttering. “I—I—I’ll be sure to mention that to everyone. We’ll listen very carefully for *any* sounds. So very good of you to explain things, I—I, uh, I need to be going. Business and—and such.”

With the mayor sufficiently satisfied—or terrified—the party broke up.

Ernie left muttering something about digging holes, and Charlez parted with some word about seeing Beulah. Jess said she needed to give the guards orders about defending the village and promised to come back later. This left Ben alone.

It was odd to be back in York. Nothing seemed the same. The wall around the village made everything feel closed in, but Ben decided the difference was more than just the stockade walls. York itself felt different. The villagers were treating him strangely—well, even more strangely than before. Now it was as if nobody even wanted to look at him, as if they didn't know what to make of him. For Ben it was too much like how the court acted, too much like he didn't fit in.

Ben decided to go look for his parents. He thought everything would feel normal, right and comfortable with them, and he wanted to see them after having been gone for so many weeks. He found them without too much searching. They were staying with Cendric, the blacksmith. But after the first joyful hugs it became awkward. Cendric politely inquired about the hammer he had lent Ben for the journey, and Ben had to admit he had lost it killing a foul beast. This thrilled Abern, but upset Jemima greatly, and Ben thought it best not to go into any further detail, especially as he had nearly died in that incident. In fact, Jemima's concern about Ben's well-being made it decidedly difficult to talk about most of the adventure to Galdoron, as quite a bit of it involved death and mayhem.

Conversation devolved into Abern admiring Goblin Terror, Jemima repeatedly asking Ben if he was okay, and Cendric adding in the occasional and unrelated observation about smithing, just because it was the only thing he could comfortably talk about. In a way it was not much different from how life had been before Ben left—and yet in another way it felt completely different.

After an hour Ben excused himself and ended up wandering around York. Eventually he found himself on the stockade wall, staring toward the looming Shiddow Mountains. He was still there when Jess found him.

“What are you doing, Ben?” She stopped beside him.

“Just thinking, I guess.”

“What's the matter?” She leaned on the wall beside him, looking at his face. “You've never been a bundle of talkative energy, but you're quieter than normal.”

“It...Everything is strange, I guess. Things are...different. York is different. I...don’t know what is going on,” he admitted. “But I think I don’t like it.”

Jess sighed. “Ben, you’re different. That’s what’s changed. You’re not the same young man who left this village.”

“Is that bad? I feel lost.” Ben wrapped his arms around himself. “You’re not supposed to be lost in your own village.”

“I guess it all depends on what you make of it. You can’t go back to being that happy ignorant farmer. You’ll have to decide how you’re going to go forward—what path you will take. You’re starting to see the world a little clearer. Ben, you were under a bit of a misapprehension about your mission for York..”

“Androbobel doesn’t like me,” Ben said.

“Yes.” Jess paused. “Androbobel didn’t believe there really was any goblin danger—not a real danger to the village. He sent you away to bring help because he saw that as a way to be rid of you, forever. He thought you would get lost, and never come back. Once he was rid of you and your parents, he figured he would be free to rule York uncontested. But then it turned out the goblin threat *was* real, and worse than anything he could have imagined. Then there was nobody brave enough to venture out and ask the king for help. But you actually made it, and you brought back help. And now Androbobel sees a chance for even greater advancement for himself. He sees a chance to use this situation to make himself the king’s new advisor, and rather than run a little village he will rule a kingdom. If Androbobel has his way, he is going to leave this backwater York behind, and set himself up nicely in Galdoron. The people of York will be mighty surprised to find out how their good friend will treat them then.”

“How do you know all that?” Ben said, amazed. “Nobody told you anything.”

“I’m a princess. And not a stupid princess, unlike most. I’ve grown up in the court. I’m very good at reading people, and understanding their machinations. Androbobel works just like the court.”

“Well.” Ben stopped. He knew Jess was right. She was smart that way. He couldn’t put things together so neatly like her, but he knew there was some reason why he was never quite comfortable around Androbobel. “So what are we going to do?”

“Worry about the goblins first,” Jess said. “The rest...we’ll deal with the

rest later.”





## CHAPTER TWENTY

### SCHEMING

That night found the king and queen dubiously examining their new sleeping quarters at the inn. They had the largest room, but it was quite packed with traveling supplies. They didn't travel light, and chests full of clothes, washing supplies, and books lined all of the walls, the contents overflowing onto the floor. The queen's attention, however, was fixed on the bed in the middle of the room.

"Check it out, Harry," she said.

"Looks big enough, I guess," the king said. "Not so big as our bed back in the castle, but all-in-all I'd say it's better than sleeping in a tent."

"No, check it for bed bugs!" the queen hissed. "Who knows what vile contaminants a provincial place like this might have."

"It looks quite clean." Dutifully, the king went over to the bed and lifted the blankets. "Nope, no bed bugs," he said, clearly having no idea what a bed bug was, or what it might look like.

"Get into bed," the queen command.

"You coming?" the king said, climbing in and pulling the blankets up. "Honestly, you act as if—"

"Do you feel any bites?" the queen insisted.

"No." The king looked at her, slightly uneasy. "Am I supposed to?"

"Good." The queen let out her breath. "No bed bugs then. One can never be too careful."

The queen climbed into her side of the bed.

"It's been the most peculiar day," the king mused once they were both

settled in. “Disturbing, actually. I never knew such monstrous things existed!”

“What’s that?” the queen said.

“Gertrude, do you know where milk comes from? I hesitate to tell you. They squeeze it out of cows.” The king looked at her seriously. “Why wasn’t I ever told this before? They reach down and squeeze this grotesque bulging sack under the cow and the milk comes out. It’s so gross—I never knew I was drinking cow fluid. Revolting.” The king shuddered.

“There are worse things, Harry,” the queen said patiently. “Now, about—”

“But that’s not the end of it,” the king hurried on. “Eggs. Do you know where chicken eggs come from? Chickens *excrete* eggs. Eggs are chicken poop—I never knew! It’s so vile! And to think that man was going to give me chicken eggs for our daughter. Why—”

“What *were* you doing today?” the queen asked.

“Inspecting the village. A few of the townspeople took me around and... showed me things. I don’t know if I dare eat anything besides vegetables now.”

“How about we focus on more pressing matters, like dealing with *that* man. We’ve arrived, and it’s time we bring him down.”

“But how?” The king sat up. “Did you see what he did to those goblins with that sword today? He could fix any problem with that sword.”

“The sword is a prize, yes, but without the sword, he is nothing.” The queen waved a hand. “He barely stuttered his way through that meeting of the court. If I could get one chance at him without your mother or Mol meddling, he’d be finished—run out of the court, and even the kingdom. But I’m not going to depend on that chance. Listen carefully, Harry, because I have other plans, and there is no way that man will escape them.”



Jess slept fitfully that night and woke early. Staring up at the ceiling in the dim light of near dawn, she considered lying in bed for a while, then decided it would do nothing to calm her troubled thoughts. Instead, she rose and dressed, leaving the room. When she stepped into the hall she nearly ran into Androbobel. The professor jumped guiltily, then gave her a hasty bow, murmuring, “My pardon, Princess,” and hurried on.

Feigning disinterest, Jess started toward the stairs, but she watched from

the corner of her eye as Androbobel slunk to the opposite end of the hall, gave a quick furtive glance around, then slipped into the king and queen's bedroom. Soon as the latch rattled shut Jess was back down the hall, silent as a cat, her ear pressed against the door.

"Majesties. You called for me." It was Androbobel's voice.

"It was good of you to come." The queen spoke distinctly.

"I am ready to serve."

"We may have the opportunity for a working relationship," the queen said.

"My Queen. I believe we see Ben Transom alike. A difficulty."

Jess's jaw clenched, but she kept listening.

"A difficulty," the king agreed.

"One that must be dealt with," the queen said.

"Your desired end?" The professor's voice was smooth as oil.

"That man out of the way, by one means or another. My daughter married to the fine Charlez. And this little goblin trouble removed." It sounded like the queen took a sip of her tea. "If you are helpful, there is a place at the court. If you are very helpful, the highest place in the court."

"Majesties...I think I can be very helpful."

"Excellent. Now—"

But at that moment Jess shifted her position at the door and one of her boots scraped across the floor.

"What's that?" the queen cried.

Cursing silently, Jess left the door and slipped down the hall, taking the stairs as fast as she dared without making a sound. In the common room of the inn she tried to compose herself, thoughts racing.



Ben slept soundly that night, the best he had slept in a long time, and woke refreshed, happy to be home and even—for the moment—ready to face the goblin trouble. He strapped on Goblin Terror and headed downstairs to see what the day had in store. Besides Jak at the counter, Jess was the only one up when he entered the common room. Jess was preoccupied with her own thoughts and didn't speak when Ben sat beside her. It was early for breakfast, so Ben was content to simply sit quietly beside her and re-acquaint himself with the familiar surroundings of the inn.

Charlez slept in late, but Ernie was up early, coming down fifteen minutes after Ben, his arms overflowing with papers, which he spread out on the table in front of Ben and Jess, setting to work scribbling notations with a determined concentration.

“Goodness, this is unusual,” Jess said, coming out of her thoughts. “Our wizard is actually working.” She glanced at the scattered parchments. They had various diagrams sketched on them, and scratched calculations.

“I’m surprised we haven’t heard more whining.” She peered at the wizard. “What has you preoccupied? Is that your last will and testament?”

“As I have always said, we should concentrate on saving our hides.” Ernie looked up from his writing and scratched the end of his nose with the quill tip, leaving a streak of ink. “And while all of you are playing your little games, I’ll be saving your hides.”

“You, save our hides?” Jess snorted. “That’ll be a first.”

“I’ll thank you if you fetch some toast and jam,” Ernie said primly, and dipped his pen back into the inkwell.

They were still eating breakfast when Horace made his appearance for the day, trundling thorough the inn’s front entrance. He approached their table, radiating a hyperactive joviality which couldn’t quite hide his nervousness.

“Ben old boy, I just can’t stop telling myself how glad I am that you’ve come back. I’m more glad about that than—than I’ve been glad about anything in my life.” The mayor stopped to give what he probably imagined was a happy little chuckle, but it came out sounding more like some chicken dying a horrible death. “So...have you been properly taken care of? Do you need anything? Anything I could help you with?”

“I guess not,” Ben said, a bit flustered. He wasn’t accustomed to such attention from the mayor.

“Good, that’s good.” Horace glanced at Jess, than quickly looked away. “So, what do you have planned for this morning?”

“First thing is getting Ned back,” Ben said.

“Ned?” the mayor repeated, stupidly.

“My plow horse.”

“The one he was *persuaded* to give up when he left York,” Jess prompted. “I’m sure you haven’t forgotten.”

“Not at all.” Horace gave a little start. “Uh, as I recall you temporarily traded your horse to Danwise the miller for three dozen eggs. Now that

you're back the eggs can be returned to Danwise, who I'm sure will gladly return your horse."

"I don't have the eggs anymore," Ben said.

"That's terrible, a real tragedy...without the eggs the situation is irreversible." Horace did his best to look grave and sound concerned. "Without his eggs, Danwise will have to keep the horse."

Ben looked confounded. "I knew selling Ned was a bad idea," he said. "There must be some other way."

"I have a solution," Jess said.

"Don't you dare give him those last eggs I gave you," Ben protested. "Those were for you! To make chickens and more chickens until you have all the chickens you could possibly want."

"I wouldn't dream of giving him those eggs," Jess said. "They are special to me. But Danwise will get his payment, and you will get Ned." She reached into her money pouch and pulled out the smallest dirty copper coin she had and laid it in the mayor's hand.

"What's this?" Horace peered at the coin in his hand, befuddled.

"Nobody in York knows the money game," Ben reminded Jess. "They—"

"Everyone else in York doesn't, but *he* does." Jess looked squarely at the mayor. She was right. One of the first things Androbobel had done upon taking Horace under his tutelage was teach him the value of coinage. Thus had begun their joint career in graft.

"It's not the value of a horse," the mayor protested. "This coin is only worth—"

"Three dozen eggs in a Galdoron market." Jess's voice was light, but her eyes were hard. "You will accept that as payment for the horse. You or your good friend Androbobel may produce the eggs for the miller, or convince him to take the coin. But you will have Ned here in a half hour."

Horace left, clutching the coin and looking quite out of sorts.

"That's settled at least. And we can finish our breakfast in peace," Jess said.

They did, but only just. The king, queen, and Charlez all came down just as Ben was clearing away the dishes. The threesome were in fine form, Charlez happily remarking about how events would turn out like this or that novel he had read, the king opining loudly on everything while saying not much of anything, and the queen in general fawning over Charlez.

Muttering, "Time for us to go get some fresh air," Jess tugged at Ben's sleeve. The two of them exited, but not before the queen called out in her shrill voice, reminding them that the court would be in session at mid-morning, when Ben could present his further intentions for dealing with the goblins.

"What will we do then?" Ben said once they were outdoors. "What am I going to tell the court?"

"What would you do if the court wasn't here?" Jess said.

"Find the goblins," Ben said. "We need to know how many there are, and where they are."

"Exactly." Jess looked pleased. "So you will give orders for scouting parties to be sent out. Then, once we know where the goblins are, and how many there are, we can form a plan of attack. You'll get the hang of this, Ben."

"Well, gee," he said. "I guess so. But I really don't like ordering people around. If they don't want to do it, I don't want to make them."

"Ordering people around is the job of kings, Ben. And one other thing: There is more scheming going on. When you get up there to speak, be careful. Early this morning I heard—"

Jess was cut off by the appearance of the mayor and Danwise the miller. Following behind Danwise, plodding dutifully along, was a bedraggled gray plow horse. Ned looked as if he had seen hard days of work and little recent tending, but otherwise appeared unchanged. The horse gave a hopeful nicker on seeing Ben, staring at him with big sad eyes.

"Ned! Ned!" Ben shouted, throwing his arms around the horse's neck. "You've missed my songs terribly, I can see it. But I'm back now, and everything will be all right."

"Apparently some people don't know how to care for a horse properly," Jess said, her gaze taking in Ned's condition, and attributing the poor appearance it to something other than a lack of songs. "If a horse in my stables was left in this condition I would have the stable master flogged."

"Yes, Mistress," Danwise said meekly, looking much cowed from his usual self. "But it is only a plow horse, and one starting to get old."

"But it is a good plow horse, and all the more reason to treat it right. Now be gone, before I decide that flogging is a good idea," Jess snapped.

Danwise didn't need to be told twice. The mayor didn't even wait to be dismissed before making himself absent.

“Where can we tend to Ned?” Jess asked Ben. “We could stable him with the court horses, but I don’t think Ned would appreciate that.”

“No, not with them,” Ben agreed quickly. “Ned isn’t that kind of horse, and he wouldn’t be happy with them. Master Cendric has a small stable behind his forge. We can keep Ned there.”

The rest of the early morning was spent by Ben and Jess currying and feeding Ned. Ben also sang Ned many songs—which he insisted the horse needed if he were to feel better. He sang rather badly, but Ned did seem to appreciate it.

By the time they had Ned comfortably put away, it was time to attend the court.

A more formal court proceeding was set up in the open air in the village square. Some quick carpentry work had built a rough stage in the center of the village commons. Many chairs collected from all over York were carefully set in neat rows facing the stage. The effect was passable for a seating of the court, in the opinion of the queen. It also maximized Ben’s feeling of intimidation.

Once the entire court was seated, the king nodded for Charlez to begin. Charlez strode to the center of the stage, brandishing his sword with his typical dramatics.

“We are here,” the bard began, “because the kingdom is in danger. We are here to vanquish the forces of evil, and liberate the oppressed. This day we start down the path of victory.”

Charlez paused—momentarily drawing a blank on any more literary lines to quote.

The king and queen clapped, much of the court joining in.

“And—uh—my good friend Ben, the Duke of York, is here to explain how we’re going to do that.” Charlez finished his introduction in a rush, motioning for Ben to step forward.

Ben, feeling rather light-headed, took the stage. He drew a quick breath, then wished he hadn’t as he was already nearly hyperventilating.

“We need more information to make a right decision about what we must do,” he stuttered. “We need to find out where the goblins are, and how many we face.”

“And how are we going to do that?” the king said.

“We send out scouting parties,” Ben said. “Horsemen, skilled and mounted

on the best steeds. Within a few days we will know what goblin army we face. Then we can make plans to attack.”

The queen tisked. “Every one of these plans seems to evade the heart of the matter,” she said. “What we really need is to be rid of this goblin danger. When will we see a demonstration of your true abilities, Duke?”

“Whenever it is needed, I guess,” Ben stammered.

“I hope we are all awed,” the queen said, sounding utterly insincere. “As the first step in that demonstration, you will ride with these scouts?”

“Uh—I will.” Ben sputtered. It took all of his self-control to keep from leaping off the stage. The eyes of the court on him, and he thought he heard a snicker making its way through the crowd. He didn’t know what he was supposed to say, or what he was supposed to do—he just wanted to get away, and he wasn’t sure how much longer he could keep talking, no matter what Jess said he was supposed to do.

“As will I,” Charlez said. “As leader of this army, I must see firsthand what we face.”

The king looked at the queen. The queen was making some kind of exasperated motion at the bard which seemed to be instructing him to shut up. Charlez didn’t notice.

“The scouting parties should leave as soon as possible,” Ben said.

The queen opened her mouth.

“The time of battle draws near. Then we shall see what kind of goblins we face!” Charlez declared.

Then someone started screaming.





## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### UUG-LUKK COMES

**W**e're dead! We're dead!" Josline shrieked from her point of watch atop the wall. She had taken over watch from one of the bums a short time ago and was now squealing and dancing around in a circle, flapping her arms like some rotund tornado. "The goblins are here! The goblins have come and we're dead! Somebody save us! Oh, somebody—"

At that point Josline lost her footing and went tumbling from the wall. It would have gone very badly for her except she landed head first in a rain barrel which promptly burst asunder beneath her great weight and sent her rolling some distance down the road. She finally came to rest in a sodden heap directly across from Cendric's forge where she lay, staring up at the sky, quite stunned.

"Oh dear," the mayor whimpered.

The entire court stared. Heads appeared from every house on the street. People looked first at Josline, then at the wall. The mayor appeared frozen in terror, indecision, or perhaps both. Charlez looked perplexed, the event having no literary precedent. The rest of the court seemed uncertain as to whether what they had seen was real or not.

"Uh, I guess we'd better go check," Ben said. "Sometimes Josline is a little hasty about these things, but there could be goblins, or something."

Ben and Jess hurried down the street, the mayor reluctantly following. Charlez—along with much of the court and most of the village—hurried in pursuit. In a few short minutes it was a mad rush for the wall.

Ernie ran with the rest, hat, staff, and sack all gripped tight, beard awry

and eyes wide. “Oh, I didn’t get time for my preparations,” he said breathlessly. “I was going to start digging after lunch. Oh, I hope there aren’t very many, I really *really* hope there aren’t very many! This is exactly what I didn’t want to happen. No worse way to ruin a morning and a good breakfast. This is why we were supposed to go vacationing at the beach,” he added, to no one in particular.

“I hope it’s the entire horde out there,” Charlez said, sounding almost gleeful. “This adventure is finally starting to get exciting. We’re going to have some fighting—I can just feel it!”

This didn’t make Ernie feel any better.

“We’re dead. We’re aaaalllll dead!” Josline wailed, staggering back to her feet and bringing up the rear.

Soon, just about everyone in York was packed on the catwalk along the north wall—which creaked alarmingly under the weight—the crowd gaping at the sight before them. As far as the eye could see, a black wave of goblins spread out from the forest. Thousands upon thousands of them advanced, and still more came. Their little beady black eyes glimmered in the morning sun and their crooked teeth glistened as they waved their crude goblin weapons, shrieking and yammering.

“Gee,” Ben said, and didn’t know what else to say. He had never imagined so many goblins existed.

“That’s a lot of goblins,” Charlez said. The bard sounded a little uncertain, as if he too had not expected so many goblins to meet his boast. “This reminds me of *The Strong Redoubt* or *The Last Stone*. Both stories ended in a great battle defending a castle against overwhelming odds. I hope this turns out like *The Strong Redoubt*, because in *The Last Stone* the heroes died in a great last stand and...I’d prefer to survive.”

“It’s too late—the invasion has begun,” Ernie gasped, his voice muffled by his hat, which he had taken off and was chewing on in his fright. “If we surrender peaceably maybe they’ll let us live and work in the mines instead of being eaten.”

“We’re not surrendering,” Jess said sharply. “Instead of suggesting ways we might lose, you could offer up some comforting words of confidence for our army.”

“I’m not good at pretending delusion,” Ernie whimpered. “At the moment you should be thankful I’m not screaming.”

It wasn't only Ernie who contemplated defeat. A sense of dread and despair gripped the crowd atop the wall. Everyone, that is, except Abern.

"The time of reckoning has come, goblins!" Abern shouted, his beard bristling. "Today, you will all pay for what you did to my farm! Oh, the slaughter that I'll wreak upon you all!"

So saying, Abern drew an arrow back in his bow and fired. However, in his eagerness to make the innumerable goblins pay, he shot too early and the arrow struck the ground several yards short of the goblin ranks. There it stood, stuck in the ground, quivering. The action seemed to release everyone on the wall—as if from some spell—and terrified murmurs began to work through the villagers, and the members of the court.

"What are we going to do?"

"There is no way we can survive!"

"We should never have come!"

"How can we escape?"

"Don't be afraid, people!" Jess said in a loud voice. "Ben will protect you!"

"Can that sword really work against this many goblins?" the king asked, nervously chewing at his lip in a very un-kingly manner. Seeing the vast horde, Ben had to wonder too.

Before Jess could answer, the advancing tide of goblins stopped just short of Abern's arrow and a huge goblin, four times the size of a normal goblin, stepped forward from the ranks. In great swaggering strides he came a dozen paces further, flanked by his personal guard.

There Uug-lukk stood, arrogant and vile. He wore a crown of fangs and a great necklace of rodent skulls, along with various bits of bone piercing his ears and fat nose. His bloated stomach protruded from his crude black plate armor and his massive hunched shoulders and arms looked strong enough to snap every bone in the body of *anyone* who should dare to stand in his way. His drooling mouth—ringed with sharp and broken teeth—looked able to bite off the head of any opponent, and in one hand he carried a massive curved ax. His guard—also large goblins, twice the size of any normal goblin—each wore a black metal hauberk and carried a great black scimitar.

The sight of the goblin horde had sent the people murmuring—the sight of Uug-lukk struck them dumb. Josline—and a good many women of the court—fainted. The rest of the villagers shrank behind the wall as if they wished the ground itself would rise up and swallow them, to hide them from the sight.

The noblemen and guards of the court shifted uneasily, and even Charlez looked as if he had lost his swagger.

Ernie pulled his hat down over his eyes and began wildly babbling, “This isn’t real! This is all a dream and when I open my eyes it will all be gone! I want to wake up now!”

“Well drat and all that,” Jess finally said. “Even Dougyal wasn’t that hairy, slobbering, or repulsive. And Ernie—shut up, before I kick you off the wall.”

“Well, this reminds me of something,” Ben said, pondering the appearance of Uug-lukk. “Bannard’s Brook out by my farm was named after an old man who long ago had his head bit off by a giant goblin. I bet it was a goblin just like Uug-lukk. If I get my head bit off will somebody name a brook after me?”

“Ben, don’t talk like that,” Jess said quickly. “Nobody is getting their head bit off!”

“I’m just saying if it did happen, I wouldn’t mind having a brook named after me.”

Before she could say any more, a smaller goblin advanced, carrying a standard which displayed a skull gripped in two clawed hands. Behind that goblin came two more who held curved black horns on which they blew a shrill blast. When the last of the grating echo died away, Uug-lukk lifted a hand high above his head and spoke.

“I am Uug-lukk the Mighty, chief of all this horde!” He spoke in a loud rasping voice that had a slight gurgle, but carried on the air with an edge of menace. “You cannot hope to stand against my mighty army. Surrender now, and perhaps I will show you some mercy.”

“We surrender! We surrender!” Ernie squealed. “Oh most merciful cruel one, I’m not very good to eat!”

“Nonsense!” Charlez struck a declarative pose. “Do not fear him! As Horatio said in the great epic *The Might of A Thousand Swords* when he was challenged by the evil monster, ‘I have lived all my life for this day! I have lived for the day when I might stand here, before all these witnesses, and revile your face! Who are you, the most loathsome of creatures, to even think of challenging—’”

“We’re surrendering!” Ernie howled. “Don’t listen to him, we’re surrendering!”

“Wizard, *shut up!*” Jess shouted. “We’re not surrendering. Charlez, that was a very nice recital. Some day you should put on a play. But—”

“Positively stirring,” the king agreed, trying to force an air of confidence in his voice, without much effect. Uug-lukk looked like the sort of thing to give him a fit, and he wasn’t feeling well.

“Hear Charlez, all you people,” the queen said.. “He has the mettle of a true leader—it is *he* who will save you.”

“That will be seen soon enough,” Jess said loudly. “Ben?”

“What?”

“Answer Uug-lukk! Show everyone what you’re made of!”

“Me?” Ben looked slightly taken aback. He hadn’t thought of anything to say—he still had been wondering what it felt like to have your head bit off.

“Yes! You’re the Duke of York. Tell him we’re not afraid of him, or something.”

“Well, okay.” Quickly thinking of the closest thing to *I’m not afraid of you*, he drew Goblin Terror—the blade flashing in the morning sun—and held it aloft.

“Come and prove your words!” he shouted back to Uug-lukk. “I’m ready to face you and your entire horde!” With his stutter it didn’t come out quite that nice, but it was close enough.

“No, no, no,” Ernie moaned, banging his head against the wall. “Why won’t anyone take the sensible path and follow my advice?”

“That’s a pretty good line.” Charlez cleared his throat and looked at Ben. “Where did you get it?”

“Nowhere,” Ben said. “I—uh—just made it up.”

“Listen to my boy, you big beast!” Abern screeched. “We’re waiting for you! I’ll rip out your nose hairs and hang you with them myself!”

“You think you’re safe?” Uug-lukk sneered back. “There are many things which do not fear that sword, and more than goblins serve me. That sword won’t save you from my hand. If you don’t throw yourselves upon my mercy by sunset tonight, I will unleash my fury against your hovel. Then we will see what your rabble is made of.”

“That’s enough threatening,” the king stammered, his knees knocking together. “This is upsetting, and I won’t stand for it! Somebody do something!”

“You have big words, Uug-lukk!” Ben bellowed, getting into the swing of things. “Let’s see if your deeds can match them!”

“That is what I’m advising against!” Ernie squeaked, “Hasn’t anyone here

heard of de-escalation?”

“You will see, little man.” Uug-lukk spat toward York and turned about, his guard falling in behind him. The goblin chieftain departed without looking back, the vast horde following.

“Ha,” Jess said, watching them go. “He thought he could bluff us in to surrendering. He knows that sword will make him terrified if he comes close, and he doesn’t like it.”

Ben lowered Goblin Terror. “It looks like we won’t need to go look for the goblins anymore.”

“Nope,” Jess agreed.

“We must call a council of war,” the queen said crisply.



The tavern was used for the council of war. The council was smaller than the full court, a few select nobles in attendance, along with the king, queen, Jess, Ben, Charlez, Ernie, Androbobel, and the mayor. It was a very subdued group. The king and nobles were looking pasty and sweaty, their faces various unnatural shades of fear. To say the size of the goblin force was unexpected would have been an understatement.

“We are here to decide what to do,” the king said. “The situation has turned out a little different than expected. We are slightly outnumbered and... um...we must decide what to do.” Sometimes, the king was a master of understatement.

“The key is to kill Uug-lukk,” Jess said. “Without him, there is nothing holding the goblin horde together.”

“I could kill him,” Ben said. “If we find out where the goblin horde is camped, I could sneak in and kill Uug-lukk.”

“A wonderful idea,” the queen said quickly. “Begin your preparations immediately! A single man sneaking alone into the goblin camp is a great idea.”

“Actually, I have a better idea.” Charlez stood. “I say we go capture a dragon, and unleash it on the goblins.”

In the silence that followed everyone stared at Charlez.

“A...*brave* suggestion,” the queen managed with difficulty, the tone of her voice saying that, to the contrary, she wished Charlez would for once stop

speaking. “But you cannot do that, dear Charlez, because we need you to stay and lead the army, and defend the village. Your duty calls you to stay with us.”

“Where would we find a dragon?” Ben said, not catching the general opprobrium the rest of the audience had given the bard’s suggestion.

“There is one very near,” Charlez said. “I’m an expert on dragons—I studied them in college. I know for a fact there is a dragon living on Forkroot Mountain.”

“That’s just behind my Da’s farm,” Ben said. He was quite surprised, to say the least, to hear a dragon lived in the towering peak that he had always looked at out his bedroom window. It made his childhood obsession about monsters living under his bed seem rather misplaced.

“This is ridiculous,” Jess said. “If a dragon lives so close, how come everyone here doesn’t know about it?”

“Because he didn’t pillage here,” Charlez said. “Dragons pillage and ransack for a few years and then retire for long periods of time until they get bored, and decide to go pillaging again. This dragon pillaged in the more southern regions twenty years ago. Dragon observers said it moved up this way after it tired of destruction. It stashed all of its loot in some cave high in Forkroot Mountain.”

“That doesn’t sound very safe,” the king said. “Who knows when the dragon will decide to start pillaging again? Someone should have said something.”

“How would we get it to eat the goblins and not us?” Ben asked, trying to keep the conversation on track.

“Tame it.” Charlez lifted his chin proudly. “I got an A on my paper about dragon taming.”

“You can tame a dragon?” Ben was willing to believe many things, but even he had a hard time accepting this. “You can’t tame a bikalis.” Of that his personal experience made him very certain.

“There is a big difference between a dragon and a bikalis,” Charlez said, sounding a bit huffy. “The bikalis live deep in the infernal regions, and are evil creatures. Dragons simply live in mountainous regions of the world, and aren’t evil creatures. Wild, untamed, and violent—yes. But not evil, and once tamed they are very useful creatures.”

Ben thought about that a bit longer. “And how do you bring a dragon into

submission?”

“You tie it up and don’t let it go until it promises to serve you forever,” Charlez said. “I could do this because I know how to speak dragon. And after I had tamed it I could then unleash the dragon on the goblins, and he would ravage the horde. It would be kind of like the story *Bestial Fury*, where—”

“Complete rubbish!” Ernie snapped. “Of all the nonsense I’ve ever heard, this is the worst, by far. The only clear record we have of dragon taming is in the Boldoz manuscript, and everyone with half a brain know the Boldoz dragon taming manuscript was fiction. It has been determined conclusively that the Boldoz dragon taming manuscript was pure fabricated fantasy. End of story. Nothing more to be said.”

“On the contrary.” Charlez drew himself up. “My paper was a re-examining of the evidence, and I conclusively proved that the the Boldoz manuscript was based upon factual events. By careful planning we can reenact—”

“You won’t be reenacting anything—you’ll be doing it for real,” the wizard shouted. “And what you’ll be doing is ending up dead! You’ll be toast—in the most literal sense. It is insanity to follow the imagined story of some ancient babblers.”

“Don’t be so negative.” Charlez looked irritated. “They do this sort of thing all the time in stories. You just have to be brave, and fearless.”

“We can do this!” the queen said loudly. “Charlez in his brilliance has hit on the perfect solution! The Duke of York can go and tame this dragon for us while Charlez holds off the goblin horde with the army. By taming the dragon this Ben can prove his true bravery, and worthiness to lead the kingdom.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Jess shouted. “Ben isn’t going off to get himself killed on the insane idea of taming a dragon. You’re not getting rid of him that way. Everyone knows a dragon can’t be tamed.”

Charlez opened his mouth, but Jess raised her hand, stopping him.

“Much as I hate agreeing with the wizard,” she said, “I’m afraid he is right this time. They say a stopped clock is right twice a day—perhaps this is the second time in Ernie’s life that he is right.”

“Thank you...I think.” Ernie looked a little uncertain.

“Not only will dragon taming not work,” Jess said, “but it’s certainly not the easiest, simplest, or most direct way of dealing with our problem.”



“Then what does the duke suggest?” the queen demanded.

“Well, I was willing to try the dragon idea,” Ben said. “But Uug-lukk is the heart of our problem. So if we must deal with him directly, we find out where he is camped and then kill him.”

“With the entire army,” Jess added. “Nobody is going alone. Together we can defeat this threat.”

“But we may not even get that far,” the mayor said faintly. “Uug-lukk said our doom will come after sunset.”

“Ah. Yes. Speaking of that—” Ernie hopped out of his chair. “We’ve done enough talking. I must get to work.”

With that final pronouncement, Ernie hurried out of the room.

Jess gave the wizard a puzzled look. “I’m not going to guess what he is up to, but we all have work to do. We must look to the defenses, and post extra guards tonight. Tomorrow Ben can present his final plan for attacking the goblins.”

The council of war was adjourned.

Ben and Jess spent the rest of the day inspecting the defenses of York. About mid-afternoon they were making a circuit outside the stockade when they came across Ernie digging a hole at the base of the wall. It wasn’t his first hole—a long row of carefully mounded dirt piles marked the previous holes the wizard had dug and then filled back in.

“The industriousness of Ernie continues,” Jess said, observing the wizard. “But what he is doing only a madman would know.”

“Hello, Ernie,” Ben said. “What are you doing? Digging a moat?”

“Nope,” the wizard said.

“Perhaps digging yourself a hiding hole?” Jess said, grinning. “Or maybe burying treasure?”

“If I had been in charge, we would presently be hiding away at the beach.” Ernie leaned on his shovel. “As it is, I find myself in the position of being required to do strenuous physical labor in the wild hope that it will save our lives.”

“Would you like some help?” Ben said.

“Dearly.” The wizard returned to his digging. By now he was up to his waist. “Unfortunately, this involves the fine art of mathematics and the placing of the holes is a delicate process. I couldn’t risk you messing it up.”

“It’s going to need to be a lot bigger hole than that if you hope to catch all

the goblins,” Jess said.

“I aim to do better than that,” Ernie said, haughtily. “I don’t want to catch them—I want to keep them away. I’m doing things too great and lofty for your mind to comprehend. Now go, or I’ll never finish this before we all die.”

Ben and Jess moved on.

“What do you think he is doing?” Ben said. “I’ve never seen Ernie work this hard before.”

“Whatever it is, it probably won’t work and wouldn’t solve our problems even if it did. We can be thankful that his little project is keeping him occupied and out of trouble, but beyond that we’ll have to think up our own solutions.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### NARKLISS THE GREAT

A double watch was posted on the stockade wall—the normal contingent of guards, and a full equal compliment of villagers. The villagers were less than happy with this arrangement, but Jess was firm.

“How will we know what we’re looking for?” Cal the farmer said. “We don’t have any training.”

“You don’t need training. Watch for anything out of place. You’ll know when you see it,” Jess said. “A horde of charging goblins isn’t exactly hard to see.”

“What happens then?” Buddle the bum said.

“What do you think?” Jess said, with forced patience.

“Um...we die?”

“No, we fight. Our enemy is brutal and determined, but we will prevail.”

“What about us?” Ben said after Jess had finished admonishing the night guard. “Do we leave the guarding to them?”

Jess shook her head. “I wish we could, but with Uug-lukk’s threat I don’t trust any but you or myself to oversee the night watch tonight, so we’ll have to split the night—you stay with the watch for the first half of the night, and I’ll take over for the second half. If something happens, we wake the rest of the village.”

Ben expected the hours of his watch to drag, but Charlez joined him on the wall and the bard made the time pass easily. Charlez was not good at

watching—he spent most of his time and attention talking at Ben—but the bard’s nattering conversation about his love for Beulah and what stories the night reminded him of kept the hours from feeling too empty.

During the first hours of the night, Ben was tense and alert, watching for any sign of what Uug-lukk might have planned. But when there was no sign of anything stirring in the fields beyond York, Ben began to relax. By the time his watch was over he felt sure Uug-lukk had given an empty threat. The goblin chieftain was frightened of Goblin Terror, and would do nothing.

Leaving Charlez where he had fallen asleep on the wall, Ben went and woke Jess for her half of the night watch. Wishing her a pleasant remainder of the night, he retired. Keeping his sword nearby—and not undressing just in case something happened—Ben went to bed. He drifted off to sleep while pondering how he would sneak into Uug-lukk’s camp and kill the goblin chieftain. His last thought was that he probably could disguise himself as a large goblin.

He snapped awake at the sound of shouting. For a moment Ben thought no time had passed, but in his befuddled grab for Goblin Terror he realized he must have been asleep for an hour, or more. Something was wrong. Buckling on his sword, he burst from the bedroom and nearly collided with a guard.

“What’s happening?” Ben demanded.

“Snakes—Nur’gali are attacking,” the guard gasped. “The princess sent me to wake you. You’re needed at the walls!”

“Right. Warn the king and queen. And Ernie,” Ben added, and started down the hall at a run.

On the street it was nearly pitch dark, except for the illumination of torches. Men with flaming brands ran this way and that, and in the chaos Ben couldn’t make out who was a member of the court, a guard, or a villager.

“To the walls!” Ben shouted, and took off without waiting to see if anyone followed.

At the stockade walls, the chaos was even worse. Archers fired down at enemies in the darkness beyond, and men yelled in alarm.

“Jess! Jess! Where are you?” He called out.

Finally he heard an answering call, and rushed along the base of the north wall.

“Jess—what’s happening?”

“The nur-gali are attacking, as I expected,” Jess said calmly, her voice one

spot of assurance in the sea of shouting.

“How many?” Ben loosened his sword in its sheath.

“Hard to tell in the dark. A few hundred, I think.”

“Can we take them?”

“The night will soon tell. We need a man to rally the defense.”

“Where is Charlez?”

“No, Ben,” Jess said, irritation showing in her voice. “You are supposed to lead this battle. Charlez is north on the wall, shouting grand book quotations at the nur’gali but offering no kind of effective leadership to the men. You need to show everyone what kind of leader you are.”

“What should I do?”

Jess folded her arms. “I’m not going to tell you—You need to decide that. Think! Follow your instincts.”

“I think you know how to handle this better than me, and my instincts are telling me to do what you say,” Ben said. “Come on, Jess, we both know you’re better at this kind of leading stuff than I am!”

In the flickering light of the torches Ben saw Jess lift her chin stubbornly.

“When you are king I won’t be able to always be at your side, telling you what to do. This is your time, Ben.”

“Bother with all that.” Ben drew his sword, mind racing. “Archers—stay on the walls. Swordsmen, pull back to the base of the wall. The nur’gali are going to try to burrow under the walls, and we must be ready to meet them.”

Ben climbed down from the wall, hoping Charlez’s warning earlier was correct.

“Everyone! People! Somebody! Prepare—” Ben’s attempted instructions were interrupted by an explosion of dirt behind him, a large snake bursting from the earth. Giving a strangled cry of surprise, he spun, Goblin Terror swinging, and sliced off the head.

Screams from around the village told Ben that more snakes had breached the defenses. A few yards to his left the earth stirred and another nur’gali surged through. Lunging forward, he killed it before the creature could collect itself to attack.

Ben tried to catch his breath. The panic of the village felt overwhelming. There was danger on every side, and no one knew what to do.

“Fight! Everyone fight!” Ben stuttered, and charged along the base of the wall. In his headlong rush he caught and killed three more nur’gali, but more

snakes were coming through under the wall everywhere.

He was about to turn and rush off again, when something grabbed his arm. He whirled around—and caught himself just before he sliced off the queen’s head.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, holding up the torch in her hand.

“Try—fighting,” Ben stammered.

“Fighting? You can’t kill all these monsters by yourself!” She shook the torch. “You’re supposed to be *leading*.”

“I need to be going,” he said, looking around for more nur’gali.

“Charlez knows how to lead. I heard him on the wall, bravely rallying the defenders. And you—you are just running around like some fool! Are you going to marry my daughter and be king? You must show the people what kind of king you can be—command them to drive off the snakes.”

“I’m doing my best,” Ben said, feeling very harried. “And you’re not helping by standing here talking to me. I’m not good at the talking part. I—”

“If you don’t take command there will be disaster. Look—we’re already losing! You call running around killing snakes a plan? This is your strategy?”

“The best I have—Goodbye!”

Shouting incoherently, Ben threw himself at several more snakes. He knew the queen was right, but he couldn’t think of what to do besides running around and killing the nur’gali. It was always what he had done before, and it had always worked. He didn’t know what to give the defenders, he didn’t know what to say, and the queen shouting at him didn’t help. He could fight, but his brain refused to plan, and his mouth refused to form words. He was sure they were lost, and all because of him.

Ben ran as fast as he could, and swung Goblin Terror with all the skill he had, but the snakes were too many. Everywhere he went there were more men down, paralyzed by the nur’gali venom, and more snakes swarming into the village. The remaining defenders were about to break. Disaster had come. He had to warn Jess.

Avoiding the larger groups of snakes he couldn’t defeat, and killing those he could, Ben made his way toward the northern wall as fast as he was able.

“Jess!” He couldn’t see her, but he hoped she could hear him. “Jess, I’ve failed! I can’t hold them—we’re being over-run!”

“Hold on a little longer,” Jess called back. Then he heard her say, “Archers, switch to burning arrows!”

Ben didn't understand how a few burning arrows would save them, but now that he had warned Jess he was ready to sell his life at the cost of as many nur'gali as possible. Taking a fresh grip on his sword, he turned back to battle.

Three nur'gali met him, coming in a pronged attack. Trying to keep the stockade wall at his back, Ben moved in a flanking counter-attack. A quick leap kept him safe from the first nur'gali strike, the curved fangs snapping on air. He brought Goblin Terror down in a lethal chop as he landed on his feet. Twisting, he avoided the second nur'gali, the snake passing so close he felt the brush of its scales even as he brought his sword around in a fatal counter-stroke. He dodged the last nur'gali, but not quite fast enough. What would have been a full strike on his chest only grazed his left shoulder, a single fang slicing through his flesh.

Ben brought Goblin Terror up in a swipe that took off the last nur'gali's head, but he felt his shoulder quickly grow numb, his left arm now hanging useless. Chest heaving, he brought his sword up. He wouldn't be able to fight much longer. Then he realized there was nobody left to fight.

It took him a moment to realize what had happened. Had they really, somehow, killed all the nur'gali? Or was it something else? Then he noticed the smell of smoke on the air, and the reddish hue in the sky over the stockade wall.

Uneasy, but determined to find out what was happening, Ben clumsily climbed a ladder one-handed to the top of the stockade wall. Beyond the wall, a sea of flame spread across the darkened fields beyond York. Caught in the flames, nur'gali were burning and dying everywhere.

"Jess?"

"I set the fields on fire." Jess watched the wall of flame advance, the light of the fire showing nur'gali vainly trying to escape.

"Amazing."

"You were supposed to think of it yourself," she said. "A leader needs a quick mind to grasp all possible solutions."

"I...didn't think. Won't York catch fire?"

"No. I took that into account. The wind is in our favor, blowing the fire out toward the nur'gali. York is in little danger, and the battle is won."



Dawn found the defenders keeping a weary vigil on the wall. The snakes had fled in blind terror before the flames, but many had not escaped. The battle had been a complete rout of the nur'gali. The charred remains of hundreds of snakes lay among the smoldering ashes of the fields. A thick haze lingered over the battlefield, the stench of burnt nur'gali and smoke wafting on the air.

"I failed," Ben said, for not the first time.

"Ben, you did fine," Jess said.

With the arrival of daylight, and the clear end of the battle, Ben had told her what the queen had said, and his agreement with her. He had shown no leadership.

"The queen is right," Ben said. He shook his head slowly. "I failed. I didn't lead anybody—I just ran around killing snakes. That isn't leading the defenders."

"We need to work on the leading thing a bit," Jess conceded. "But you weren't a complete failure. You did call the swordsmen down from the wall, which was a good anticipation of the nur'gali's method of attack. And running around killing the nur'gali is better than nothing. I needed as many nur'gali as possible close to the wall to die in the fire, and you gave me that, drawing them into the battle. Ernie healed everyone who was poisoned by the nur'gali, so don't feel guilty about that. We didn't lose anyone in the fight."

"That's thanks to Ernie, not me. What will happen next time I screw up? I didn't do anything special—nothing good enough for a king. I didn't even act like a *duke*. I was just...me. And that's not good enough."

"Look," Jess said. "If you hadn't fought at all everyone else would have fled—and who know what would have happened then. You did good enough."

Ben sighed. "The nur'gali might come back, and you can't burn the fields again."

"You'll do better next time," Jess insisted. "Nobody can be a better duke for this place than you."

"You're just saying that. We should find someone else to be the Duke of York, and I can just help."

"No!" Jess said, forcefully.

"Cheer up, Ben," Charlez said. The bard was seated with his back against the wall, writing what was either a gripping account of the night's battle, or a love letter to Beulah. It was hard to tell which. "You didn't run away. That's



what the cowardly losers do in all the great stories. Why, Sir Dunwal in *Cowardice by Night* turned and ran at the mere sight of—what’s that?”

Ernie—who had been dragged out of the inn before dawn to heal the poisoned defenders and since then had been snoozing on the wall—startled awake at Charlez’s exclamation and staggered to his feet, peering about. “What? What did you say? Some danger? Should we be heading back inside?”

“Not if it’s danger,” Jess said testily. “What did you see, Bard?”

“I thought I saw movement, out by the edge of the forest.” Charlez leaned forward. “Maybe it was just heat moving in the air.”

“Then no sign of the enemy?” Ernie groggily attempted to rub the sleep from his eyes. “Well. I’m sure more trouble will come, eventually. But if nobody is going to show up soon, I should get back to work on my project—”

A scream from Ernie’s right nearly sent the wizard toppling backward off the wall.

It was Buddle.

“S—S—Snakes.” Buddle pointed, his voice so high it sounded like he was whistling. “More snakes!”

Another squinting glance at the field beyond York revealed nothing, but then pale gray shapes began to appear, slithering through the wavering heat and ashes plumes of the fields. Thousands of snakes.

“I guess they have a lot more fight left,” Ben said. He straightened his shoulders with determination. “This time, Charlez, can you show me how to lead?”

“Ben, he doesn’t have a clue—” then Jess caught herself. “Fine. We won’t argue this time.”

“Oh, this is too soon! I’m not done with my project,” Ernie squeaked. “The holes—”

“Sound the alarm,” Jess commanded the nearest guard.

“It looks to be a slashing good fight—but I do wish we had more soldiers,” Charlez said, a bit of his bravado slipping. “It would be a little easier if I didn’t have to pull off such a heroic victory on my first adventure.”

“I never liked it either,” Ben said. “Especially once I realized it doesn’t always turn out like the stories.”

“Nonsense,” Charlez said stoutly. “What do you think those stories are based on, anyhow—fiction? We just need to make sure this turns out like the *right* adventure. Now watch what I do closely, and soon you’ll be an expert

leader like me.”

Jess rolled her eyes, but still held her tongue.

The horn sounded its long call, the note echoing over York. It was quickly joined by the clang of the warning bell, all the bums wildly heaving away on the pull cord. The king and the noblemen scrambled from their breakfast and rushed for the walls, the villagers close behind.

“Why, why, *why* couldn’t they have waited a few more days,” Ernie said, wringing his hands. “Then I would have been finished. Instead they come today and...we’re not dead yet, so we’ll...hope,” he finished in a strangled sort of voice.

“What seems to be the trouble?” the queen said.

“More snakes, Gertrude!” The king grabbed her arm in a very un-king-like manner, pointing and growing pale in the face. “What are we going to do this time? We barely survived last night!”

“Sometimes the only thing to do is fight,” Ben said, and drew Goblin Terror.

“And you’re going to lead today just like you led last night?” The queen did her best to look down her nose at him, which was hard because she was so short.

“No.” Ben went from sounding determined to sounding defeated. “Charlez will show me how its done.”

“Very good.” The queen smiled. “Soon the entire court will see who has the qualities of leadership.”

“Er...I take it that all this talk about fighting is hyperbole,” Ernie interrupted. “As the odds are anything but extremely favorable, I trust that whoever is in charge will initiate a strategic withdrawal.”

“What?” Ben said. “Why?”

“To save our hides!” Ernie said, going a little shrill. “I don’t think *anyone* here needs to be a hero! I think we’re all too mature and sane to even consider—Nobody is being paid! I mean, come on! Think about it! If there is the slightest chance of it being risky we just gather up our stuff and run.”

“But we must defend York,” Ben pointed out.

“And the entire world,” Charlez added. “Why, in all the stories it comes down to—”

“York, York! It’s all about York! I’ve been working like a mad-man for days and then these snakes come before I’m finished! What’s the point of even

trying anymore? Don't you think we've given enough for York? Why don't we just let those chumps fend for themselves and worry about saving our own hides?"

"That wouldn't be nice," Ben said. "Besides, I'm the Duke of York now. I have to defend York—even if I don't know how to lead an army."

"The magical properties of Goblin Terror will do nothing against those nur'gali," Ernie pleaded, shaking Ben's sleeve. "To them it's just a sword—one sword against thousands of snakes! What chance of victory do you have? What chance!"

"I'll do my best." Ben turned a stubborn gaze toward the advancing snakes.

"You really think you're going to save York?" Ernie looked at him for a long moment, then turned away. "Somebody save *me*," he moaned.

Ben wasn't paying attention. He watched the snakes advance, and wondered what he was going to do—or even what Charlez could possibly do. In all his adventures with Jess they had never had the odds in their favor, but today the odds, by far, were the worst. Uug-lukk had many more goblins—but the goblins had been helpless before the drawn blade of Goblin Terror. To the snakes—as Ernie so well pointed out—it was just a sword, and killing several thousand snakes with one sword wasn't looking very likely. In that moment he wished with all of his being that he knew how to lead, because right now it felt like he didn't know anything at all.

"Take courage, people!" Jess shouted, drawing her sword. "Ben and I are not afraid, and we have defeated these creatures before! We'll show these snakes that York will never fall!"

"That's right!" Charlez whipped out his sword, slicing the king's cape in the process. "We're going to win, because I have a plan—"

Charlez's words choked off as a massive snake, many times bigger than any other, rose up out of the grass some distance away from the wall. It towered up from the ground, rising twice as high as a man. The snake surveyed the defenders with a cool arrogance.

"I...didn't expect they had a snake that big," Charlez said weakly. "That is a little problem for my plan. In fact, this reminds me of...of a very bad story."

"Villagers of York," the snake hissed, its rasping voice seeming to make the very air vibrate. "I am Narkliss, greatest of the nur'gali and king of all these snakes."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### THE CHALLENGE

**A**w, shut up your stupid snake,” Abern said, breaking the stunned silence of the crowd. “I don’t take with uppity varmint, and I certainly don’t parley with the likes of you. Go on back to your natural ways of slinkin’ through the grass, before I fix you permanently!”

“It can talk like us,” Ben said, surprised.

“Obviously a very skilled nur’gali, as I suppose one must be to become king.” Charlez still looked a little shaken. “It’s a rare feat, not often recorded. I’ll have to make mention of this occurrence to the archivist of the bards.”

“None can stand against me,” Narkliss continued. “Surrender, and you will be shown mercy.”

The defenders had—with the exception of Abern—lost all their strength, and what last shreds of courage they possessed, at the sight of Narkliss. Faces everywhere went pale as bleached flour, and weapons fell from many hands to clatter uselessly on the ground. The king was speechless, his face rigid, caught up in a fit of terror. Ernie had his eyes closed and appeared to be wishing very hard that he was somewhere else.

“Behold, you dastardly cretin! It is I, Bartholomew!” Charlez called back.

“What?” Jess stared at him.

“Bartholomew from *A Land of Mighty Deeds*,” Charlez said. “It’s dramatic. Besides, my mind froze up and I couldn’t think of anything else. But I can tell you this—today victory is within my grasp! I know how this is won—just give me a minute and I can—”

“Will you stop quoting stupid books,” Jess said. “Honestly, that snake isn’t

going to be impressed.”

“You’re wrong, Narkliss!” Ben shouted, picking up in Charlez’s place. “Your army was defeated last night, and today Charlez and I stand against you!”

“Better. Very good—you’re getting the hang of it, Ben,” Jess said.

“Getting the hang of it? Being swallowed whole is one of the *worst* ways to die,” Ernie said. “Is anyone thinking here? Can things get any worse? Nothing like going down that moist gullet—so cold and dark. Could things be worse? No—”

“So you think, little warrior.” Narkliss undulated closer, his scales glinting under the hot sun, his eyes hard with malice. “But your little fire trick cannot be played again—and your village was almost lost in the first battle. Can you do better today? I have heard of your sword, and indeed it is a great blade. But it holds no fear to me. It is impossible for you to defeat all of my nur’gali.”

“Maybe so,” Ben called back stoutly. “But we have a great wizard with us, who can burn you all to cinders.”

“Wha—” Ernie started to shriek, before Jess’s hand clamped over his mouth and cut him off.

“It’s a brilliant bluff,” Jess said through her teeth. “Wizard, you just shut up and let things play out. As you just said, it can’t get worse.”

Narkliss hissed, clearly displeased with Ben’s answer. “You are a fool, but I will offer you a generous bargain. Let you and I fight alone and save needless bloodshed. If you defeat me, York will be spared. If I defeat you, York is mine. But if you refuse this offer, I will send all my nur’gali against you, and not one of your smallest children will escape the slaughter.”

“I accept!” Charlez shouted.

“I stand corrected,” Jess muttered. “It can get worse. Bard?” She looked at Charlez as if she couldn’t believe she had heard right.

“I knew it was going to come to this,” Charlez said. “It always does in the stories—the great hero and the evil creature must battle it out. I’m leading, and as leader of this army, it is my duty. Don’t worry—I know how to fight these battles.”

“I wish I could be so hopeful.” Ernie folded his arms gloomily. “I had always thought Ben was the man with the smallest brain, but apparently I was wrong. Narkliss will swallow you whole before you so much as finish

your wordy introduction. Charlez—this is goodbye! How I loved eating mint pastries with you!”

“Ben?” Jess chewed at the corner of her lip. “Charlez isn’t really—”

Ben hesitated. “I haven’t done very good myself.”

“So you’re going to let him risk his life?”

Uncertain as Ben was at that moment about his own ability, the question pricked his conscience. “Charlez, it is dangerous,” he said. “Is this really the best way to lead? I mean, fighting Narkliss is something I might do, and I’m not very good at leading, so it seems to me that someone good at leading wouldn’t—”

“I’m commander of this army, and only a cowardly commander lets someone else go out in his place. Haven’t you read *A Fire to Lead*? I’m not a coward,” Charlez said, starting to sound angry. “Sometimes, the commander must face down the vile champion of the enemy. Sometimes, this is how you lead!”

“No—” the queen said hastily.

“Am I the commander of the army?” Charlez pulled himself up stiffly, whirling to face the queen.

“I—Yes.” Her face sagged.

“Then it is settled.” Charlez relaxed slightly. “Don’t worry, I’ve studied for just such a situation as this, and I do have a plan. We’re surrounded by a horde of foul creatures, just like in the story *Eternal Blood*. Angirk challenged the leader of the foul ogres to single combat. While the ogres were distracted by this battle, Angirk sent most of his warriors around to surprise the ogres from behind.”

“And?” the queen said stupidly.

“We’ll do the same. Mount up every fighting man who has a horse. While I ride off to fight in single combat against Narkliss, the rest of the men will circle around to attack the army of nur’gali from behind. I defeat Narkliss, the nur’gali are scattered, and we have a complete victory.”

Jess raised her eyebrows. “I’ll give you credit for being bold, but we don’t have a large enough force to leave our defensive position and engage on the open field—”

“Charlez, can’t you be the one to defend the village and let someone else lead the army,” the queen burst out.

“No.” Charlez’s eyes narrowed. “The stories are very clear. It must be me.

Besides, it is Ben's right to defend York. He is duke of this village."

"But I wouldn't mind going out to fight Narkliss, and maybe I should," Ben suggested politely. He had no desire to lead a bunch of men—or fight Narkliss really—but the longer he stood there the more he thought Charlez going out alone was a *very* bad idea.

"No, no, Ben." Charlez waved an admonishing finger. "I realize you're the helpful sort, and I appreciate it, but this is my battle. It's my turn. Beulah must see my valor—only then can she know the true depth of my love for her."

"I suppose that is important," Ben said, uncertainly.

"Be careful, Charlez." The queen wrung her hands. "Call for help, if you need it, and let the armor master properly equip you for this fight."

"Of course." Charlez started to climb down from the wall. "They do that in the stories, you know. Make sure the men are ready to ride in short order—a glorious destiny awaits us!"

The next half hour was a bustle of hasty preparations. Horses were saddled and mounted. Charlez was decked out in the best suit of plate armor, and mounted on the finest war horse available. The queen, without too much persuasion, convinced him to take a large battle ax, and a lance. To most people he looked like a man prepared for battle. To Jess and Ben he still looked more like a man sent on a suicide mission.

With a final grand wave to the watching crowd—and many blown kisses to Beulah—Charlez road through the gateway alone. The king and queen stood at the gateway, watching him go. Their faces had the stunned expressions of those who saw their last hope perish in disaster.

Ben and Jess stood on the wall top, watching Charlez's progress. Jess almost felt some satisfaction that the king and queen's scheming had come back to thwart them. But she was sorry that Charlez, with his romantic delusions, had become caught up in events. And she was very worried that events appeared in the process of unraveling completely. Unless something happened to drastically change the situation, it looked as if the day would end with Charlez dead, and the entire force of fighting men from Galdoron facing the same demise.

Jess clenched her hands into fists. "This is a disaster! We have to do something, Ben."

"If you can think of something, let me know," Ben replied. "I haven't come



up with anything yet.”

“Look!” Jess pointed beyond Charlez, off to the side, where the ash was blowing thick over a rise in the field. “I think I can see more snakes hidden there. They’ve set an ambush for the bard—it’s a trap!”

“How typical,” Ernie moaned. “What snake isn’t devious? The bard is doomed.”

“We have to warn him,” Jess said. “We can’t just let him ride into that. Ben—” She turned. Ben wasn’t there.

Mankiller charged toward the gate in a thunder of hoof beats, Ben riding bareback.

“Ben!” Jess shouted. “Not alone! Take Ernie!”

“No, no, no!” Ernie backed away. “I refuse! I didn’t agree to this. I’m not going out there. If someone else wants to be a fool and risk their life, I won’t stop them. But I’m not—”

“Catch him!” Jess called out, and pushed Ernie off the catwalk.

The wizard landed in a sprawled tangle of arms and legs across Mankiller’s neck. Ben hauled the sputtering Ernie back, and urged the horse on faster.

“Don’t mess it up, Ernie!” Jess called after them.

“Mess it up! What am I supposed to do?” Ernie shrieked up at Jess. “I’m a pacifist wizard, remember? Pacifist!”

“Make sure Ben and Charlez come back alive,” Jess yelled.

“I can’t very well do that if I’m dead myself! Did you think of that!”

Mankiller was the fastest horse in the king’s stable, and the ground passed in a blur as Ben bolted through the gate and raced after Charlez. Ahead, he could see the bard riding along in unconcern and willed his horse to gallop faster. In a final burst he reached the bard and passed him, wheeling Mankiller around.

“Ben, what are you doing?” Charlez pushed up his helmet visor. “You can’t be here. You’re breaking the rules. This is supposed to be a contest between the two great champions.”

“Narkliss set a trap,” Ben panted. “There are nur’gali all around.”

Charlez’s eyes widened. “The dastardly creature! It’s just like *Black Betrayal*. Except that time it was fire demons and—”

“Never mind all that,” Ben said. “We’re going to turn this around on them. We surprise the ambush and drive them back, then go after Narkliss together.

We don't have much time."

"Okay—together!" Charlez hefted his ax. "We'll be like the two warrior brothers in *A Bond Before Time* when they went off to fight the swamp monster—"

"Right, right," Ben said. "Come on!"

Ben didn't share his friend's confidence, but there was no turning back now.

"Let me off—stop the ride," Ernie said through chattering teeth. "I didn't agree to this!"

Spurring Mankiller back into a gallop, Ben overtook the nur'gali waiting in ambush and caught them by surprise. Sword swinging, Ben decapitated the leading snakes and brought Mankiller around and made a second pass before the nur'gali could recover, killing several more. Then Charlez caught up with him and rode straight in, flailing wildly with his ax.

Charlez was a skilled dueler, but had never used an ax before in his life. His mounted attack contained absolutely no skill, but the sheer ferocity of his ax flailing was enough to mortally wound several nur'gali before a venomous snake bite took his horse down. Tumbling from his stricken mount, the bard somehow made it back to his feet and continued flailing the ax, half blinded by his own helmet. Several nur'gali struck but Charlez's heavy armor protected him. Ben knew the bard's luck couldn't last for long, and rode Mankiller in on a third charge.

At that moment Ernie fell off Mankiller. The wizard had been riding with his eyes closed, hanging onto his hat, so it had only been a matter of time before he lost his perch. The fall winded Ernie and the wizard struggled back to his feet, gasping, to find Ben already two dozen yards ahead, engaged in battle. Nur'gali noticed the isolated wizard and began to move in.

"Nooo!" Ernie shouted. "I won't let it end this way. You can't have me! *Buzi-bi flam-bi!*" Throwing his arms high, Ernie's clothes burst into flames.

Yelping frantically, the fireball that was Ernie began flopping about, shrieking various incantations. Terrified snakes fled in every direction, and the fight quickly turned into a rout of the nur'gali. Ernie's screaming finally managed some right combination of words and the fire winked out as fast as it had appeared.

"Are we alive?" Ernie asked. The wizard now lay in a smoldering heap. His clothing and beard were burned, but he didn't appear to have suffered

any serious injury.

“Um, yes, we’re all alive, except Charlez’s horse has been paralyzed by the nur’gali venom. Did you mean to set yourself on fire?” Ben looked at Ernie uncertainly.

“Of course.” Ernie climbed to his feet, fingering his blackened robs. “I mean, for a second it had seemed like a good idea. Do I look like the sort of wizard who does things by accident?”

“You were screaming,” Ben pointed out.

“Because then it suddenly *didn’t* seem like such a good idea. Anyhow, it was only supposed to be for a moment. Just a quick flash, you know—make them think twice about eating me.”

“It was really cool.” Charlez lifted his visor. “Just like in the stories. You should do that more often.”

“I hope I never do it again,” Ernie said peevishly. “It is a defense of last resort, and terribly dangerous because it is very possible to burn oneself up. Now, let’s get back into York before anything worse happens.”

“Worse is already happening,” Ben said, rising up in his stirrups to stare ahead. “Narkliss is coming. Ernie, heal Charlez’s horse from the poison. He needs a mount if he’s to have any chance.”

“Out of the question.” Ernie gave him a baleful glare. “I don’t heal horses. I am a wizard of the third order, not some second rate veterinarian!”

“Ernie, Narkliss is coming!” Ben said desperately. “You need to do it if we’re going to escape him!”

“Oh. Well. In that case—” Ernie tottered over to the paralyzed horse and tapped it on the head with his staff. The horse snorted as if disturbed from a nap and quickly clambered back to its feet.

“‘Victory is at hand,’ as Brackon the Champion said in *Those Glorious Spoils*,” Charlez declared, snatching up his lance from the ground. “Today our names shall be emblazoned on the pages of history! Charge!”

“The lunatic!” Ernie stared after the bard. “We’re running away, not running off for more fighting.”

“Actually, I am,” Ben said. “The only way we can escape is if Narkliss is defeated. You stay here—I’ve got to help Charlez!”

“Stop—!” Ernie started after Ben, but Mankiller and his rider were gone in a cloud of dust and ashes.

“Fine!” The wizard stomped his foot and hurled his staff to the ground.

“Go get yourselves killed, see if I care! Have fun being eaten by a giant snake! But I’m not setting myself on fire again, you hear me?”

Ben didn’t hear him. He was too busy dealing with other things. A quick look around the field showed that Charlez’s larger plan for victory was rapidly unraveling. A glance to the north told him it was only a matter of minutes before the fighting men from Galdoron broke completely before the main nur’gali army. They were on the cusp of disaster. And Charlez—if Ben didn’t do something Charlez would be dead very soon. The bard was charging directly toward Narkliss in the most dramatic and brave fashion, but Ben knew it was the stupidest way to attack a giant snake. One quick strike and the bard would be out of the fight.

“At least he can be a distraction,” Ben muttered. “Narkliss can’t fight both of us at once.”

When the giant shape of Narkliss broke through the swirling ash, Ben didn’t hesitate. Gripping his sword, he steadied Mankiller and prepared for his last fight. As Charlez and Narkliss moved to engage, Ben sent Mankiller into a charging attack. He would take the giant snake from behind.

Narkliss lunged, his huge jaws swallowing the entire front of Charlez’s horse. Bard and mount went down.

“Charlez, I’m coming!” Ben shouted. “Fight me, you big cowardly snake! Fight me!”

Goblin Terror flashed in the sunlight as Ben brought the blade around, striking at the coiled mass of Narkliss’s back half. The sword cut deep and blood spurted. The snake coils unleashed like a giant whip, slamming against Ben.

When Ben came too he was staring up at the dust clouded sky, his ears ringing. Dimly, he remembered the coiled body of Narkliss lashing out, knocking him from the saddle. The world wobbled unsteadily as he rolled over onto his stomach and pawed around for Goblin Terror. The bloody sword lay a few feet away. In the other direction, a little further on, lay Mankiller. Ben couldn’t tell if the horse was dead, or simply stunned.

Ahead, he saw Charlez and Narkliss facing off. The bard held his ax up in front of him, the snake towering over him. Both were bloodied, but if the state of Charlez’s battered armor was any sign, the bard had taken the worst of the fight.

Ben leaped back to his feet with a hoarse yell, snatching up his sword and

flinging himself at Narkliss's side. He landed several blows before the snake threw him back again. This time Ben landed on his knees, Goblin Terror still firmly gripped in his hands. Narkliss swung around, mouth opening wide—but before the snake could attack Ben, Charlez struck again.

The great snake hissed and pulled back. Charlez gave a triumphant shout and moved forward, but it was too soon. The bard was slowed by his injuries and he stumbled. Narkliss swooped down, snatching Charlez up in his mouth like a toy doll and flung him violently to the ground.

“No!” Ben raced to his friend's aide, but it was too late. Narkliss picked up the limp form of Charlez and threw the bard against the ground again.

Goblin Terror bit deep into Narkliss's side, and with all of Ben's strength behind it the blade cut down to the bone. The snake screamed.

This time when Narkliss swung around to attack, Ben was ready. As the massive jaws descended on him, he brought Goblin Terror above his head and thrust the blade up through the roof of the snake's mouth. As the jaw closed around him, he rolled away.

He almost made good his escape, but as he slipped out he felt the fangs scrap across his back, followed by a sudden spreading numbness. Gasping, Ben staggered. Narkliss was dead, the giant snake convulsing and thrashing as the last of its life bled out from its gaping mouth. But Ben was afraid the snake had won, even in its death.

“Ernie!” He willed his legs to move, running in a stumbling gait toward where he had left the wizard. “Ernie, we need you!”

He fell, but somehow made it back to his feet, staggering on. His back and arms had gone numb, his feet barely working.

“Ernie! Narkliss is dead. Come quick!”

His vision began to fade, the world growing fuzzy before his eyes. He fell to his knees, and this time he couldn't rise again. Everything had gone numb. Was that a blob in front of him, and was it moving toward him, or away?

Blackness swooped in.

Then the blackness vanished with a rush of cold that felt like ice water had blasted through his body. His eyes snapped out to see Ernie standing over him. The wizard shook his head.

“My, my, that was quite the dose of poison you had. Er—where is the big snake?”

“Dead.” Ben came to his hands and knees, panting. “Go find Charlez—he's

hurt bad. Hurry!”

“The snake...you’re very sure—”

“Very dead! Go, Ernie!”

“Right!” the wizard squeaked. “I’m going, I’m going!”

Ben made it back to his feet, still feeling a bit light-headed from the wizard’s healing. It was then he became aware of the horsemen everywhere, fleeing back toward York.

“Don’t retreat!” He ran toward the nearest rider. “Stop! We won!” He wracked his still muddled brain, trying to remember what one was supposed to say in this situation.

“Rally! Rally!” he cried. “Victory is ours, Narkliss is dead!”

To his great relief, he saw several of the riders stop. Maybe victory could be salvaged from this yet.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### CHOICES

It was a battered and shaken party that rode back into York. Defeat had been turned into victory, but more than a few people were unnerved by how close a thing it had been. Once Ben had slowed the retreat of the knights and nobles, and both men and nur'gali realized that Narkliss was dead, the tide of the battle quickly turned. The nur'gali broke into a complete rout. Those that didn't speedily escape were killed in the retreat.

Ben and Charlez rode at the front of the tired and filthy column of men. Charlez's armor hung in broken pieces, but his body beneath was whole, thanks to Ernie's magical healing. The bard was still rather dazed from the whole experience. Ernie said it would take a good nights sleep before he would return to normal—it had been a lot of healing.

"Ben!" Jess shouted from the top of the wall, hurrying to climb down. "I saw it all! You—"

"People! We have a true hero!" the queen cried, rushing forward to meet Charlez's horse. "Have you ever witnessed such bravery? Have you ever seen such a warrior, capable of meeting the most vile beast in battle and defeating it? This is the man who knows how to lead an army. This is the man who planned our victory, and brought it about. Here is our champion! Here is—"

"It was Ben!" Jess shoved her way through the crowd. "Don't you dare—"

The rest of her words were lost as Ben's hand clamped over her mouth. He swung down from Mankiller's back—leaving Ernie to preen alone before the shouting crowd—and dragged Jess back out of the press of bodies.

"Never mind all that," he said, once they were clear of the pressing bodies.

“It’s not important.”

“What are you doing?” she hissed once he removed his hand. “Charlez didn’t kill Narkliss—you did!”

“So what?” he shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.”

“So that!” She pointed back at the crowd, which was now shouting Charlez’s name, hoisting the bard on their shoulders. “You’re supposed to be there!”

“I don’t want to be there.” Ben turned away.

“Think for a minute!” Jess grabbed his arm. “How are we going to win this, if you keep giving away the victory?”

“It doesn’t matter, so long as we’ve won,” Ben said stubbornly.

“It matters if we’re going to prove that you can be king!” Jess looked ready to cry tears of frustration. “Charlez’s plan was a disaster! If you hadn’t gone out then Charlez would have died and the entire court of Galdoron wiped out! They all owe you their lives, and instead of thanking you they are cheering on that worthless peacock!”

“Charlez helped—he fought Narkliss too. He was brave to go out and fight, and he nearly died. He deserves—”

“What about what *you* deserve!” Jess grabbed the front of Ben’s shirt as if she wanted to shake him. “They’re ready to crown Charlez king tomorrow because of this—and you’re just going to walk away?”

“Yes—I don’t want any of it! I hate all of it!” Ben burst out. “Cheering crowds make me tremble and sick. The court makes me miserable! It’s all stupid, dumb, ugly stuff, and it doesn’t really matter. I might have killed Narkliss, but that doesn’t mean I can be a king!”

“So you’d just let someone else steal your place?”

“Maybe Charlez should be king. Maybe I don’t want to be king.”

Ben turned and walked away, his shoulders hunched miserable. Jess watched him go, her mouth hanging open.



The queen looked up as the door shut quietly. Jess stood just inside the bedroom, her eyes thunderous, her face like a marble mask. The queen straightened in her chair, inclined her head toward the sleeping king, and motioned for quiet.



“He’s had a taxing day. All the excitement.”

“What are you doing?” Jess demanded, hardly dropping her voice at all. “I know you’ve never liked Ben—and I’ve lived with that. I know you’ve wished he would fail, you’ve hoped he would fail—and I’ve tried to ignore that. But this—this is beyond everything else!”

The queen sighed and rolled her eyes heaven-ward.

“Mol, I’ve tried to be patient. I’ve tried to take into account the occasional whims of your emotions, but this has gone on long enough. Someone must tell you the hard truth: That man isn’t fit to run a kingdom. This marriage simply won’t work out, and it’s time you realized that.”

“He saved your life and your kingdom!” Jess exclaimed. “Doesn’t that count for something?”

“So he is useful when violence is needed.” The queen shrugged. “All the more reason not to marry him. Give him a job in the guard or something.”

Jess turned away.

“Don’t you see, Mol? Think about it reasonably. I want you to be happy. I want you to be successful. I want you to have beautiful, successful, children.”

“You don’t seem to be trying very hard to make me happy. It looks to me like you’re trying to get what makes *you* happy.”

The queen’s jaw clenched. “How clearly must I spell this out for you? The man is a stuttering ass! He is completely incompetent, unable to lead, and unfit to rule. He is a disaster in every sense of the word. I’m simply trying to work everything out to the appropriate conclusion, like any good ruler.”

“No!” Jess took a step forward, quivering. “He’s not! How dare you call him that!”

“You think I’m wrong? Ask the court.” The queen gave a broad wave of her hand. “I promise you, if the majority of the court thinks he is fit to be king, I’ll give no complaint. But they don’t, and it’s time you faced up to that, Mol. It’s time you opened your eyes. Find someone else.”

“Like Charlez?” Jess snorted. “You think he has the skill to run a kingdom?”

“Yes,” the queen said calmly. “And soon you will see that. When he defeats the goblins and wins this war, you will see that.”

“Fine.” Jess turned suddenly cold. “The proof will be in the deeds. If Charlez does defeat the goblins, he is fit to be king. But if Ben does that, you’d better see he is fit to be king!”

Then she left.



Ben slept poorly that night, tossing and turning. He had nightmares—vague undefined dreams that caused him to wake with a start, and then drift uneasily back into sleep. He woke for the last time before dawn, feeling miserable. He dressed and went for a walk around York, hoping the exercise and morning air might clear his head. He wandered around the village for awhile, wondering if he should find Jess and say something. But he didn't know what to say. He couldn't remember having ever shouted at Jess before in anger, and just thinking about it made him feel more miserable. He was sorry he had said the things he did, and silently promised he would do better, and try harder to do what Jess wanted, and to be somebody who could be a king.

But while he walked Ben realized something: beneath all of his miserableness, beneath feeling sorry for having an argument with Jess, beneath all that he felt fear. It was fear, deep down inside that clutched at his heart and made him feel like he was drowning. He wanted to be what Jess wanted, and the king that she needed—but he was afraid he couldn't. In fact, now he was sure he couldn't, no matter how hard he tried. It was an impossible dilemma, and the only halfway workable solution he could think of was dying in the process of defeating the goblins. That seemed like it would solve all his difficulties.

Somehow, he found himself outside the wall of York, almost stumbling over the latest hole Ernie was digging around the perimeter of the stockade. Dawn had slipped past to morning, and the wizard was already at work, garments covered in dirt.

"Hey, Ernie," Ben said. "You still sure you don't want me to help? It'd go a lot faster if we both worked—whatever you're doing."

"Do you have a college education?" Ernie looked up, wiping at his sweaty brow.

"Uh—no," Ben said. "But I think I know how to dig holes."

"It's not that simple," Ernie said. "This is a very tricky thing. An art really—very mathematical. A mathematical art. All sorts of hypotenuses, cosigns, and any number of tricky tangents. Do you know anything about these sort of

things?”

“No,” Ben said, not having the faintest clue.

“I thought not.” Ernie took his shovel in hand. “Which is why I must slave away, all alone, like all great artists. We wouldn’t want the whole thing to come crashing down in the end.”

“We wouldn’t,” Ben said, finding one thing he could agree with.

So Ben sat at the base of the stockade wall and watched Ernie work.

“It’s too bad magic can’t fix every problem,” Ben said after awhile.

“Actually, I’ve found it could solve just about every problem I’ve come across,” Ernie said.

“Not people problems,” Ben said.

“Well, no,” Ernie agreed, working his shovel around a rock. “I suppose not. What kind of people problems are we talking about?”

He thought about mentioning his fight with Jess, but decided not. “I can’t stand the court, and they hate me.” Ben picked at the toe of his boot. “The king and queen and the court are...they’re messing everything up. Nothing is going how I imagined when I thought I’d bring the king back to save York. I think it’s all going to end in disaster.”

“Which is why it was my advice to not get us in this situation in the first place.”

“But how do I fix this problem?”

“Heck if I know,” Ernie said. “But that’s why I try to avoid people. Life is much simpler if you’re a selfish old man.”

Ben couldn’t think of anything to say to that.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### DISASTER

Jess spent the entire day on edge, waiting for the next scheme of her mother. But it turned out to be a very quiet day. The court seemed to need some time to recover from the excitement with the nur'gali, and Charlez spent the entire day sleeping to restore his energy from the healing. It was only a lull in the plotting, she knew. For a short while she thought about preempting her mother by going out with Ben against the Goblins immediately, but then she thought about the recent argument with Ben, and changed her mind. He needed a bit of space, and a short break. The stress was getting to him. He wasn't used to court life, she reminded herself.

So York sat quiet for a day with little more going on than Ernie's industrious, and strange, hole digging. A few hopeful people began to suggest that many the goblins had given up, and the fight was over.

Jess didn't sleep much that night. She lay awake in bed, thinking. She realized somewhere toward the middle of the night that the trouble with her mother, the court, and Ben was bothering her more that she wanted to admit. For weeks she had been telling herself there was an easy solution to all of this, but in the darkness and long hours of that night she had to admit the fear: she was increasingly afraid that there was no easy solution.

Sometime toward morning she finally fell asleep. A few hours later she awoke, determined to speak with Ben. However, on getting up she discovered he wasn't so easy to find. She had woken late, and a quick check of his room showed he was already up, his bed in a disarray that suggested he had left in a hurry. Then, when she left the inn, she found all of York in chaos. The court

was up and about—at an alarmingly early hour for the court. Something was happening. Jess would have sworn the court intended to travel today—except she had been told of no such plan.

The bustle gave her a strange sense of unease, and she hurried to find Ben. She found him, eventually, but in a place she least expected him. He was at the picket lines, carrying water for the horses of the court. If the sweat staining his shirt was any measure, he had been working hard for several hours.

“Ben!” she exclaimed. “What are you doing?”

“Watering the horses,” he said. “I’ll be just a minute. I’m almost done.”

“But *why* are you watering the horses?” She followed after him. “Ben, that’s the job of a stable hand—you’re a duke now, remember?”

“That’s true, I suppose.” Ben dumped his last two buckets of water in the long trough. “I don’t mind, though. They needed my help.”

“Who needed your help?”

“The servants. They came bursting into my room very early this morning, saying the court would be leaving on a journey in a few hours, and the horses needed watering first. They asked me for help, so I helped.” Ben looked around. “I’d say they’re about ready to leave.”

“But where, and why?” Jess’s eyes narrowed as looked around at the crowds. “I was told nothing about this plan, and that is decidedly unusual. Something isn’t right. Come on.”

She took Ben by the arm, pushing through the crowd of people. Her goal was to find the king and queen, and that ended up being very easy. There was a great trumpet blast, and the crowd of villagers and servants divided. Ahead, the king, queen, Charlez, Androbobel, and the long procession of the court nobles advanced, most of them already mounted on their horses. The king and queen rode with lofty dignity, Charlez with an air of unrestrained excitement. Androbobel smiled like a cat that had swallowed the canary.

“That is rude, and downright sneaky,” Jess muttered. “Whatever they are up to, I’m going to—”

“Greetings, Daughter,” the king said on reaching them. He was dressed in extravagant finery, a voluminous cloak completely engulfing his person. “You’ll be joining us, won’t you?”

“Where, and for what?” Jess demanded.

“We’re going to defeat the goblins,” Charlez said, his face shining.

“Everything is heading for its perfect climactic conclusion. It will be the last great battle. I will finally have my victory. And then I’ll sweep my Beulah up in my arms and say—”

“Certainly I’ll come,” Jess said, her tone clipped. “Ben and I will be along in a moment, though it would have been appropriate for you to inform us of this earlier.”

“Oh, no, no,” the queen said. “*That* man isn’t coming. He absolutely can’t. As the duke of York he must stay and defend his domain. Who knows if there might be some goblin raid, or a counter-attack against the village. The court has grown tired of waiting for *that* man to finally decide what course of action he would take, and so today, Charlez will show us all what kind of victory he can win against the goblin horde.”

“Leave Ben behind?” Jess’s eyes blazed with anger.

“I don’t mind,” Ben said. “I never cared for fighting anyhow.”

“I’m not going either.” Jess turned away from the procession.

The king blinked. “What?”

“You heard me! If you want to go without Ben—fine! You go without him, *and* without me. In fact, I think it’s a grand idea—you go and see how much you need Ben! You go and fight the goblins without him. Let’s see this great victory by Charlez—I’ll be waiting right here when you come running back.”

“We won’t come running back.” The king sniffed. “We will ride back with the dignity befitting a victory procession.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to come?” the queen cajoled. “You’ll have the chance to see a great victory—a great master at work.” She motioned toward Charlez, who was waving at the crowds.

Jess laughed bitterly. “I’m not afraid of missing that. Go on—I’m staying.”

The queen hesitated—then shrugged. “Suit yourself. There will be time enough later.”

The procession rode on past. Jess glared. Ben watched.

“But Androbobel,” the mayor called out. “Where are you going? Why are you with them? We need you.”

“I am going to advise our great leaders on their battle plans.” Androbobel gave the mayor a condescending glance.

“And then you’re coming back?”

“Certainly not.” The professor urged his horse on. “I will then take up position as grand advisor to the king and queen, exercising my important

duties in Galdoron.”

“But what about us?” the mayor protested, starting after him.

“You can fend for yourselves,” Androbobel said over his shoulder. “You were a waste of my talents, anyhow.”

“But...But...”

“Go home, Horace,” the professor said coldly.

The mayor stopped following. He opened his mouth, but no more words would come.

“Good riddance to them,” Jess said as the gate doors shut. “They can go riding about while we have breakfast.”

Ben and Jess were halfway through breakfast when the dowager entered the inn common room.

“Good heavens, did I really sleep so late?” The dowager rapped her cane on the floor. “How could the entire court leave before I was out of bed? And where did they go?”

“Join us, Gram,” Jess said, pulling out another chair at the table. “Everyone else went off to defeat the goblins—or so they think.”

The dowager stopped. “That’s not right.”

“It’s stupid. They’ll be running right back in a few hours, and then Ben will show them how it is really done,” Jess said smugly.

“I only hope it goes so well.” The dowager leaned on her cane, lips pursed. “They must have some plan, some scheme, that makes them feel confident of victory.”

“Against that huge horde of goblins?” Jess looked at her grandmother. “What could they possibly have that would make them think that?”

There was a moment of silence, where the question hung on the air. Then Jess turned to Ben.

“Where is Goblin Terror?”

“Right here—” Ben dropped his hand to his side, where Goblin Terror usually hung. “Oh! I guess when all the servants came rushing into my room asking for help I forgot to put it on this morning.”

Jess’s mouth tightened. “Go get it, quickly.”

Ben hurried away.

“It’s not possible,” Jess said, answering the dowager’s look.

“Anything is possible.” The dowager sighed.

A few minutes later Ben returned. “I can’t find Goblin Terror in my

room,” he said. “I must have accidentally put it someplace else.”

Jess paled. “We’d better find it.”

The dowager closed her eyes.

After searching for well over an hour, Ben was forced to admit that Goblin Terror was gone, and the king and queen had taken it. Ben and Jess sat in the village square, despondent.

“I’m not surprised.” The dowager sounded fatalistic. “My son always had a terrible case of sword envy, and his wife was always reckless. This is a fine mess.”

“We can fix it,” Jess said, getting up and starting to pace. “We just need to think.”

“Maybe you can fix it. I am going to take a nap.” So announcing, the dowager marched off.

“So that’s it.” Ben rested his head in his hands. “We’re done. I can’t believe they did that.”

“Don’t worry,” Jess said. “We’ll get Goblin Terror back. They won’t be able to stop me. I’ll get it back, even if—even if I have to strangle them.” Her hands clenched as if she imagined doing that very thing.

“I don’t really need it back,” Ben said. “I never particularly wanted a sword in the first place. I’m just afraid of what will happen—I mean, I’m not sure the king can really use it, or Charlez. If something happens to Goblin Terror—Ernie will throw a fit when he learns I don’t have the sword.”

“And for good reason, for once.” Jess stopped her pacing. “If something happens to that sword...” she didn’t finish.

“I hope it doesn’t end that way. But I guess at this point all we can do is wait.” Ben looked around the village square. The place was completely deserted, as if the mayor’s sense of abandonment had spread to the rest of the villagers.

“Yes, wait...and talk,” Jess said. “Ben, I’ve been thinking a lot about things—about how everything has been going.”

“I have been too,” Ben said. “I’m sorry I haven’t done a better job at this king stuff. I—”

“That’s just it,” Jess said. “You’ve done a great job at being Ben. The problem is—”

At that moment there came a loud banging on the wooden gate.

“Open! Quick! Open the gate,” a voice shouted.





Since Ben's suggestion of sending out scouting parties had never been put into action, neither the king, the queen, the court, Charlez, or even Androbobel had any precise idea of where the goblins were camped. Androbobel had simply advised them to ride toward the Shiddow Mountains, and had assured them the goblins would appear. So the party rode along the northward path. The rutted track led to Ben's old farm which had been burned down many weeks ago—but nobody in the court realized that.

Charlez was quiet for most of the ride, which was very strange for him, especially since the king and queen spent the entire time talking about what a great victory would be won, a subject the bard typically found very invigorating. It was only after they had crossed Bannard's Brook, and were getting very close to Ben's farm, that he spoke.

"Why didn't you let Ben come along?" he said. "He is very good at fighting, and really this should be his fight."

"He is a disaster." The king gave a dismissive wave of his hand. "And besides, I didn't want him making a scene."

"A scene? Ben never makes a scene. Why would he make a scene?" Charlez said.

"When he sees that I have his sword." The king threw back his cloak, revealing Goblin Terror strapped to his side.

For a moment, Charlez didn't comprehend what he saw. Then he did.

"Hey, that's Ben's sword! How did you get that?"

"I took it," the king said, and grinned. "I can do that because I'm king."

The party rode out of the forest and into the large open space of the Transom farm, with its many spreading fields. Almost unobserved, a large black metal cage was slowly advancing from the forest on the opposite side of the farm.

"That's *stealing*, and it's wrong," Charlez said hotly. "That's just like the evil king Xadrox in *The Darkened Ways*."

"It's the sword that makes the man," the king declared. "I can do anything that man could, now that I have his sword."

"I don't work with the side of evil." Charlez drew back. "If you don't return that sword, I'll quit being commander of the army. The forces of evil always lose in the end."

“That won’t be necessary,” the queen said sweetly. “Because the king intends to give *you* the sword.”

“Then I’m giving it back to Ben,” Charlez said.

“Certainly, certainly—if you still wish to. That is, after you win this great victory you can always give the sword back to that man yourself, or keep it as your due.”

“No!” The king gripped the hilt of Goblin Terror. “I’ve changed my mind. I’m keeping the sword for myself. Charlez can help me win this great victory—but the sword stays with me!”

The queen’s mouth fell open. “Harry! We agreed—”

“It’s better this way,” the king babbled. “I *am* King Harry, the great and glorious. This is my destiny! This is my moment of triumph! How I have dreamed of this day when—”

“I quit,” Charlez said, and started to turn his horse around. “I should have seen this coming a long time ago. I should have realized there would be a vile backstabber in this adventure. I’m not going to wait around for your to reap the punishment for your crimes.”

“Victory is mine!” The king rose in his stirrups. “Come, all you evil creatures, and be defeated!”

“Don’t go! Don’t go!” the queen pleaded, grabbing Charlez’s arm. “Let me reason with him. Sometimes he takes leave of his senses—please!”

“No. I know what you are now—I see what you are doing to Ben—and he is my friend! Besides, it’s too late now.” Charlez pointed.

The massive iron cage had been slowly advancing out from the forest and across the expanse of the field. Many goblins were lined up behind and before the cage, pushing and pulling as it creaked and groaned, moving forward. Every few feet the cage would shake with a great crash from within, and rattle as if it were about to fly to pieces. From behind the bars burst loud stamping and frenzied snorting that could only come from a very large animal.

The queen’s eyes widened. “What—what is that?”

“Not a goblin,” Charlez said, his own voice strained. “I don’t know what, but something very bad. Something we’re going to wish Ben was here to fight.”

“You can fight it,” the queen said breathlessly. “Harry! Give him the sword! Charlez will save us.”

“No. I’m going to win. I can fight it, and be the hero.” The king hunched his shoulders petulantly. He was looking uncertainly at the advancing contraption.

The cage was still some distance away when the goblins stopped moving it. Most of them quickly scattered and fled back into the forest. Only one remained, holding a very long pole. Everyone in the court watched with breathless apprehension as the last goblin carefully advanced to the front of the cage and knocked the massive iron latch-bar free. Throwing the pole aside, the goblin took off for the forest in a mad flight that could only be induced by stark terror.

No sooner had the iron bar struck the ground than the cage door burst open with a crash and a giant black shape—many times larger than a mounted man—hurtled free. The creature looked like a wild boar the size of an elephant. Beyond its prison, the massive shape stopped a moment and shook itself, pawing the earth with its hooves, slicing up chunks of sod as big as a man. The black coat bristled, the long white tusks waved in the air.

“Oh no,” Charlez said weakly. “It’s a felghant.”

Then the felghant bellowed, a roar like that of ten angry bears, a blast loud enough to shake the leaves on the trees. The king promptly fell off his horse.

“We’re dead,” Charlez said.

Members in the court screamed, and everyone began to scatter. Then the felghant charged.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### THE FELGHANT

Soon as Jess motioned for the guards to open the gate, Charlez burst through. His clothes were torn and dirty, his hair wild, his horse trembling in an exhausted lather. Ben and Jess rushed forward.

“I was tricked—they didn’t tell me what they were doing! It wasn’t my fault! It wasn’t my idea—and I had nothing to do with it! I could have told them it would have ended that way!” Charlez dropped out of his saddle, nearly crumpling to the ground when he landed on his feet.

“What happened?” Ben asked.

“Where is everyone else?” Jess demanded.

“Those that escaped will be here soon.” Charlez swallowed hard. “I rode as fast as I could to warn you. The felghant is close behind us. It will be here within the hour.”

“Where are my parents?” Jess grabbed the bard’s collar.

“Captured by the goblins,” Chalez said. “And the professor, and half of the court. The felghant routed us, and then the goblins swooped in.”

“Goblin Terror?” Jess looked like she didn’t want to hear the answer.

“Lost.” Charlez hung his head. “I tried to get it—I tried to save it—but I was too late.”

“Of all the stupidest—” Jess let go of the bard. “Couldn’t anyone there have had the brains and the competence to salvage something? Couldn’t we have suffered something less than a complete disaster?” She looked up at the sky, as if expecting an answer.

“It’s okay, Charlez,” Ben said “You did the best you could.”

“He may have done the best he could, but he is still part of this disaster, and the situation is not okay,” Jess snapped. “This situation could not get any *less* okay.”

“But what is a felghant?” Ben said, thinking it time to move the conversation onto more productive topics.

“A creature of hunger and death,” Charlez wheezed.

Ben and Jess looked at him.

“How about a little more detail,” Jess finally said.

“Something like a giant wild boar. It lives on the fringes of the infernal regions, and instead of eating acorns, mushrooms, and other such nice things, it eats whatever tender, or not so tender, meat it can find. They are huge, fat, fast, and inclined to destruction. According to what literature is still in existence, they cannot be tamed, or controlled. But apparently they don’t need to be controlled—they just need to be unleashed in the direction you want destroyed. Their nose will draw them to the smell of fresh meat.”

“That sounds very bad,” Ben said.

“The crowning point of a very bad day,” Jess muttered. She waved to the guards. “Open the gates—the rest of the survivors will be here in minutes. Ben, you’d better go find Ernie and warn him. It’d be nice if *he* had some sort of useful suggestion.”

Ben didn’t look forward to telling the wizard what disaster had befallen them, but he knew he couldn’t leave Ernie to his hole digging with a felghant soon arriving. He had to walk most of the way around the stockade to find the wizard—Ernie had nearly finished a complete circuit of holes around the wall.

“Bad news,” Ben said without preamble. “The king stole Goblin Terror and went off with the entire court to fight the goblins. But Uug-lukk had a felghant, and the king lost the battle. The goblins now have Goblin Terror. The survivors from the court are returning, and the felghant is following them, and will be here soon.”

“Ha, ha, very funny,” Ernie said, not looking up from his digging. “Go amuse yourself with someone more gullible—Can’t you see I’m busy.”

“No, Jess sent me to tell you,” Ben said.

“What for? As she suddenly found some sense of humor?” Ernie jammed his shovel into the ground. “I didn’t think she was the type to have people telling stories.”

“It isn’t a story,” Ben said. “It just happened.”

Ernie froze. “No, it didn’t,” he insisted.

“Charlez just came back and told me everything.”

The shovel dropped from the wizard’s numb fingers.

“Goblin Terror! You-you-you decrepit failure! Numbskull! What possessed you to let them take the sword?” Ernie shouted.

“I didn’t. They stole it!”

“Then what crazy idea possessed you to allow them to steal it?”

“I didn’t! They—never mind.” Ben turned to go. “You can blame me if you want. I just thought you’d want to know that a felghant is coming.”

“Disaster has come upon us.” Ernie groaned, slumping down in his hole. “My defensive measures aren’t completed. We’ll be trampled to pieces. I should just stay in this hole and give up.”

“If you want,” Ben said. “But I’m going back inside the walls, where it’s a little safer.

Ernie decided that sounded like a slightly better idea.

By the time Ben and Ernie returned to the town square, a large crowd had gathered. Jess had rung the warning bell, which brought out the villagers. Those of the court who had escaped the battle were now returned as well. Most of the contingent of guards had returned, but over half of the court was captured by the goblins. The surviving ladies of the court were in hysterics, and many of the remaining noblemen had lost their weapons in the rout. It was not a force ready for battle.

“Be silent, everyone,” Jess commanded. “We must make a plan to stop this felghant.”

“Kill it,” Abern said promptly. “That’s the solution to every problem in life.”

Everyone ignored him.

“There is no plan that can stop a felghant, so there is no course of action,” Ernie said. “We’re doomed!”

If Charlez’s description of the felghant was even close to accurate, Jess was inclined to agree with Ernie, much as she didn’t like agreeing with wizard. But she couldn’t agree in any case, because she was supposed to be rallying the defenders, not encouraging them to give up in despair. “Ernie,” she said sternly. “If we were doomed every time you said we were, we never would have made it this far. Everything has a weakness—we only need to find the

weakness of this felghant. Charlez—what can you tell us about this creature? Do felghants have any known weakness, fears, or vulnerabilities?”

“Not particularly,” Charlez said.

“Drat, and drat.” Jess paced in a circle. “How fast is it?”

“Very fast. Only a swift horse could out-run it. The best I can say is it’s very stupid, and becomes bored easily.”

“Maybe it will get bored before it reaches York,” Ben said.

Charlez shook his head. “We made it really mad.”

“Oh.” Ben almost asked why they went and made the felghant so mad, but thought better of it. “Maybe the walls will keep this felghant out,” he said hopefully.

“Not a chance,” Jess said, sounding frustrated. “This stockade would break like a wall of matchsticks under any decent assault, much less the charge of a wild boar the size of an elephant. What we really need is some supplies and a week’s time to build a few ballista. That would take care of the problem.”

“Ballista?”

“It’s like a huge cross-bow,” Jess explained. “Probably the perfect thing for killing an elephant-sized pig. But we don’t have one, and can’t build one, and so there isn’t any point in thinking about it.”

“Then we’ll think of something else,” Ben said, trying to muster up a sense of determination.

They hoped to come up with some idea of how they might defeat a giant rampaging beast, but a quick survey of York’s defenses revealed that wasn’t an easy problem to overcome. The plan to deal with the felghant failed as such, because nobody had any ideas. The best they got was some more woeful predictions from Ernie, which only irritated Jess. By the time a half hour was up Jess ordered everyone to the walls to prepare whatever defense they could manage.

Ben and Jess took position side-by-side on top of the stockade wall, facing north. With Goblin Terror missing, Ben had borrowed a large hammer from Cendric’s forge. Jess loosened her sword in its scabbard.

“I don’t have a solution, but maybe we’ll survive,” Jess said. “We’ve been through tighter situations before...I think.”

“What about after the felghant?” Charlez said. “What are we going to do about all the goblins?”

“I don’t know,” Jess snapped. “We’ll have to take it one thing at a time.”

A sense of unease, verging on panic, hung on the air as people took their positions on the wall. Nobody seemed to know what to expect, or what they would be doing. Horace actually asked if they were going to surrender to Uug-lukk.

“You may march out and do so yourself, if you wish,” Jess said, her eyes flashing. “By all means, demonstrate your path of mayoral leadership for us, and lead the surrender party. Those who think it a good idea are welcome to follow you. But I think you will find Uug-lukk’s mercy severely lacking. The rest of us will plan some kind of defense.”

A few minutes later a call went up from someone on the wall. It was a shrill and quavery call that sent the defenders scrambling in haste and dread, frantic for a sight of the creature. There, in the full light of the midday sun, a massive black shape burst out from the thick forest, tree limbs flying. The felghant stopped for one snorting breath, then took aim for York.

Somebody—probably Ernie—squeaked, and a number of people leaned against the wall as if they had lost all strength to stand. Jess drew a slow breath. Ben fingered his large hammer. This wouldn’t be easy, he thought.

The felghant bellowed, put its head down, and charged.

“Change of plans—Everyone off the walls!” Jess shouted. “Off! Now!”

There was pandemonium on the wall as comprehension set in and everyone tried to escape the direct path of the felghant. Screaming and pushing, the crowd rushed in either direction along the wall, some terrified villagers managing to throw themselves from the wall to nearby rooftops. Jess—taking one last survey—saw Ernie transfixed in place, goggling at the felghant as it rapidly bore down on them, grunting and snorting.

“Wizard—move!” She gave a very unprincess-like curse. “Charlez, give me a hand with him!”

The two of them dragged Ernie from the wall. In the scramble to get down, they didn’t notice Ben’s absence.

Ben hadn’t left the wall. In fact, he had only moved a short distance away. Hefting his large hammer, he braced himself against the wall and prepared to throw.

It was only when Jess, Ernie, and Charlez reached the inn and stopped running that Jess realized Ben wasn’t present.

“Where’s Ben?” she cried, panicked. “Didn’t he come with us?”

“Maybe he got down first,” Charlez said. “He could be inside the inn—”



“Wait, I see him.” Ernie pointed at Ben atop the wall, his feet braced wide, swinging the hammer.

“Ben!” Jess shouted. “You don’t have enough time to throw the hammer! It’s coming too fast, and—”

The felghant struck the stockade with a deafening crash. A portion of the wall exploded in splinters, log fragments blasting skyward. The entire wall jerked, and Ben hurtled through the air. He sailed in a long arch before landing with a jarring crash on a thatch roof several houses down the street.

“Ouch.” Ernie cringed. “That must have hurt.”

The felghant was already through the gap in the wall, plowing into the nearest building and sending it down in a shower of dust and debris. Ben recovered quickly, struggling free from the roof thatch and leaping down atop the felghant.

“The lunatic!” Ernie cowered behind Jess. “What does he think he’s doing? He can’t fight that beast!”

“Oh, no. Oh, no, no.” Charlez watched in horror. “This isn’t going good. This *really* isn’t going good. I gotta help him!”

“Charlez, don’t just run out there! You’ll get killed.” Jess looked around, her mind searching for some idea.

“Might get killed! And you just noticed? I tried to tell everyone!” Ernie shrank against the side of the inn. “But does anyone listen to Ernie, the wizard of the third order? No! Everyone thinks they know better than me.”

“We’ve got to do something!” Jess clenched her hands. “We’ve got to help!”

“Unless we can stop that felghant, there is nothing we can do.” Charlez dropped to his knees, clutching at his face. The felghant had shaken off the rubble of the first house and had resumed its rampage, clipping the corner of the next house, smashing Ben against the stonework.

The impact shook Ben down to his teeth. Shaking the stars from his vision, he tried to think of what to do. The felghant seemed nearly impervious to the blow from his hammer. The more he hit, the madder the creature became. Without Goblin Terror, he felt helpless.

The felghant moved in an erratic path, swerving to demolish a chicken coop before side-swiping the stockade again, shearing off a large section of catwalk and nearly flattening a portion of the wall. Ben tried to duck, but he wasn’t fast enough. When the felghant swung against the stockade wall Ben

smashed into the catwalk bracings. The impact knocked him from the felghant's back and he went down in an avalanche of timbers. When the world stopped tumbling end over end, Ben found himself flat on his stomach beneath a heap of wreckage.

"Can't you think of something helpful?" Jess turned on the bard. "How about a useful suggestion, a bit of advice—something!"

"I can't think—my mind has seized up!" Charlez covered his eyes as the felghant came around again, scattering several villagers. "Improvise!"

"My advice is that since we'll all be dead shortly, we might as well go back into the inn and stuff ourselves with all the food we can before the end arrives," Ernie said, and started toward the inn door.

"Yes—improvise! We're not giving up," Jess said fiercely.

"Then we need to find some explosives," Charlez said. "It's the only way we can kill that thing."

"Exactly!" Jess grabbed the wizard by his shoulders. "Desperate situations call for desperate measures! There is only one thing that can stop that beast now—your blasting! You compromised your pacifist principles once and blasted the goblins when they tore up your quilt, you can do it again!"

"But—but that was an *accident!*" Ernie protested. "A momentary failure, a weakness of passion in my high ideals!"

"Would you like us all dead?" Jess turned him around to face the felghant, and the spreading path of destruction.

"If I blast something into horrible nastiness I'll die from the trauma." Ernie gripped his beard. "My psyche is still in a fragile state from all I endured last time."

The felghant crossed the street in a rush and blew a hole through the building two houses down, raining rubble on them. Ernie flinched.

"Well, uh...okay, I'll tell you what." Ernie licked his lips, his gaze following the felghant. "If I close my eyes and you just tell me where to blast it won't count. I'll be absolved of moral responsibility. Because I won't know what I'm doing, you'll have moral responsibility."

"That's great. Wonderful," Jess said hurriedly. "So glad you've resolved your moral quandary. Now hurry up and close your eyes before the entire town is reduced to rubble."

"Give me a minute." Ernie adjusted his hat and cleared his throat. "Now, should I use my staff or my hand?"

“What’s the difference?” Jess said, distracted. She was busy watching the felghant, nervously eying its weaving charge.

“I use my hand to blast with lightening, I use my staff for explosive blasting, such as at the inn. Both are very useful, but each is better in a particular circumstances,” Ernie nattered on, waving his staff and gesticulating, clearly feeling important.

Jess thought about the gaping hole in the inn ceiling. “Which causes less damage if we miss?”

“Lightning. It doesn’t vaporize inanimate objects as much. A little more dynamic—”

“That’s what I thought. Charlez, take the wizard’s staff.” Jess dragged Ernie forward. “Blast with your hand. We don’t need to level the entire village.”

“Just blast with something—before that beast reaches us!” Charlez clutched the staff, following close behind Jess.

“Don’t get impatient,” Ernie huffed. “You’re not the one who has to gather his mental energies.”

The wizard closed his eyes and held up one arm directly in front of him. “Ready and set. Aim me, and say when.”

“Right.” Jess took position behind Ernie, slowly turning the wizard. “Okay, blast!”

“Ummm. Uh...” Ernie stammered.

“Blast!” Jess shrieked.

“Ka-zaam,” Ernie said weakly. A tiny jolt of lightening burst from his hand, missing the felghant and singing a small spot on the stockade wall.

“You call that blasting?” Jess shouted. “That was sparkling. You can do better than that!”

“Yeah, well, I need to get warmed up,” Ernie protested. “I’m not really feeling in the mood, and I’m still not sure I can go through with this.”

Jess cringed as the felghant’s tusks sliced through the posts of a front porch and brought the entire facade down with a crash.

“You worthless wizard! Blast! Blast now!”

“Kazaam!” Ernie said, with a little more force. A slightly larger lightening bolt shot wildly from his hand, missing the felghant by a good dozen yards and striking a thatched roof, which immediately caught fire.

“Is it gruesome? Is it horribly gruesome?” Ernie asked shrilly. “Are there

blood and guts everywhere? Oh, I've been traumatized already! I'll never be able to open my eyes again!"

"You missed again," Jess said, grinding her teeth. "And if you had hit with that blast you would barely warmed the felghant's bottom, not blasted him to pieces. I thought we were trying to kill it!"

"I'm getting there, I'm getting there," Ernie said. "I have to work myself up to it."

"Well, we haven't much time. You better get into it *real* fast, because if Ben gets killed by that thing I'm going to kill you."

"Not to worry. I'll increase the volume. Kazaam! Kazaam! Kazaam!" Ernie blindly fired a volley of lightening bolts, not even waiting for Jess to aim.

"NO, BLAST THAT WAY!" Jess bellowed, jerking the wizard's arm around, barely keeping him from blasting the pile of rubble that Ben was still extracting himself from.

"All right, I hear you. No need to shout. It's hard to do this with your eyes closed," Ernie whined.

"Geez." Charlez gave Ernie a sharp look. "He's a threat to the general public. One wonders how he got licensed."

Jess tensed. "The felghant's coming round. You'd better get it right this time, Wizard."

The felghant had reached far end of the village by this time—a path of destruction and leveled buildings left in its wake—but the wild blasting had attracted its attention and now it turned around, snorting and churning up the earth. With another great roar, the felghant charged down the street, heading straight for Jess, Ernie, Charlez, and the inn.

"Look out!" Ben shouted, starting forward at a limping run. "Get out of the way!"

"Blast! Blast!" Jess shouted. "Blast, you stupid wizard, or we're all dead! Charlez—the staff!"

Snatching the staff away from the bard, Jess slapped it into the Ernie's hand.

"Blast!" she screamed in his ear.

"Aaarggghh! KAZAAM!" Ernie yelled.

There came a loud *blam!* and the felghant exploded, vanishing in a fine spray of blood, large chunks of meat and hair splattering in every direction.

"No shouting in my ear—that was totally uncalled for!" Ernie's eyes

popped open, and he whirled around to glare at Jess. “I am an old man of *dignity*. I don’t deserve this kind of abuse and the last thing I need is someone—*eep*.”

The last of the felghant bits came raining down upon York, a large bloody chunk landing on Ernie’s hat. The wizard promptly passed out.

“Well. He did it with style when he finally did it.” Charlez peeled a scrap of felghant hide from his face and distastefully tossed it aside. “That kind of reminded me of the book *Thunderous Fury* where at the end the mighty wizard Ga’Jabbarkok destroys Mamblug the great demon dragon. But this was a little too close for comfort if you ask me.”

“A little close? A little?” Jess leaned weakly against the inn wall. “Two more steps by that felghant and we would’ve become meat pancakes. Fetch me some water so I can wake the wizard.”

“Are you okay?” Ben limped up, grabbing Jess by her shoulder, looking her over. “Nothing hit you?”

“Only a bit of ground meat, which is better than you can say,” Jess said. “Would you check on everyone else? I think most of them made it to their root cellars before the felghant really started destroying things.”

“If my Da wasn’t out here trying to shoot that beast with arrows it means my Ma got Cendric to hold him down so he couldn’t fight. They’re probably hiding in the forge—I’ll start there.”

Charlez brought a bucket of old mop water from the inn. Jess promptly dumped it over the prostrate form of Ernie. The wizard came up sputtering.

“The felghant got me! I’m done for!” Ernie wailed. “I’m being devoured alive!”

“You’d deserve it, you incompetent wizard.” Jess handed Ernie his sodden hat. “But lucky for you, it’s over and we’re not dead. Somehow.”

“Ugh, icky-nasty.” Ernie scrambled backward, his eyes falling on the scattered felghant innards. “Did I do that? Did I kill it? Oh! I did it! I blasted that poor defenseless creature to smithereens! It meant nobody any harm—it was just a little hungry. It looks horrible! Horrible! I’m going to need counseling, I can feel it already!” He turned away, gagging.

“You’re beyond counseling.” Jess looked like she wanted to kick the wizard. “Besides, I have the moral responsibility, remember? You were an innocent tool, a helpless victim.”

“That’s true—and a horribly abused victim at that.” Ernie sounded

somewhat mollified, but he kept his eyes averted, studiously examining the inn wall.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### BEN'S DECISION

The felghant had left the village in shambles. Nearly half of the houses were reduced to rubble, more damaged, and one now burning to the ground—a great plume of smoke rising into the sky—courtesy of Ernie's wild blasting. The villagers, and the survivors from the court, took stock of their situation and appeared caught between bewilderment and shock.

"That felghant creature made three holes in the wall," Cendric finally said. He was a practical fellow, not easily unsettled, though not particularly quick, either. "The stockade won't be able to keep the goblins out, now."

"We're doomed," Josline wailed. "The goblins—"

"Are not here yet," Jess said. "And panicking won't help."

"And we can fix the wall," Ben added.

"Mayor, gather everyone in the village," Jess ordered. "We're going to have a meeting."

"You can have a meeting, but I have work to do." Ernie settled his bedraggled hat back onto his head. "And I...uh, hope this place is cleaned up by the time I'm back, if you catch my drift." The wizard tip-toed through the blasted remains of the felghant—carefully not looking at any of the bloody bits—and returned to his hole digging outside the wall. The assertion that Jess was morally culpable for the blasting of the felghant had clearly not entirely assuaged his conscience.

"Right," Jess said, watching him go. "And we don't need you for the meeting anyhow, because you never have any helpful advice, or any useful

thing to do.”

“Well, he did blast the felghant,” Ben said.

“That may be true, but he hardly *helped* in the process,” Jess said. “Anyhow, we have worse problems.”

“We can’t fix the holes in the wall before the goblins come,” Ben said.

“Worse.” Jess leaned close, her voice going very low. “Ben...I’m sorry. My parents and the court were supposed to come and take care of the goblin problem, but instead they turned it into a disaster. This is it. We’re finished.”

She turned her eyes to the smoldering ruins of York, and looked ready to cry. “They should have never come. I should have never come.”

“No, that’s not true,” Ben protested. “Nobody could have made it worse than it already was. York couldn’t save itself—it was already doomed. But now we’ve defeated the nur’gali, and the felghant. We’ve done something, and we can do more, if only we don’t give up.”

“The court has squandered the one chance at victory. Do you understand?” She looked at him. “I didn’t want a panic, but Josline is right. We are doomed. There is no way we can stop the goblins now, not without Goblin Terror. My father has destroyed the kingdom. The best we can hope is for everyone to retreat back to Galdoron and muster an army.”

“Maybe we should go capture the dragon, like I said before,” Charlez suggested. “With the dragon we could—”

“Will you shut up about that! This isn’t one of your stories!” Jess whirled on the bard. “We can’t! We can’t just go off and do some lunatic scheme you dreamed up from some trashy novel! Hasn’t this disaster taught you anything? Haven’t you caused enough problems already? When are you going to realize the world is not so simple and easy as the stories you read? A dragon is not going to fix any of our problems. If it did anything, it would make them worse!”

“I—” Charlez stepped back, blinking.

Jess snapped her mouth shut.

“Just don’t talk about a dragon,” she said stiffly. “Just—don’t. You already had to be bailed out of your last great idea. I don’t want Ben bailing you out of that one too.”

She turned and walked back toward the inn, her head down.

There was a long silence.

The court and the villagers began to drift away until the one people left



were Ben and Charlez.

"I guess that's it." Charlez looked deflated. "I thought it was a good idea. I mean, I know I can't do it by myself, but I figured if we worked together—"

"We're going," Ben said suddenly.

"What?" Charlez looked at him.

"We're going to tame the dragon—you and me."

"But..." Charlez looked down the empty street toward the inn. "Jess said—"

"I know." Ben took a slow breath. "But I've been thinking, and...and Jess isn't right about everything. I have to do what I can to save York, and the kingdom, and Jess. I have to try. Even if that makes her mad at me," he finished miserably.

"That's great!" The bard's face brightened. "The two misunderstood heroes sneaking off to save the world! It's just like—"

"Not now, Charlez. I really don't want to know what story it is like."

"Right, right. Supplies." Charlez straightened his shirt. "So—where can we find a lot of chains in this village?"



A half hour later Jess came back out of the inn. She saw Cendric and Abern standing up by the gate and went over. "Have either of you seen Ben," she said.

"Yep, just seen him off," Abern said, and puffed up his chest proudly.

"Took nearly all the chains in York," Cendric added, sounding a bit bewildered.

"Excuse me?" Jess said.

"If anyone can do it, my boy sure can," Abern crowed. "I was gonna go with him, but he insisted that I stay and take care of the dear wifey. Besides, I don't much care for riding horses, with my game leg and all."

"Do what?" Jess felt a spike of alarm. "You mean he's left?"

"To go tame a dragon, he said." Cendric nodded. "Don't quite understand that part, but not my concern."

"He told us to let you know after they were good and away," Abern added. "He didn't want you followin'. Said if it went badly he didn't want you gettin' hurt."

"Mercy—" Jess groped for something to support herself. "After I told them

not—I can't believe—it's not too late." She whirled about, almost staggering in her panic. "I can go after them. I can stop this! I—"

Ernie burst through the gate doors, slamming them behind him.

"Yaaaaa!" he yelled. "I did it—just in time! All done! Quick, they're coming!" The wizard was wild and bedraggled, his clothing smeared with dirt.

"What have you done?" Jess said.

"Goblins!" The cry went up from the stockade wall. "The goblins are coming!"

"I've saved our hides!" Ernie said, throwing up his arms. "And in the nick of time, too. You can thank me later!"

A deafening shriek went up from the forest as the goblins burst out of the trees and rushed toward York like a black tidal wave ready to drown the village.

"Oh no, not now," Jess said under her breath. Then, rallying, she shouted, "Everyone to their positions! Stand ready!"

"Made it! I made it! I must get into position!" Ernie raced up the street, wheezing and gasping.

Ernie stopped in front of the inn, right in the middle of the road, and began hurriedly drawing various lines and diagrams in the dirt with his staff, muttering to himself. After several short minutes he paused and cocked his head, listening to the continuous goblin shriek, which was growing louder. "Oooh, I hope I get this right. I'm not very good at doing math under pressure."

"What are you doing?" Jess snapped. "We need to be on the wall—now!"

"Math." Ernie squinted at his lines in the dirt. "Constructing a shielding ward requires all sorts of math. You know, pi times the radius squared. A squared plus B squared equals C squared. Tangents, hypotenuses, and all the sort of stuff."

"You lunatic!" Jess looked around wildly. "You can't stop the goblins by scratching lines on the ground!"

Ernie squinted critically at his markings in the dirt. "I think that is the right number of decimal points. But maybe I should double-check my parallel lines."

He glanced up at the walls, noticing the frightened crowd of villagers gathered on the walkway, staring transfixed at the charging horde. He licked

his lips. "Eh. Perhaps I don't have the time. We're either cinders or saved, as my old applied mathematics professor used to say."

Ernie raised his staff over his head and gazed intently at the bulls-eye he had scratched in the middle of his diagrams. "SQUARE ROOT OF A PRIME NUMBER!" he yelled, and brought the butt of his staff down with a thud in the center of the mark. There was crack like a blast of lightening, followed by a roar. The roar didn't fade, and as the sound continued what looked like a wall of azure glass began to rise around the stockade. The wall continued to rise until it completed a dome encircling the village. Then the roar ending in a final thundering boom.

"Waahooo!" Ernie tossed his staff and hat aside, dancing around in a circle. "I did it! I did it! Bonus points for me!"

Jess looked like she might fall over from surprise.

"What...?"

"Brilliant, isn't it?" Ernie gazed up at the shimmering dome over the village.

"What do you mean—what the heck is that?"

"It's a shielding ward. I've been working on it ever since we came to York," Ernie added proudly. "I knew we would need it. It's a very good ward. One of the best—very difficult to construct. Why, I should be raised to Wizard of the Second Order. This is a perfect demonstration of pacifist principles. No goblin will get in through that ward, and nobody will get out. Peace shall prevail."

"Ingenious." Jess looked genuinely impressed. "I'll write you a recommendation to the council. So what happens next?"

"Well, there is a formal review process, and then, unless there is some particular outstanding achievement there are usually tests and—"

"Not about your elevation to wizard of the second order, you ninny—what happens next *here* and *now*, with the goblins!" Her amazement at Ernie's achievement quickly evaporated in fresh ire at the wizard.

"Oh. Well, at this moment there are thousands upon thousands of goblins battering on every side of the ward, but they won't be able to break the shield down. They'll have to wait until the ward comes down."

"And the ward won't come down unless you lower it, right?"

"Oh, I can't *take* the ward down," Ernie said. "That's impossible. This type of ward remains in place until it is depleted. It can't be removed before

expiration. Once it expires it simply evaporates.”

Jess looked uncertain. “When does it expire?”

“Twenty-four hours. It was the best I could do unaided.” Ernie picked up his hat and dusted it off, setting it back on his head.

“So we have twenty-four hours to consider our fate before the goblins come rushing in.”

“Something like that.” The edge of enthusiasm faded from Ernie’s voice.

With an effort, Jess looked up at the shimmering dome over the village. “What is the plan after the ward comes down?”

“Well, if the goblins don’t get bored and leave...um...terror and screaming, I guess. I hadn’t thought that far.”

“Brilliant,” Jess said wearily. “Your pacifist principles always come up a little short of an actual solution.”

“Ask Ben for a solution,” Ernie said. “I’ve done my part. That young man sometimes has a few good ideas.”

Jess bit her lip to hold back a swell of emotion. “Ben already followed his idea, Ernie. And it was probably the worst idea he’s ever had. Somehow, Charlez managed to convince Ben they could tame a dragon. The two of them left before I could stop them.”

Ernie paled. “The dumb fool—I thought I made it perfectly clear that wouldn’t work! Why did he have to go off and get himself killed?”

“You’re supposed to tell me he has a chance of success.” Jess turned away so Ernie wouldn’t see the tears in her eyes. “You’re supposed to tell me that since he is very skilled and brave he will succeed and come back to rescue us all.”

“Not a chance.” Ernie’s face sagged. “He’d have more chance of success if he marched up to the goblin camp and demanded Goblin Terror back.”

“You’d better hope you’re wrong. Terror and screaming have been found very ineffective at prolonging one’s life.” Jess set her jaw. “You have to be wrong. I won’t accept Ben killing himself by following some misguided attempt to save the world. He will come back—he must!”

Ernie fingered his beard thoughtfully, then blew out a sigh. “Twenty-four hours is just about enough time to eat all the food in the village before we die.”

“I think I’ll just throw up,” Jess said.

“In which case I suppose you won’t be hungry for any of the food,” Ernie

said. "Hey-ho, one must try to look at the bright side of things."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### DRAGON HUNTING

Ben was almost *painfully* aware that dragon taming was either a very bad idea, or a very good idea. It certainly would be very painful in the most literal sense if it turned out to be a bad idea—and it might even be a painful experience if it was a good idea. He didn't relish what lay ahead. Worse, he couldn't shake the feeling that he might be over-looking something.

"Charlez, do you think this is a good idea?"

"Well, in comparison to dying, yeah. Sure! Better than going out to fight the goblins with our bare hands, I mean."

"That's not saying a lot."

"What am I supposed to say? It's not a picnic. There is a reason there aren't many stories about dragon taming. Not just anyone can do it. You have to be made out of the right stuff. And you need plenty skill, lots of bravery, and no small amount of luck."

"Yeah, that's about what I was thinking too," Ben said, unhappily. "I've never felt very lucky. You think we have all of that?"

"We are heroes, aren't we? You need to stop doubting things so much." Charlez shifted uncomfortably in his saddle.

Ben looked toward the mountain peak. It would take them a full day of travel to reach the top of the mountain, and this day was already half spent. Did they have enough time to get the dragon? Did they have a choice?

He turned to the bard.

"You think we should do this?"

“Why do you keep asking me?” Charlez looked flustered. “You already made a decision. You were so confident and sure back at York.”

Ben shrugged. “I was just being decisive. Jess kept telling me I needed to be more decisive. Something had to be done—so I decided. But...I’m wondering if I made the right decision. I’m worried about Jess.”

“If we’re lucky—if we hurry—we might be able to reach the dragon and bring it into submission before Uug-lukk returns to York with his entire horde,” Charlez said.

“And if we don’t?” Ben said.

“Then this becomes a very bad story. York is annihilated and everyone is dead.” Charlez tried to give an unconcerned laugh, but it didn’t work.

Ben nodded. “It was the right decision. It won’t be easy, but it’s our best chance. It’s our only chance.”

“Come on, Ben! Cheer up. Don’t have doubts. Be bold. Be like Markhan when he put down the rebellion in *A Betrayal of Fire*. Stand up and say—”

“I’m not like a hero in a story, Charlez. I’m terrified.”

There was a long silence filled only by the *clap-clap* of horse hooves.

“I thought you had to be,” Charlez finally said. “Brave and unafraid, that is.”

“I’m not.”

Charlez screwed up his face. “You’re not making me feel any better. In a minute I’m going to start feeling afraid and worried.”

“Sorry. I guess I’m just not the brave companion.”

“It’s not your fault. Things just aren’t working out the way they’re supposed to.” Charlez flicked the reins to his horse. “That parting with Jess wasn’t exactly story-book, either. The books never have you getting shouted out by the princess.”

“They’re just stories, Charlez.”

“Yeah, but in them everything made so much *sense*.”

“That’s what made them stories, and not real life.”

Charlez looked up at the Forkroot mountain, and cracked his knuckles uneasily. “Then I’m thinking I want to stop doing all this, and write stories instead.”

Ben gave a small laugh. “You would be good at that. Okay, no more glum talk, agreed? Give us a good quote, or something. A bold saying to take our mind off what we left behind. You’re good at that.”

“All I can think of is ‘Tomorrow we die,’ spoken by Octranius in the tragedy *A Wicked Heart*.”

“It might be appropriate,” Ben said.

“It isn’t. Trust me,” Charlez said. “Always go with something upbeat. Like: People of York! Noble villagers! Remember your heritage of old! Remember the hard steel from which you have been wrought! It is to you that the honor of this hour has fallen—in your hands lays the last defense. Hold fast, and watch for us. We shall not fail you!”

“That sounds pretty good.” Ben paused. “What is the heritage of old, anyhow?”

“Heck if I know,” Charlez said. “I was just quoting from *Dark Thunder* and put York instead of the rugged mountain villagers of that story. It was a good book, you know. Spent ten weeks on the bestseller list. It had lots of sword fights, big battles, and beautiful women in need of rescuing. Always quote from the best.”

“So we’ve started this properly, then,” Ben said. He wished he felt better.



They rode briskly, seeking to conserve their mounts’ strength while covering as much ground as possible. The sky was clear of any clouds, the sun very hot for the waning days of summer, and they were glad to travel in the shade of the forest beyond York. The cool air was pleasant in the darkness. The trees close around them were less so. They seemed to loom over the two riders, threatening of hidden goblins and unseen dangers.

Charlez rode close behind Ben, fingering his rapier and clearly feeling the absence of Goblin Terror. Ben gripped his forge hammer tight, wrestling with conflicting emotions. He couldn’t keep his thoughts from turning to Jess, and that only brought a gnawing ache to his chest. What was she doing now? How would she defend York? Was she all right? He tried to shut away such thoughts, because they quickly made him sick to his stomach. He wished he could have left York a different way, but he had known how Jess would react. It was a price he had to pay.

When they reached Bannard’s Brook he remembered the many weeks ago when he had first begun the adventure. He had left the farm, splashing through the brook, not knowing what lay ahead. He hadn’t known he would



meet Jess, hadn't guessed all that would happen.

"Uug-lukk had better not bite off Jess's head," Ben muttered to himself.

They rode through Bannard's Brook and down the last winding twists in the road until they broke out of the forest into the wide open area that was the Transom farm—or had been. Far across the fields they could see the Shiddow Mountains rising, very close, beautiful and threatening at the same time.

The remains of the farm looked worse than he had remembered. Spring had passed away while he was gone, and summer too. The ashes and rubble of the house had become overgrown with weeds, the fields gone wild, tall grass growing up around the vacant and damaged barn. Here and there goblin skeletons poked out among the weeds, a reminder of the first battle that long time ago, a collection of white bones, fangs, and claws. There were also signs of the more recent battle with the felghant—the scattered weaponry and clothing of the court, and much of the earth churned up by fleeing horses and a charging felghant.

Charlez gave a nervous look around, and shuddered. "Let's not linger," he said. "I've got bad memories from this morning. There might still be goblins watching."

They rode throughout the afternoon and evening, traveling until it was too dark to see and too dangerous to continue. Then they pitched camp and started a fire in a secluded cleft among some boulders on the mountainside. It was colder at their high elevation and a gusty wind blew, whistling through the rocks with a mournful howl. The fire guttered and flared, casting wild and uncertain shadows on the surrounding stones. The two travelers sat huddled around the fire, wrapped in their cloaks.

"Not exactly a cheerful night." Ben stared across the fire to where the horses cropped at the short sparse grass.

"We made good progress today. I expect we'll be at the dragon's cave in no time, tomorrow," Charlez said.

It was difficult to be happy about that thought.

After a length of silence Ben spoke again. "I suppose we ought to have a watch in case of goblins."

"Hardly necessary." Charlez pulled his cloak tighter. "If we're assaulted during the night we're doomed anyhow, so we might as well get as much sleep as we can. Besides, I highly doubt any goblins will venture onto a

mountain occupied by a dragon. After mountain goats and sheep, dragons feed on goblins. We probably face scarcely more danger from goblins on this mountain than in the citadel of Galdoron. Now as to the danger of being devoured by a dragon...we shall forgo dwelling on that."

"What is the chance of that?" Ben said. "How often do they hunt?"

"On average, once a week, and generally at dawn or dusk. But as I said, we won't dwell on that. Let's think about beer, a hot meal, and a warm bed. That's where I'd like to be now."

Ben looked out at the darkness. "I wonder what Jess is doing," he said, finally speaking aloud what had really been on his mind.

"Probably comfortable in bed. But let's not talk about them," Charlez said quickly. "Let's not think about them. There is nothing we can do right now. No point in imagining any...things." The bard went through an elaborate effort at rearranging his cloak, humming a strained tune.

"I wish we were at the dragon's cave right now," Ben said.

"Yes, let's talk about that," Charlez said, eagerly snatching at some subject—any subject—other than the goblin threat looming over their companions. "The historical documents on dragon taming don't cover all the details. One thing they always skip over is exactly how one gets the dragon tied up. How are we going to do that to a dragon without being eaten? I've been thinking about that all day and still haven't come up with an answer."

"Oh." Ben was silent for a minute. "I thought you had all that stuff figured out already."

"There are some good modern stories—*Dragon Lord of Hightower* was recently on the bestseller list for nearly a year—but they kind of fudge the details a bit. We'll have to make up some of the details ourselves."

"I could knock the dragon out by throwing Cendric's hammer at it," Ben said, looking at the large hammer lying beside him. "I killed one of the bikalis's heads doing that."

"Good idea, except a dead dragon isn't any use to us." Charlez wrapped his arms around his legs and stared at the fire. "Think you can be careful enough to not kill it?"

Ben thought a bit. "No," he finally said. "I might kill it accidentally, or not even knock it unconscious."

"Then those two possibilities makes it a very bad idea."

They both lapsed back into silence, and there was no more conversation

that evening. Without realizing it, both men began staring back the way they had come, down at the dark valley, straining for any sight of goblin torches. Later, they both laid down under the pretense of going to sleep. But neither did, not for a long time.

The next morning they set off before first light. As they climbed the mountain the day brightened and behind them the spreading valley became visible, shrouded in mist. The world around them rested, peaceful and quiet, as they ascended ever higher, the horses slowly picking their way. The peak of the Forkroot rose before them, glorious in its snow capped brilliance, and around them towered the heights of more peaks in the Shiddow range, like silent sentinels, stretching on into the unseen distance.

The morning waned on and Ben began to grow uncharacteristically impatient. "How much further?" he said. "We have York waiting for us, and Jess. And Ernie, and my Da and Ma. If we take too long it won't matter how many dragons we bring back."

"I know, I know. I'm thinking about Beulah, too. But I don't know exactly how far it is to the cave," Charlez said, just as irritable with worry. "I've never been there before myself. The records of the dragon watchers said the main cave entrance was up near the snow line, but I don't know how near is near."

Ben looked up, measuring the distance to the glimmering snow ahead. "Not near enough," he said. "We'd better hurry."

They urged their mounts up the steep rocky slope as fast as they dared. Not too much later, they saw the first signs of the dragon's presence. Large scorched swaths marked the rocky incline at scattered intervals, growing more frequent the higher they climbed. A general odor of char began to prevail in the air and soon the travelers spotted bones scattered on the mountainside.

"It all lends a rather unpleasant atmosphere," Charlez said, and shivered.

"You're scared?" Ben looked up from examining a heap of bones.

"Why do you sound so surprised?" Charlez sounded defensive. "Yesterday you said you were, and we weren't even on the mountain yet."

"Yeah...I kind of forgot today because I've been thinking so much about Jess."

"Well, I have everything perfectly under control." Charlez straightened in his saddle. "I'm the model of calmness and self-control. I'm just saying that it's...unpleasant."

The mountainside grew increasingly steep and eventually they were forced to dismount, leading the horses on foot. Much of the rock around them was scorched and blackened, the bones now lying thick on the ground, sometimes an entire heap of them piled across their path. Adding to the ominous atmosphere, vultures circled and wheeled overhead.

“There! I see it!” Ben exclaimed. “Up ahead!”

Appearing just over the next stony rise, there opened a massive jagged fissure in the mountainside. It gaped like a dark cavernous mouth. The entrance was still some distance away, but already they could detect a faint odor of rotting meat, and something that smelled like hot metal.

“That’s it.” Ben took a deep breath and gripped his large hammer. “I guess it’s time to march up there and get started.”

“What?” Charlez squawked. “Are you doubly crazy? That’s the surest way to get yourself eaten.”

“How else are we going to do it?” Ben was a very practical fellow.

“Any way but that! You don’t just walk in the front door without knowing what the dragon is doing. We go look for an air vent and sneak in the back way like some thief and exchange riddles with the dragon or something. Or, if you’re lucky, maybe you won’t.”

“I guess that would be better,” Ben agreed.

Working their way around from the lower side of the massive cave entrance, they began climbing the rocky face. They soon had to leave the horses behind, both because it was becoming too steep, and because the mounts were growing too nervous from the smell of dragon.

“Don’t worry,” Ben said to a nickering horse. “We’ll be back.”

“At least we hope we’ll be back,” Charlez said mournfully, unable to hide his increasing dread. “We like to pretend we will. But probably we won’t.”

“We’ll have to come back,” Ben said.

“I’m starting to really dread what we might find.” Charlez nibbled at his lip. “The stories never conveyed this sense of fear one has when preparing to capture a dragon.”

“What about the dragon’s appearance?” Ben peered up the rock face. “Do any of the books describe that?”

“All contradictory,” Charlez grumbled. “Everyone describes dragons differently. Fat or thin. Dark or shiny. Colored or black. Doesn’t matter—all the stories say dragons are very dangerous, so we can be sure of that.”

“Then give us a brave quote to send us on this final path,” Ben said.

“Can’t.” Charlez let out an unsteady breath. “All I can think of are tragedies right now, and it isn’t helping. Maybe because this *is* a tragedy. Or a farce. I never did like farces,” he muttered.

Not allowing themselves time for second thoughts—at least any more than they already had—they began the final ascent. Scaling up the jagged rock, they soon found a small hole in the stone which—by the smells emitting from it—led into the dragon’s cave. The opening was just large enough for them to wriggle through on their stomachs.

“Rats and all that” Charlez said, looking at the small opening. “This reminds me of a horror story I read once, about these people exploring a cave. They got their heads bit off by this weird creature that lived in the dark.” The bard licked his lips. “Bah, why am I worried? The dragon probably ate them all.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

### DRAZ'GLASSUR

Staring out from the wall, Jess stood alone, apart from the rest of the defenders. She watched the teeming mass of goblins beyond the shield ward, and, unnoticed by anyone else, the tears slid silently down her cheeks. “Ben, what have I done?” she whispered. “I shouldn’t have let it come to this. I shouldn’t have let you get away from me.”

“Lucky Ben and Charlez,” Ernie said, coming up behind Jess.

“Lucky?” Jess quickly wiped her eyes and gave a shaky laugh. “I’d hardly call getting killed by a dragon lucky.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. There probably isn’t even a dragon,” Ernie said. “So they’ve escaped the likely slaughter of York by going on a wild goose chase.”

“That thought would give me at least a little comfort, if it were true.” Jess leaned against the stockade wall. “But I have little hope of that. You and I both know that The Dragon Watcher’s is an international tracking organization charged with recording the location of all known dragons. I never read the dragon list, but given our bard’s fascination with those creatures, I’m sure he did. And as he has an amazing ability to retain what he has read, I’m sure he remembered the dragon’s location correctly, along with his stupid idea about taming it.”

“Well...” Ernie wilted. “Maybe they’ll get lost and not find the dragon.”

“We should have tried to get Goblin Terror back,” Jess said to no one in particular. “Soon as Charlez came back with word it was lost, we should have saddled up and tried—something. It would have been our best chance.”

"Someone say something about doin' stuff?" Abern called out.

"Not now," Jess said. "Now we just wait."

"I don't like doing that. I'm bored," Abern grumbled, limping along the wall top. "It's enough to put a man to sleep, standing here and staring at goblins. When do we get to start the fightin'?"

"Soon as the ward comes down, which will be soon enough. Tomorrow, if Ernie is right," Jess said. She squared her shoulders. "It's time for me to get York ready for the goblins. We'll keep those goblins away until Ben gets back." The last she said as much to convince herself as anyone else.

Unwilling to spend any more time thinking about what dangers Ben would face, or regrets about what she should have done, Jess threw herself into the defense preparations. She sorted through all the survivors of the court, and the villagers, and set aside all those who were able and brave enough to fight. These she armed, and divided into two groups—one under her direct command, and the other under the command of Abern.

The remainder of the people, both of the village and the court, man and woman, she put to work preparing the village for the coming goblin assault. Growing up, Jess had studied the art and theory of war when she was supposed to be learning cross-stitch and music. Now she put all of that learning to use. Rubble was heaped at all of the breaches in the wall and sharpened stakes mounted at the top. The houses of York were fortified and the roads barricaded to form a second layer of defense.

Jess made the members of the court work like they had never worked before, and the villagers no less. By the time the sun had sunk to the far horizon and the evening shadows were beginning to lengthen she decided they had done everything that could be done in preparation.

Nobody—except Abern and Ernie—slept well in York that night. As firm and impenetrable as Ernie's ward appeared, nobody felt entirely sure it would remain through the night. The clamoring goblins pressed up against the shimmering shield reminded them all what awaited, and it was hard to rest easy with the possibility of goblins at any moment streaming into the village. Only Abern, who seemed to have little concern about any number of goblins, and Ernie, who had a profound confidence in his own work, slept soundly.

Morning came, and the ward remained, still a translucent shield around York. Jess looked out over the heap of rubble blocking one of the breaches in the wall, and stared at the black shimmering sea of goblins on the other side

of the barrier. She saw one change from the previous night. Before the wall of York, in sight for all to see, were the captured members of the court. Bound like slaves, filthy and bedraggled, the prisoners huddled together. Jess could just make out her mother and father and Androbobel at the front of the crowd, tied to steaks like meat set on display.

She felt her throat tighten, and thought she tasted bile. Whatever the faults of her parents, whatever the conniving of Androbobel, they didn't deserve this end. "I'll die happy if someone kills Uug-lukk," she hissed.

"Ah, a new day, a day in which we still can hope," Ernie said, coming up beside her, smacking his lips from breakfast. True to his intentions, he was doing his best to help eat up all the supplies in York before the final battle began.

"Hope for what? That Ben will bring back the dragon?"

"No, there isn't a chance of that." Ernie shook his head sadly. "But perhaps the king will show up with a large army."

"Of what—goblins?" Jess gave him an incredulous look. "Or perhaps you are blind?" She jabbed a finger toward prisoner display.

"Oh my." Ernie put a hand to his stomach, as if his breakfast was no longer sitting quite so comfortably. "That is very disturbing. It seems to reflect an unhealthy mental state on the part of our attackers. And I think that violates some treaty about the humane treatment of prisoners. Really, it's very improper. Someone should lodge a complaint."

"Then you're just the man for the job," Jess said. There was not much bite to her sarcasm. She was distracted, unable to take her eyes from the prisoners.

"Perhaps the king will escape and rally an army from somewhere," Ernie said

Jess snorted. "I have more hope that Ben will actually capture a dragon. I have more hope that Ben will return with nothing but his hammer and help us, than that happening."

"Being hopeful is the important thing at this point." Ernie nodded sagely to himself. "For example, about right now I'm hoping none of this is happening, and I'm really laying at the beach and dreaming all of this."

"Good luck with that," Jess said. "Twenty-four hours, you say?"

"Approximately." The wizard fiddled with his staff. "It may fail a few hours early, or an hour or two late. It's not an exact science."

"I prefer before dark." Jess struggled to resist biting her lip. The sight of the



goblins in daylight was bad enough. Night only made it worse.

The day felt like it alternately dragged, and then rushed by. The defenders held their positions and watched the goblins as the sun followed its track through the sky. Everyone worried about the goblins, but Jess worried even more about Ben. Every passing hour made it all the more certain York would perish to the goblin horde, but it also made it ever more certain Ben had failed.

Still, they waited.

By late afternoon the ward began to show the first signs of failing. The azure blue began to fade, the translucence thinning like a bubble ready to pop. The goblins noticed, and their tumult increased.

"It looks like this is about it," Jess said. "My only wish is that Ben were here—dragon or not. Archers—be ready," she commanded the men on the wall. "Any moment now, the battle will begin!"

"I'm ready to slaughter those goblins," Abern shouted. "They'll feel my wrath—they'll be sorry they ever crawled out of their cave!"

There came a loud humming, and for a moment the ward vanished, then shimmered back into place. The goblins roared. Jess drew her sword. The ward flickered, wavering, then disappeared for the final time with a loud *snap!*

The moment of silence that followed was quickly lost in a great shriek from the goblin horde.

"Archers, fire!" Jess yelled.

The goblins surged forward into a rain of arrows. The battle had begun.

Fighting was fierce. The defenders put up far more resistance than the goblins expected. Twice the horde was thrown back from the breaches in the wall, each time with heavy losses. But there were always more goblins to take the place of those who fell, and still the battle raged on.

York was hopelessly outnumbered, and as one hour of fighting dragged on into another, the superior strength of the goblin numbers began to show. Evening drew near, and Jess knew they would not long outlast the coming of darkness.



Shoving the hammer in front of him, Ben crawled into the dark hole. The

air was hot, dry, and tinged with the smell of molten metal and some wild thing. He wondered, a bit uneasily, what might lie ahead. Then he told himself he wouldn't find out by wondering, and began to crawl deeper into the darkness.

Some distance further on, the tunnel began to open up. No longer forced to crawl, they picked their way forward through the darkness. Their surroundings began to brighten ever so slightly, but even as it did the air grew more oppressive. Coming from ahead, they could make out the deep rumble and hiss of the dragon's breathing.

Ben gripped his hammer. Charlez followed along behind, clutching his arm. The tension felt unbearable, their fear palpable in the darkness. Ben and Charlez sucked their breath in quick short gasps, groping ahead as they moved forward.

Finally, an opening became visible. Reaching it, they cautiously stepped out. The light was brighter here and they found themselves in a cavernous chamber with a vaulted ceiling. The heat made them sweat heavily, their clothes quickly soaked with perspiration.

Taking stock of his surroundings, Ben realized that they had come out on a large spur of rock high on the carved wall. To their left a small patch of daylight showed the distant main entrance through which the dragon came and went. Below them was the dragon. Cautiously moving forward, Ben edged up to the lip of the spur and peeked over. He gave a muffled gasp and slid back.

"What is it? What is it?" Charlez whispered, tugging at Ben's sleeve.

"The dragon," Ben managed to stutter. "See the dragon."

Together they crawled back to the edge of the lip, Charlez coming only because his curiosity slightly outweighed his stark terror. They looked, and saw the great dragon below them.

The creature was massive, its body long and thick, covered in crusty scales: bronze, black, and red, with a mottling of dark green. The large clawed hind feet were big enough to engulf a man, the gigantic wings like the sails of a ship. The dragon was sleeping, and with each exhaled breath it rumbled like a forge running at full blast.

Charlez gurgled in a high-pitched sort of way that seemed to indicate a strangled scream and fell backward, rigid with terror.

The dragon lay curled up in a rough nest of rocks that filled the entire

cavern. The rock nest was lined with with innumerable bones and all sorts of shiny things. Some of the treasure was worthless, like the large amount of broken glass and mirrors, and some of practical use, such as the vast collection of weaponry and armor, and some of great worth, as seen in the assortment of gold, silver, and jewels.

Ben managed to recover from his shock and found himself fascinated by the sight of the dragon. He could have studied it for a long time, pondering over the habits and personality of the creature, except he became aware of Charlez feebly plucking at his sleeve in a spastic, distraught sort of way. He reluctantly slid back down into the safety of the rock cleft.

"What?" he said.

"I...uh...think we need to reconsider," Charlez croaked. "I don't care if someone has brought a dragon into submission before. I don't care how many stories have been written about such feats, or how long they were on the bestseller list. They weren't dragons *that* big and mean. It can't be done to that dragon."

"Sure it can," Ben said, sounding more certain than even he felt. "But there is no way we can do it from up here. We'll have to go back to the horses, and bring the chains in the front entrance."

"Are you *mad*?" Charlez whispered. "Do you *want* to be eaten? This was my idea—when I thought we'd have a reasonable sized dragon. Like, maybe a quarter of the size we have down there. I'm telling you now—this is a bad idea."

"It's sleeping," Ben said.

"So?" Charlez looked ready to start running and not stop until he was back to York.

"So how deeply do dragons sleep?"

"It depends." Charlez shifted on his feet. "If they're in hibernation, it's a very deep sleep. You might be able to go down there and steal some of his treasure without the creature waking, though I wouldn't recommended it. Otherwise, if they're not hibernating they sleep more lightly. Maybe deep enough that you could sneak in there, if you were very quiet, or maybe so lightly that the smallest movement of a pebble would wake it."

"I guess we'll have to hope it's in hibernation," Ben said.

"Hope? Have you decided to become some kind of gambler?"

"How else can we do it?"

“I told you, I’d rather not risk it at all.” Charlez edged toward the exit.

“We have to. York is depending on us. It’s the only way we can save Jess, and York. I *am* going to save them from the goblins, no matter what. We’ll use all the chains we brought.” So saying, Ben started back the way they had come.

“I’m not sure all the chains we brought are enough.” Charlez let out a little tremulous breath.

They returned to the horses, and started unloading the chains. Between the two horses they had rode, and the two additional pack horses they had taken, it was quite a heap of chains.

“We’ll have to make several trips,” Ben said.

“If we don’t get eaten on the first trip.” Charlez picked up one long chain, reluctantly. “You sure you want to do this?”

“I don’t want to, but I’m going to.” With chains coiled in long loops over both shoulders, Ben started toward the main entrance of the cave.

“Just great.” Charlez sighed. “I can’t abandon you now. Duty is like a weight around the shoulders, death the final rest.” Mumbling various quotations to himself, Charlez gathered up a few more chains and followed.

They picked their way into the main entrance with as much care, and silence, as they could manage. The cave’s high ceiling echoed back every sound with a frightening amplification, making the clink of the chains on their shoulders sound very loud. Nearly every dozen steps they stopped and held their breath for fear of waking the dragon.

A sulfurous wind blew out from the cave, the air hot enough to tighten the skin on their faces. The rumble of the dragon’s breath was so loud they could feel it through their feet, the sound raising the hair in a prickle on their necks. When they came around the last bend in the cave tunnel and found the dragon lying before them, sprawled upon its nest of treasure, they both paused.

“So?” Ben finally said in a low voice.

“So, I’m trying very hard to not pass out,” Charlez whispered.

“There are more chains. We need to hurry.”

“Quietly!” Charlez hissed.

Nerve-wracking as the journey was, the tunnel was not long. In a half hour they had the entire heap of chains moved into the dragon’s lair. It was time to bind the beast.

"All set," Ben said, and scrubbed the sweat from his forehead. "Any particular way we should go about this?"

"Start with whatever is closest," Charlez whispered. "It hardly matters. We must bind all limbs, the tail, wings, and mouth. If it wakes before we do that, we're dead. You go first."

"Right. Should be easy as eating breakfast," Ben said. The comment did little to reassure the bard.

For a moment, even Ben didn't think he could do it. The dragon was so massive, so powerful, so *wild*, that every fiber of his being rebelled against the thought of going up and touching the beast. But he had to save York, and there was Jess depending on him. It was only when he fixed Jess in his mind, imagining her looking at him, waiting on him, that he could go forward.

The first chain went around both hind legs. He wrapped the chain around the legs where the dragon had crossed its limbs in sleep, making several passes. The dragon didn't stir, even when Ben pulled the large lock out of the pouch at his side and snapped it in place, securing the chain permanently.

Ben went back for the second chain. "Are you going to help?" He looked at Charlez. "We need to hurry if we're going to save York."

Charlez squirmed. "Well...right. But I'm keeping an eye on him, and if he starts to wake, I'm out of here."

Working together, Ben and Charlez used the second chain to secure the dragon's smaller arms, two more locks creating a crude set of manacles. Then two more chains went around the legs, and another secured the end of the tail to the legs in a hobble to keep it from thrashing about.

Near disaster happened when Charlez stumbled while carrying the next chain into the nest. The bard let out a squeak and Ben whirled about in time to leap forward, catching him by the collar. Instead of a loud clattering crash of scattered stones and metal chains, there was only a faint skitter of a few pebbles dislodged by a boot.

"Too close," Charlez mouthed, and sat down trembling. "Ben, I'm done living out stories. This is more scary than the most exciting book I've ever read. Let's go home."

"We can't," Ben murmured, and picked up the chain. "We have to finish this."

Two chains went around the base of the dragon wings. Another chain went around the dragon's arms, and still two more around the legs. Ben was

very worried about the legs, which looked strong enough to tear stone from castle walls.

“We can’t forget the mouth,” Charlez hissed. “If it can open its mouth, then it can use its fire breath. And if it can use its fire breath—”

“Right,” Ben said. “Okay, we’ll use the last two chains on the muzzle.”

“I can’t help you with that.” Charlez took a step back. “I’m sorry—but I... can’t. I can’t walk right up to a sleeping dragon’s mouth. He might wake up and I—I—”

Ben nodded. “I understand. I’ll do it myself. If it does wake—just run. Try to make it back to Jess, and tell her what happened.”

Charlez gave a lop-sided grimace.

Slowly, Ben crept up the mound of treasure. He inched his way toward the dragon’s head, careful to avoid dislodging any metal objects that might go clattering down to the base of the nest. His throat was so tight with fear he struggled to breathe.

In the end, his nerve almost failed him when he reached the dragon’s head. The mouth was so close he could lift up his hand and touch it. The jaw was so close it could easily turn and swallow him, a maw so big it could devour nearly half a horse in one bite.

Not allowing himself the chance to think, Ben tossed one end of the chain over the dragon’s snout and pulled the loop tight, securing it with another thick lock from Cendric. He was sliding the second chain into place when the dragon shifted, snorting. Ben froze. The dragon’s eyes slid open a fraction. Ben stopped breathing. Then the eyes drooped shut again and the dragon’s snoring rumble returned.

Shaking and fumbling, Ben quickly secured the last chain and scrambled down from the nest. He didn’t stop to catch his breath until he had reached Charlez. There he halted, hands on his knees, trembling and trying to still his racing heart.

“I think I might throw up,” he whispered hoarsely.

“I did throw up a little bit in my throat when he opened his eyes,” Charlez agreed. “I wanted to scream so bad.”

After a few minutes Ben regained his breath, though his heart still felt like it was beating funny.

The two men stared at the chained, sleeping dragon.

“Definitely hibernating,” Charlez said.

"Before I was afraid it would wake," Ben said. "But now I wish it would. A sleeping chained dragon isn't going to do anything for us. What do we do?"

"Maybe nothing. I still say we can't tame this dragon. There has to be some size limit on dragon taming that I never read. We'd best leave and call this a good attempt." Charlez turned for the exit. "That, or shout at it to wake up."

The latter suggestion had been in complete jest, as a reasonable person would have known. But Ben took it as a valid suggestion.

"HEY DRAGON!" he bellowed. "WAKE UP! WE NEED YOU!"

Charlez jumped, and screamed like a high-pitched steam whistle. Then he took off at a full run, and would have made good his escape except he stepped on some loose treasure that had spilled out of the nest, and ended up going for a tumble that left him flat on his face, winded and stunned.

The dragon surged to its feet—or tried to. The chains brought it up short, and the creature fell back, confused.

"Here it goes!" Ben crouched low. "Time to get angry."

The dragon took a moment to realize it was caught, but only a second to become wild with rage. The dragon exploded into movement, thrashing, twisting, and bucking. It released a thunderous roar that—even muffled by its chained jaw—shook the cavern and nearly deafened Ben.

Charlez staggered back to his feet, cowering, scrambling to get away.

"How long before it gives up?" Ben shouted.

"How am I supposed to know?" Charlez squeaked. "I've never done this before!"

"You're the expert!"

"Nobody is that kind of expert! It takes as long as it takes—or until the dragon breaks free and devours us."

The dragon threw itself against the wall, head and tail flailing. Stone and treasure went flying, ricocheting off the cavern walls.

"We're dead, we're dead," Charlez cried, covering his head with his arms. "A dragon this big can't be tamed!"

As if to fulfill Charlez's words of doom, the chain holding the dragon's tail snapped. Unleashed, the tail whipped across the cavern.

"Look out!" Ben pinned Charlez to the ground as the tail sliced through the air where they had stood, gouging the stone wall.

"Run! We need to run!" Charlez leaped to his feet.

“We must stay.” Ben gripped his hammer. “We must tame the dragon!”

“We must stay alive!” Charlez looked wildly for some path of escape.

The dragon had seen them now and its chained maw turned, head swinging around. The creature lunged for them.

Ben held his ground.

“Don’t be a fool!” Charlez pulled Ben back into a shallow crevice, saving him from the dragon’s chained, but still dangerous, jaws.

The dragon smashed his head against the cavern wall and the room trembled. Stone shattered, great slabs breaking from the walls and ceiling, raining down on them. Charlez cried out, falling to his knees as stone fragments battered down around his shoulders. Hand covering a bleeding gash on his forehead, the bard crawled for shelter.

Wiping stone dust from his eyes, Ben staggered back to his feet. Glancing up, he saw the dragon had snapped one of the chains on its jaw. Horrified, he realized that by smashing its head against the wall the dragon had broken the first chain holding its mouth, and by the same method second would quickly follow. Once the creature’s jaw was free fire would flow—and it would be over.

Unless he did something.

When the dragon’s head swung low again Ben acted faster than he could think. Ducking the blow, he rushed forward and leaped up, grabbing the dragon’s small tender ear. He didn’t know what he was going to do—he just knew he had to stop the dragon.

The dragon roared as Ben’s weight came down, pulling on the ear and its head lurched, smashing into the wall. The last chain on the dragon’s jaw burst apart in flying fragments of rock. Ben was nearly thrown free by the sudden stop, but managed to hang on with his one hand, gripping his massive hammer tightly in the other.

The dragon’s head whipped around again, flipping Ben into the top of the hard skull with a jolt that made his eyes cross. Brightly colored lights burst across his vision. Flame shot from the dragon’s mouth and nostrils, searing air and stone. The creature flung itself about the cave, hobbled by the chains, mouth snapping, roaring, and spewing more flames.

Ben clung to the dragon like a drowning man would cling to his hope of rescue—he hung on like he had never before. But the dragon was powerful, more powerful than Ben had ever met before, and as his arms strained in their



sockets he felt his fingers slipping. The air was hot like fire itself, the dragon scales like metal pulled fresh from a forge. *This is it*, he thought. *The dragon can't be tamed. We're all going to die. Might as well let go, and end it.*

His fingers were about to slip away when Jess's face floated back into his mind. She was looking at him, pleading. His hand convulsed, the fingers curling tight. *Jess*. He couldn't abandon her. Even if he couldn't tame the dragon, he could at least kill it, and go back to fight the goblins.

"You're not going to win, dragon!" Ben shouted. Pulling himself up, he squeezed his eyes shut, fixing Jess in mind, and started pounding with his hammer. He thought of Jess, and wouldn't let go. He thought of her, and imagined that it was Cendric's anvil in front of him, and beat the dragon's head like he would hammer a massive piece of metal fresh out of the forge—except he struck even harder.

The dragon screamed and convulsed. Flamed spewed across the cavern in a sheet. Pain pummeled Ben's body, but still he wouldn't stop, he wouldn't let go.

He wouldn't let go, but his strength had a limit, and as the dragon thrashed and bucked he didn't know how much further that limit would last. In a quarter hour he felt as if the battle had continued an entire day, and still the dragon wasn't slowing. The beast once again hurled itself against the side of the cave and there came another jarring crash which rattled every bone in Ben's body. Sputtering, the creature came back to its feet. Ben kept hammering, certain he couldn't hold on for another minute. He braced himself for the end as the dragon reared up on its hind legs, towering all the way to the top of the cavernous chamber.

The dragon gave one last great roar, then collapsed on the floor.

The impact jolted Ben's eyes open, and he nearly flew off. The dragon groaned, then went silent.

The sudden quiet felt unreal.

Ben blinked, not sure if his soot blurred eyes were seeing right. Smoke hung thick on the air, the darkness penetrated only by the glow emitted from pools of molten metal. The dragon's nest had been destroyed. The chains were gone, stones pulverized, treasure scattered, much of it melted.

Ben gaped, aghast.

"The king's name," Ben croaked. "I didn't expect—I mean, Charlez?"

His voice was so choked with smoke and dust he had to try again before it

came out clearly. "Charlez? Are you still alive?"

"Are we dead?" came the wavering reply.

"I'm not. Not yet, anyhow."

"Then I must be alive. Barely."

"That's good." Ben saw a small shape crawl out from behind a shielding boulder at the far end of the cavern. He shifted his position on the dragon, then gritted his teeth against the wave of pain that rolled through his body. He wasn't dead, but it felt as if he had been half burned to death.

"Uh, the dragon isn't moving. Is it dead?"

"Not a chance!" Charlez yelled. The bard climbed stiffly to his feet, one hand still clamped to his bloody forehead. "But what did you do? There is nothing about sitting on a dragon's head to tame it."

"I pounded it with my hammer. I was trying to kill it."

"Oh. I guess I didn't get the taming thing quite right. Never would have thought you were supposed to beat it over the head."

"That's good then, right?" Ben coughed weakly. "I forgot to ask before... but what do I do now? Should I climb down?"

"No! Not yet!" Charlez danced in place. "Don't let go until it has submitted to you!"

"How?"

"You must say to it in the dragon language, 'Do you swear upon your dragon's honor, and upon your nest, to serve me faithfully and fully as long as you live?'"

There was a length of silence.

"I don't know how to speak dragon," Ben said. "Can you do that?"

"No, the dragon only acknowledges the oath demand from the one who defeated it. Come on, it's not that hard to say." Charlez said. "Just repeat what I say."

The bard uttered some low guttural growls and deep grunts.

"Gosh, I never went to college to speak like a dragon. But...I'll try." Ben licked his dried and cracked lips, and tried to clear his raspy throat. "I don't know if I'll stutter in dragon speech."

Sucking in as much breath as he could manage, Ben attempted to growl and grunt in what he hoped was a close approximation of Charlez.

It was answered by a deep growling rumbling grumble from the dragon. Ben started. A part of him hadn't expected any reply at all.

"He, uh, says that he is Draz'Glassur one of the great ancient dragons, and he swears to fully and faithfully obey the almighty master who defeated him, as long as he shall live." Charlez sounded shrill again, as if he had difficulty believing what he was hearing, and seeing. "So, um, you can let go and get down now."

"Well." Ben paused. "I just hope I can get down."

For a bit, he wasn't sure he could even move. Then, mustering what little strength he had left in his battered body, he forced himself to let go of the dragon ear and crawl to the side of Draz'Glassur's head. He slid down the scaly jaw and landed on his feet. His knees promptly buckled and deposited him on the ground.

Freed of its rider, the dragon slowly lifted its head and turned to look at Ben. In that moment Ben hoped—with all of his heart—that Charlez had been right. Otherwise, he was dead and Jess was lost, along with all of York. He wished he had said a better goodbye to Jess. Large yellow eyes stared at him, and he stared back. Then a dark pink tongue, almost red, snaked out of the gigantic mouth and licked his front like a dog would lick its master.

Charlez started laughing hysterically. "You have a pet dragon! A pet dragon!" The laughter died away. "So—uh—tell the dragon that I'm your friend whom he must never, ever, eat, no matter what, promise upon his soul, amen."

"Okay. How do I say that?"

After further instructions in dragon speech, Ben passed on the command to Draz'Glassur who responded with a short rumble.

"Um, good. He promises. Very good. Well then, all is safe!" With that last, slightly uneasy declaration, Charlez stepped forward.

"By all the gold in Tarn, Ben, that is one big dragon. I can assure you, nobody has a dragon like yours." Charlez rubbed his hands together and gave a forced little chuckle. "And—ah—you're not going to die, are you?"

"I don't think so. Why?"

"You're...uh...kind of blackened." Charlez sounded alarmed.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Er—that you kind of look like somebody who should be dead."

Ben looked down at himself. He still felt a little dazed, but had collected himself enough to realize that he did look much the worse for his ride. He *was* utterly blackened with soot, and charred rags were all that remained of

his clothes. His face was smeared with blood from his mouth and nose, his body covered with cuts, scrapes, blisters, and burns. When he touched his head he found there was only a charred stubble where his hair had been. Beneath all the soot and ash, he hurt. He hurt everywhere—dull aches where stones had smashed him, sharp stabs of pain where he had been cut, or burned.

“I think nothing is broken,” he said, “but I feel like I was the anvil in Cendric’s forge.”

With an effort, he managed to climb to his feet. “We need to leave,” he said, his mind clearing enough for him to recall what had brought them to the dragon’s den.



## CHAPTER THIRTY

### VICTORY OR DEFEAT

When they exited the cave, Ben and Charlez discovered that early evening had arrived. The sun rested on the far horizon, and the air was rapidly cooling. The cold breeze felt soothing on Ben's burns, but the late hour made his heart constrict with fear.

"More time has passed than I thought," Charlez said, alarmed. "We're running late. We won't make it off the mountain before dark. There is no way York can hold out for another full night. We've failed."

"No, we haven't," Ben said stoutly.

"Yes, we have." Charlez groaned, and slumped down on a stone. "Beulah..."

"We can still get back in time."

"How can we possibly get back in time? We can't sprout wings and fly."

"But somebody else can." Ben's eyes rested on the dragon.

"The dragon?" Charlez looked uncertain.

"Why not?" Ben said.

"Of course! Why hadn't I thought of that! Just like in *Wings of Fury* where—but what about our horses?"

"We'll leave them, and come back later."

Ben boosted himself up, climbing the dragon's side. He settled into position at the base of the dragon's neck, just ahead of the wings. He looked down at Charlez, who was still staring up apprehensively, chewing his lip.

"It's easy. Climb aboard!" Ben called out encouragingly.

"I suppose. It *is* adventuresome, and it should be fun, but all of the sudden

I'm not so certain." Charlez climbed up behind Ben.

After some conferring with Charlez, Ben gave directions to Draz'Glassur.

Stepping from the cave, the dragon surged forward, flinging himself off the side of the mountain, wings unfurling.

Charlez screamed.

"Brace yourselves! We're going to crash!" he shouted, and closed his eyes.

Contrary to the bard's sudden conviction, the dragon wings caught the wind and they soared upward with a giddy rush that left their stomachs behind.

"Wheeeeeee!" Ben yelled, feeling some of his pain and weariness lift away as they circled up, higher and higher, the wind in their faces, the world opening around them. "I always wanted to fly!"

"Onward to York!" he said. "With all speed!"



The defenders' arrows were exhausted. When the goblins began to breach the walls Jess gave orders for the stockade to be put to the torch as a last delay of the assault. With the goblins forced to advance through the breaches between walls of flame, a few brave fighters were able to hold back the horde while the rest of the defenders retreated to the village.

Jess fought at the very front. The battle became pitched and desperate over the mounds of rubble. The burning stockade walls loomed close on either side, and the heat and smoke swirled around the combat. Ernie rushed here and there among the defenders, healing whenever one of them fell.

For another hour the defenses held.

As the evening shadows lengthened, exhaustion began to take its toll on the men. The battle had raged for hours without pause and still the goblins pressed their assault. The men couldn't fight forever. Finally, Jess saw they couldn't hold the breaches any longer.

"Every man makes his last stand here!" she shouted. "Let them take York over our dead bodies!"

Pulling her sword free from the last goblin she had killed, Jess took her stand in front of Ernie. The wizard had collapsed from exhaustion, utterly spent from hours of healing.

"This is the end," Jess said. "Ben, I'm sorry I didn't get to say goodbye. I'm

sorry for everything.” Then she lifted her sword to meet the next wave of goblins.

A roar loud as thunder beat down upon her and fire blossomed. Jess felt herself hurtling backward and for a moment her senses faded. When consciousness returned, she was still flying through the air, blackness all around her. Dimly below, she could hear screaming goblins.

*So this is how it is, she thought. I'm dead. It's the end and I'm flying away to wherever dead people go.*

“Jess, are you all right?” A concerned voice shouted from above. “Jess?”

“Ben?” She shrieked, her heart leaping into her throat. “Ben is that you?”

“It’s me. I was so afraid.” She heard his voice crack.

“And me!” Charlez shouted, gleefully. “And we’re going to win this battle tonight because Ben has a dragon!”

Twisting around, Jess could make out the dark shape of the dragon above her, the canopy of stars swirling through the sky. She was held firmly in the dragon’s grip. Across from her, she saw Ernie dangling, unconscious, from the dragon’s other paw. She couldn’t believe it, and yet she did. Somehow, Ben had done it!

The dragon swooped down coming to a surprisingly gentle landing in front of the inn. There he carefully set his two burdens on the ground.

“Stay here!” Ben yelled. “I’m going to rescue the others. I’ll be back!”

“Ben!” she shouted back. “I love you!”

“I know!” he called back.

In a blast of wind the dragon leaped back into the air.



Draz’Glassur swooped down again, roaring, scattering goblins with his claws and tail. Soaring back into the night sky, the dragon circled around with fire spewing from his mouth, turning another large swathe of goblins into greasy fireballs.

“Run, goblins, run!” Charlez shouted. “You doom has come! The end is at hand! The night of great slaughter! We’re going to kill them all, right Ben?”

“Eventually,” Ben said. “But not right away. Once they’re retreating I want to stop and check on the survivors from York. Then we can hunt goblins all night.”

“That’s a good idea. I must make sure Beulah is safe, and that she knows I am all right.”

Ben swung Draz’Glassur in a wide circle around York, spreading a great swath of fire on every side. It took only minutes for the entire goblin horde to break in retreat.

“Haha!” Charlez crowed, nearly jumping for joy and almost falling off the dragon in the process. “We’ve won! It’s the end. Victory!”

“Wait! What is that?” Ben pointed. It felt as if his heart had stopped.

Draz’Glassur was making the final approach to land at the inn again, and there below them stood one goblin—The greatest goblin of all. In one hand he held a mighty ax. In the other he held Jess by her throat.

“What are you going to do, little man?” Uug-lukk leered up at them, his tongue lolling. “She fought well—but not well enough. Take care with that dragon. If you try to kill me, she goes first!”

With a short command Ben brought Draz’Glassur in to land, settling down a short distance away on the street. Inside, he felt as if he were about to go to pieces, but he had to be strong. He had to keep his thoughts together. He had to be ready. Nothing mattered except that Jess remained alive.

“Attack, Ben!” Jess shouted. “Don’t let him stop you! Don’t let him escape! He’ll kill me any—” her words died in a strangled choke as Uug-lukk’s black fingers squeezed tight around her slim throat.

Uug-lukk laughed, a terrible laugh, and stretched his arms wide. Hanging across his front was the sheathed Goblin Terror.

Ben didn’t move. “Your battle has taken a bad turn, Goblin. How does defeat taste?”

“I love the taste in my mouth,” Uug-lukk sneered, then licked his slobbering tongue up the side of Jess’s face. “But is this the taste of your victory, or your defeat? Make a move, little man, I have nothing to lose.”

The silence lengthened, filled only by the powerful rasping breath of Draz’Glassur.

Ben rose up from his seat on the dragon and spoke. “I am Duke of York. Those are my people, Uug-lukk. I won’t leave. What do you propose?”

“Just so,” Uug-lukk sniggered. “You don’t trust me, and I don’t trust you. If I release the little lady, you’ll send your dragon to devour me. If you depart, I’ll slaughter the wench anyhow. Yes, we both know how it works.”

Uug-lukk laughed again, slobbering over his lips.



“So this is how it must be: One of us dies. You against me—the two true warriors in this fight. Send your dragon away, and then you and I can fight, and all will see who is the better. If I win, all the people are mine. If you win —” Uug-lukk tapped the hilt of Goblin Terror, the sheathed sword dangling from his front, a gleaming reminder. “—Then victory will surely be yours.”

Jess shook her head frantically, but Uug-lukk squeezed tighter and she went limp, her eyes rolling back in her head. Ben’s jaw knotted, his eyes blazing.

“What is your choice, little man?” Uug-lukk taunted.

Ben swung his leg over the side of Draz’Glassur, but Charlez grabbed his foot.

“What are you doing?” the bard demanded.

“Killing him,” Ben snarled.

“That’s madness! He’s bigger than you—and he has that ax. We must think of some other way.”

“There is no other way,” Ben said. “I must save Jess. You take Draz’Glassur out to kill the rest of the goblins.”

“No.” Charlez looked at Ben, then Uug-lukk. “I’m not leaving you. Send Draz’Glassur back out alone.”

“If you’re going to say, do this for me: Uug-lukk will drop Jess when I attack. Protect her.”

“With my life, Ben. But be careful—you’re already hurt.”

“Don’t worry about me. Uug-lukk doesn’t know what mistake he made touching Jess.”

The two of them climbed down from Draz’Glassur.

Ben turned to Draz’Glassur. In the dragon language he told him to fly away and search for other goblins, to kill them until the sun had reached its peak in the sky, and then come back and kill any that remained here. Whether he succeeded in rescuing Jess or not, Ben was determined that Uug-lukk’s horde would never be a threat again.

With a grunt of acknowledgment, Draz’Glassur lifted his wings and leaped into the air. The dragon quickly disappeared from sight.

“Now, little fool, you will learn why no one faces the mighty Uug-lukk and lives,” the goblin chieftain snarled.

Ben threw his hammer faster than he had ever thrown one before, faster than Uug-lukk could move. The hammer caught the goblin chieftain right in

his middle, squarely across the scabbard of Goblin Terror. The force of the blow hurtled Uug-lukk backward, Jess flying from his grasp as the goblin smashed into the stone wall of the inn. Jess rolled across the ground, slack as an old dish rag. Ben rushed for the goblin chieftain, furious enough to kill with his bare hands.

Uug-lukk recovered quickly, leaping to his feet and bringing his ax up for a deadly blow.

Ben met Uug-lukk and caught the shaft of the ax as it came down, halting the stroke midway. Uug-lukk's eyes bulged, stunned to discover himself checked. Ben tried to pull the ax free, but found it held fast. Uug-lukk tried to wrench it free, and found he couldn't. They grappled, wrestling back and forth with the ax between them.

"You have no chance," Uug-lukk rasped. "Your feeble allies have fallen, and so will you. My horde will rise again."

"You hurt Jess, and for that I'll kill you," Ben stuttered in angry reply.

Uug-lukk snarled and began lunging at Ben, teeth snapping. Ben ducked and dodged the slobbering jaws as best he could while still holding onto the ax, but he knew he couldn't escape the teeth forever. He would end up headless, unless he did something.

Unable to let go of the ax with either hand, he did the only thing he could. The next time Uug-lukk lunged, teeth snapping in a spray of spittle, Ben latched onto the goblin's hairy, greasy, bulbous, nose with his own teeth and bit down hard. Uug-lukk squealed like a pig and tried to shake free, but found himself held fast.

It was a stalemate, but one Ben knew he couldn't maintain forever. He was tired, and weakened from the wounds he suffered taming Draz'Glassur. His strength would fail before the giant goblin's and that would surely end the battle. He fought against Uug-lukk with all the strength he could muster, but Uug-lukk fought back with an equal fury, and the two of them remained unable to overcome the other, shaking and sweating with their efforts.

That likely would have been the end for him except Charlez—grasping the situation, and seeing their doom—abandoned Jess, and all sense of self-preservation. Drawing his rapier, he rushed toward Uug-lukk shouting, "Let go, you cankerous sore! Let go!"

Locked in battle, the goblin chieftain didn't so much as hear him.

"Take that, you deranged psychotic cretin!" Charlez flung himself onto

Uug-lukk, stabbing. The rapier struck the goblin's armor and the blade promptly snapping in half.

That got the goblin's attention.

Uug-lukk released his ax with one hand and wrapped his clawed grip around the bard's throat, hoisting the helpless man off his feet.

"No!" Charlez tried to pry the fingers from his neck. "I'm dead! I—"

In the moment of Uug-lukk's distraction Ben saw his chance. Releasing the goblin's ax, he ripped Goblin Terror from its scabbard and plunged the blade into the goblin chieftain.

The three of them went crashing down.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

### AFTER

**N**obody complained about Ben ever again. You just don't complain about someone who has a pet dragon. Nobody had any objection to him marrying Jess either. And certainly nobody had any problem with Ben as the future king. Everyone swore they never had thought differently.

A pet dragon can smooth over many difficulties.

The king and queen begged for Ben's forgiveness for stealing his sword, and said it was all Androbobel's fault. Ben didn't believe the last was entirely true, but he kindly forgave them, though Jess said maybe they should have groveled a little longer. Somewhere in the bustle of the day Androbobel slipped away and left York, never to be seen again. Nobody missed him, and it wasn't until the next morning that anyone even realized he was gone.

The court—while not able to slip away—was also in a hurry to return to Galdoron and the comfort of refined living. But as much as the lords and ladies wished to hurry, they would not be leaving for a week. Jess was determined to have her wedding in York, as immediately as possible. The queen protested, but quickly gave way, and nobody else was much inclined to argue. Her groom, after all, had a pet dragon.

Everyone spent the next week cleaning York, tearing down the remains of the stockade, removing rubble, and preparing the village for the wedding. Everyone, that is, except Ernie, who slipped out of York early in the week without telling anyone where he was going. He didn't return until the day before the wedding. The wizard's absence put Jess in a fit, because she had

planned on Ernie—who was a phenomenal tailor—making the wedding garments. But when he returned and promised to have everything made by the wedding day, Jess was satisfied.

On that wedding morning the sun rose over York, shining down on a village that stood neat and fresh. All the rubble had been removed and the remaining village houses cleaned and repaired until they nearly shone. Everywhere the forest surrounding York was touched with the first brilliant fiery splashes of red, orange, and yellow. Autumn was coming, and the sky stretched overhead, clear and blue, promising a perfect day for the perfect wedding.

A crowd began to gather early in the street, people milling about, talking and waiting for Ben and Jess to make their appearance. Drasel, Josline, and many others told rather exaggerated stories to members of the court about how well they knew Ben, and what good friends they were with the hero of the day.

Then someone cried out, “Look! They’re coming!” and the crowd began to part.

It was an odd party. First came Jemima and Abern, who were supposed to lead with stately dignity as the procession went down the street. Both were supposed to have come mounted, as the rest of the party, but they had refused—Jemima having never been taught, and Abern preferring his own two feet. Beyond insisting on walking, Jemima, for her part, proceeded down the street with proper dignity, beaming at everyone. Abern, however, had taken leave of his marching directions and was strutting this way and that in front of the people, prancing around like some bantam rooster and crowing, “That’s my son there. That’s my son, Ben,” to anyone and everyone. He still hadn’t quite finished savoring the fact that Ben was Duke of York, and Androbobel a quickly fading memory. The demise of the latter was something he still giggled over when in bed at night.

Next came the most prominent members of the court, dressed in their finery and pomp. After them followed Ernie, hauling his sack and waving wildly at the crowd, indiscriminately blowing kisses at everyone. Charlez rode tall beside him, looking brave and dashing. They were followed by the king and queen, who sat in stately dignity and tried their best to appear as if they were enjoying the procession.

Last came Ben and Jess. Ben rode on Ned and Jess on Mankiller. Seeing

them, the crowd began to cheer.

Ben wore a black jacket worked with gold at the cuffs and collar, and matching black pants. Jess had given Ernie careful instructions for the tailoring of his garments. With Goblin Terror hanging grandly at his side Ben looked nearly fit to be a prince—except nobody could mistake the slightly scruffy, fidgeting, nose-picking man riding on a very plain plow horse for a prince. But then, nobody could mistake him for anyone but Ben, either.

Jess rode beside him, Mankiller high-stepping, and looked every inch the princess. She wore a beautiful green dress and carried a bouquet of flowers in her hands. A garland of the first autumn leaves crowned her long flowing hair. She smiled at everyone, but most of all at Ben.

Ben thought she looked radiant, more beautiful than anything he had ever seen. If he had been aware of the screaming and cheering crowd he would have closed his eyes from the embarrassment, as he had done not so very long ago in a great parade through the streets of Galdoron. But Ben didn't notice the crowd, or hear their shouting. Jess was there in front of him, like a beautiful dream. He couldn't stop looking at her, and she was all he saw or heard.

"Ben, be careful where you're going," Jess said, trying very hard not to laugh. "You might ride into a wall or something."

"I suppose," he said, rather absently, not correcting his course and still watching her with a very goofy grin on his face. Ned wasn't a parade horse who knew to follow the path without direction, and with Ben's distracted lack of guidance Ned was quite happy to wander off into the watching crowd, which he was in the process of doing.

"Come on." Jess took hold of Ned's bridle, now laughing in spite of her best efforts. "We're almost there."

The procession marched to the center of York. There a great platform had been built in the square, where the warning bell had once stood, and in the middle of the stage was arbor, festooned with every type of flower. The wedding party dismounted their horses and took to the stage as the watching crowd gathered round.

The wedding went wonderfully. Even though Ben stumbled over his lines so it came out like he was burying Paul Wessel everyone knew he was really marrying Mol'Jessel. By the end there were tears in a few eyes—though Ernie and Charlez would have denied it.

Afterward, there was much feasting. Ernie in particular indulged himself.

“So where did you run off to this week?” Jess asked Ernie over dessert. “You gave me quite a fright there, disappearing when I needed you to make the wedding clothes.”

“The Quilter’s Guild Championship was this week, and I just had to be there.” Ernie dabbed at his lips. “I need to be seen by my peers, you know.”

“I suppose you deserved the break—but you should have told us where you were going,” Jess admonished. “So how was the championship?”

“Good. Very good.” Ernie served himself another large helping of the apple pie with cream topping. “A little unexpected.” The wizard paused, sucking some cream from his finger.

“You actually finished your quilt?” Jess glanced at the massive sack propped against the back of Ernie’s chair. She knew he hadn’t rid himself of it.

“Sort of.” Ernie spoke through a mouthful of pie, the cream dribbling down his beard.

“And you won first place?” Ben said, remembering Ernie’s greatest desire.

“Yes and no.” The pie finished in several large mouthfuls, Ernie proceeded to licking his plate, talking while he worked. “The brilliant vision contained with my quilt could go on forever, but after having repaired all the damage done it—” he gave Ben a slightly reproving glance, “—I realized there is a time for statements of finality, and the championship was very close, so I just finished off the edges where they were and submitted it in all of its raw, emotional glory.”

Ernie wiped the sticky mess of his beard on the back of his sleeve, looking reflective. “I was sure I would win first place in quilting, but instead I won first place in Impressionistic Abstract Art Sculpture. Which is okay—everyone was saying how wonderful and talented I was, how my creation so exquisitely captured the ambiguity, uncertainty, and sublime tragedy of the human condition, and how much they wished they could be like me with the greatness of my skill, and the depth of my insight.”

“Just what you wanted.” Jess grinned in spite of herself.

“Exactly.” Ernie rubbed his bloated stomach, seeming quite content. “I’m a fulfilled man now. The wizard council is going to be so sorry they kicked me out. Just think—the council of wizards kicked out the winner of Impressionistic Abstract Art Sculpture! They’ll never live down the shame

and humiliation.”

“No doubt,” Jess said, and though her eyes danced with a sarcastic observation she said no more.

“Anyhow, here I am.” Ernie cleared his throat and stood, moving to his sack. “I mean, as the brilliant matchmaker who brought you two together and nourished the first buds of romance and fanned the flames of love until it grew and became what it is today—well, I just had to make sure I gave you a wedding present.”

“A present?” Jess looked at the sack with some foreboding.

“Really, Ernie, you shouldn’t have,” Ben said.

“No, no, I insist,” Ernie said grandly. “Having finished it, I wanted to see it go to someone who could really appreciate it—cherish it forever, and pass it on to their children. And I thought, who better than my own little happy couple?”

Straining mightily, Ernie hauled the vast heap of his quilt out of the sack and staggered over to Jess, depositing the multi-colored and mismatched concoction of cloth onto her lap, completely burying her under the mountain of fabric.

“Er...thanks, Ernie,” Jess said. “You’re sure you don’t want to keep it?”

“No. I’ve thought long and hard about it. There comes a time when a man must move on. Use it as the coverlet for your bed, or hang it on your wall where it can be admired by everyone. Uh—there might be a few mice living in it at the moment, so just be careful. Anyhow, I’m ready to start something new and daring. Toward that goal I think I’ll take up knitting socks.”

“Socks?” Ben said.

“Yes, I can just see it now.” Ernie tilted his head to one side, as if beholding some private vision. “Great socks, powerful socks, meaningful socks! Socks like you never dreamed or imagined. Socks that a king would *beg* to wear!”

“That’s nice.” Jess extracted herself from the heap that was the quilt, and gave Ben a look. The quilt was large enough for three beds, and was closer to being a full sized room rug. He was sure she didn’t care for the mention of mice.

“I—I’m sure we’ll get lots of use out of it,” Ben said. He didn’t know what they were going to do with it, but he was surprised, and touched, that Ernie had given them his most prized possession.



After the feasting, it was time for the dancing. Everyone danced, except Ben. Ben gave spin-a-rounds to all the little boys and girls—and Jess, who asked for several after her food had settled. She didn't care what anybody thought.

The celebration went on until late in the night.



The sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon when Ben, Jess, and Ernie slipped out of York, flying away on Draz'Glassur. Charlez was still in bed, sleeping and dreaming of his future with Beulah. Ned and Mankiller were left with Abern and Jemima. The village was quiet and still as it shrank below, the dragon quickly lifting them into the sky. Jess rode in front, Ben behind her, his arms wrapped around her waist. Ernie filled the last position, looking slightly ill.

"But I still don't understand," Ben said. "Why are we doing this?"

"Because we're eloping," Jess said.

"My Ma says gentlemen don't elope." Ben glanced back at York, which was quickly growing smaller behind them. "Besides, how can we elope? We were married yesterday."

"We're eloping from everything else. From all of the pomp. From the return to the court—everything."

"Oh." That sounded good to Ben. "But we'll have to go back, eventually."

"No we won't," Jess said.

"But you're the princess, and someday you'll be the queen. And I'll have to be—"

"Not anymore. You see, Ben, I now know something I should have known a long time ago. I don't want to be queen, and I don't want you to be king. I've abdicated. I'm not a princess anymore. I left a letter for my Ma and Da to find. I told them everything."

"But why—"

"Because there are some things more important than being a king or queen. Because I love you too much for you to be king."

Ben looked puzzled. "The court accepted me. Everyone wanted me to be king, Jess. You got what you wanted. I would have been king for you."

"They wanted you to be king because you have a pet dragon. They wanted

you to be king because they thought a king with a dragon would make them famous, and important. They didn't want you as king because you were *you*. And that is what I want more than you being king."

"What?" Ben looked at her, confused.

"I want you to be you, and me to be me. Only then will we be happy."

"Okay." Held her close. "But what about the kingdom?"

Jess shrugged. "They'll find someone. I told them they could adopt Charlez, if they wanted. Make him the next king. Or they could get one of my nasty cousins. There is always someone willing to be king. We defeated Rimmah, and we saved the kingdom from Uug-lukk. We can be proud of that, Ben. And that is enough."

"Are you happy, Jess?"

"Yes," she said.

"I'm glad," he said. He was more than glad—He felt like a great burden had been lifted from his shoulders, and he could fly away, soaring even higher than Draz'Glassur now took them, right up to the stars. He and Jess were going to live together, forever, and he didn't have to be king.

After awhile he said, "You still haven't told me where we're going. You just told me to command Draz'Glassur to fly west."

"You'll see." She gave him a little smile. "I'm surprised you haven't already guessed."

They flew high and fast and Ben wasn't sure how many hundreds of miles passed beneath them. It was getting on toward noon when Jess told him to command the dragon to descend for landing. Ben saw greenery, the flash of something bright, and what he thought was water, but he couldn't make any sense of it until they had landed.

Once they landed he saw they were a short distance from the beach. In the distance sat a small village, quaint and peaceful. Everyone climbed down. The golden sand spread out before them and the cool blue water rolled in from the horizon. The air blew warm and pleasant, wafting on a soft breeze.

Ernie stood open-mouthed.

"The beach?" Ben said.

"Yep." Jess laughed. "Ernie, here is your beach vacation. You deserve it."

"The beach!" Ernie squealed like a little child and dashed off down toward the water's edge. "I've finally arrived, and it's everything I've dreamed. Bliss has come!"

“Good bye, Ernie!” Jess called after him, laughing in delight. “We’ll be back for you in two weeks!”

“Back for him?” Ben looked puzzled again.

“You didn’t think we’d take him with us, did you? I’m not going to have a whining wizard on my honeymoon. We’ve some more flying to do.”

Jess told him to have Draz’Glassur fly southward along the coast until a small island out at sea came into sight. There they landed on a beach that spread far and wide. It was deserted, the sand so pure and white it looked almost like snow.

“It’s beautiful, Jess,” Ben said.

“It is,” she agreed.

“You knew of this place?”

“Yes,” she said. “When I was a little girl my father took me on a tour of the coast lands. Before we headed back to Galdoron we stopped at this island. There is a small town on the other side where we can go for food and a place to stay. Every day I slipped away from my nurse and explored the island, and on the morning we were going to leave I found this place. I couldn’t stay long, but I promised myself that if I every got married I would bring my husband back here and we could explore it together.”

Ben turned around in a full circle, his eyes shining.

“Don’t just stand there.” She smiled, and took his hand. “There is so much more I want to show you!”

And so they wandered across the sand and through the waves, laughing and talking, marveling at the life they would share together, hand in hand.





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rundy 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 [creative-vapors.com](http://creative-vapors.com).