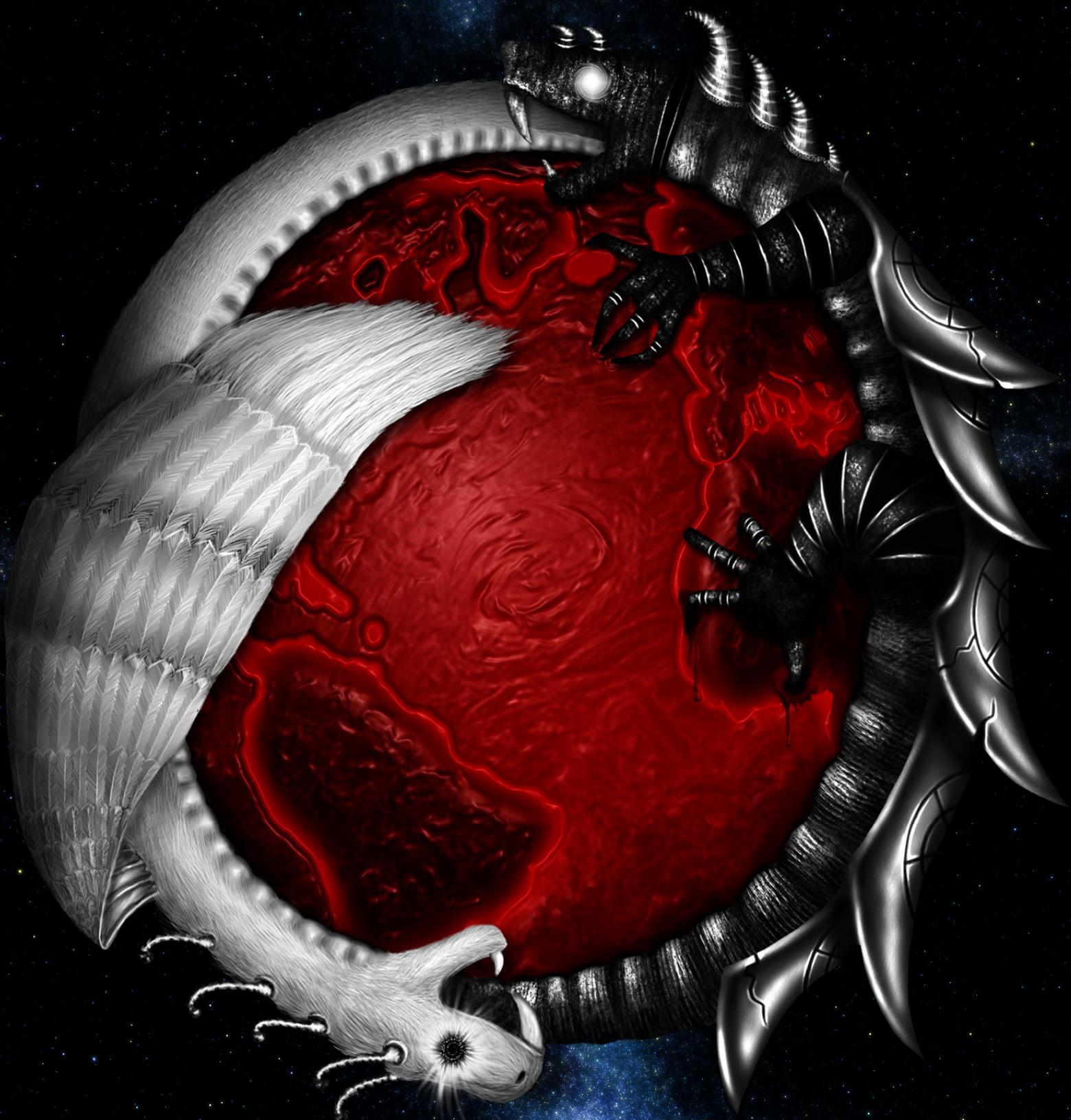


Quentin Oakwood



Lost in Glory

# LOST IN GLORY

by

Quentin Oakwood

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Dawn broke over the goblin village, but no cockerel was crowing this morning. It was a very bad omen. It meant that one of the goblins had eaten the cockerel. Again.

The goblins woke up early anyway. They didn't like to sleep late. They liked to eat early.

"I love the smell of roasted squirrel in the morning," one of the goblins said.

"Silly youngster, burning a perfectly good squirrel!" an elderly goblin complained.

"Raw squirrel is disgusting! How can you eat it like that, grandpa?"

The older goblin examined his squirrel carcass. "I can't. Not flat enough! Now, where was my club...?" He wandered away, muttering to himself and looking for some handy squirrel-flattening tool.

The goblins who weren't busy with activities that involved today's food were gathered around the latrine to deal with yesterday's food. There was quite a queue there.

"Who used up all the plantago leaves?!" a shout came from the inside.

"Use poison ivy!" a goblin awaiting his turn replied.

"You can take your poison ivy and stick it where the moon never peeks! Or I'll do it myself when I come out!"

"Kitty! Here kitty kitty kitty! Come here, my little furry breakfast!" a sleepy goblin called, while chasing a small ginger cat. The cat apparently didn't want to become a little furry breakfast. It skilfully raced between the wooden shacks. The goblin followed it a bit less skilfully, stumbling on everything in his path. Desperation for a tasty meowing meal kept him going. The pursuit ended when the cat jumped over a garbage pit. The goblin tried to follow, but he fumbled his jump and fell into a heap of rubbish.

Other goblins gathered around to watch. They rarely had any entertainment this early in the morning. A goblin covered with food scraps and various refuse wasn't the funniest thing ever, but still pretty amusing. Especially because he couldn't get out of the pit. Time and again he slid back into the garbage, spitting and cursing and begging for help. That only caused more laughter. Unfortunately the amusement was cut short by a voice coming from the watchtower. "Human! Danger! Human alert!"

The goblins sprang to attention. They dropped whatever they were doing and scrambled for their weapons. The garbage goblin was quickly pulled out. Human alert was no joke. Goblin chief Blahterk was already climbing the tower. "Where?" he asked. The watchgoblin pointed. Indeed, a human was approaching. The chief scratched his head. "Only one?"

"Well, you know, I used a singular noun, therefore I most certainly meant..."

"Shut up!" The chief cut the elaborate explanation short by hitting the watchgoblin on the head.

"Ow!" the goblin complained, but Blahterk ignored him. He turned his full attention to the approaching human. Something was wrong. A human, out here, in the middle of nowhere? It

was most unusual. Humans didn't wander out here as a rule, with crazed old hermits being the exception. This one didn't qualify. Possibly crazed, probably not old, definitely not a hermit. Hermits didn't carry around swords and shields. Nor did they wear full plate armour. Knights, on the other hand, did.

A lone knight. With just his weapon and armour. No sack, no bag, nothing to keep provisions in. No way he could have got here like this. He would have perished on the way, surely. So many interesting ways to die in the wastelands... Thirst, hunger and heat were the most common, but not by any means the only ones. There were also scorpions, snakes, spiders, skunks and sloths. And other dangerous creatures, not necessarily sponsored by the letter S. Not to mention inanimate surprises like quicksands, miniature tornadoes, long-forgotten-but-still-working bear traps, and exploding treasure chests that someone inconveniently had left behind.

No. One does not simply walk into the Desolated Wastelands. One could simply ride into the Desolated Wastelands though. A mount would vastly increase travel speed, thus improving chances of survival. The knight surely had a horse. He just... left it somewhere. Somewhere quite far away, cause there was none in sight. Blahterk licked his lips. He might go look for it later. It was a long time since he had eaten a decent horse.

The knight was quite menacing. Knights usually were. Although a single knight couldn't possibly be a threat to a village with a few dozens of goblin warriors inside, it was better not to risk.

"Arm yourselves! Goblin the palisade! Bowgoblins, prepare to fire!"

Orders weren't really necessary. Every goblin knew what to do in case of a human alert. They were armed and ready. Their weaponry was crude: rusty swords, bent spears, bows that were basically pieces of wood with a string attached. Armour was no better. No goblin had a full suit. Most had just a piece or two. Damaged, dented, often too big. Whatever they had scavenged. One of the goblins brought the chief's sword. It was the only decent one in the village. 'Decent' meaning rust-free in this case.

The knight stopped and decided to announce his intentions. "Hear me, goblins, unholy creatures! I am here to eradicate you! Prepare to die, ugly green scum!"

The goblins just laughed. Not even the chieftain took this seriously, much as he tried. "Hey! Who are you calling 'green!'?" he shouted back. His own skin colour was much closer to brown.

"Yeah!" echoed Bluars, who was somewhat reddish.

"Violet forever!" cried the intensely violet Fuchsius.

"Shut up, you!" the chief quieted him.

"What?! Do you know how well can I hide in... in... in violet flowers?"

The knight didn't seem to pay any attention to the goblins' shouts. "Your warriors will perish and your walls will fall. Not a stone will be left standing!"

"Because everything is wooden here, you dolt!" Blahterk replied.

The human didn't seem to even acknowledge the response. Apparently he wasn't interested in a dialogue. A monologue was more like his thing. "I will kill each and every one of you! I will slaughter you like the vermin you are! Your foul presence will be removed from the surface of the earth!"

"All right," Blahterk called to his goblins, "which one of you copulated with his mother?" Disgusted groans were the only answer he got. Jokes about intercourses with female humans weren't funny. They were revolting. No self-respecting goblin would do that. Pinkish skin colour, a distinct lack of fangs, annoying, high-pitched voices... Hideous, simply hideous.

"I did! With his father!" shouted Rolfzor, the village jokester. This even more disgusting joke resulted in clods of dirt being thrown at him. "Knock it off, you homospeciophobes!"

In the meantime, the knight continued shouting his threats. "I will burn your wretched village to the ground! And sprinkle what remains with salt! And pepper! And cinnamon, whatever that is! So shall do I, paladin Arthaxiom the Great, Deliverer of Light, Slayer of Evil and Wicked, Guardian of the Ancient Secret of the Holy Mysterious Summoning of the Mythical Archpegasus, Apostle of the Rainbow Sturgeon, Holder of the Hidden Antique Malodorous Anvil of Ancient Knowledge..."

The Hidden Antique Malodorous Anvil of Ancient Knowledge was the straw that broke the chieftain's patience. This man was hostile and clearly insane. Goblins knew only one cure for insanity. "Fire!", he ordered.

"...Thirty-ninth Warrior of the Joyous Beige Dragon, Crushing Flame from the Eerie Enchanted Eastern Island..."

Arrows flew towards the paladin. Most of them completely missed. A few struck his armour, but did no damage. "Keep firing!" the chieftain screamed, for no reason really, because the goblins didn't stop. Neither did they improve their aim. Their bows were primitive, but they usually were quite good with them. Not this time. It was some of the most awful shooting this village had ever seen. One goblin even managed to shoot himself in the feet. Both at once.

"...Turquoise Spearman of Heavens, Sword of Justice in the Gloom of Uncertainty!" Arthaxiom finished his litany. Arrows were still falling around him, but he completely ignored them. "Hear this, evil goblin village! I challenge you to a duel!"

"You challenge the entire village?!" the chief asked, somewhat shocked. He didn't know much about duelling, but he was quite sure it didn't work like that.

"Yes." This was the first time that the paladin acknowledged anything that was said or done to him.

"Uhhh..." Blahterk hesitated. "We don't accept!"

"That is because you are evil, wretched, cowardly and pitiful creatures! I will slay you anyway!"

"It was worth a try," Blahterk said to nobody in particular.

The paladin was heading straight for the gate. He wasn't in a hurry. His speed was suitable for a nice walk in a park, not for charging towards a fortified settlement in a hail of arrows. It

didn't matter. The goblins were unable to cause him any harm. Quite a few of them managed to injure themselves instead.

Blahterk with some sort of morbid curiosity watched his bowgoblins. One of them just lost a finger. It was quite a feat. The chieftain never before had seen anyone lose a finger to a piece of string. He turned away. He needed to keep his eyes on the approaching enemy. Also, he didn't really need to see another goblin eat the cut-off finger. Goblins didn't like to waste anything, but that was going a bit too far.

Only now the chief could have a good look at Arthaxiom. He was rather intimidating. About a head taller than any human he had ever seen. A head taller than most humans meant two heads taller than most goblins, because goblins were vertically-challenged a bit. He was appropriately well-built too. At least the size of his armour indicated so. No single goblin would stand a chance in a fight against this giant. Fortunately, it wasn't going to be a single combat. The chief smiled. His goblins may have forgotten how to shoot, but surely they didn't forget how to swarm and stab a human. He almost pitied that poor sturgeon-worshipper. The paladin wouldn't be the first to try to scale the palisade. He also wouldn't be the first to get killed during his climb or shortly thereafter. This village would not fall easily.

Blahterk was quite proud of his village. It was strategically placed in the middle of nowhere. There were no forests nearby, no rivers, no anything. Just wasteland. Seemingly it was the worst place ever for a settlement. Yet somehow it thrived. The goblins even managed to get themselves some nice juicy small woodland furry animals to eat. They didn't know where did they come from, but they didn't care. A goblin doesn't look a gift squirrel in the mouth. A gift squirrel goes into a goblin's mouth instead.

The village itself contained about twenty huts. Each one housed a few goblin warriors. No females, no younglings. They lived somewhere else. Probably. The goblins weren't sure about the details, but it had to be working out somehow. Or else there would be no goblins at all.

Apart from the huts, there was also a catsty for cat breeding, a latrine and a garbage pit. The village was surrounded by a stout wooden palisade about thirty feet high, adorned with skulls of slain enemies. Mostly squirrels. With several dozens of goblin warriors ready to defend, there was absolutely no chance of a lone knight getting inside the settlement.

The entrance was guarded by a nice, sturdy gate. It was supposed to allow the goblins to enter and leave at will, and to keep unwelcome guests outside. Like maniac paladins, for example. It was a really good gate. Blahterk felt that one would need some sort of a battering ram to break through. Therefore he was pretty surprised to see the paladin attack it with his sword. He was even more surprised when it broke to pieces and fell inside after just two strikes. Other goblins also were surprised, but none as much as one unfortunate soul who for some reason was standing just behind the gate and got knocked down by falling debris.

"It shouldn't have done that!" the goblin chief exclaimed.

"You're a bad, bad gate," the crushed goblin said weakly. These weren't the best last words ever. Arthaxiom the paladin didn't care. He killed the goblin before he managed to get up.

"Attack! Swarm him!" Blahterk shouted and the melee began.

It was a weird battle. The paladin shouldn't have stood a chance against that many opponents. Had they attacked him all at once, like they were commanded, the human would have fallen.

They didn't. Only two of the goblins stepped forward to engage. The rest stood back. They seemed uncertain of what they were supposed to do and settled on running around pointlessly, shouting obscenities and making faces.

The two goblins who decided to fight also had some problems with their memory. They completely forgot that activities like "parrying" or "dodging" are quite useful in combat. As a result of that they got promptly decapitated. When they fell, another goblin charged at the paladin with his spear held high, roaring a battle cry. Arthaxiom gracefully sidestepped the charge and tripped the speargoblin, who in an astonishing feat of acrobatics managed to impale himself on his own weapon.

Blahterk couldn't believe his own eyes. His goblins were losing the battle despite superior numbers. "Rush him! Fight, you idiots!" he screamed as another lone attacker was cut in half. In addition, just before getting separated in two, the hapless goblin randomly and dramatically threw away his sword. It hit another goblin in the throat, killing him on the spot. These unbelievable feats of ineptitude and bad luck rendered the chieftain speechless and motionless. It had to be a dream. It had to be! They couldn't have been getting slaughtered by a single human!

They couldn't, but they did anyway. Arthaxiom was effortlessly decimating the goblins. It wasn't a display of master swordsmanship. He was simply standing there and killing them as they approached one after another, while the rest was waiting for their turn to die. Just like sheep. Sick, elderly sheep.

Only when a severed goblin head landed directly in front of him did Blahterk come out of his shock. He unleashed a war cry and ran towards the paladin. One of his goblins tackled him before he even got near.

"Chief, you cannot fight him!", the goblin cried.

"Get off me, you flea-ridden moron!" Blahterk elbowed him in the head. The goblin didn't let go.

"No! I must protect you!"

While Blahterk tried to free himself from his overzealous follower, the remaining goblins continued their struggle. It looked more like headless chickens running around than an organized attempt to defend the village. Especially that some of the goblins ended up headless. The rest of them died in other spectacular or comical ways. Finally there were no more warriors. Only then the protective goblin let go of his chieftain and ran towards Arthaxiom with a blood-curdling scream. Unfortunately, he tripped over his own legs and fell down. The paladin ended the goblin's life with a powerful kick. Blahterk just sighed.

"Watch, wretched creature, as your cult of evil falls!" Arthaxiom said to Blahterk.

"It was a goblin village, you dolt!" the goblin chief replied.

"Good triumphed over evil once again."

"You slaughtered everyone!"

"I did."

"You... you brainless piece of garbage!"

"Your puny insults do not impress me, bug-ridden spreader of disease! I will kill you, I will extinguish your species, and all related species too! And the good people will erect a statue in remembrance of my Heroism, and yearly festivities will be held in my honour, and there will be feasting and singing..."

"Die, you bastard! Die!" Blahterk was fully aware that he has a better chance to win a dwarfspotting contest against a two-headed giraffe than to defeat this opponent, but he was going to try anyway. And he was going to use his skull for a chamber pot should he succeed. It was the least he could do for his fallen comrades.

"I shall not die," Arthaxiom replied. The goblin's wild slashes were easily caught on the paladin's shield. "Nor am I..."

"Shut up!" Blahterk realised he was accomplishing nothing and retreated a few steps. "Do you have to talk so much?!"

"Yes. This is an epic duel between good and evil! Between right and wrong! Between day and night! Between heaven and hell! Between unicorn and..." The paladin didn't get to say what is the opposite of unicorn, because his opponent attacked again. Unfortunately, putting the end to the monologue was the only thing that Blahterk achieved. Once again he saw he was getting nowhere and disengaged.

"Could you please allow me to finish my Heroic speech, you sack of unholy filth, before I slay you?" the paladin asked.

"No!" If the best he could do was to annoy his opponent, he was going to annoy him as much as possible. He redoubled his efforts to get through his opponent's defence. That exhausted the Arthaxiom's patience. He smacked the goblin with his shield and sent him flying.

"See, wretched whelp of a writhing wraith, dirt is the last thing you taste before your demise!"

"I fell on my back! Are you blind?!" Blahterk quickly got up. He had dropped his sword when he fell, but it didn't do him any good anyway. He needed something better, and fast.

"Running away like a duck from a broken carriage, are you?!" the paladin called after him, displaying an inability to come up with a sensible metaphor. "You can run, but you cannot hide from my holy wrath!" But the goblin didn't intend to run away. He ran to grab a wooden pole from the shattered gate. It was a crude, unwieldy weapon, but it was longer than the paladin's sword.

"Puny goblin! If you think you will defeat me with a piece of wood..." CLANG! Blahterk didn't ponder the matter. Instead he decided to test it in practice. With complete disregard to his own safety, he ran towards the human and hit him on the head with the pole as hard as he could. Surprised Arthaxiom didn't raise his shield in time. His helmet protected him, but the force of the strike made him stagger. He made a step back and prepared to block the next strike. "You are out of luck, little worm! My sturdy shield... AAARGH!" This time the paladin was ready to protect his head, but Blahterk struck low. Arthaxiom's leg failed him and he fell on one knee.

The goblin knew now was his chance. His opponent was stunned and vulnerable. This might not happen again. He gathered all his strength and struck from over his head.

Arthaxiom had seen it coming, but he was in no position to block the strike or to move away. He only managed to quickly murmur a bit of a desperate prayer to the various entities he worshipped in the intention of keeping his helmet intact. If what happened next was their doing, they did a lot better than that.

CRACK! Blahterk watched in horror as his pole broke harmlessly on the paladin's helmet. He had a brief thought that it shouldn't have done that, and that the poles they had used for the gate were just too tough to simply break like this. It was a very brief thought indeed, because a second later he had a sword through his stomach. "Unholy carp!" he swore and collapsed.

A few moments later the village was ablaze.

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The chamber that General Eneumerius Roseduck had chosen for that particular occasion wasn't exquisite. In fact, it was the least luxurious chamber in the entire Commander's Tower. That was exactly why the General had picked it. Everything in there was disposable. Nobody would miss a cheap-looking wooden table, nor any of the three battered chairs, should any harm come to them.

Inside it was dark. Only a bit of sunlight was coming through a very small window, illuminating the bare stone walls. Overall, the chamber was rather depressing. The General's guest didn't care. He rarely cared about anything.

"A goblin village in the Northern Wastelands was burned down," General Roseduck announced, slowly walking across the chamber.

"Oh dear. Shall we dispatch Smokey the Bear to educate the goblins about fire safety?" Vannard asked as he sat down. Then he drew his dagger with his right hand, put his left hand on the table with fingers apart, and proceeded to stab the table between his fingers. He did it with incredible speed. Only a blur of motion could be observed.

The General sighed. It was very hard to make Vannard take things seriously. He was just sitting there, playing with his dagger and smiling. And blurting out some gibberish, but that was nothing new. Roseduck more often than not had no idea what Vannard was talking about. He decided not to inquire. Experience had taught him that it was better that way.

Vannard was a difficult person to deal with. At first sight there was nothing unusual about him: a rather tall man with short dark hair and a perfectly ordinary face. He wouldn't stand out in a crowd. Nothing suggested that he was a very skilled assassin. It was sort of a prerequisite for being one. Someone looking like an assassin would have a lot of trouble in this line of work.

Roseduck was well aware what Vannard was capable of. He didn't know all the details, but he knew enough. Enough to be painfully conscious of the fact that just about anyone in the assassin's close vicinity could die any second. The General himself included. It was bothering him quite a bit, but he did his best to hide it. He was a firm believer in not showing his fear.

He faced the wall, turning his back to the assassin. Giving Vannard such an opportunity could be considered either brave or stupid, but actually it didn't really matter. Being in the same chamber with someone was a good opportunity for him. Which way the target was facing was mostly irrelevant.

"No, we shall not dispatch your mythical bear to educate the goblins about fire safety. They didn't burn down their own village. Someone else did. After slaughtering the inhabitants."

"AAAAAARGH!" Vannard interrupted with a loud scream.

"Stop that!" the General scolded him, without even looking. "I am very well aware that you are way too skilled with that thing to stab yourself."

"Awww, you're not fun anymore."

"Furthermore, I expected you would do that. You are getting predictable."

"Ducky, now that was downright nasty!" Vannard said reproachfully. Roseduck cringed. He hated being called that.

"Serves you well," a female voice replied. A woman clad in a long red dress entered the chamber. She was tall and slender, with long, red hair. Almost beautiful. Her facial expression, which promised a painful death to anyone and everyone, spoiled the effect somewhat.

"Oooh, look who's here!" said Vannard, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Sally, the Mistress of Magic! You're probably expecting us to repeat everything to you?" Roseduck's sense of dread just quadrupled. Having these two in the same room was a bad idea. He knew that, but he made them meet anyway. Because they all were on the same team, so to speak. They were at least supposed to be on the same team. The team name would have to be Enraged Rabid Wolverines.

"You know very well what my name is. Also, there is no need to repeat your fake scream of pain and anguish. I heard it all too well thanks to the Enchanted Ear spell I cast earlier," the sorceress Saalteinamariva replied, not even looking at the assassin.

"You and your magic tricks again," Vannard said with distaste. He stood up and looked around. Indeed, there was an ear in the corner, barely visible, hovering just above the floor. He slowly walked there and stepped on it. Hard.

"I'll let you know that, unlike you, I learn from my mistakes," the sorceress mocked him. "My Enchanted Ears don't relay pain anymore."

"Don't relay pain, eh? How interesting. But what would happen if I..." Vannard didn't finish. Instead he spat right into the Ear. Saalteinamariva let out a scream of shock and disgust. It was quickly replaced by an angry shout as she hurled a fireball at Vannard. He wasn't surprised and swiftly moved out of harm's way. The fireball struck the stone wall, splitting into stray flames. One of them fell on an empty chair. It started burning.

"Stop that!" the General shouted. "You behave like children!" He realised that he was berating two people vastly more powerful than he was. He might have been a commander of an army and all that, but in this room, between those two, he was helpless like a snail. An old, sick

snail. On drugs. He was neither a match for Vannard at stabbing things, nor for Saalteinamariva at putting things on fire. To make it worse, he was quite a bit shorter than both of them, and his physique was not impressive to say the least. Fortunately for him, his guests didn't bother with feeling insulted.

"Ducky, children don't play with fireballs, you know," Vannard said. The sorceress ignored the remark.

"Put out this fire, will you?" The General didn't direct this request to anyone in particular. Also, he doubted that any of them would listen. He was just trying to maintain authority. Or a resemblance of it.

"Do I look like a *water* mage to you?" the sorceress asked and stared at him nastily.

Vannard said nothing. He just shrugged, grabbed the flaming chair and threw it against the wall. It broke into pieces. Then he calmly took another chair and whacked the burning remains with it until the fire was gone.

"Is violence your solution to everything?" the General asked as he sat down on the only chair that was still intact. Vannard shrugged again. The question was too silly to deserve an answer. "Very well. I have something to tell you, and I believe it's rather important. Otherwise, I would not risk integrity of the castle by having you both in the same chamber. I'd ask you to sit down, but there don't seem to be any chairs around anymore. So just listen and try not to destroy anything else!"

"Oh very well, I'll put him on fire later," the sorceress said.

"Good luck with that," Vannard replied, smiling.

"Shut up and listen. Our patrol found remains of a goblin village in the Desolated Wastelands. It was burned down and the inhabitants were slaughtered. That is not an uncommon occurrence, villages of primitive humanoids get destroyed all the time and new ones are erected. The interesting part is that it was reportedly done by a single person."

"Reportedly? Who reported that?" the sorceress inquired.

"There was a lone survivor. An intensely violet goblin managed to hide itself in a cluster of fuchsia flowers."

"How convenient," Vannard remarked.

"Convenient indeed," General Roseduck agreed. "Especially that these probably were the only fuchsia flowers in the entire region. Even too convenient, I'd say. The scouts decided to bring the goblin with them for further questioning. Unfortunately, on their way back they were attacked by a particularly large irate badger. It bit the goblin's head off and ran away."

"How inconvenient," Vannard remarked again.

"Very inconvenient. Especially that it was most likely the only irate badger of the size required to bite off a goblin's head in the region. Or in this part of the world, for that matter. All that is improbable enough to be suspicious. What are you so happy about, Vannard?"

"Just imagining the scene, Ducky. A giant badger attacking a borderline patrol. That must have been awesome."

"I don't find anything awesome about this."

"Neither do I," the sorceress agreed.

"You wouldn't find anything awesome unless it was on fire," Vannard accused her.

"Not true. But I have to admit, a giant irate badger attacking a borderline patrol while being on fire would be pretty awesome."

"You two never cease to horrify me."

"My pleasure." Vannard smiled. Roseduck just sighed.

"So we only know whatever the goblin had told our scouts before getting decapitated. It claimed that they were attacked by someone claiming to be some sort of paladin. Also, a servant of a beige dragon and a lover of a rainbow surgeon, or something like that. He said that the goblins were evil and attacked the village. They were unable to hurt him. He killed all the goblins, burned down the village, and walked away towards the Northern Wilderness. Our scouts say the tracks confirmed that. So, Vannard, you know what I want you to do, don't you?" Roseduck immediately realised he shouldn't have asked that. But it was too late.

"Of course." The assassin seemed genuinely pleased. "You want me to find a bigger village, slaughter all inhabitants and burn it down afterwards. I shall enjoy that immensely."

That was exactly the sort of response the General had been afraid of. He was going to explain why Vannard's idea was very, very stupid, but Saalteinamariva interjected. "You moron! Of course he doesn't want you to slaughter a village! If he wanted a village slaughtered, he would have asked me! Magic is a much more efficient way to do this."

"It may be so, but it's nowhere as satisfying as the conventional method," Vannard replied calmly.

"Vannard..." the General started, but the assassin held up his hand to interrupt him.

"Yes, yes, it was a stupid idea. It's obvious you want me to track down and assassinate that paladin."

This idea was marginally better than the previous one. Only marginally. "Vannard, do you really think I want you to try to find a paladin who was last seen walking towards the Northern Wilderness a few weeks ago and who could be just about anywhere by now? In order to avenge a goblin village?"

"Well, when you put it like that... No, not really. So who do you want me to kill?"

"No one. I want you to find out where did that paladin come from."

"Come again?" Vannard seemed utterly confused.

"I require information on that paladin's background. What is his name, where did he come from, what does he want, and so forth. This might be of utmost importance. I want you to gather this information."

"But..."

"But that does not involve killing people. Yes, I know. I am well aware that you are an assassin, not a scout. Unfortunately, I don't really have anyone else to send. You can do it."

"But..."

"But you do not know where to start. Don't worry, I do. If my theory is correct, he is most likely travelling in straight lines. I extrapolated the path he was travelling according to the vector of his approach to the goblin village and found possible starting points. You will receive a map containing these."

"But..."

"But you do not know how to gather information? It is simple. You go to a village, you ask around. Start with the mayor. I think that an encounter with that paladin might have been quite memorable. Also, remember that a nice silver coin often helps people with refreshing their memories. You will be provided with funds."

The assassin smiled nastily. "Some say that a nice steel dagger also helps people with refreshing their memories, you know."

"Does it really, in your experience?"

He thought about this for a moment. "Well, in my experience, it usually helps people to become quite dead."

"I thought so. Stick to silver."

The sorceress sniggered.

"Be quiet, hyena," Vannard said. "You would put people on fire before questioning them."

"At least they'd be burning to share their knowledge," Saalteinamariva replied, ignoring being called a hyena. Roseduck groaned inwardly at the awful pun.

"So, Vannard, will you do it?"

"Very well. Since you refuted all my objections before I even came up with them, it appears I don't have any way to wiggle out of this assignment." Vannard paused. "Unless... I kill you." He paused again, but the General didn't even flinch. "Which I'm not going to do at the moment."

"Very obliged," Roseduck said. "There is a horse prepared for you. Here is bag containing some funds and the map. Also, a few pointers on what to ask, so that you don't have to think too much. I know how you hate that. Find out as much as you can, but try to return as fast as possible. I might have some people for you to assassinate soon."

"Will be looking forward to this," Vannard said, took the bag and left.

"Break your neck!" the sorceress called after him.

"Was that really necessary?" the General asked.

"I guess not." She shrugged. "And, to tell you the truth, I'd be quite disappointed if my wish came true. I want to kill him myself one day."

"Now that's... I don't even know how to respond to this."

"So don't." With the lack of chairs still in effect, the sorceress sat on the table. "Instead you could tell me why did I have to witness you sending that moron somewhere far away for no apparent reason? Not that I disapprove."

"Because we are on the same team and we need to work together." Roseduck realised how ridiculous and unconvincing that sounded. But it was all he had.

"I'm on no team!" Saalteinamariva protested. "Especially not with that insane murderous cretin! And I am beginning to have my doubts about you."

The General sighed again. "We went through this before. You know very well that no other lord will keep you around..."

"Why not?!" the sorceress protested again. "A lot of them would be delighted to associate with someone of my power and..."

"BECAUSE," he interrupted, "they don't appreciate insolence, bad temper and putting random people on fire."

"Call me bad-tempered one more time..." she rose to face the General. She stopped herself just before threatening to put him on fire. Roseduck just smiled and nodded.

"You see what I mean."

She sat down again. "I can't help it. I'm a fire mage. Fire magic causes anger. And I wasn't a calm person to begin with."

"You are what you are and many can have a problem with that," the General said. "I don't. As long as you don't put me on fire."

"I'll try not to. But no promises."

Roseduck sighed yet again. "Very well. Let's get to the matter at hand. The... accident."

"Vannard did it," she said without hesitation.

"I didn't even say what accident I'm talking about!"

"True. But there's high chance it was him, whatever accident you have in mind."

"I mean the Emperor's accident," the General explained.

"I still say it was him."

"Unlikely. Too elaborate. I do not wish to hypothesise on who, how and why at the moment. Instead, I'd like to ponder the consequences."

"I never cared much about these things," Saalteinamariva admitted. "One Emperor dies, the next one gets enthroned, things stay as they were?"

"There is no next one," the General said sadly.

"What do you mean, no next one? He didn't have children, that much I know, but next of kin?"

"According to the Codex, nobody alive is related closely enough."

That surprised the sorceress. "So...?"

"So for the first time in history we'll have an election!" Roseduck replied with an added display of false enthusiasm.

"A... what?!" She never heard this word before. She heard a similar one once, though. The person she had heard it from ended up running around and screaming as a result of being put on fire. It would be better for Roseduck if that word wasn't related.

"Election. The High Lords will vote to choose a new Emperor."

"Ah. How... interesting." Voting on things. What a strange notion. The sorceress didn't care much.

"That's not all. What happens next might interest you more."

"Very well, what happens next?"

"The new Emperor chooses a new High Lord Commander to replace me, and then I most likely get assassinated." Roseduck smiled brightly.

"Oh. That's not too good, I guess."

"I'm glad that we're on the same page here."

"Do you think the next High Lord Commander will appreciate a bad tempered sorceress with a tendency to put people on fire?" Saalteinamariva asked, with a wide, false smile.

"Unlikely," Roseduck replied, smiling back even more widely and falsely.

"That's what I thought. I suppose it means I should help you stay alive?" She didn't seem particularly enthusiastic about this.

"Correct, but that's a topic for some other time. There's no hurry. Right now what interests me that a first Hero for a really long time appears just as the Emperor dies."

Saalteinamariva was sceptical. "You mean that guy you sent Vannard to find out about? Killing some goblins isn't all that heroic."

"I mean a Hero. With capital H. Like these from stories of old. Attacking a superior force in a rather silly way and winning anyway, fighting whatever he sees as 'evil', adding stupid titles to his name..."

"This all might be just a coincidence."

"Yes, it is just a coincidence, and the Emperor's accident was just an accident. And the old stableman accidentally self-immolated last week too?" he asked, risking the sorceress' wrath, yet this time she controlled herself.

"Accidents happen sometimes. Of course, it was a just a coincidence that he had been looking at my behind just before it happened," she replied, unabashed.

"He was short-sighted. In fact, almost blind."

"So he didn't even see it coming."

\*\*\*

Arthaxiom travelled through the wastelands. On foot. In full armour. He was a Hero, so he didn't mind.

He carried no food nor water. It was not a problem. Heroes don't die from hunger or thirst. That wouldn't be very Heroic.

He walked alone through hostile, uninhabited territory. There was no one to keep guard when he slept. He could have got ambushed and eaten by wild animals. Nothing like that had happened. Wild animals suddenly became polite and well-mannered. They attacked only when the Hero was ready to fight, and only in limited numbers. Swarming a Hero would be really inappropriate and could tax him unduly, whereas they were only supposed to be a mildly entertaining food source.

It is hard to say if crossing the Desolated Wastelands took the Hero a few days, a few weeks or a few months. It is not important. Every day was almost the same. Wake up, find a small water reservoir cleverly hidden where no water should ever be, have a drink. Get attacked by a random animal, kill it. Find some dry twigs despite a distinct lack of trees in the vicinity. Strike a fire. Cook and eat the killed animal. Walk, walk, walk. Kill more random animals. Eat some of them for lunch. Walk some more, kill some more, have another meal, find some more water... And find a comfortable spot for a good night's sleep, however improbable it would seem.

Only the animals varied. The wastelands had a surprisingly rich ecosystem. Things like snakes, rats, and even an occasional hyena were quite understandable. On the other hand, a polar camel certainly wasn't, and neither were a flying swordfish and an obese orange opossum, to name just a few. A lesser man might have been startled by those, but not Arthaxiom. They were something to fight, so he fought them. They weren't something to think about, at least for him. He wasn't big on thinking. The origin of a white rabbit wearing fancy clothes and a top hat was of no importance to him. He appreciated the taste, though. Only the round ticking thing was somewhat difficult to chew.

Encounters with wildlife posed little trouble to Arthaxiom. They weren't supposed to. Having an epic fight with each one wouldn't be very Heroic. They were too random and not quest-

relevant enough for that. That is not to say that they were completely defenceless. The camel, for example, had a nasty icy spit.

One day the scenery changed. The wasteland ended. Arthaxiom entered the Northern Wilderness. It was covered in snow, like everything named 'northern' should be. The paladin didn't waste a thought on absurdity of a snow-covered forest bordering a scorched wasteland. He had more important things to do. Like being a Hero, for example.

The snow-covered forest contained, not surprisingly, snow. Also cold and icy wind. It didn't bother the paladin any more than heat of the wastelands did. Not at all, that is. He continued forward, even though he didn't know where exactly he was going. He was supposed to reach the Northern Wilderness, and here he was. Now he was supposed to find a cave inhabited by a wise man. Or a mage. Or a hermit, maybe. He wasn't really sure. That was just a small detail, unworthy of a Hero's attention.

Another small detail, also unworthy of a Hero's attention, was the size of the region. It never occurred to him that the Northern Wilderness could be huge and that finding the hermit-containing cave could take him weeks, or even months. He just went there and found it, without a need for any sort of directions. Heroes always find their way.

One thousand, three hundred and thirty-seven steep, narrow stairs led to the cave. Each one covered with ice. In case of a fall, Arthaxiom would have a fair chance of ending up in a nice deep chasm. It would be an instant death with some luck. Slow and painful otherwise. He went upwards anyway, without regard for his life, and he succeeded. After all, it would be very inappropriate for a Hero to fall into a chasm. He almost slipped once, but it was just to add some tension.

There was a sign next to the cave entrance. Arthaxiom couldn't read it. Mainly because he didn't know how to read. Fortunately, a small magical invisible little blue bird was there just in time to tell him that it said "NO SALESMEN, EVIL DEMONS, SNOW PUMAS". The paladin was pretty sure he was neither a snow puma, nor an evil demon. None of his titles suggested that he was a salesman, but he wasn't entirely sure about that one. He entered anyway. Signs don't stop Heroes.

The cave, as it is usually the case, was full of interesting rock formations. They were conveniently illuminated by some fluorescent fungi. After all, a Hero can't be expected to lug a torch with him wherever he goes, just in case he needs to go underground.

It was long and convoluted. One could easily get lost in there. Arthaxiom didn't. He found the right way, guided only by his Heroic instinct. Getting lost in a cave and starving to death wouldn't be a demise worthy of a Hero. Suitable for a secondary character maybe, and not a very likeable one too.

The paladin encountered rats, bats, spiders, and other cavelife. None of these challenged him. He was rather pleased about that. Littering someone's home with corpses would be a bit rude, and he needed that someone's help.

There also were skeletons. The lying around, unmoving kind. Arthaxiom somewhat expected them to suddenly turn into the walking around, bone-rattling and hostile kind, but they refused to. He briefly wondered why, but came up with nothing. What he didn't wonder about was why would all those lie around. Skeletons in a cave seemed quite natural to him.

Finally, he reached his destination. In the middle of a small chamber there was someone. Or something. It looked like a heap of grey hair. Was there a person underneath? Arthaxiom wasn't sure. He wanted to ask, but he felt it would be rude to intrude on someone just like that. He decided to knock first. There was no door, so he improvised.

"Knock knock!"

"Gaaaaah!" the heap of hair screamed and leapt in the air. Indeed, it was a person. A person wearing dirty gray robes. His hair was so long that the end of it was still lying on the floor when he stood up. Same with his beard. The colour also was dirty gray, matching his clothes nicely. Overall he looked he had been living in cave for quite some time. Which was obviously the case. That had to be the hermit who the Hero was looking for. Or a wise man. Or maybe a mage. Possibly some combination of these.

"I apologise, I did not mean to scare you..."

"Begone, foul demon!" the hermit interrupted.

"I am not a demon. Demons are not allowed here," the paladin replied calmly.

"They enter anyway! These scamps, scoundrels! If you are not a demon, then take off that steel can and show me your face!"

The paladin did as he was told. The old man saw his neatly cut brown hair and his square face without a trace of facial hair. He looked into his blue eyes which seemed focused, yet completely devoid of intelligence. He instantly realised who was standing in front of him. He wasn't an old wise man, a hermit, and possibly a mage too, for nothing. Recognising a Hero from not a long way away wasn't hard when one knew what to look for.

The wise man wasn't at all happy that a Hero came to visit him. He would definitely prefer a demon. Some of them weren't all that bad. Those of female persuasion were even quite pleasant sometimes...

"Well?" the paladin broke the hermit's daydream.

"Ah, yes, right. You're definitely not a demon. Also not a salesman I suppose?" He would even prefer a salesman to a Hero. They were nasty, nasty beings, but he knew how to deal with them. A nice, large stick usually did the trick. He had quite a collection of those. An old wise man has to have some pieces of wood lying around. Quite handy for chasing off unwanted guests. But not Heroes. You can't chase away a Hero with a stick. That just doesn't work.

"I am not a salesman. I am paladin Arthaxiom the Great, Deliverer of Light, Slayer of Evil and Wicked, Guardian of the Ancient Secret..."

The wise old man didn't expect that. He couldn't have. Nobody could have. He just stood there, with his eyes wide open, not really believing in what he was hearing.

"...Sword of Justice in the Gloom of Uncertainty!"

There was an awkward pause. Evidently, some sort of a reaction was expected from the mage. "Yes, yes, very nice. Why did you come to see me, Apostle of the Sturgeon?"

"The Rainbow Sturgeon," the paladin corrected.

"Right, the Rainbow Sturgeon." The old man rolled his eyes. "So, what do you want?"

"I want you to help me! Come with me! Together, we will defeat the Empire of Evil!"

"Of course, I'll be delighted to join you.... gaaaaaah!" the hermit bit his own tongue just in time. The need to accompany the Hero was tremendous. Only those strong of will can resist that. He was taken by surprise and was having a really hard time. If only he could find an excuse... "I mean, I mean, I would, if I could, but I can't, because, because... because I have a headache! And hernia! And magnesium deficiency! Don't mind me, young man, run along and defeat the Empire of Evil while I recuperate here in my cave."

"A pity," Arthaxiom replied. The old man sighed with relief. He wasn't sure he'd be able to resist if the paladin had persisted. "In this case, could you possibly point me towards an ancient artefact of great power which would aid me in my quest?"

"Yes, I could do that." The hermit was happy to survive the temptation, so he decided it couldn't hurt to send the Hero somewhere. Possibly far, far away. "What artefact are we talking about?"

"I do not know. An ancient one. Powerful."

The mage scratched his head. "Very well... I know of a Magical Ladle of Taste."

"What does it do?"

"Makes every dish you cook taste like the excrements of angels, or so they say."

"It is not what I had in mind." The paladin looked disappointed.

"A Nimble Needle of Nirvana? With this you can sew thrice as fast!"

"I sew quite badly."

"So you would sew badly with triple the speed!"

"I do not think I really want to. Perhaps something else?"

"The Jolly Rake of Precision! It makes gardening not only easy, but also fun!"

"No, no, no! I am looking for an artefact that will help me to defeat the Empire of Evil! A sword! Or an axe! A mace maybe, or a spear! Some sort of armour! Magical gauntlets! Or bracers! Or shoulder pads! Perhaps a halberd, or a trident..."

"Stop! I get it! You don't need to list every possible type of weapon!"

"Sorry, I got carried away."

"So... the Singing Axe of Heavens?"

"What does it do?"

"It sings, I guess."

After a long discussion Arthaxiom finally settled on the Shining Slaughtering Sword of the Silver Sun. It seemed to fit his titles well. Also, a shining sword would really suit a paladin. Last but not the least, he really liked the letter S.

The hermit merrily informed him that this sword was hidden in another dark and foreboding cave, located somewhere in the Gloomy Jungle. Well defended, of course. That was to be expected. Arthaxiom wouldn't have it any other way. An ancient artefact that isn't guarded probably isn't any good.

Thus, the paladin continued on his journey. He only knew in which general direction he had to proceed, but it was enough. Heroes need no maps.

The old man returned to his duties. They mainly consisted of sitting on the floor and staring intently at rock formations, while occasionally letting out a wistful sigh. Being a hermit wasn't an easy job.

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Glorm the bandit chief also didn't have an easy job. The westernmost part of the Empire wasn't a good place to be a bandit. Lack of people to rob was somewhat problematic. It was a downtrodden, rural area, with population consisting mostly of peasants. Peasants were poor as a rule. A rich peasant wouldn't be a peasant anymore. And probably would have moved out immediately.

Peasants were a lousy target for bandits, but it wasn't as if they had much choice. And they needed to rob a lot of them, cause the loot was just horrible. A bag of beetroots was the best one could hope for. On a lucky day. Sometimes it was an empty bag. Or a hit in the face with a rake, because some peasants could wield a nasty farming implement and they weren't keen on giving up their beetroots.

More wealthy travellers happened very rarely. It wasn't actually a bad thing, because they were even worse. They had better things to steal, but they also had guards. Nasty, nasty guards with even nastier cutting and stabbing things. They never hesitated to inflict some nasty wounds with those. No fun for a bandit, none at all.

Decent targets were few and far between. Therefore Glorm was pleasantly surprised when one of his men told him about a lone traveller.

"Ya sure, Flam?" he asked warily.

The other bandit scratched his straw hat. He realised something was wrong, so he took off his hat and scratched his head. With his hat. Something was still wrong. He moved his hat to his other hand and finally scratched his head. Only then did he reply. "Yah."

"Why is he alone?" Glorm was somewhat unconvinced.

Flam scowled. These were difficult questions. He didn't like difficult questions. That's why he became a bandit. He got fed up with having to respond to things like 'Flam, ya fed da pig?' or 'Flam, wat happened to da bottled spirits?' or even 'Flam, why ya has no pants on?'. Unfortunately the questions followed him even here. "Dunno," he replied and shrugged.

"He's not a mage?" The band had bad memories after trying to rob a sorcerer once. He simply laughed at them. So Rude Lenny stepped up and called him an 'old fort'. Lenny wasn't good at insulting, but made up for it by making an effort. For that particular effort he got turned into a frog. Nobody else bothered the mage. As for Lenny, the bandits took good care of him. They didn't leave their own behind. Unfortunately, during a very harsh winter supplies were scarce, so he ended up eaten.

Flam thought about this question. This one was important. Even he knew that. He remembered eating Lenny's leg all too well. Tasted a bit like chicken. "Nah. No beard."

"Good. So where is he now?"

Flam sighed. Being a scout was fun until one actually spotted something. And then the questions came. Where did he come from and what does he look like and all that stuff. He really pushed his brain to produce coherent answers. He knew it was worth it. If the robbery was successful, the one who spotted the victim would get an extra share.

Come morning, the bandits were waiting in an ambush. The whole band gathered for the occasion, all seven of them. It's not like they had anything better to do. Their idea of ambush was simple. They waited where the road entered a forest. Three of them were hiding in the bushes near the road, and the remaining four with their horses hid in the trees a bit further away. It usually worked well, so there was no need to change anything.

They knew their victim was coming their way. He came to the village by the road from the east, so he had to leave by the road to the west. As simple as that. The bandits' logic, flawed as it might be, worked. There simply was nowhere else to go. Nobody ever came there just to visit that village. It was way too small and hopeless for that. It didn't even have a name.

Their victim wasn't an early bird. They couldn't have known that beforehand, so they had laid the ambush at dawn. Now it was almost noon. Glorm had a lot of time to regret his choice of companions. Flam had been chewing on a bush for the last hour, and Sig was passing gas from time to time. The bandit chief a bit philosophically decided that he shouldn't be too annoyed with himself for picking them. The other ones would surely annoy him too. He knew them all too well.

Finally, a lone horseman appeared. A slim figure, clad all in black, riding a big brown horse. He didn't look like a mage. That was fortunate. If there was a slightest hint he might be one, the ambush would be off. Glorm squawked loudly. It was a squawk of a wounded desert owl, which he had always used. It signalled the other group to get ready. In response he received a howl of an angry wolf, which meant that the horsemen were ready, and a scowl of an annoyed fox, which meant that there was an annoyed fox nearby. Everything seemed to be in place, so he braced himself and jumped out.

The ambush went flawlessly. The bandits sure knew how to ambush someone. They did it many, many times before. The three footmen blocked the road, swords drawn, ready to strike if the victim tried to charge through. The horsemen burst out of the forest: two were flanking, and the other two blocked the rear. Now it was their target's choice: talk or fight. Glorm always preferred talking. Fighting was bad for business. Bandits could get wounded, horses could get wounded. Loot could get covered with blood. Really unnecessary. Should the man cooperate, they might let him go. After taking all his belongings, of course. Unless they decided they really disliked him for some reason, in which case they might kill him anyway.

"Your money or your life!" said Glorm. It was a good old traditional approach. A choice and a threat. He had witnessed many responses to that. Some tried to fight, some begged for mercy, some gave up their possessions while trying to keep their pride. This one did none of that.

"Ah. Finally." The man was smiling. Smiling! He shouldn't have been smiling! Glorm was pretty sure of that.

"What?!" he asked, incredulous.

"What I was meaning to say is that I was beginning to get worried that you wouldn't ambush me," the man replied pleasantly. Seeing the outlaw's surprise, he continued. "Yes, I knew. I noticed your friend. The one who's busy eating a twig." Glorm looked at Flam angrily. Flam guiltily swallowed the twig and started coughing furiously. "I can recognise an inept bandit sneaking around, you know. By the way, nice signal you made there. Let me guess, a mating call of a moose?"

The man's perfect calm made Glorm uneasy, but he tried to compose himself. This wasn't going well, but they still outnumbered him seven to one. And, oddly enough, he seemed unarmed. "All right. You knew. But you fell into our trap anyway! Don't try to run! You can't escape!"

"Because those guys have horses, right? Are you sure you are feeding them well? I'm no expert, but they look awfully skinny. And that one seems to be a donkey."

The bandit gurgled in fury. "Now you give us all your stuff or we'll kill you and take it ourselves!", he threatened.

"Yes, yes, that's how it works usually," the man replied. "But not this time, you see. This time I will do the killing. Quite some time since I killed someone."

"You don't even have a weapon! Surrender, and I'll let you live!" The bandit leader's shout sounded more like desperation than like a threat. He suddenly realised he didn't want to fight this man. He didn't know why exactly.

"Oh, I have a few knives around my person. Don't worry, I'll manage," the lone horseman replied.

Glorm had no choice. He couldn't just back up now. Not without losing his face. And whatever self-respect he had. He had to order the attack. "All right, get..." he started, but didn't get to finish. There was a blur of movement, a whizzing sound, and both Flam and Sig fell down. They were screaming and clutching their faces, and blood was oozing from between their fingers.

It took Glorm a moment to understand what had just happened. A moment he shouldn't have used. By the time he realised that his henchmen were downed by two daggers thrown at once, his opponent was on the ground and running towards him. Before he could decide whether to fight or run, he was down on the ground, squirming in pain. The pain seemed to stem from several places at once. He thought he was done for, but then he realised he actually wasn't bleeding. He hadn't been wounded. Still, he was too much in pain to get up and fight. He could only watch. And he was watching intently.

He saw the four horsemen of inept banditry hesitate. Nobody could blame them for hesitating in this situation. Their companions had just fallen without putting up a fight. As it often happens in such situations, the group followed the first one to act. And the first one to act was Hurm, the stupidest of the bunch. He charged. So did the other three. Glorm hoped they would ride their victim-turned-killer down or hack him to pieces. It was a vain hope.

Hurm leaned from his saddle and lifted his sword, preparing to strike. His opponent on the other hand didn't prepare to strike. He simply passed him on the side that didn't contain the hand with the sword. And stuck a knife in Hurm's kidneys in passing. The process was repeated with the next rider. And the next one too.

Glorm briefly wondered just how many knives did that man have and where did he keep them. He also was glad that none of them were stuck in him at the moment. He wasn't as glad that out of control horses were coming his way. He barely managed to roll away from danger. Hurm fell down near him. He didn't seem very alive.

Now there was only one outlaw horseman left. Or a donkeyman, to be exact. He managed to break off his attack in time, probably because the donkey was a bit slower than the horses. He sheathed his sword and grabbed his bow instead. It was actually a decent idea. Glorm knew that a fight between a mounted bowman and a footman armed only with knives simply had to end with a victory of the bowman, yet he somehow doubted this would be the case.

"A bit late for this, don't you think?" the knife-wielder asked, mockingly.

"Never too late to shoot you in the AAAARGH!" The bandit screamed as a thrown dagger hit him in the throat. He fell from his donkey and stopped screaming when he hit the ground. His killer calmly went up to the body and retrieved his dagger. He stabbed the corpse once more just in case, cleaned the knife and hid it somewhere on his person. Then he went to the next fallen bandit and repeated the process.

Glorm watched in horror as his comrades were being finished off one by one. Suddenly it struck him: this could not be a human. Surely a demon or something! The bandit was hurt and in a lot of pain, but he was still alive and he intended to keep it this way. Fear of the demon gave him extra strength. Also the pain was subsiding slowly. He stood up and ran. Back into the forest. As fast as he could, not stopping, not looking back. Just forward, forward, away from that man, or demon, or whatever it was... He didn't care much about the direction. He should have cared. Because after a few minutes he ran straight into a trapping pit. His own trapping pit.

It was a good pit. Glorm had made sure of that. The bandits put a lot of effort into it when there were no adequate targets for banditry, which means they had *a lot* of time for that. The pit was meant for trapping huge animals, up to bears. No bear could have gotten out of it. And neither could a human. Not without tools at least. But it was a problem for later. Right now, the outlaw was happy and relieved. He missed the spikes. He got away from that...

"Enjoying yourself?" Or not. The demon was looking down the pit and smiling.

The bandit felt like a bear that fell into a trapping pit. The only difference was that he wasn't a bear. "You! You... whatever you are! How did you find me?! How did you kill them all?!" He had nowhere to run, no way to fight, so he just shouted in pure desperation.

"Some say that practice makes perfect. And I had a lot of practice." The demon smiled again. It was not a pleasant smile.

"Are you going to kill me?" The answer was obvious. Glorm simply had nothing better to say. Yet the demon hesitated.

"I... think not." There was a brief pause. "Leaving you in here seems funnier."

"You bastard!"

"Now now, no need to be rude." The demon turned around to leave. Suddenly Glorm remembered he had a dagger too. He had completely forgotten about it. It seemed so inadequate, but he had nothing to lose now. He quickly snatched it from his belt and threw it at his enemy.

The throw was perfect. The blade should have pierced the target's skull. But it didn't. The demon made just a slightest move with his head. His hair moved as the dagger sailed past him.

"That would have been helpful in getting out of the pit, don't you think?" he asked without turning. Nothing indicated that he even cared about the knife being just an inch away from killing him. The only response was a cry of anger and frustration.

The demon went away. Glorm was left in the trapping pit. There was nothing he could use to get out, also no food and no water. It was very unlikely that anyone would come to his rescue. He really disliked the idea of being the first and only victim of his own pit. He looked around, desperately seeking anything to help him. There was nothing. Nothing but stout spikes, dug in firmly into the ground. He tried to get some of them out, but to no avail. They had dug them in too well. After all, they were supposed to impale a falling bear. He sighed and started gnawing on one.

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The paladin's journey to the Gloomy Jungle was rather uneventful. Apart from the usual coincidences helping him to survive, that is.

The Gloomy Jungle itself proved to be aptly named. The trees were gloomy, the bushes were gloomy, the birds were gloomy and even the bees were gloomy. Arthaxiom didn't care. Gloom is among numerous things Heroes are immune to.

As he was walking through the jungle, three ogres appeared out of nowhere and barred his way. Each of them was about a head taller than the paladin. They were sickly green and very, very ugly. Not to mention very, very smelly. Fortunately Heroes have no sense of smell, at least when it comes to negative things. They can still smell flowers and other nice stuff. Not that they do this too often. Stopping to smell the flowers isn't too Heroic.

Each ogre had a huge crude club, obviously made from a tree trunk. 'Made' meant that the tree had been torn out of the ground and the branches were broken off. Or eaten. Also, each ogre wore a loincloth made from something that had died a long time ago. That proved that even ogres living in the middle of the jungle had a sense of decency for some reason. While the garments helped with the visuals, they didn't improve the smell.

*"Finally, a chance to test my skills!"* the paladin thought. He drew his sword and waited for the ogres to act.

One of the ogres stepped forward. "You! Shall not! *Piss!*" it declared and struck the ground with its club. That confused Arthaxiom a bit.

"Of course I shall not piss! I am a Hero, you know!" he replied, which in turn confused the ogre.

"Uhhh..." it said.

"Me thinks dats supposed to be 'You shall not pass!'" the other ogre suggested.

"That would make more sense," the paladin agreed.

"Right," said the first ogre. "You! Shall not! *Pass!*" It struck the ground again, even harder, unknowingly giving a concussion to some poor mole living down below.

"Why? Why are you interrupting my noble quest, foul creatures of the swamp?" Arthaxiom asked. He thought that this should be established before the start of the fight. After all, ogres don't just randomly bother Heroes. Ogres are usually more purposeful.

"Dunno," the ogre replied.

"I knowd. But I forgetted," said the second ogre.

"I haz a note!" said the third one, and gave a small piece of paper to the first ogre.

"Me no can read!"

"Me no can read also. You! You read dis!" the ogre decided and gave the note to the paladin. He was unable to read as well, and the small magical invisible little blue bird failed to appear to help him this time. He didn't want to admit his illiteracy. It would mean he was as dumb as the ogres, and he most certainly wasn't.

"It says here that you are not supposed to let me pass because... because... because I am the Guardian of the Ancient Secret of the Holy Mysterious Summoning of the Mythical Archpegasus!" Arthaxiom improvised.

"You iz what?!" the ogre asked. It didn't expect that. In fact, it didn't really have any particular expectations about the contents of the piece of paper, nor did it really care. Still, it seemed like a very strange thing to say. Or to write down.

"Guardian of the Ancient Secret of the Holy Mysterious Summoning of the Mythical Archpegasus," Arthaxiom repeated.

"Uh, yah," the ogre mumbled. "You shall not pass, you iz a guardian of secreted holy argasus."

"Guardian of the Ancient Secret of the Holy Mysterious Summoning of the Mythical Archpegasus," Arthaxiom repeated yet again.

"You shall not pass, you iz a guardian of ancient secreted moistening of homynogasus," the ogre tried again, this time using the most complicated words it knew.

"Wat a homynogasus?" the second ogre asked.

"Dunno. Liek, homyn wid gas?" the third one replied.

"Wat a homyn?"

"Dunno. Liek, dat guy?"

"Ah."

"Guardian of the Ancient Secret of the Holy Mysterious Summoning of the Mythical Archpegasus!" the paladin corrected a bit less patiently, ignoring the other ogres calling him a homyn.

"No good, me not remenenber," the ogre declared.

"Wat a archpegasusus?" the second ogre asked.

"Liek, pagesusus iz horse wid two wingz," the third ogre said. "So archpagesusus iz liek horse wid... moar wingz?"

"Yes! Five!" Arthaxiom exclaimed. "It has five wings! And it breathes fire!"

"Woooooow!" the ogres said in awe, despite not knowing how much exactly was five. Sounded like a lot.

"All right, with that out of the way, could we finally start fighting?" the paladin asked.

"Fight? We no fight! Not in contract!" the first ogre declared.

"We dided wat we wered payed to did!" the second one added.

"Run away!" the third one shouted, and suddenly they were all retreating with surprising speed. Before the paladin had any chance to react, all three ogres were out of his sight. He stood still for a minute, wondering what to do next. There was only one option.

"I have won!" he declared to the nearby squirrels. "Once again I faced the sinister emissaries of evil! And once again I triumphed! There was no fear in my heart, no doubt in my mind!" Arthaxiom raised his sword over his head. "Ominous forces of vileness scattered like grain in the wind at the sight of my strength and persistence! Glory of my deeds will resound through generations!" A small hedgehog sitting under a bush decided that it had absolutely no intention to inform the future generations of hedgehogs about an armoured idiot shouting at the squirrels. "The peasants will throw gold coins and raisins at me!" Unfortunately there were no peasants in the vicinity, especially ones possessing gold coins and raisins. Only a woodpecker decided to honour the paladin by leaving a small token of appreciation on his helmet. Of course Arthaxiom was too busy shouting of all his titles at nobody in particular to notice that. After several more minutes of nonsensical declarations he finally ran out of breath and continued on his way.

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Vannard didn't care much for horseback riding. He didn't know much about horses either. He only knew that he was riding a big brown horse, and that it was a good horse. It was a good horse, because it was going in the direction he wanted it to go. Otherwise it would be a bad horse. Bad horses didn't last long around Vannard.

His journey to the village of Stinkybadger was rather uneventful. He hated uneventful journeys. Only one group of bandits attacked him during the past week. And that's despite him trying to look as non-threatening as possible in order to encourage them. This was a truly pitiful area.

He had always counted on bandits to amuse him during his travels. A lone, well-dressed rider usually attracted quite a few. Thanks to that he didn't have to go out of his way to find someone to kill. Also, most bandits were at least decent fighters. It was good for him to practice his skills. But not this time.

That group of bandits was a pleasant distraction, but nothing more. They weren't even an actual threat. Vannard's skills weren't put to a test. Just some harmless fun. Harmless for him at least, not for the other people involved. And that's exactly what he considered fun. The other fun thing about bandits was that nobody complained if some suddenly turned up dead. The idea that he made the roads in the Empire a little bit safer amused him to no end.

The village of Stinkybadger wasn't a lot to look at. Some wooden buildings, many of which looked like they could collapse soon. Some fields around. A well in the middle. A badger next to the well. A dead and smelly one. It was held upright by a wooden contraption. It was obvious that it some sort of a village sign. Vannard briefly wondered whether they had found some way to make the badger last for a long time or do they have to get a new one from time to time. Now, to find the mayor. It was not a difficult task. He simply entered the house that the badger's front paw was pointing at.

"Good day to you, peasant," Vannard greeted the mayor amicably. "I came from the capital. I have some questions to ask you."

The mayor got excited at the arrival of the unexpected guest. He instantly forgot about being called a peasant.

"Good day, m'lord! From the capital? A rare pleasure! Never been there myself. Is it as magnificent as they say?"

*Ah, small talk*, Vannard thought. Normally he didn't do small talk. It was boring and he wasn't any good at it. On the other hand, when he agreed to complete this assignment, he had decided he would do it right. Doing things wrong wasn't in his nature. Unless it was amusing. Offending the natives would be neither helpful nor particularly amusing, so he decided to indulge the mayor. The question wasn't hard. The capital indeed was magnificent. He knew why all too well and didn't even need to fake his enthusiasm.

"Yes, it is glorious! Oh, just imagine all those whorehouses! All the murders, burglaries, duels! Truly, there isn't a night without something interesting happening!"

"Ah, yes, yes, sounds wonderful," the mayor replied, evidently somewhat confused. His definition of magnificence was a bit different than Vannard's. Nevertheless, he continued the conversation. "Too bad about the Emperor. It was a horrible death, or so they say."

"Yes, horrible indeed," Vannard agreed, "but you know, at least it was memorable. Most people die from something boring and mundane, like an illness, or a knife in the face, or falling from a horse. But the Emperor, he actually made falling from a horse interesting! Right into the moat! And for some reason there were lions swimming in it! Some say he even took one or two with him. Too bad he couldn't kill all of them. I think it might be possible. Lions shouldn't fight too well in the water. In any case, that's the way to go!"

The mayor was seriously weirded out. This man sounded like he actually would like to try falling into a moatful of lions. Something was wrong with his head, no question about that. Could be dangerous, too. The mayor had a strange feeling that this meeting might not end well for him. Vannard often had that effect on people.

The assassin on the other hand thought he was doing quite well. He was successfully conducting a conversation about things completely irrelevant to the matter at hand with a person he couldn't have cared about less. A rare feat. A bit tiresome, but it wasn't like he had an appointment to kill someone or anything. No hurry.

"So, you had questions?" the mayor asked. As he had been anxious to talk with his visitor earlier, now he was anxious to get rid of him.

"Ah, yes. There might have been a paladin going through here. Two or three months ago, maybe. Do you know something about that?"

"I don't know. What is a paladin?"

Vannard was glad he got instructions from Roseduck, because he would have no idea how to describe the paladin. The best he could come up with was 'some sort of holy doofus knight'. It might have even worked, but he decided not to improvise. "A big man. In armour. With a sword, and maybe a shield too. Speaks weirdly, probably. About strange animals and such."

"No, no such men were seen around here."

A pity. All this smalltalking for nothing. Anyway, it was time for the second part. *'Try to make it seem that you didn't come all that way just to ask about the paladin'* Roseduck had written. No hints on how to accomplish that. Only a post-scriptum saying *'No killing'*. Typical Ducky. Oh well, let's try something...

"And was there any unusual weasel activity around here?"

"Uhhh... what?" This one went right over the mayor's head. Vannard decided to rephrase.

"More weasels around these days?"

"Ah, no, no, not really. Why?" Although the mayor wanted to get rid of his visitor, he couldn't help himself. Why would this strange man ask about weasels?

This strange man actually wasn't quite sure himself. Weasels seemed like a good thing to ask about. He didn't anticipate the peasant being curious. "We are tracking weasel migrations," he hazarded. "They are behaving suspiciously these days."

"Suspiciously? How?" The mayor's idea of suspicious activities consisted of a man trying to steal a duck by carrying it under his shirt. It rarely ended well for either party, but definitely there were no weasels involved. On the other hand, Vannard's idea of suspicious activities consisted mostly of planned and unplanned assassinations. He also had some general knowledge about thieving and whoring. Weasel assassins didn't seem to be too plausible. Weasel thieves and weasel whores were even worse. Unless they were strictly metaphorical, but he didn't want to go there. What could weasels do, what could weasels do...?

"They are nesting. In thatched roofs."

"They are?! That's bad! We'll check all the roofs!" This got the mayor scared a bit.

"Yes, you do that." Vannard was very pleased by the reaction. Checking roofs for weasels would take the paladin off the peasant's mind.

"But why would you come all the way from the capital to ask about weasels nesting in roofs?" The mayor's curiosity knew no bounds and was stronger than desire to get rid of his guest. Vannard, on the other hand, wanted the mayor to get rid of him, therefore he decided to use his universal two step-plan for dealing with annoying people. Step one: threaten to kill them. Step two: make good on this threat if needed. It was a bit less harsh version of his one-step plan which contained only the second step from the two-step plan, but he decided he won't kill this peasant unless it turned out to be really necessary. And this peasant was just a few annoying sentences away from 'really necessary'.

"Matter of Imperial security. If I told you, I'd have to kill you."

"Oh. That bad?"

"Yes. That bad," he said gravely. "If you find any, fire is your best bet. Now I must leave. Time is of the essence."

Not long after leaving Stinkybadger the assassin looked back at the village. There was smoke. A lot of smoke. He smiled. This was an even better distraction than weasel searching. A useful lesson too: sometimes letting people to hurt themselves is even more fun than murdering them. Of course, only sometimes.

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General Eneumerius Roseduck was in his private quarters at the top floor of the Commander's Tower. He was looking out of the window and admiring the view. From here he could see above the outer walls of the Imperial Castle. Below the Imperial Hill was the capital city of Antherophenimarinusville. Roseduck sighed and once again pondered on human stupidity.

So, some guy with a silly long name founded the city a long, long time ago. And it wasn't even a city back then, just a village. And 'founded' meant that he had built the first house there. He named the village after himself for some reason. It probably had something to do with a serious overgrowth of ego. Not a problem really. The problem was that nobody was using the full name anymore. Abbreviating it in any way was considered 'unpatriotic' and a

sign of laziness. As a result everyone referred to it as 'the capital'. In fact, hardly anyone knew the proper name anymore. So changing it would seem only logical...

Roseduck shook his head sadly. Once he had suggested that at the Imperial Court. He almost got eaten alive. *You can't just throw away history like that*, they said. *You can't dishonour a great man like that*, they said. Not that he had done anything remotely remarkable apart from building a house. *You are an evil bastard who should be thrown to the wolves*, they said. He wasn't liked at the court much. Needless to say, the motion didn't pass.

He tried to look on the bright side. Antherophenimarinusville was a very suitable name for the capital city of 'The Glorious Empire of the Falling Star with Questionable Smell'. It was named like that because the very first Emperor had seen a falling star on the very first day of his reign. 'Empire of the Falling Star' would be a decent name. A bit pompous, maybe, but it would do. Too bad that the Emperor, while admiring the star, stepped into something he shouldn't have stepped into. As nobody was willing to tell the newly crowned Emperor that he had just done something rather silly it was decided that the falling star was the source of the unpleasant smell. Thus, the Emperor decided it was some sort of a sign and named his new Empire after it. At least that's what Roseduck suspected. The official version was a bit different. Somehow the eternal struggle of the Lord of Light against the Unholy Demonic Cow got added into the mix, and the falling star became a projectile in that fight. Eneumerius didn't like to think about that. It made the whole Empire look stupid.

At least the placement of the castle was good. The Imperial Castle stood on the tallest hill around, surrounded by a stout wall, guard towers and all that. The city wasn't that lucky. It was below the hill. Its outer wall was crumbling, and anyway the city had sprawled beyond it a long time ago. New buildings were being erected more or less randomly these days. In case of any sort of invasion, the city would be wiped out immediately. Fortunately, there were no invasions, so everything was fine. For now. Roseduck was often astounded how stupid people could become if there was nothing to punish them for it.

The faulty city planning, or lack thereof, wasn't what the General was worried about at the moment. It was sort of a pleasant distraction even. Something to think about and maybe get a bit upset about, but not something that would make him lose sleep. Unfortunately, there were much more serious and immediate things for him to worry about.

The Emperor's untimely death was the big one. He sort of liked the man. After all, the late Emperor had promoted him to the rank of General and appointed him as the High Lord Commander of the Awesome Army of the Empire. Not that he didn't deserve it. He considered himself the finest military mind in the Empire. Not that it was a difficult task, as only nobles could be army commanders, and most nobles did it only for prestige. They didn't care about having the skills and knowledge required. Roseduck on the other hand was very interested in strategy and tactics. He read about these things, he thought about these things, he tried out these things... and was laughed at by other commanders for organising so-called 'manoeuvres'. Yet in the end, it got him to the top.

Eneumerius remembered the Battle of Some Bunch of Trees very well. It all had started with reports about elves appearing in the forests at the eastern border of the Empire. The Empire wouldn't be very Imperial if it allowed elves to roam around its forests. An army was dispatched to deal with them. It was led by the High Lord Commander himself, General Genodorius Bravewood von Winespear.

Battles those days were quite rare, so Genodorius was more than happy to lead the expedition. He didn't care much about battles, but he liked triumphant returns. He took about five thousand soldiers with him. It was an overkill, but he liked his triumphant returns big. A few minor mages were present in the army too. After all, fireworks for the victory celebrations wouldn't just conjure themselves up. Also, a lot of lower ranking officers were along for the trip. Their job was to repeat the General's orders a bit louder. And hang around him during the inevitable celebrations, of course. A bunch of officers in pretty formal uniforms sure looks nice on a parade. Also nicely highlights how many more medals the High Commander has in comparison.

Amongst the junior officers there was a certain Eneumerius Roseduck. He was a young and promising commander, but nobody was paying any attention to him. He was quite highly ranked, but rank didn't matter all that much. The staff was more of an entourage than actual staff, and surnames mattered there. And the Roseducks weren't an important house.

The army reached its destination. Scouts were dispatched. Elves were located in a small grove. So a plan of action was developed. Developing the plan meant that von Winespear decided to send the infantry into the grove and slaughter the enemy. Cavalry and archers would stand at ready to shoot and ride down any elves attempting to escape. It was a simple idea. Simple ideas had always worked for him before. Perhaps because his forces had always outnumbered the enemy by some ridiculous ratio, like fifty to one. Perhaps because 'the enemy' usually was a starving band of marauding orcs or something similar. Most likely the combination of two. General von Winespear didn't expect this encounter to be any different, therefore he saw no need to change his strategy. Elves, orcs, gnolls, koboldmons, what's the difference?

The infantry surrounded the grove. It was almost too easy to trap the elves in there. It should have made von Winespear suspicious, but it made him happy instead. The orders were given and the battle commenced. Nearly a thousand footmen armed with swords and spears entered the grove, but encountered no enemies. So the soldiers started shouting insults, taunting the cowardly elves, stabbing bushes just in case... And the rain of arrows came from above.

Shouts and taunts suddenly changed into screams of pain and terror. The soldiers didn't know how to react, simply because they were too used to being on the overwhelmingly winning side. The ones who shoot arrows, not the ones arrows are being shot at.

The arrows were only the half of the problem. The other half consisted of pits. And spikes. And pits with spikes. And pits with scorpions. And pits with spikes and scorpions. And pits with spikes and scorpions and scorpions and scorpions and a jolly farewell note and even more scorpions. And whatever else the elves had managed to come up with. The rabid squirrel pit was a nice touch.

The footmen who decided to run away fared the best by far. They got out alive. At least those who didn't get shot on the way out and avoided falling into deadly elven surprises. Those who tried to attack failed badly, mainly because there wasn't anyone to attack. The elves were up in the trees. There were two choices: climbing a tree containing an elf, or cutting down a tree containing an elf. With the only cutting implement at hand being a sword. Both approaches were tried. Both failed, mostly because the elf in question had a bow.

Those who ran in circles screaming fared even worse, because of increased chances of falling into various pits. Some (un)lucky ones scored some uniques, like the paralysing poisonous toad pit or the surprising insta-freezing pit.

A lot of screaming and panicked warriors running out of the grove distinctly suggested something went wrong. Some screaming and running was expected of course, but not in that amount. And the elves were supposed to be doing it. Therefore there was only one logical course of action...

"All infantry, into the forest!" von Winespear ordered. "Kill those elves! Archers, fire!"

...and trying the same thing once again wasn't it. Archers shooting blindly into the trees didn't improve matters either. Roseduck tried to suggest retreating, regrouping and changing strategy, but was ignored. The order was given and the rest of the infantry entered the grove. Soon there was more running and screaming, and even the meditating mantis pit got its first victim. And things had only started to go wrong.

The problem with Genodorius was that he wasn't simply a bad commander. He was no commander at all. He had no relevant knowledge. He had never needed any. Winning a battle while having a vast numerical superiority and when the enemy is dumb and unprepared is a simple task. Even a chimpanzee could do that simply by pointing in the right direction and making random noises. As a result, General von Winespear was completely unprepared to face an enemy who was ready for him.

The approach 'find the elves, kill the elves' proved to be a total failure. The second step failed rather spectacularly, while the first one was executed poorly. It wouldn't have been too much of a problem if there weren't any elves elsewhere, but on this particular occasion there were. Where they had been hiding when the army was approaching, nobody knew. Now they were positioned right behind the main force, having a perfect shot at the forces that weren't currently being slaughtered in the Grove of Fun.

The elves weren't numerous, but they shot well. They aimed for the cavalry first. The horses didn't appreciate being shot at. They showed it by throwing down the riders and trampling them, as well as everyone else in their way. They weren't picky about who to trample. The soldiers also didn't react too well to being shot at, and even worse to being trampled by horses that were supposed to be on their side. As a result the Awesome Army got awesomely disorganised awesomely fast.

General von Winespear had no idea what to do. Neither he nor his horse were wounded yet and he intended to keep it this way. He also really didn't want to lose the battle. "Charge!" he screamed. "Attack! Stop dying!" Unfortunately, the horsemen weren't really able to charge at the moment. Some were preoccupied with trying to stay on their horses, some were chasing their horses, and some were chased by their horses. As for the other order, everyone wanted to follow it, but unfortunately it was getting more and more difficult to do that.

"Archers! Fire at those other archers!" This wasn't a bad idea, but the vicinity of panicking horses somewhat distracted the archers. Genodorius looked around in desperation. One of his mages was nearby, dismounted, but still alive. He rode up to him. The mage was grabbed, lifted by his collar, and shaken quite a bit. "You! Mage person! Do something! Summon... something... wombats! Wait! No! Tigers! Flying tigers! On fire!"

The poor mage was as confused as anyone else. He was having a bad day. He was shot at, fell from his horse, barely escaped being trodden on by that very horse and also a few others, and now his commander demanded flaming tigers from him. "Uh... no tigers, no lord, can't do!"

"Tigers! NOW!" Genodorius insisted. "Or lions! Pumas! Thunderstorms! Lava creatures! Manticores! Jelly...aaargh!" His desperate litany of things to summon was suddenly interrupted by an arrow, which narrowly missed the mage and hit him right in the eye. He let go of the mage, clutched his face, and fell down screaming.

The mage was still in shock when Roseduck dismounted next to him and helped him to get up. "Can you do anything useful?" he asked.

"Uh?" The mage wasn't too communicative. It was quite understandable. Seeing the High Lord Commander shot right in the face was likely to have that effect on people.

"We need to kill those elves or distract them somehow," Roseduck explained slowly. "Or we will die."

"Right. Right. Mist. I can do mist."

"Great. Do it. Now!" The mage hastily murmured some words, waved his hands, chirped like a little bird, and released some bad smell. That last part might have had less to do with the spell and more to do with his state of mind. Nevertheless, the air in the area started to get foggy.

"All right. FORM UP! PREPARE TO RETREAT! PREPARE TO RETREAT!" Roseduck shouted as loud as he could. He didn't have a strong voice, but whoever heard him, obeyed. Nobody cared who was formally in command anymore. The order got repeated. Soldiers liked this order very much. "Now, fire. Can you do some fire?" he asked the mage.

"Yes. A bit."

"So try to put that grove on fire a bit."

A small fireball hit the grove. The mage was way too weak to cause serious damage, but the fire served its purpose. The elves got distracted. A few of their beloved trees were burning. It was very painful for them, especially for those sitting right in the burning trees.

Roseduck got back on his horse. "Get archers and footmen on the horses! We're moving out!" He briefly considered what direction for retreat to give. Given that the wizard's mist was pretty good and visibility was dropping quickly... "That way!" He simply pointed in direction that was away from either group of elves. "Repeat the gesture!" The other horsemen also started pointing in that direction. "Retreat!"

The retreat was somewhat successful. Roseduck led the decimated army home. Of course, the Emperor wasn't happy. He demanded answers. It was the most crushing defeat his Awesome Army had suffered in years. What was supposed to be a 'group of elves' killed nearly half of the troops and drove away the rest.

Roseduck, as the most senior officer alive, was the one to answer for that. He eloquently explained how the late High Lord Commander had commanding skills of a distracted prairie

dog. Up to that point, Roseduck was neither liked nor disliked by the powerful nobles. Mostly because they didn't notice him. Now they did.

Winespear's friends and relatives obviously didn't appreciate the report much. Nor did the other lords, even Winespear's enemies. They were uncomfortable with the idea of a minor noble claiming to be a better commander than a descendant of an old and influential noble family. If someone was going to badmouth an important lord, it should be another important lord.

There were angry whispers about disgrace and execution. The Emperor just asked questions and listened and asked more questions... and a few other survivors were questioned... and in the end Eneumerius Roseduck was promoted to the rank of General and appointed as the new High Lord Commander. That surprised everyone around, including Roseduck himself. Was it because he had convinced the Emperor of his skills and knowledge? Or maybe the Emperor simply wanted to annoy the gathered lords? Or maybe the only reason was that a new High Lord Commander was needed and Roseduck was conveniently at hand? Perhaps some combination of these. He didn't know and he would never know. In any case, his life in that moment had changed, mostly for the better.

Amongst the many things that changed for him, one of the important ones was the change in his relationship with the High Lords. Or rather the emergence of such relationship. Now they knew about his existence. And they weren't too happy about it. Furthermore, he was supposed to be one of them, which upset them even more. Especially Duke Thinoak, who was a close relative of the deceased General Winespear.

As long as the Emperor was alive, nobody dared to challenge his choice of the High Lord Commander. But now the Emperor was dead. Still, Roseduck had some time left. Assassinating the High Lord Commander was a high treason. It was the only crime still treated seriously even by the most powerful nobles. Unfortunately, a new Emperor would surely pick a new High Lord Commander. After that Roseduck would be fair game. Maybe if he was lucky, he would be left alone to enjoy early retirement. If he wasn't that lucky, he would not be left alone and instead he would become an early corpse, which he most certainly wouldn't enjoy. He didn't trust his luck.

The worst part was that it was common knowledge he was going down. Naturally, nobody wanted to go down with him, therefore he couldn't count on any sort of loyalty from his underlings. They would carry out his orders, of course, but there was absolutely no guarantee they would keep important information to themselves. Only ones he could trust were Vannard and Saalteinamariva, and only because they had no other possible employers. No one else wanted to hire an insolent homicidal maniac, and a female mage who also was an insolent homicidal maniac. The problem with both of them was that they were powerful, insubordinate, and, well, homicidal. Either of them could turn against him at any point and for any reason. Or for absolutely no reason at all. They could also turn against each other, this time for real. And they still were his most trustworthy allies. It really showed how bad his situation was.

Roseduck's other worry was the Hero. As far as he knew, there had been no Heroes in this part of the world for at least few centuries. He had some knowledge about them, but not as much as he would have liked. Perhaps it was a good time to educate himself more. He really doubted that appearance of a Hero at this time was a coincidence. If he really was a Hero, that is.

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Arthaxiom arrived at his destination. The entrance of the cave was here. It was big. Really, really big. It gave some clue about how large the beast living inside could be. Somewhere along the lines of biting the paladin in half. Arthaxiom wasn't worried at all. Considering whether he can defeat the beast or not didn't even cross his mind. He knew that he could. It was a part of being a Hero.

The paladin briefly considered rushing into the cave with his sword drawn. He decided against it. In front of the cave there was a nice big glade. It would do well as a site of an epic battle. Now, to get the monster out... Fortunately, the hermit had told him what kind of beast guarded the sword.

"I, paladin Arthaxiom the Great, Deliverer of Light, Slayer of Evil and Wicked, Guardian of the Ancient Secret of the Holy Mysterious Summoning of the Mythical Archpegasus, Apostle of the Rainbow Sturgeon, Holder of the Hidden Antique Malodorous Anvil of Ancient Knowledge, Thirty-ninth Warrior of the Joyous Beige Dragon, Crushing Flame from the Eerie Enchanted Eastern Island, Turquoise Spearman of Heavens, Sword of Justice in the Gloom of Uncertainty, challenge you, the Eight-and-a-half-headed Minotaur Dragon, Terror of Abdynyfyland, Defenestrator of Goats, Devourer of Cows, Pigs, Horses, Donkeys, Geese, Meese, Turkeys, Aardvarks and Pineal Glands to a battle to death, without pardon nor remorse!" Arthaxiom shouted and bent himself in half from the effort. Now he awaited a snarl, a roar, he expected the ground to shake and the magnificent beast to come out to face him, with its eyes blazing, with smoke coming out of its seventeen nostrils...

"Jeffrey's not home, sorry!" a response came from the cave. It didn't sound like a voice of the mighty Minotaur Dragon.

"Excuse me?" the paladin asked, confused a bit.

"I said that Jeffrey's not home. He's on holiday. Probably devouring some aardvarks right now." The owner of the voice emerged from the cave. It was a rather short humanoid, maybe a half of the paladin's height, clad all in spring green. He was thin, with short dark hair. He had a sling tucked behind his belt and a trident strapped to his back. He obviously wasn't the Eight-and-a-half-headed Minotaur Dragon, nor any other kind of dragon. And he was waving his hand cheerfully for no good reason.

"The Minotaur Dragon's name is Jeffrey?!" Arthaxiom was surprised by that. He was surprised by very many things in this situation, but this one surprised him the most. He simply didn't feel that *Jeffrey* was a proper name for a fearsome beast.

"Well, no, not really. But it takes 15 minutes to say his real name, and last time he tried that, I almost drowned in spittle."

"Ah, right." The green fellow's explanation made some sense. "Well, who are you then?"

"I am Alexander the dwarf. I'm Jeffrey's temporary replacement."

"A dwarf?!" The paladin was even more confused.

"Yes, a dwarf. What, can't you recognise a dwarf from not a long way away?! Am I too tall?"

"Well, no, but... you have no beard," Arthaxiom explained apologetically. "And you are quite thin. And you are not wearing armour. Also, no axe. And the name..."

"All right, all right!" Alexander interrupted. "Yes, it's all true! Do you think that every dwarf is a stout short dude with a beard, who hangs around wearing armour, brandishing an axe, drinking a lot of beer and looking for a fight?"

The paladin scratched his helmet with his gauntlet. "Uhm... yes. Yes I do."

"Erminous stereotypes!" The dwarf was quite irritated by not being considered to be dwarfy enough. "I don't do any of these, and I'm still a dwarf! I wear green clothes, I'm thin, I don't drink beer, I shave my beard regularly, and I don't carry an axe! I have a trident instead." He demonstrated his trident and gave it a spin.

"Uhhh... do you have a bow too, maybe?" Arthaxiom asked doubtfully.

"Don't be ridiculous!" the dwarf scolded him. "Did a swamp owl eat your brain? I am way too short to use a bow properly. But I have a sling!"

Alexander crouched, dropped his trident, grabbed a stone from the ground, took out the sling from behind his belt and shot the stone at the paladin. The stone hit his helmet with a clang.

"You do indeed," Arthaxiom commented.

"And I'm pretty good with it." Another stone hit the paladin's helmet.

"Yes, I see. You can stop now," the paladin suggested, but yet another stone flew towards him.

"Three in a row!" the dwarf exclaimed enthusiastically.

"Stop that!"

"Sorry, I got carried away," Alexander apologised.

"All right. Shall we now have an epic battle for the Shining Slaughtering Sword of the Silver Sun?" the paladin asked.

"Oh, there's no need to do that! You want that old piece of junk? Wait a second, and I'll get it for you!" The dwarf ran back into the cave. Arthaxiom felt strangely disappointed and unsatisfied. It was so long since he had a chance to prove his skills! The ogres ran away, the Eight-and-a-half-headed Minotaur Dragon went on holiday... But wait! Maybe that dwarf has no intention of giving him the sword! Maybe right now he is activating the most devious traps ever designed, releasing dangerous monsters, hiding behind secret doors...

"I'm back!" the dwarf shouted, waking Arthaxiom up from his daydream, in which he was currently jumping over a chasm (in full armour of course) while slicing a giant bat in half in mid-flight. "Here you go. The Shining Slaughtering Sword of Some Silly Esses." He gave the sword to the paladin and took a note out of his pocket. "Wielder of this sword will not hold the manufacturer liable in case of self-inflicted injuries, and also in case of having the sword taken away from him slash her and then getting injured with it," he read. "Avoid contact with

acid, lava and goblin urine. Warranty void if the blade is separated from the hilt. Best to clean with alluring amaranth algae."

Arthaxiom didn't pay attention to any of that. He threw away his old sword and held the shining blade, admiring its beauty. Then he took off his helmet and knelt on the ground.

"I thank thee, gods, for this mighty weapon!" he prayed. "I thank thee, Mythical Archpegasus, for leading me faultlessly to my destination! I thank thee, Rainbow Sturgeon, for giving my arms strength and my heart courage, so that I did not falter or doubt myself! I thank thee, Joyous Beige Dragon, for giving me wisdom and knowledge required to complete my holy task!" When the prayer was finished, he kissed the blade of the Shining Sword. Alexander grimaced in disgust.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," he said. "Jeffrey used it as a toothpick."

Arthaxiom's eyes suddenly went wide and his face turned green. The dwarf watched with amusement as the paladin dropped the sword and ran towards the nearby bushes.

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The village of Purpledonkey was very similar to Stinkybadger. The main difference was a presence of a dead donkey instead of a dead badger. The donkey stank no less than its counterpart, but additionally it was dyed purple. Vannard came to a conclusion that colour overrides smell when it comes to village signs. Also, since apparently such signs were common in this region, he briefly regretted that he wouldn't be visiting Hornygoat. That one's sign could be most peculiar.

Luckily for both parties, the mayor of Purpledonkey didn't insist on small talk. Even more luckily, he had information about the paladin.

"Some armoured guy visited our local inn one day. Rambled about holy quests and such."

That could be him, all right. But not necessarily. Vannard had no idea if armoured guys rambling about holy quests were a common occurrence in these parts.

"Did he say what was that quest was?"

"He wanted to destroy a goblin village and visit a seer. After that he was going to defeat some sort of evil empire. He asked us to help him with that."

That had to be him. The assassin was surprised and even somewhat impressed. He had no idea how Ducky could have known that the paladin was here. Then again, he himself might have guessed it too, if only he had thought about it and had proper information and... something else maybe...? In any case all this thinking was boring and going nowhere.

"And what was the answer?"

"Some told him to get lost," the mayor replied. "Some asked how much he paid. The rest were too drunk to notice him at all. He called us wretched, cowardly peasants and went away."

"Ah. Most interesting. Where did he come from?"

"He came by the road from Sillysquid. Left straight through the field, leaving a trail in corn, that scamp!"

And now... time for distraction. Vannard had a bit more experience with that this time. "Was he by any chance followed by a flock of beavers?"

"Uh... no, I don't think so. But maybe... he left them outside, hiding in the darkness?"

"Maybe," Vannard agreed. "Or maybe he is not the person I am looking for. But if I were you, I'd check all the wooden beams in the village. Especially those holding up houses. If you see a beaver, kill it with fire. They are vicious. And now I must leave."

He left the mayor a bit scared and rather heavily confused. Overall, the visit to Purpledonkey went quite well. He acquired some information about the paladin, he avoided small talk and he distracted the mayor. Too bad that these peasants failed to put their own village on fire. Maybe beavers were not scary enough, or too esoteric.

What Vannard didn't know was that he had started a new rural legend. From now on, old peasant women of Purpledonkey would scare children with tales about a mysterious knight who comes at night, surrounded by beavers. Beavers who chew off legs of naughty children. Needless to say, the children were less than impressed and the old women made themselves look sillier than usual. The legend died after a week.

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Alexander waited patiently while the paladin was emptying his stomach. Finally, Arthaxiom emerged from the bushes. He wasn't looking too well. "I should have cleaned it before kissing it," he stated.

"Famous last words," Alexander replied. The Hero gave him a dirty look.

"By the way, why do you need that sword?" the dwarf asked, just to change the topic. "Just between us, it's awfully unwieldy, you know. And that ornamental hilt... I stabbed myself in the hand with it a couple of times. It's not practical. What's it shaped like, some kind of weirdo eagle?"

The paladin examined the hilt. Indeed, it looked like some strange avian creature. The creature seemed to have a few wings too many. Tips of its feathers were sharp, a danger for an unwary wielder. Arthaxiom had no idea what the creature was. "It is no weirdo eagle, silly dwarf! It is shaped like the magnificent Mythical Archpegasus!"

The dwarf didn't feel all that silly for not recognising a creature he had never heard about. "Are you sure about that?"

"Well, no, but it is logical. My new Heroic sword cannot have a 'weirdo eagle' as a hilt, can it?"

"I don't know? Can it?"

"Of course it cannot! Do you not know anything?"

"I don't know much about heroic swords and weirdo eagles," Alexander admitted.

"It is Heroic. With capital H," Arthaxiom corrected. "It is not a plain chunk of steel with a pointy end, like my old sword. It does not have a weirdo eagle as a hilt. It has the Mythical Archpegasus as a hilt! It is shiny! It has a glorious name! Truly a weapon for a Hero."

"So you came all the way here for this sword just because it is pretty and has a name?"

"No! Well... yes," the paladin admitted. "It is a Heroic thing. I am supposed to use it."

"Ah. Suit yourself. But I wouldn't say it looks menacing or anything. You think it's any good in a fight?"

"Of course it is! It has a name and a hermit pointed me towards it!"

"Ah. Right. Silly me indeed."

"I see you finally get it," Arthaxiom said. He didn't spot the sarcasm. Heroes as a rule aren't good sarcasm spotters.

"So now that you have the sword, what are you going to do?"

"I will wield the Shining Slaughtering Sword of the Silver Sun and continue on my mission to defeat the Empire of Evil in order to bring peace, justice and freedom to the world! And I surely will commit many lesser Heroic deeds on the way! Will you join me? Future generations will compose poems about our quest! And sing about us at the campfires! And..."

"All right, all right, I get the idea!" the dwarf interrupted. "I'll join you, why not. I was getting bored of guarding this cave anyway. Since the sword is no longer there... Actually, only now I'm beginning to realise how stupid this whole thing was!"

"Why?" the paladin asked. "Guarding an artefact in a cave for a Hero to come and acquire it after a glorious battle makes a lot of sense."

"Yes, it does. If you are a Hero," Alexander replied. "If you are a guardian, not so much."

"I do not think I see what you mean."

"I was just sitting there, waiting for someone to come and kill me. Crappy job if you ask me. Can't imagine doing it full time."

"Someone has to."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why? You cannot have undefended artefacts just lying around! Anyone could simply take them!"

"But they don't. Jeffrey told me he had no visitors for the last few centuries or so."

"But he could have!"

"But he didn't!"

"But he could have!"

"But he didn't!"

"But imagine if he was not here and someone came and took the sword!"

"You just did. Your point?"

This conversation wasn't going well. The paladin helplessly looked at his sword. Then at the dwarf. Then at his sword again. Then at the dwarf again. "But I was supposed to!"

"So it's okay if you take the sword, but not okay for anyone else?"

"Yes! No! I mean, it is not desirable to have an artefact undefended, but since I am a Hero, I would have claimed it anyway..."

"Yeah, right," the dwarf muttered. He didn't feel like elaborating on the fact that even Jeffrey's half-head's mouth was big enough to eat Arthaxiom in one bite.

"...and I cannot be blamed for the fact that the guardian was absent and his replacement was unwilling to fight."

"Because I'd end up dead and you'd get the sword anyway!"

"While that is undoubtedly true, I really cannot applaud the lack of effort."

"And yet you want me to come with you?"

"You do not look a gift sidekick in the mouth."

"Hey, I think something got stuck in my teeth. Could you take a look?"

"Of course." Arthaxiom bent over and took a peek into the dwarf's open mouth.

"Aha! See? You do look a gift sidekick in the mouth!"

"You tricked me! This is no time for that!"

"There is always time for a good joke."

"Not when we have a quest to fulfil! Onwards and forwards!"

"Oooh, we're going to have so much fun together! A quest! Oh dwarf oh dwarf oh dwarf!" Overexcited Alexander was jumping up and down as he followed the Hero on the path to fame and glory.

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Sillysquid was a proper town. Not a big one, but definitely a town, not a village. It had a proper town square, and a proper statue of a squid. There wasn't anything especially silly about it, maybe apart from its facial expression. Also, the nearest sea was quite a long way away. Any squid found around here would be very silly indeed.

The town didn't have a mayor. It had a lord. He was not a terribly important lord, but a lord nonetheless. Lord Seagull Sassysnake was his name, which irritated him quite a bit. It was

hard to be taken seriously when one introduced himself as Seagull Sassysnake, Lord of Sillysquid. At least he wasn't a Squire of Sillysquid. It would have made matters even worse.

Lord Seagull lived in a house located next to the town square. It was easy to spot, because it was a lot bigger than other houses. Almost like a half of a castle. Admittedly the smaller half, which was nibbled on a bit, and slightly spoiled from one side too. Maybe closer to a quarter of a castle, but still impressive, at least by Sillysquid standards. Vannard wasn't impressed. He went right in.

He was in a hallway. There were multiple doors there, and also stairs leading upwards. Nobody in sight. He looked around. The hallway was completely unremarkable apart from a few works of art. Any lord's house must have a few of those. So there was a sculpture of a man holding a spear in a curious way, a painting of a man holding an eagle bigger than himself, an offensively pink and rather misshaped vase, a painting of a five-legged dog brutalising a three-legged hare... Vannard was no art connoisseur, but even he knew something was wrong with some of these. Probably decent artists were hard to find around here.

Since nobody appeared to either greet him or chase him away, the assassin considered his next move. An obvious idea would be to shout, but he was against shouting as a rule. Shouting was not assassiny. He decided to explore on his own. Going upstairs was a logical choice, because the stairs were covered with some sort of red material. Covering stairs with a red material was something lords often did, although Vannard never understood why. In his experience, bloodstains were less visible on red than, let's say, white, but he doubted that was why the lords liked it.

He went upstairs. There were multiple doors. He selected the most lordly-looking. It had a handle shaped like a lion. A lion with a facial expression suggesting violent stomach problems. He entered. The room he was now in contained a clerk sitting at a desk and two guards guarding another door. This suggested that this door led to the lord's chambers.

Vannard assessed everyone in the room as non-threatening. The guards were rather large, but guarding in their particular case consisted of sitting on the floor and playing some sort of a board game, while their halberds were lying on the floor next to them. The clerk was a small, thin man. There were stacks of papers in front of him. He seemed to be totally absorbed by scribbling something on yet another piece of paper. A very typical clerk. Vannard had seen many like him before. Their existence seemed a bit pointless to him. Filling papers was all they did. What are papers good for? The only use for them he knew of was to make paper cuts, and he had always preferred to cause more deadly injuries.

Neither the guards nor the clerk appeared to notice Vannard, maybe because he didn't make much noise, or maybe they just didn't give a newt. It didn't bother him, but he had things to do, so he decided to announce his presence.

"You, clerk person!" he said as he approached the clerk's table. "I want to speak with the lord."

The clerk didn't even look at the visitor. Maybe if he had, he would have decided that it was in his best interest to help him. Or maybe not. "Do you have an appointment?" he asked. Meanwhile the guards got up in an attempt to look a bit more guardly.

"I do not," Vannard replied truthfully.

"So you cannot speak with the lord. Go away," the clerk said, put away the piece of paper he had been working on, and started scribbling something on a new one.

At this point Vannard decided that peaceful, non-violent approach was unsuccessful and switched to a different one. One he had a lot more experience with. "I do not have an appointment, but I have several daggers," he said pleasantly.

After hearing such statement most people would at least look at the person issuing the threat. Not the clerk. He was quite insistent on not caring about the visitor. "Guards. Throw him out."

"You. Get out," one of the guards said without much feeling. They were there mostly for show, very rarely needing to use actual violence. A big man with a halberd, wearing a chain mail, a steel cap and all that, was usually a good deterrent without a need to do anything.

Vannard only smiled at the guards. That weirded them out a bit, because people usually don't smile at guards who are telling them to get out. Well, one time there was this wandering masochist who had made it quite awkward for these particular guards. Especially when a few minutes later he returned, asking for more. They weren't looking forward to repeating the experience.

The guards weren't quite sure how to handle someone who apparently wasn't intimidated at all. The one who had spoken before waved his halberd at Vannard in a threatening manner. That wasn't his best idea ever. An eye-blink later he was lying on the floor and the world was spinning around his head. It took him a moment to realise that this nice gentleman in black had just wrested the halberd from his grasp, spun it around and hit him on the head with the shaft.

The other guard didn't fare much better. Although he had a moment longer to prepare, he didn't anticipate a vicious upward strike aimed at his crotch. His steel codpiece absorbed some of the blow's power, but not nearly enough, and thus he also ended up on the floor, writhing in pain. The halberd's shaft broke.

Vannard thought that killing the defenceless guards, however enjoyable, could make the lord reluctant to cooperate, so he decided against it. On the other hand, removing them from the vicinity was advisable, because allowing surprise attacks from behind would be really unprofessional. "Out of the window," he commanded.

The guards knew better than to argue. They half-walked, half-crawled towards a large window, opened it and jumped. Vannard expected some pained screams when they hit the ground, yet instead there was only a soft, mushy sound. He looked out of the window to investigate. "Ah. Dunghill. How convenient," he said, half to himself, half to the clerk. Now it was time to ask to speak with the lord once more. He expected that this small demonstration would cause the little wretch to realise the error of his ways, but apparently it was not the case.

"More guards!" he shouted, this time a bit more lively, with some silly glimmer of hope that they would do any better than the first two. Vannard waited patiently.

Two more guards entered through the door. They were armed just like their unfortunate counterparts and didn't seem very combative as well. They saw a black-clad person holding half a halberd and some blood on the floor. Also, their fellow guards were nowhere to be seen. That made them hesitate.

"Your friends left through the window," Vannard explained pleasantly. "You can follow them willingly or I will be forced to use excessive violence."

"Kill him! Kill him!" the clerk cried, but these guards weren't that dumb. Someone who had just thrown two armed guardsmen out of a window had to be taken seriously.

"We... will leave?" one of them said, looking at his companion for confirmation.

"Uh... it's quite high, you know," the other one replied, unconvinced.

"Do not worry, there is a dunghill below," Vannard reassured him. "Meeting with it will be smelly, but relatively painless. On the other hand..."

"Right. Right. So... we go," the guard said and both of them walked towards the window.

"Turn back! Turn back and fight, you cowards! Mice! Gerbils!" the clerk screamed, but it did little to persuade the guards. They jumped, and Vannard turned to the clerk.

"And now..."

"What is going on here?!" Another man burst through the door. "Who are you?!"

Vannard immediately guessed that this had to be the lord himself. The first clue was wealthy-looking clothing, and the second one was asking 'What is going on here?' when he could clearly see that guards who should have been there weren't there anymore, and that their absence might have something to do with an unknown man in black holding a broken halberd. At least he had enough brains to be wielding a sword when asking that, not that it would do him any good if he decided to use it.

"Greetings, you must be the lord of this place. I came from the capital to speak with you, but this silly person ordered the guards to attack me, so I had to defenestrate them," Vannard explained.

Lord Seagull pondered that for a moment. "I understand you had to defend yourself, but did you really need to cut off their... things?!" He seemed a bit shocked.

It took Vannard a moment to understand what was the lord's objection. "Ah. You're thinking about castration. I performed a defenestration, which is a sophisticated name for throwing a person out of a window."

"Oh. Well. Not that bad then," the lord decided.

"Indeed."

"So, if you bothered to come here all the way from the capital and threw all my guards out of the window on the way, I should probably speak with you?" lord Seagull asked.

"I would appreciate that, yes," Vannard replied. "But first..." He dropped his impromptu weapon, turned to the impudent clerk, grabbed him by the scruff of his collar and lifted him up with one hand. He squirmed and dangled his legs in desperation, but to no avail.

"Could you please not damage him too much? It is hard to find a decent clerk around here, you know," lord Seagull requested. "He often is nasty to people, but he's the only one in this wretched town who can read and write."

"Oh, I'll only defenestrate him too. There is a nice dunghill below, so he should be fine, although a bit smelly," Vannard explained, as he went to the window and threw the clerk out. The unfortunate man screamed during his flight. Then he screamed some more, obviously in pain.

"You said he'd be fine!" the lord complained.

Vannard looked out of the window to see what had happened. "I didn't anticipate one of the halberds being left in the dung, sticking up," he explained. "Your clerk impaled his buttock on it. I find this most amusing."

Lord Seagull joined Vannard at the window and they both laughed as the screaming clerk was being dislodged from the halberd by dung-covered guards.

Nothing bonds two men better than laughing at others' misfortune. Well, it is not entirely true, but in Vannard's case any sort of bonding was a success. Unfortunately, that didn't amount to much, because lord Seagull didn't know much about the paladin. Like every good lord, he didn't really care what was happening in his lands, unless it was really important, and sometimes not even then. A wandering armoured madman certainly didn't register as something important, a passing curiosity at best. Therefore, the assassin decided to talk with some less important people who might have paid more attention. He was surprised to notice that his visit to the lord's castle had some interesting after-effects.

"Ah, ye must be that nice lad who jabbed da clerk in da arse!" the elderly stable master said. "And 'twas right 'bout time someone did it, aye, mayhaps not exactly like that, but he deserved it, aye, pompous fool, ye know what I mean?"

"Yes, I do," Vannard replied. Not that he really understood, but apparently this man approved of his defenestration technique. Definitely not a bad sign.

"Aye, so, ye asked bout that paladin lad, eh? He was here, aye. Was a few nails short of a hammer. Wanted a horsey. For free, imagine that! Of course, I told him to have some fun with a rusty spear, if ye know what I mean. Wretch says he's on a qvest. A holy qvest, imagine that, m'lord! Lad looks like a cow sat on his face, and he's on a holy qvest! So he goes right to the nastiest horsey around, and says 'tis destined to be his glorious steed! And pats it on da neck! Lad has speed, I give him that. If he didn't jump back, he'd lose half his face, aye. So he says horsey's a demon, and me its cursed servant, and we are doomed. Doooooomed he said, aye. And perish in unspeakable torment, imagine that, m'lord. So he left, hitting his head on the doorway on the way out. Called it work of a demon carpenter, aye, m'lord."

"So, you're that guy who threw Imponderabilus out of the window. Good job!" The blacksmith was another person who was happy about the clerk's misfortune. "He thinks he's all important cause he's the only one around that can read and write. Nice to see him return to the dunghill he crawled out from. The halberd was a nice touch too, and a deserved one! He

was always a pain in the butt for anyone who had business with the lord. Now he has a pain in the butt of his own, and serves him well, I say! But I ramble on a bit. Yes, that armoured man was here. Wanted a sword. Didn't want to pay for it. Told me some gibberish about how that sword would help him bring freedom to the land and some other crap. I could've thrown him out, you know, but he ermined me off a bit. So I gave him a sword that my apprentice had made during his training. Not a good sword, not at all. In fact, I wouldn't have sold this crap to anyone, but since he wanted one for free, well, why not? You get what you pay for. That thing probably broke the very first time he used it. If he had a chance, that is, cause that armour of his wasn't too good either. Rust got it quite a bit."

"Right." Vannard decided not to mention that the paladin with this crappy sword and rusty armour apparently slaughtered a villageful of goblins. Unless he found some better ones on the way. The assassin didn't care much. It wasn't his job to figure this out. He was only gathering information. And his mission wasn't over yet.

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General Roseduck was slowly running out of time. The High Lords of the Empire one by one were arriving at the capital. Roseduck was well aware of that. He had eyes everywhere. Not that he needed them for High Lord spotting, anyone missing a High Lord's entourage would have to be blind and deaf. And have no sense of smell.

The succession talks were going to start soon. The process wasn't simple. The new Emperor would have to be no older than twenty, of noble birth, and as closely related as possible to the previous one. That limited the number of candidates somewhat. Fortunately, there were no silly rules about birthmarks shaped like broken bananas or stuff like that. Getting four out of seven High Lords to agree on a candidate should prove pretty difficult regardless.

This ridiculous system was a few hundred years old, when Emperor Cygnerius the Third had decided to create some sort of codex of law. He very imaginatively named it 'Codex'. It was a novel idea. Before the Codex there was no written law. The unwritten law was that everyone could do whatever they wanted to as long as it didn't upset anyone of higher station. And if two people of similar stance were in a disagreement, they resorted to traditional conflict resolution methods, such as direct violence, blackmail, assassination, bribery, or calling upon someone more important for help.

The Codex didn't change all that one bit. It nicely phrased all that instead. Unfortunately there were only so many words one could use to describe a pretty straightforward system, therefore some irrelevant laws were added just to make the Codex bigger and more important-looking. The problem was that some of these got relevant much later and proved to be absolutely nonsensical. Just like this one. At the time nobody cared what had been written in the 'in case of the Emperor dying without a direct descendant' article simply because the current Emperor had seven sons, most of whom already had had sons of their own. So nobody had thought through consequences of that article, which in this case involved a need for some people to make an important decision together. People, who usually disagreed on principle. Making two High Lords agree with each other was hard. Four, almost impossible.

Roseduck, as the High Lord Commander, was the holder of the only non-inherited High Lord title. The rest of them was passed down from the father to the eldest son. Or to some other son, sometimes. Or a cousin. Or to someone completely different in some cases, when the Emperor had decided it was time to give some other family the privilege of having a High

Lord. Other old, rich and important family, of course. All High Lords were descendants of old, rich and utterly decadent noble houses. Quite a bit inbred, too. A proud and troublesome group and sometimes a bit stupid. Quite often quite a bit stupid. Eneumerius hoped that they would be quarrelsome as usual. He was even pretty sure that they would. He was also pretty sure that in the end they surely would decide on someone, if only to stop having to talk to each other. He needed a better plan, and fast.

Roseduck was heading towards the Imperial Library. It was just an ordinary library, but since it was on the Imperial Castle grounds, it was Imperial by inheritance. For the same reason the old man who was running it was the Imperial Librarian.

"Eneumerius, nice to see you again! More reading about battles, eh?" Roseduck sighed. The librarian couldn't wrap his old mind around the fact that the little boy who used to borrow books about battle strategies and tactics became a High Lord and all that. Well, at least he stopped calling him 'Merry'. That had been most annoying.

"Not this time. I need books about Heroes."

"Reading about battles when little, reading about heroes when older? Most people go the other way, heh, heh..."

"Say 'heh' once more and I'll kill you," the General threatened.

"Oh no, you wouldn't do that!"

"I wouldn't," he admitted. "But I could ask someone to do it for me."

"You wouldn't do that too... but I don't think I want to risk that."

"Good man."

They entered the library.

"So, what kind of heroes you want?"

"I'm not sure. I think I'm more interested in those that might have been real, as opposed to ones entirely made up."

"Harmonicas, harpies, hedges, hedgehogs, heroes! Here they are! Let's see... Jack and the Brain Stick?"

"Please summarise."

"A small village boy Jack finds a magical growing stick attached to an old wooden doll. He throws away the doll and takes the stick home. Little does he know that the stick grows very fast when its owner gets embarrassed. So when a small village girl Jill tells Jack he's kinda cute, the stick suddenly grows so much that it stabs right through his skull and in the brain, killing him outright."

"Fascinating. What's heroic about this?"

"I don't know really. I'll better move it to another section."

"What section? Retarded stories?"

"Comparative religion I think. What's next... Fierylocks and the three trolls. A red-haired princess called Fierylocks gets lost in the woods. Not wanting to spend the night outside, she hides in a nearby cave. Unfortunately, the cave is a home to a family of trolls. Fierylocks hides behind three stalactites, but has to leave when the baby troll goes there to use them as toothpicks. Then she hides behind three stalagmites, but has to leave when daddy troll goes there to take a leak. Then she hides behind three stalagnates, but mommy troll went there to berate those. Fierylocks doesn't have any other place to hide, so the trolls find her. It irritates her quite a bit, therefore she drags them out of the cave and beats the living daycarp out of them until dawn, when they turn into mirrors. And not a good kind of mirrors, cause the princess looks a bit fat in them, so she drags all three of them up a cliff and pushes them off."

"I think I'll take this one."

"Thought you might."

"Next please? Some knights or paladins maybe?"

"There are many stories about the Knights of the Square Table. There were thirteen of them, and they always argued about who had to sit on the side of the table where there were four places."

"How quaint. They all were Heroes?"

"Well, up to a point. Let's just say that there was Sir Edric the Dragonbane and there was Sir Eric the Dragonsnack."

"Ah. Well, I'd take something about them. With focus on the more successful ones."

"Of course. Next, we have..."

So they went through the shelves. Finally, the General had a stack of books, amongst them such classics as 'Jimu and the Armageddon's Bride' or 'Big Bald Barbarian and His Handy Heroic Hamster'. He had a lot to read. He liked reading, but he wasn't looking forward to this particular lecture session. There was that nagging feeling at the back of his head, a feeling that soon he will want to stab his own brain with a stick. He sighed heavily. Some things simply had to be done.

He somewhat regretted that he didn't have enough time to read some interesting, but most likely unrelated titles. 'The Art of Albatross Selling' would have to wait, as well as 'Two Men in Black Clothes and Black Binoculars Riding Black Horses in the Middle of the Night'. Too bad. He had always been focused solely on books about real battles and now he realised how many gems he was missing.

There was also the whole subsection called 'Village Boy Saves the World'. Pretty self-explanatory. For example, there was "Village Boy Fights His Armoured Zombie Father and Saves the World". Details varied. Sometimes the boy was a girl. Sometimes only a kingdom was saved. Sometimes an entire universe, whatever that meant. Usually the title promised some ridiculousness on the way. Way too fat-fetched to bother with right now, but the General promised himself to read at least one of those some time in the future. If he survives.

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They were travelling through a particularly unremarkable forest. It had trees, it had bushes, it had birds... Not interesting for a Hero. On the other hand, very interesting for a dwarf. Maybe not for every dwarf, because most would prefer more rocks and less leaves, but certainly for this particular dwarf.

There was a nice path going through the middle of the forest. After all, one can't expect a Hero to hack his way through the thicket all day, every day. Arthaxiom was walking on the path, as any halfway sensible Hero would. It was the obvious choice. Alexander in turn did just about everything else. He ran forward or he lagged behind, he jumped around, he walked on his hands, he climbed trees, he poked random bushes with his trident, he slung rocks at the paladin...

"Stop that!" Arthaxiom scolded him for perhaps the hundredth time.

"Sorry," the dwarf responded as usual, and as usual wasn't going to stop. "How much longer do we have to go?"

"You have asked that..." A larger number of times than the paladin could count to. He wasn't going to admit that. "...way too many times. Do not be so impatient. We have only started the journey today."

"Yes, but I am bored already!" Alexander complained.

"Why?"

"Because there isn't anything to do!"

"You are doing something all the time," Arthaxiom pointed out.

"Yes, but it's not doing doing, it's more like doing looking for something to do. But there just isn't anything!"

"What is it that you are looking for?"

"I don't know! Anything! Some animal to play with!"

"There are many animals in the forest."

"Yes, but they run away. In the cave I had bats. Of course there's only so much things to do with a bat... but I could poke them with the trident, shoot at them with my sling, chase them around while waving my hands and screaming, hang from the ceiling by my legs while making squeaking noises and pretending I'm one of them..."

"I get the idea," the paladin interrupted.

"Yes, well, you know, the point is that they were stuck in the cave. Here, I try to play with something and it runs away. Or flies away. Or crawls away. Or..."

"That is enough."

"Ah. Sorry. You don't really need to know about those who jump away. Or dig their way away. Or..."

"Alexander, please!"

"Right. Right. Sorry. Anyway, no animals to amuse me. I was also hoping to find something. I don't know. Like, magical items or something?"

"Magical items? Do not be ridiculous. Magical items do not simply lay around in the forest."

"But you are a Hero, no? Aren't you supposed to find some?"

"I might be. But they will not be hiding in random bushes. I cannot be searching for them all the time. If I was, I would never finish any quest. If there is a magical item I am supposed to find, it will make itself known."

"Like, jump out of the bushes and kick you in the rear?"

"Well, maybe not exactly like that. But somehow."

"So I won't find anything?"

"Probably. But worry not! You are travelling with a Hero! Something interesting will surely happen. Something that will allow me to show my Heroism! That is what being a Hero is all about!"

"Heroism is all about walking around in hope that something will happen?" Alexander was doubtful.

"Not walking around, we are walking in a straight line," Arthaxiom corrected. "Also, there is no hope involved. Something has to happen sooner or later, because I am a Hero."

"Has to?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I do not know," the paladin admitted. "I... feel it. With my entire Heroic self. I am a Hero. Heroes do not simply walk through forests without something happening to them. Heroes do not need to search for adventures. Adventures happen to them, so that they can test their skills in battle, gain allies, find magical items... In the end, the Hero becomes powerful enough to complete his main mission. Which, in my case, is defeating the Empire of Evil."

"You are saying that something might happen to us at any time, even though this forest seems absolutely normal and..." the dwarf paused. "Attack of the undead squirrels!!!" he screamed.

"What?! Where?!" Arthaxiom shouted as he unsheathed his sword. "You will perish, undead scum, like the abominations you are!" he cried, while waving his sword around aimlessly. "I, Arthaxiom the Great, will cut you into pieces, and crush your unholy skulls with my iron boot! I will destroy you all! You will dissolve in ignominy!" The paladin was spinning

around, hacking at the air, screaming threats at the squirrels, until he noticed that Alexander was rolling in the dirt, laughing. "That was not funny," he said reproachfully.

"Oh yes it was," the dwarf replied, still rolling. "What's more, I'm not bored at the moment! Oooh, a butterfly!" he exclaimed with joy, got up and ran after a large yellow butterfly. Arthaxiom sighed, sheathed his sword and continued on his way.

Meanwhile, in the nearby bushes, the Magical Nut of Fertility also sighed with frustration. It knew it should have leapt out and kicked the paladin in the rear, but it was somewhat difficult to do that without legs. And the dwarf got distracted and ran the other way. Great. Just great. The Nut was pretty sure that its day couldn't get worse at that point. It was wrong. A random hare made it even worse by eating it.

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Many people had seen the strange, armoured man. Many had heard him spurt some random declarations about glorious quests. One boy had even seen him stealing an old shield that had been used to shovel cow dung onto the now-famous dunghill. Yet it took Vannard quite some time to find someone who knew where did the paladin come from. That someone was an old crone, who looked like a victim of a particularly vicious raccoon attack. She pointed him towards a village of Happylake, and promised him 'dooooom' if he went there. She didn't seem a particularly reliable source, but Vannard lacked any other leads, and thus he was approaching Happylake now. He also promised himself that if she had misled him, he would personally provide her with some 'dooooom' of his own should an opportunity arise.

The lake was not happy. It seemed rather sad instead. Perhaps it was an effect of the nearby ruined and half-burned-down village, but Vannard wasn't quite sure. He had seen enough ruined and half-burned-down villages (and even some three-quarters-burned-down) to be bothered by this. He only hoped that there was someone alive around. Certainly didn't look like there was.

He dismounted and chose a house at random. Well, not entirely at random. He chose a house that had a door. He knocked. The door fell apart. "Most interesting," he said to himself. Suddenly some unidentified noises were heard, and a hunched figure emerged from another barely-standing hut. It wielded a pitchfork.

"Begone, foul ghost!" it moaned and waved the pitchfork in something which probably was supposed to be a threatening manner. It was a rather sad attempt. It reminded Vannard of an old, toothless dog that had attacked him once. Probably. Maybe it was having an epilepsy attack. In either case it was so pitiful that he didn't even bother to kill it, and that meant something. To be more exact, it meant that he decided it would die soon enough on its own and therefore killing it would be an act of mercy. Vannard didn't do mercy. Unless it was funny for some reason.

"Drop that implement or you will become a foul ghost yourself," the assassin suggested amiably. The figure, which upon closer examination proved to be a peasant wearing some rags, was not suicidal enough to argue. "Right. So, is this the place of origin of one 'Arthaxiom the paladin'?"

The peasant cringed. "Don't thee say that name! It brings doom! Dooooom!"

"I'll take it as a 'yes'. Please elaborate a bit. And could you drop the 'cryptic foreshadower of doooooom' act? It is getting tiresome and may cause injury. To you, of course."

"Right, right, I'll be good," the peasant agreed and Vannard braced himself for another long and utterly boring story. "See these ruins? All his fault! We had a village here. Everything was fine. Peasants were drinking, cows were mooing, cats were meowing..."

"No need to elaborate on animal noises. Unless you wish to re-enact peasants who were screaming and bleeding."

"Uh, no, not really, no..."

"So please continue your exciting story."

"Right. Well. It started when old Revy was repairing his roof. His son Arty was helping him of course. For some reason Arty fell from the roof, hitting his head. A wooden beam fell after him and hit him on the head again. We thought he's done for, but no. He seemed fine, which was, well, weird. His body was fine, that is. His mind, not so. He said he was no longer Arty the peasant, but Arthaxiom the paladin, y'see. And a rainbow surgeon, and some other things too. We thought it would pass. Didn't.

Bad things happened next. Arty was a helpful lad, but after he hit his head, 'twas like he got cursed or something. Whatever he did, went very very badly. When he went to chop down a tree he hit a neighbour with his axe, the tree fell on a stray donkey, and a squirrel jumped out of the tree right in the face of a small child. He went to feed a cat, the cat fell into the well. He went to feed the pigs... well, y'know. Good thing they got stuck. We took the well apart to get them out. Then ole Rolfy went down there to get the cat out. He slipped, he fell, he broke his arm. In three places, no less. We got him out, and the cat, and then Benny fell in. All the way down. Cause he stumbled on that same cat. The cat fell in again right behind him and landed on his face. It was ugly.

We tried to do something about this. Our local witch magicked a bit. We think she did at least, cause she turned herself into a large turkey. Fell down the well too, aye. This time Henk went down there and tried to get her out, but she breathed fire on him. Nobody else wanted to try, so we left her there.

We wanted to hit Arty in the head again, to make him better. We tried a stick. The stick bounced right off and killed a cow. So Chegg threw a brick at him. It circled around Arty and took out Chegg's eye. We stopped hitting him with things after that.

We tried to talk him out of being helpful, but he insisted he has to work to earn money. He said he needs to buy a sword, a shield, a horse, and armour. So ole Gerold dug up his great-grandpa's rusty armour from his attic and gave it to that dolt, on condition that he leaves and never comes back again. And so it happened. He left and never came back."

"A beautiful story," Vannard said. "I almost cried. While it explains a lot of devastation around, it certainly doesn't account for all the damage around."

"Ah, yes, y'see, when he left, we threw a party. We were all excited that 'tis all is over and drank a leetle too much. Some singin', some dancin' and stuff. And someone barfed just a leetle bit into the well-hole. As you might remember, the fire-breathing turkey-witch was still inside, and she was a lee..."

"Say 'leettle' one more time," Vannard warned, "and you'll have a 'leettle' bit more holes in your body than you have right now."

"Ah. Um. Er." The peasant got somewhat distressed. "She was... a bit unhappy. She breathed fire. The poor barfing wretch was burning nicely, and he started running around screaming and putting everything on fire. And we were a lee... a lot drunk," he corrected himself in a hurry, "we didn't help, just laughed and cheered. He was a human torch, haha! But in the morning, we wake up, all hung over, and nothing is left standing. I thought I was still drunk. Then I broke an egg on my forehead, and another one, but it didn't get any better."

"Why did you break eggs on your forehead?" Vannard was rather surprised by this action.

"'tis our traditional hangover cure."

"Does it work?"

"Well, dunno, really. My pa said it does, my grandpa said it does, an all the boys said it does, so it does, I guess."

"Ah. Yes. That makes sense. Please continue."

"Nothing to continue. We buried the ones who burned to death. Everyone else just left. I stayed. Nowhere to go, too old to start again. And too lazy. Now I just wait here to die... GACK!" he stuttered, as Vannard's dagger struck him in the chest, right in the heart, even before he finished saying 'die'. "I... I... didn't... mean... now!"

"Oh. My apologies in this case," Vannard replied and removed his dagger from the peasant, who promptly fell to the ground. Then they both started their journeys: Vannard back to the capital, and the peasant to a hopefully paladinless afterlife.

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"Undead squirrel attack!" Alexander the dwarf shouted.

"It is not funny anymore," Arthaxiom replied calmly. "It was not funny the previous twelve times. Neither was the invisible bear-shaman, nor the fire-breathing turkey-witch, and most certainly not-"

"Chiiiiirp! Chiiiiirp!" something chirped and landed on the paladin's helmet with a clang. A second later a small skeletal head peeked into his visor. He instinctively stepped back, but that didn't amount to much. The skeletal squirrel chirped again and tried to reach his eyes with its little skeletal paw. The paladin tried to swat it away with his hand, but he was way too slow. He only managed to hit himself in the helmet. That stunned and disoriented him quite a bit.

The squirrel changed its approach. It sat on the top of the helmet and tried to dig in. Arthaxiom tried to hit it again, but to no avail. The undead animal was fast and agile, and the paladin couldn't see what he was doing.

"Alexander, help!" he called, but Alexander was having trouble of his own. A small zombified weasel was trying to bite his ankles. He was jumping around to prevent that and did a good job so far. He also tried to impale the creature with his trident, but was unsuccessful. In view of this Arthaxiom decided that the right strategy would be to change opponents.

"Ow! You carp-brain!" Alexander cried as the tip of the paladin's iron boot hit his leg instead of the weasel. "Use your sword, you dolt!"

Arthaxiom indeed felt like a dolt. He was a paladin, a Hero! He was not supposed to forget about his sword! What was he thinking, trying to kick that zombie?! He unsheathed the Shining Sword, but the weasel didn't wait for him to use it. It hissed and disappeared in the bushes. Meanwhile the unmolested squirrel decided to try the visor again.

"Augh! Get it off me!" the paladin shouted when the revived rodent remains appeared in front of his face and clawed him right in the nose. The dwarf dropped his trident, pulled out his sling, and fired a rock at the squirrel. The shot was true, the squirrel was hit and fell to the ground. It gave an annoyed chirp and followed the weasel before Alexander managed to grab another rock.

"We have triumphed!" Arthaxiom declared and waved his sword around.

"No we didn't," Alexander disagreed.

"Yes we did! We dispatched the sinister forces of evil!"

"We barely chased them away."

"And it was a glorious victory!"

"There wasn't anything glorious about that. They ran away unharmed, your nose is bleeding and my leg hurts quite a lot."

"I apologise for that kick."

"You know, if I was a human I'd probably have my leg broken now."

"I apologise again."

"No need, no harm done. We dwarves are tough," he declared proudly, but his nice green clothes somewhat spoiled the effect. "I just wanted to point out that an inconclusive skirmish against small ex-furry undead creatures does not warrant a triumphant speech."

"You always try to deny me my triumphant speeches!" Arthaxiom complained.

"Because you always try to make them! You wanted one after you killed that old and scrawny wolf yesterday, not to mention that hedgehog two days ago... Why did you even kill it?"

"It attacked us!"

"It simply stood in our way."

"It was looking at us menacingly! And it was huge. A giant hedgehog. Anything giant is a thing for a Hero to fight!"

"If you say so. But a slightly-larger-than-usual hedgehog isn't a thing for a Hero to make a triumphant speech about."

"And I did not make one, as you might recall."

"Only because I sang a jolly song about crushed tomatoes very loud until you gave up!"

"Yes, you were quite... persuasive," Arthaxiom admitted. "Perhaps you were right and that battle wasn't worthy of a triumphant speech. But today we did not encounter a random animal. This was a skirmish with the evil forces of undead! It surely deserves a speech!"

"I disagree."

"Just a little one. Please?"

"Oh very well. But make it quick."

"We have triumphed!" Arthaxiom started again. "A bit! We defeated the sinister forces of evil, even though they were rather small! The glory of our deed will resound for some time but not really long, and maybe a peasant or two will sing a short song of mediocre quality..."

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Arthaxiom indeed had cut his speech short. Mainly because Alexander threatened to sing about funky ferrets. Now the paladin was sitting on the ground and tending to his nose, which got scratched by the squirrel's paw. He didn't mind. Being wounded was Heroic. The wound was very minor, but it would do for a start. "That had to be doing of a vile necromancer," he said.

"How do you know?" Alexander inquired, while jumping around him on one leg, allowing the hurt one to rest a bit.

"What do you mean?!" The paladin was shocked and surprised that it isn't obvious. "Those were undead! They had to be creations of a vile necromancer!"

"Yes, yes, I know that. But how do you know he is vile?" Alexander inquired. "Or she," he added. "Or it, even. The point is, we don't really know anything about this necromancer."

"Of course he is vile!" the paladin exclaimed and got up, agitated. He also tried to give the dwarf a disapproving look, but it was rather difficult to use against a moving target.

"Necromancers are vile! Known fact!"

"And dwarves are...?" Alexander asked, calmly.

The Hero hesitated. "Well, short. Have beards, wear armour. Fight with axes, or hammers maybe. Good miners. Live underground. Why do you ask?"

"Am I any of these things?"

"Short. Not much else."

"Right. And yet, I'm a dwarf."

"To be honest, I am not entirely sure about that," he said, as the dwarf yet again jumped past him.

"What else would I be?"

"I do not know. Some sort of gnome, maybe?"

"Some sort of gnome, maybe?" the dwarf sneered. "So, what sort of gnome would I be?"

The paladin considered this. "A dwarf-impersonating gnome, obviously."

"A dwarf-impersonating gnome?!" This time Alexander got agitated. It even got him to stop jumping. He faced the paladin and waved a finger at him menacingly. "Now that is your most retarded idea so far, and that tells a lot! I am a dwarf, but I have neither a beard, nor an axe! The same way this necromancer doesn't have to be vile! You are stereotyping and discriminating! It's like if I said that all paladins are self-righteous and dumb!"

"Ah. Now I understand," Arthaxiom said.

"You do?" That caught the dwarf off-guard.

"Of course I do! I am a paladin but I am not dumb!"

Alexander didn't bother to point out the obvious flaw in that statement. Instead, he considered it a success that the paladin managed to more or less understand what he was being told. Now, it was time to make him use it.

"So you see, a dwarf doesn't have to have a beard, a paladin doesn't have to be dumb, so a necromancer doesn't have to be vile."

"But he became a necromancer!" Some stereotypes weren't that easy to overcome. "You have to be vile to do that!"

"Maybe he was lonely and misunderstood?" Alexander suggested.

"His creations tried to kill us!"

"All right, that's a valid point. Maybe... maybe it's only the necromancer's way of saying hello? Or maybe he didn't order it at all, and these creatures were just hungry or something?"

"And I still say it is a vile necromancer and that we must find him and end his reign of evil once and for all!" the paladin declared.

Alexander at this point gave up about making the Hero a bit more socially conscious. A necromancer had to be vile and that was it. "So how would you go about that?"

"Cut his head off with my sword, I think. Simple. Effective."

"I mean, how do you intend to find him? He can be anywhere. Or she. Or it."

"It is simple. We will follow the direction they ran away in."

"What?! That's stupid! You don't know if they are returning to the necromancer, and if they are indeed, you have no idea if they are going in a straight line!"

"That is what a Hero would do. That is what I will do. Alone, if need be!"

"Don't count on that. I won't miss an opportunity to tell you 'I told you so.'"

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The funeral was no fun. Of course, General Roseduck didn't expect anything else, but it didn't change the fact that he was bored. He had nothing against the late Emperor, but now the man was dead. He should be buried and life should go on. But no, it couldn't be that simple. It was traditional to wait a month so that all High Lords and other important people could gather and get bored together. And here they all were in the Grand Hall of the Imperial Castle, watching the re-enactment of the most important scenes of the Emperor's life. Those were being performed by members of the Imperial Mime Guild. That also was traditional.

The Grand Hall was grand indeed. It was made that big so that a lot of people could witness important state events. Like this one. Indeed, a lot of people came to say farewell to the Emperor. In theory. The truth was that they came to see the mimes, or to look at the lords' expensive garments, or to admire how exquisitely the hall was decorated. Nobody cared about the Emperor himself. They'd get a new one soon enough.

The General was seated on a dais behind the scene along with the other High Lords, as well as the High Priest and the Archmage. From there they could see both the scene and the crowd. On the other side of the stage there were ten rows of seats for the lesser lords and other important people. Behind them there were a few rows of guards, separating them from the common townfolk. There was quite a horde of those. As many as could reasonably fit in, and then some. A few thousands maybe, because the hall was really, really huge.

Many more were standing outside of the castle. Just because. They came too late, didn't get inside, but didn't feel like leaving for no good reason. They filled the courtyard, which was not an easy task to do, because it was rather spacious. For some strange reason they wanted to be there. Many of them were living in the capital city, so they only suffered an hour of walking up the hill just to see the outside of the castle. Others came from cities and villages further away to only see the outside of the castle as well. If they were lucky. Some could only see the backside of some tower, or maybe even just a stable. Somehow there was no complaining, at least not about not seeing anything of interest. There was general complaining about the weather and the harvest and the pig common cold that was spreading, just not about not being inside. They didn't mind. They were Participating, even if they ended up standing next to a heap of Imperial Manure behind the Imperial Gardening Shed.

The behaviour of the two groups was glaringly different. All of the lords were quiet and solemn, rarely speaking to each other and doing it discreetly. They all had their reputations to maintain. They also pretended that the crowd did not exist. The common people in the hall had no such worries. They pushed and shoved each other to get a better view. Fathers held up their children so they could see the mimes. People in the crowd cheered when they liked something and booed when they didn't. They laughed, cried, pointed fingers and discussed things loudly. People outside of the castle discussed anything and everything, only making pauses when there was particularly loud applause or cheering heard from the inside. Then they joined in. Nobody cared that it might have been slightly inappropriate during a funeral.

The General did his best not to show boredom and annoyance. The Imperial Mimes were very skilled, but it didn't help matters at all. A silent scene of a late Emperor's first word would still be boring, no matter how good the performer. Maybe a bad mime would do it fast and be done with it, but this was not a bad mime. He celebrated the moment. Roseduck groaned

inwardly. Of course, he didn't show his frustration with the show. His pose and facial expression suggested polite interest. At least he hoped it did.

After the Birth of the Emperor, First Word of the Emperor and First Steps of the Emperor came the First Unaided Potty Use by the Emperor which was at least mildly amusing. Wasn't supposed to be, but it is tough to perform such a scene in an unfunny way. Yet no one laughed. No lord or lady, no priest or mage, no bureaucrat or official, no guard or servant. Ability to hide any signs of amusement was a prerequisite to any jobs involving frequent being in presence of people of higher station. Alternatively, a complete lack of sense of humour did well too. The more important the lord, the less chance he would find amusing anything that didn't involve peasants being mauled by llamas or something. Of course, a lot of the townsfolk laughed, but nobody cared about them. In any case, individual reactions were barely heard above the general ruckus.

Roseduck was extremely good at hiding signs of amusement. Not even a snigger got away from him during the re-enactment of That One Time When the Emperor Threw a Burning Cat at a Maid. He found the mime playing the cat particularly funny. Unfortunately, each scene that followed was connected to one of the Emperor's later and more official actions, such as the Grand Opening of the New Imperial Bakery, the Emperor Observing a Fine Breed of Ducks, or the Inspection of Crops by the Emperor, were unfailingly boring. The General used this time to discreetly observe the other High Lords. It was the first time in years that they were all in one place.

Duke and Duchess Thinoak looked like a pair of whales sitting in chairs. Big, fat whales draped in purple cloth. In custom-made chairs. Neither of them could use just any chair, because most chairs would quickly turn into firewood under such weight. Eneumerius felt disgusted just by looking at them. They got fatter every time he met them. Each time he had thought that it couldn't get any worse, and each time he was proven to be wrong. How could people be so fat? He had nothing against fat people in general, but the Thinoaks were pushing it. They couldn't use normal chairs, they couldn't ride horses, they had trouble with a flight of stairs. Some joked that they were assassination-immune, because no knife would get through that much fat. He was also known for disregarding possible problems and then blaming them on others. Reportedly, he once blamed his horse for breaking under his weight. Since then he pretended he simply didn't wish to ride anymore.

Raphaelius Blueparrot, the SemiViscount of Halfcastle, was a tall, bearded man with a bald head and a vulture-like face. His title was a joke made by some Emperor of the past. It was the lowest possible noble title he could have come up with at the time. Little he knew that the descendants of the first SemiViscount would over the years grow in wealth and power to finally take their place amongst the High Lords. Old wounds still hurt. The SemiViscount strongly insisted on being referred to simply as a Count. Every time his whole title was used he got upset, and the offenders usually experienced some violence directed at them. The Count loathed situations where he couldn't exact revenge, and this was one of them. Whacking the Master of Ceremony with his own staff wouldn't be good manners. Apart from being annoyed with his title, Blueparrot often got annoyed with many other things, and readily expressed it. It even seemed that getting annoyed was a hobby of his. He didn't bring his wife with him, probably because she was annoying him, or maybe because she was getting too annoyed by him being annoyed about everything.

Next to the SemiViscount sat Marquis Lodovique de Shaggysheep. The Marquis was an old man, the eldest of the High Lords by a wide margin. He outlived his wife and some of his

children too. It was quite surprising that he was still actively participating in Imperial politics. Many had expected him to retire, pass his title to one of his descendants or relatives and go sit quietly in some nice room until he died. Most of the lords who reached that age did just that. He didn't.

The Marquis possessed a remarkable ability. He didn't care. He trained not caring to perfection. Whenever anything bored him, he was able to phase out of reality. Just like now. He sat there, smiling politely, and seemed to be looking in the correct direction, but his mind just wasn't there. It was barely noticeable, and only those who knew him well were able to tell when he was conscious and when he was just pretending. Yet somehow he usually realised when presence of his mind was really needed. In such moments he returned to the land of the awake, did what he was supposed to, and went back to the dreamlands.

Baron and Baroness Oxrabbit were a curious couple. He was tall, wide and muscled. She was short, thin, and looked like she could die any second. Or did it yesterday. Yet it was she who did all the talking, scheming, backstabbing and other political activities. The reason for that was simple: the Baron was an idiot. Not in the way many people consider their superiors to be idiots, simply because of their stupidity or incompetence. This one was a real idiot. He simply couldn't, or didn't want to, wrap his mind around any complex concept. Only things he did well were physical exercises, horseback riding (once he was persuaded that hitting the horse with a mace to make it go faster wasn't a good idea) and hunting (provided he didn't forget which team he was on). In view of this, his wife suggested to the other lords that they should deal with her, instead of trying to communicate with that oaf. After a few unsuccessful attempts, the oaf was left alone. He was quite happy because of that. The only lordly thing he had to do was attending official ceremonies, such as this one.

Earl Gevenarius von Blazingtree was the only truly religious person in the company. Many said that he was more religious than the High Priest himself. They were right, mainly because the High Priest wasn't all that religious when nobody was watching. While all the other lords observed religious customs just because they knew they were expected to, Gevenarius was a true believer. He had even shaved the top of his head for some inscrutable religious reason. This, together with his robes, made him look somewhat like a monk. A richly dressed monk maybe, but much less richly than the other lords. After all, he believed in modesty. His overreligiousness also made it unlikely for him to ever marry and sire a heir. Nobody minded. It was evolution in action, or, as Marquis de Shaggysheep once eloquently put, the main requirement for an omelette was possession of some eggs. Anyway, the Earl had enough cousins who would gladly fight for his earldom after his death, or quite possibly even before that.

The last lord was Hiwelthadt Philigree Squarewheel. This one's title was an even bigger joke than the SemiViscount's. It had been created by one of more recent Emperors. Philigree's grandfather was a Baron. The Emperor was a bit annoyed by this, because there were two High Lords with the title of Baron. Confusing a bit. So he said "Hey, I Want Each Lord To Have A Different Title!" and there were no adequate titles to give, so he used the acronym. Obviously, he thought that he was being witty. Because of the long-dead ruler's peculiar sense of humour Philigree had to suffer an absurd title. His father apparently also had a peculiar sense of humour, both in choice of his name and of the wife for him. Philigree never took her to the capital with him. Reportedly, she was ugly and insane and tried to teach rocks advanced mathematics.

As the youngest son, Philigree was never supposed to become a High Lord. Fate declared otherwise when his father and both his older brothers died in an unlikely accident involving a well, some goats, an unfortunately misplaced rake and an upset wizard. To the surprise of many, he did quite well on the top. His childhood had taught him that the best defence was offence. However he looked at it, his name sounded silly, his surname was an oxymoron, and his title was barely pronounceable. What's more, he was short, looked sickly and lacked a front tooth. The perfect target to make fun of. Therefore instead of waiting for it, he always struck first and made fun of everyone and everything in his way. It didn't make him any friends, but he didn't really care. The High Lords hated each other anyway, so no loss there.

Apart from the lords, on the dais there were the High Priest, the Archmage and the Master of Ceremony. The High Priest was a middle-aged, large, fat man, although next to Duke Thinoak he didn't look all that fat. He made up for it in glitter. He was dressed in a long white gown encrusted with gold, silver, precious stones, rare feathers, and more or less everything he could find that was pretty and valuable. His dress was easily most expensive and over-the-top in the hall, and that said a lot, given that all of the most important people in the Empire were there.

The Archmage, on the other hand, wore a plain gray robe. He didn't care about looking rich. He also didn't care about looking respectable. If he did, he would have decided against having his robe adorned with pink butterflies. There was also a small stuffed purple unicorn hanging from the tip of his pointy wizard hat, and multicoloured ribbons were attached to his staff. All of this was looking very, very strange, especially that the Archmage was so old that he made the Marquis look young in comparison. Roseduck had no idea how old the Archmage might be. Some whispered about a century and a half. Whether it was true, nobody really knew. He certainly looked old enough. His hair and beard were snow white and his wrinkles innumerable, yet there were no signs of old age in the way he moved. Most remarkable. Even more remarkable was the fact that nobody ever commented on the peculiarities of his fashion sense. People were too afraid. Nobody really knew what he could do, and nobody wanted to find out.

The Master of Ceremony was an old man with a long, white beard. He was wearing his ceremonial robes. They were intensely yellow with purple dots, but it was traditional, so nobody minded. He also had a sickly green belt, and behind this belt his traditional ceremonial hammer was tucked. A long time ago it had been used to hit a traditional ceremonial gong on certain occasions. The sound of the gong annoyed one of the Emperors of yore, therefore its use was forbidden. Yet, it was still a part of the ceremonial outfit. And so the Master of Ceremony ended up with a completely useless miniature ornate hammer.

The General himself wore his dress uniform, which was purple and covered with medals. A General with no medals is not a General, so he had been given quite a lot of them. Too bad only a few meant something. The Eagle of Courage was nice, and the Vulture of Victory not so bad, but next to them were the Parrot of Nobody Really Knows What, the Shielded Shield of Shielding and the Tripod of the Red Rooster. It didn't really matter, as long as he had enough of these things to inspire confidence in lowly grunts. And not enough to make him fall down under the weight. The things were dreadfully heavy, which was yet another reason why he was having the opposite of fun at this funeral.

He wasn't accompanied by a spouse, because he didn't have one. His marital prospects were somewhat awkward: as a High Lord, he could only marry a woman from one of the major noble houses. Anything less would be considered a misalliance, and the late Emperor did not approve of that. On the other hand, all the major houses considered him lowborn and unworthy, so arranging a marriage was out of the question. Unless the girl was stupid, ugly, or they wanted to get rid of her for any other reason. He wasn't desperate enough to marry one of these.

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The Imperial Mimes finally reached the last scene of their spectacle, the Death of the Emperor, or alternatively the Emperor Falling From His Horse into a Moat and Getting Mauled by Lions. Not an easy thing to perform, but the Guild was up to the task. The lions were almost lifelike. On the other hand, Roseduck once more wondered if the strict rules of the mime performances shouldn't be loosened a bit, because a horse just cannot be properly played by a mime. Especially a horse being ridden. It always came out somewhat awkward. Roseduck watched with little interest as the emperor-mime awkwardly riding the horse-mime fell down and got jumped on by a few lion-mimes. And the spectacle was over. Now it was speech time.

Just in case the mimes failed to bore the audience to death, each of the High Lords had to deliver a speech. To make matters worse, both the Archmage and the High Priest had to deliver one too. Nine boring, drawn out speeches about nothing. The High Priest started, by going on and on and on about how great the late Emperor was and how sad it was to see him go prematurely, but he also expressed the hope that his successor will be at least as good and maybe even better. Then the Archmage said more or less the same, but he kept confusing the late Cessorius the Thirteenth with at least two of his predecessors. He couldn't really be expected to keep track of all these short-lived, mundane Emperors. Especially if quite a few of them had the same name. The High Lords did their speeches next, apparently in random order, but each one of them knew why the order was such as it was. It reflected their current status in comparison to others. General Roseduck had to go last. He didn't mind. Nor did he mind the fact that he had to deliver a speech in the first place. It was just one of the stupid things that came with the job. A nice bonus was being the one to speak right after Baron Oxrabbit. After a very bad speech even a mediocre one would seem good.

The Baron's turn came. He didn't seem to be aware of that. His wife coughed. He didn't get the hint. She elbowed him. He failed to register that either. "Go make a speech!" she whispered angrily. Only then he moved to the podium. Philigree sniggered. The Baroness gave him a dirty look.

Those who had an opportunity to hear Baron Oxrabbit speak before knew what was about to happen. Those who didn't were in for a shock. After all, the Baron presented himself fabulously: a tall, handsome man, wearing a shiny ornamented breastplate on top of the finest clothes available. Strength and vitality seemed to radiate from him. He was like a young god. At least up to the point when he opened his mouth.

"Dearly beloved, we have gathered here today for the purpose of, uhm, departing our dearly beloved Emperor, into, well, the afterlife or such, because he's like dead a bit. But fear not, because in this hour of darkness, we can, well, wait for the next hour I guess. And hope! So it is less dark and more light. Well, that's the same I guess. But, you know, a great man he was! Awesome one even! But even the most awesomest of awesome sometimes die, because, well,

it is hard to live when you are, like, being eaten by lions and stuff. So let it be a lesson for you! Don't try this at home! And if I find any of you swimming with lions I will go there and hit you with a mace, dearly beloved!"

"Ye gods," lady Oxrabbit groaned weakly. More or less repeating what seven other people had just said shouldn't be hard, but the Baron decided to add in some variety. As usual. This time it seemed like a mix of a wedding ceremony and scolding his children.

"The downfall of the great man might give rise to a greater one even, one that would be with the Empire in good times and in bad times, in sickness and in health, in famine and in... uhh, like... overeating..." Roseduck managed a quick glance at Duke Thinoak, whose face turned somewhat red. Perhaps he would be considering some physical violence, if not for the fact that any display of physical violence between the two would be Baron Oxrabbit throwing Duke Thinoak, marking where the Duke fell, and then repeating and trying to beat the record. "...in flood and in drought and in locusts, and who would bring home the strawberry jam. Until death does them apart. Like it did, well, sort of now. Maybe not just now, but a bit sometime before, you know. When those lions happened to him. So, like this, but maybe not exactly like this. A bit later and not that violent. Yes."

Lady Oxrabbit paradoxically was happier when her husband did really badly and started stuttering, because that usually made him realise that it wasn't going well and he would cut it short. Today she was out of luck, as well as everyone else in the hall, because the Baron recovered nicely.

"Yes indeed! We should choose one who will be strong and brave and most likely lion-resistant probably, cause this helps I guess. No more falling from horses for Emperors, you know! We should make him ride a llama or something. A llama. Yes. Very unlikely to drop a rider into a moat full of lions. Never heard about one that did. Not like them horse bastards! That horse should be tried as an accomplice to murder of the Emperor and punished appropriately! I suggest mincing it into a meat pie! And I volunteer to eat that pie, so that it serves as an example to all other Emperor-killing horses out there! We could mince all those pesky lions in there too!"

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Kolmi was an Acolyte in the Damned Dark Druids of Doom cult. It was an evil cult, obviously, but Kolmi wasn't particularly evil, dark, or damned. Maybe a little bit doomed. He wasn't much of a druid either, it was simply the best employment offer that had come his way. The traditional career choice of his region was peasantry, but somehow he wasn't drawn towards that. He was too short and too scrawny to succeed as a warrior of any sort, therefore he tried for a more esoteric occupation. Unfortunately, a wandering mage said that he had no talent. A wandering priest didn't like his aura. A wandering shaman said that he wouldn't survive a fistfight against a bear. Kolmi didn't argue with that one. Finally, he got employed by the Dark Druids. Crappy job, but at least it didn't have any requirements. Sure beat being a peasant.

He started as a Chanter. Only thing he had to do was to turn up on time and chant. He quickly got promoted to Acolyte, mainly by virtue of being the worst Chanter in the group. Now he didn't have to chant anymore. Instead, he was assisting the Chief Druid with the ceremonies. This night they were attempting to sacrifice a virgin. Again.

Kolmi was the virgin handler. It meant that his job was to hold the end of the rope the virgin's hands were tied with until the Chief Druid was ready to sacrifice her. What could be easier?

The girl seemed sad and dejected. The perspective of being a sacrificial virgin often has that effect on people. She was supposed to be a beautiful virgin, but the cultists no longer cared about such details. It was hard enough to get anything halfway decent to sacrifice. This one was the best they had had for a long time. The cultist manual recommended a tall, stunning, blond-haired beauty, but a rather plain-looking, not too tall and dark-haired girl would have to do. At least she was young. And female. A certain unfortunate incident involving a transvestite was not to be spoken about. Ever.

The Chanters were standing in a large circle. Each one was wearing an exquisite black robe. Again, it was the theory. In practice, only the Chief Druid had an exquisite black robe. Lucky Chanters had to do with robes the Chief Druid didn't deem exquisite enough anymore. Unlucky Chanters had to do with whatever they could find that was dark and robe-y enough. Each of the twenty Chanters also had a burning torch. Torches weren't required by the cult itself, but the Chief Druid insisted on them. He had been insisting on them since he had lost half of his Chanters one time. Midnight ceremonies in the deep forest and people with a poor sense of direction just don't mix well.

There was a stone altar in the middle of the circle. In fact it was a large rock placed upon two smaller rocks, covered with a black cloth. Atop it there was a dish containing some menstrual blood of a female bear, which was in fact some regular blood of a male goat. Next to it there was a sacrificial knife, which, surprisingly enough, was really a knife, and not a sharpened stick. The Chief Druid was standing behind the altar. Kolmi the Acolyte was waiting respectfully on the side.

"Dear brothers in doom!" the Chief Druid started the ceremony.

"Dooooom!" the Chanters intoned.

"We have gathered here tonight to sacrifice this beautiful virgin to the Damned, Dark and Evil Gods of Doom!"

"Dooooom!"

"I'm not a virgin!" the virgin protested, but she was ignored by all but Kolmi.

"You are not that beautiful either, but we're doing the best we can," the Acolyte replied nastily, which wasn't his best idea ever. He didn't consider the fact that while the not-virgin's hands were tied, her legs weren't. She had nowhere to run, but she had a few other options. The one she chose was hitting Kolmi's manly parts with her knee. He screamed.

"Are you calling me ugly?!" she shouted in anger and knee-hit his groin again. He bent in half. And continued to scream.

"Acolyte Kolmi! Behave!" the Chief Druid berated him.

"Dooooom!" the Chanters chanted tirelessly.

Kolmi tried to reduce damage to his genitals by bending in half and covering them with his hands, but that in turn left his face vulnerable. The girl stopped kicking him, and instead hit

him right in the nose with her tied hands. The nose snapped. The Acolyte howled in pain. He dropped to the ground to protect himself, while she continued to kick him wherever she could. Finally, the Chief Druid realised that his helper wasn't going to do anything apart from lying on the ground and trying to shield his sensitive parts.

"Enough of this!" he shouted and stepped forward. And his head fell off.

"Halt, evildoer!" Arthaxiom the paladin shouted at the falling body. "Your days of darkness are over! I will cut your blasphemous head off! In fact, I seem to have done it just now!"

The Chanters scattered as soon as the Druid's head hit the ground. The girl was still kicking the Acolyte. Alexander the dwarf was staring at the paladin, who was still shouting at the corpse.

"Challenging him afterwards was not your best idea ever," Arthaxiom said. "It does not feel the same. Not so Heroic."

"Looks a bit silly too," Alexander agreed. "But you know, you gave him no time to kill the girl, or to cast a spell, or to do anything else. It has to be worth something."

"Yes. It does. But I am supposed to deliver Heroic speeches. It is a part of being a Hero, you know."

"You could deliver a speech to that girl we just saved," the dwarf suggested. "As soon as she stops kicking that loser, anyway."

"Now that is an idea!" the paladin said with enthusiasm and turned to the girl. "Greetings, fair princess! I am paladin Arthaxiom the Great, and this is my faithful companion Alexander the dwarf, or a dwarf-impersonating gnome possibly! We saved you from a gruesome fate at the hands of these misbegotten wretches!"

"I am not a princess, sorry," she replied, while still kicking Kolmi.

"Have no fear, princess, now you are safe from minions of evil!"

"I am not a princess!" she replied, a bit louder.

"I don't think you can break through his madness," the dwarf said, while Arthaxiom started his rant about Heroism and glory and the Rainbow Sturgeon. "By the way, perhaps you could stop kicking him? What did he do to you?"

"He deserves it! He said I'm ugly!" she said angrily.

"What?!"

"I mean, he tried to sacrifice me!" she corrected herself, seeing that the dwarf's shock.

"Ah. That explains it. Isn't that quite enough though? He seems well-kicked."

"I was getting tired anyway," she said, delivering one last kick to the Acolyte's kidneys.

"...and may the Joyous Beige Dragon protect you and your children, and your children's children, and..." the paladin droned on.

"What's your name by the way?" Alexander asked. "At least I'd like to know. I guess to him you'll be a princess no matter how many times you say otherwise."

"My dumb, stupid and retarded father named me Gaduria, may the owls defecate on his grave!" she replied. "And what is wrong with this paladin guy?"

"He's a Hero."

"...and their horses, dogs, cats, mules, sheep, anteaters..."

"This will be fun."

\*\*\*

General Roseduck was sitting behind a desk in his chamber in the Commander's Tower. He was listening to Vannard ramble about what he had found out. And about who he had met on the way and what terrible things befell them. Roseduck never knew how much of what Vannard was saying was real and how much was exaggerated or simply untrue. He hoped for the latter, for the sake of some random people who were in the wrong place at the Vannard-time.

The news weren't good. That paladin was a Hero indeed. Roseduck was pretty sure of that. He also was pretty sure that appearance of a Hero at this particular time was no coincidence. This spelled trouble, and he was in enough trouble even without that.

"Vannard, I'll be completely honest with you now."

"Now that will be interesting," Vannard replied without much interest.

"To put it short, I will be in some trouble quite soon. While I'm more or less safe right now, as soon as the new Emperor is chosen, some High Lords will most likely try to get me killed. I'm not much liked in the lordly circles, you know."

"Well, that's no secret, even to me. I've heard you being called a bastard, a fraud, an upstart, a skunking commoner, a misbegotten whelp..."

"Yes, yes, I know!" Vannard was having way too much fun with listing all the insults. "What is a misbegotten whelp anyway?"

The assassin just shrugged. "How would I know? Sound quite rude though."

"Nevermind that. As I said, the other lords don't like me too much. Especially Thinoak. I already got a rather nasty message from him."

"What did it contain?"

"Some insults and a promise of a painful death, obviously. What did you expect?"

"Oh, I don't know. Something more original. Five fish heads on a stick and a piece of coal, for example. That would totally freak me out."

"Now would it, really?"

"No. But it would totally freak you out."

Roseduck considered that for a moment. "Well, I guess it would. Definitely more than the death threats. Anyway, in reply I sent him a potato. That should at least make him uneasy."

"Not if he eats it. Which he will."

"It should make him uneasy even in that case, because it was spoiled a bit."

"How devious of you, Ducky."

"I'd thank you if you weren't mocking me. Anyway, as I said, my current situation is rather unenviable and I could really use your help. If you choose to be helpful, of course."

"Of course. So why should I help you? As opposed to, let's say, killing you and delivering your head to one of those lords who like you so much in exchange for a nice reward?" Vannard leaned over the desk, looked the General straight in the eyes and smiled nastily. Roseduck returned the stare.

"Nothing. Apart from the fact that they most likely wouldn't appreciate an unruly homicidal maniac as much as I do."

"And I enjoy being appreciated so much, don't I?"

"You enjoy being allowed to move around the castle. You enjoy having a room to sleep and to keep your stuff in without a need to threaten anyone. You enjoy having access to the finest knives our blacksmiths can produce. You also enjoy the fact that you're not being searched for too diligently after you murder some shady individual. Or fifteen of them, as it happens sometimes." Vannard didn't even blink. "Such a long-term agreement would be out of the question with any other High Lord, I'm pretty sure of that. Also, they are not known for their generosity."

"I see. Is there any chance that you are telling me this because you want me to help you and you don't want me to kill you?"

"Obviously. It doesn't invalidate anything I said."

"I'm aware of that. It is the reason I didn't kill you yet. I just wanted to make you squirm a bit, but you disappointed me, as usual."

"So sorry. Well then, are you in or not?"

"I'm in, I guess. Until I get bored, at least. Or annoyed. Or I stumble upon a black cat with white spots. Or..."

"All right, all right, I get it. So, back to the matter at hand. A good metaphor would be that I am in a tree and a lot of angry dogs are waiting below. I am safe, but there will be a moment when I have to leave this tree. You know what I mean?"

"Yes. My master once told me: if you fall from a tree, don't fall on the ground, because it is hard and unforgiving and you might break some bones. Don't fall on a king, because he might have a crown with pointy bits which may stab you in delicate body parts, and also some

knights might be accompanying him, and they might object to you falling on their king. Object by using their swords. Don't fall on a knight either, because an armour is a really uncomfortable thing to fall on, and the bit about the swords still applies, especially if he has friends around. Also try not to fall on a peasant, who, while better than the other choices, might be rather skinny and wouldn't cushion the fall too much. Such a peasant might be also carrying some fun farming implement, a pitchfork for example, falling on which might be extremely unpleasant. Instead, try falling on a fat merchant. They are unlikely to have pointy bits, and cushion falls quite well. Also, their guards are less likely to attack you afterwards. Especially if you share the merchant's goods with them. Or just pretend to share, and kill them afterwards, but backstabbing isn't the topic of today's lesson."

"I have some questions regarding your story," the General said. "And I will ask them, despite well knowing that it is not a good idea."

"Ask away. I am more than happy to share my wisdom with you."

Roseduck groaned inwardly at the mention of Vannard's 'wisdom', but he plunged ahead anyway. "So, how often do you have that many options when falling from a tree? And how often one of the options is a fat merchant?"

"Luring fat merchants under a tree you are falling down from was a different lesson. I must admit that the whole discipline is a bit... esoteric."

"To say the least. And did you, or your master, ever test this in practice?"

"The only time I partook in a somewhat similar experience was when I pushed my master from a rather high tower. Unfortunately, I am unable to say what would he fall on, because he grabbed an albatross in mid-flight and scrambled to safety."

"That aroused even more questions in my tormented mind. Let's start with the fact that you mentioned once that your master was a three-headed giant. I can't really see a three-headed giant being saved from a fall by an albatross."

"Me neither. My master was a small, green creature with grammar problems. Light enough for an albatross."

"So not a three-headed giant?"

"No."

"And not a one-winged dragon, like you told me the time before you told me about the giant? Also, not an insane ninja-wizard, neither an aged levitating porcupine, nor a pirate fairy?"

"I could have had many masters, you know. Or I could have lied a bit. By the way, you forgot about a particularly vicious bunny rabbit."

"Lied a bit. Yes." Eneumerius had absolutely no idea if the assassin was lying or not. Most of what he said was highly improbable, but on the other hand, it was also hard to believe that he made up all this. How could he even consider something like being an apprentice to a 'particularly vicious bunny rabbit'? Rabbits are not vicious! What could one teach him!? "One more question, asking which I will regret even more, but here it goes. Why did you push your small green creature master from a tower?"

"I was quite upset with him at the time, because he took away my rubber ducky."

"A rubber ducky? What is a rubber ducky?"

"You of all the people should know what a rubber ducky is, Ducky." Ducky apparently didn't. "It is a small, rather simplified sculpture of a common duck, made from a squishy material. It would make an amusing noise when squished, and could float on water. Nice to have during bath time."

"So... sort of a... toy?" Roseduck tried to make heads or tails out of what Vannard was saying.

"Yes, a toy. His name was Felix."

Roseduck eyed the assassin suspiciously. Did one of the most dangerous people alive just tell him that he had a toy duck named Felix?! It didn't sound like him at all. On the other hand, pushing his master from a tower sounded way too much like him. Vannard's face showed neither amusement nor embarrassment, so the General just couldn't work out if he was being serious or not. Then an odd thought struck him.

"How old were you then?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe five, or six."

"So you are trying to say that you tried to murder your own master at the age of six?!" Roseduck tried very hard not to appear horrified by the very idea. He knew Vannard was no angel, but such level of... cruelty? Insanity? Murderousity? It was simply unheard of. Unless... "Unless you are lying."

"Yes. Unless I am lying. He was very proud of me, you know." The General really hoped Vannard was lying.

"All right, the final question. How is your master's advice about falling from trees and the resulting conversation relevant to the matter at hand?"

"It isn't relevant. I just wanted to annoy you a bit," Vannard admitted.

"I hate you. Are you happy now?"

"Yes, thank you. Did I already tell you about that clerk I had thrown out of a window, who as a result of that impaled his butt on a halberd sticking out of a dunghill?"

"I hate you very, very much."

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Princess Gaduria joined the adventuring party consisting of an overheroic Hero and a hyperactive dwarf. She didn't have many other choices. Roaming the wilderness on her own wouldn't be too bright. Returning to her home village was out of the question too.

Not that it was a bad village. She just didn't appreciate the company she had back there. She was a bit too smart for her own good. Smart enough to realise that there might be more to life than having ten pairs of rabbitskin shoes. Smart enough to know that fermented goat's milk

isn't the best beverage ever, and that men who liked to watch other men kick a round object made from parts of a pig just aren't interesting.

On the other hand, she just wasn't adventurous enough to leave on her own. Therefore she was even somewhat pleased that she got kidnapped. Well, at least up to the point when she realised that her captors were even more boring than people from her village. They were only interested in doom, gloom, darkness and things like that. And their robes were just awful! Probably made from potato bags or something. Not to mention that they were going to sacrifice her. How inconsiderate!

And then she was rescued by the knight in the shining armour. Every girl's dream, more or less. Too bad he didn't have a white horse to carry her away on. In truth, any colour horse would do. Only after spending some time around Arthaxiom she had realised that if he ever had a horse, it probably ran away. And carried his sanity with it.

At least the dwarf seemed normal. 'Normal' as in 'possible to have a conversation with'. When he wasn't chasing squirrels, at least. Or doing backflips. Or balancing his trident on his nose. Or doing dozens of other things, because he just couldn't sit still or walk in a straight line like a sane person.

Yet, somehow, these two were the best company she ever had. This was a bit sad, but she wanted to make the best of it.

"So, what are you doing here anyway?" Gaduria asked when they stopped for the night.

"I am on a quest to bring down the Empire of Evil," Arthaxiom replied.

"What Empire of Evil?"

"Oh, you know those humans down on the plains, who built cities and castles and stuff there? They are the only empire around. The Empire of Stinking Star they call themselves, or something like that," Alexander explained.

"I never heard they're evil."

"He says they are." Alexander pointed at the paladin.

"I say they are," the paladin confirmed.

"See? Problem solved. Heroing is simple," the dwarf concluded.

"Indeed! I have found a magical sword, I have enlisted a companion, I have rescued a beautiful princess, and soon I will be ready to take on the Empire of Evil!" Arthaxiom declared, drew his sword and posed with it dramatically in the glow of the campfire.

Gaduria rolled her eyes. That Hero was way too Heroic for her tastes. That was too bad, because most likely she was going to spend some time in his company. Time to bring him back to reality. "Yeah? You and what army?" she sneered.

"Him and my army, perhaps," a deep voice from the shadows replied.

Startled, Gaduria and Alexander quickly scrambled to their feet.

"Who goes there!?" Arthaxiom shouted. "Fiend or foe?!"

"It's 'friend or foe'," Alexander corrected.

"Ah, right. Sorry. Friend or foe?! Or fiend?!"

"Fear not. I mean no harm." The owner of the voice stepped forward, and they could all see him now. He was very tall. At least a head taller than the paladin. Not including the antlers.

"Who are you?" Alexander asked.

"WHAT are you?" Gaduria rephrased.

The creature stepped into the light. It was a deer. A biggest deer they've ever seen. Unlike any other deer, it was walking on its hind legs. And talking. And wearing exquisite red robes to make it all even more confusing. It paused to pose dramatically in the glow of the campfire, and then it spoke.

"I am Deer Lord."

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Deer Lord sat with them and they spoke for a while. He wanted to send them on a quest. That instantly convinced the paladin of his good intentions. The dwarf already knew better than to argue. Gaduria didn't. "So, let me get it clear," she addressed Deer Lord. "You, Deer Lord, command deer. Every deer. Everywhere."

"I wouldn't call it commanding," Deer Lord interrupted. "More like giving suggestions."

"And yet, you, with all your deer, cannot handle that... Valkyrie Wolf. So you ask us, people you randomly met in the forest, to help you with this Wolf, and if we do this, your deer will help us?"

"That is correct," Deer Lord confirmed.

"And nobody finds anything wrong with this?!"

"I see nothing wrong with this," Deer Lord replied.

"Neither do I. Seems fair," Arthaxiom agreed. "It is a quest!"

"I no longer use logic around him," Alexander pointed at the paladin. "It just doesn't work anymore."

"But... if this Deer Lord, aided by every single deer in existence, cannot defeat that Valkyrie Wolf, how are we supposed to do this?!"

"What do you mean by 'we'?" the paladin asked. "I cannot take you. It is too dangerous. You must wait for us with Deer Lord."

"No way! You're not leaving me here!" Gaduria protested. "I'm not waiting for you in the company of a giant talking deer! No offense," she added after an awkward pause.

"None taken." Deer Lord nodded graciously.

"You cannot go. You are a princess..."

"And a princess goes where she wants! I'll grab a nice heavy branch and I'll be a warrior princess too!"

"Very well." The paladin sighed. Can't argue with a princess.

"So it is settled. Now, how are we going to fulfil this quest?" Gaduria asked.

"Heroically!" Arthaxiom declared, grabbed his sword, and posed dramatically in front of the campfire. Again. Gaduria looked questioningly at the dwarf. He didn't seem worried at all.

"I suppose so. Let's just go along with it. It will work out. Somehow."

"Are you suicidal or something?!" Gaduria definitely didn't share Alexander's optimism.

"Going after a fearsome beast without any sort of a plan?"

Arthaxiom decided to dispel her doubts. "Fear not, fair princess. While our lives might be endangered, it is for a just cause, and we will prevail, if such is the will of the Rainbow Sturgeon, the Mythical Archpegasus, and the Joyous Beige Dragon! And maybe, just maybe, the virtue of my deeds will make me look like a shining star of serenity in your beautiful turquoise eyes that are deep like the virgin mountain lakes!"

"Erm... what?!"

"I think he's trying to say he likes you," Alexander whispered, while the paladin carried on about hair like heavenly orchards.

"Ah. For a second there I thought he's out of his mind. Again," Gaduria whispered back.

"That's probably also true."

"And you're willingly travelling with him?!" She thought for a second about what she had just said and decided to rephrase. "And we're willingly travelling with him?!"

"Relax. It will turn out all right. See, we saved you because we went in the direction an undead weasel had run away in. And now you are a princess, because this holy oaf apparently doesn't hear it when you deny it. Or when I call him a holy oaf, probably."

"I heard this! I might be a bit holy, but I am not an oak!" the paladin protested, taking a break from giving compliments. "I am not any kind of tree. What is wrong with you?"

"Sorry. A butterfly distracted me," the dwarf apologised.

"Ah. Yes. It happens. Where was I? Fingers, I think... Your fingers are like pieces of rainbow bread, woven by elves under a pristine waterfall of..."

"Here he goes again," Alexander sighed.

"I probably should be flattered, but I don't think he's seeing me properly when he's saying these things," Gaduria said. "It's a bit sad. I'd really like to look like that thing he's seeing."

"You want to have rainbow bread for fingers?"

"Well, when you put it like this... I don't think I'd like to look like that thing he's seeing. Anyway, what did this Valkyrie Wolf do to you?" she turned to Deer Lord. "Ate one deer too many?" Someone had to inquire a bit. Neither the paladin nor the dwarf seemed interested in what this quest was all about.

"It... it sings. Dreadfully. It sings so bad that Duck Duke migrated with all his people. Ducks, I mean." Deer Lord looked terrified by just speaking about that. The escape of Duck Duke must have been a really bad omen.

"Duck Duke? How much animal nobility is there?" Alexander was curious.

"Oh, you wouldn't believe. There's Moose Marshall, Weasel Warlord, and let's not forget about Archie the Aardvark Aarchon."

"A serious case of aalliteration here," the dwarf japed.

"...and your toenails are like eyelids of unicorns..." Arthaxiom droned on.

"He's never even seen my toenails!" Gaduria protested.

"I doubt he's seen a unicorn either," Alexander japed again, but nobody seemed to get his jokes. He didn't mind.

"So anyway, where do we find this Valkyrie Wolf?" The princess decided to get the conversation back on track.

"It roams through the forest, singing viciously at whatever it finds. There is only one chance to catch up with it. Every full moon it can be found on the..." Deer Lord paused, lowered his voice and spoke with dread, "...cursed haunted forbidden cemetery."

Gaduria wasn't impressed. "Of doom?"

"Excuse me?"

"Is it a cursed haunted forbidden cemetery of DOOOOOM?"

"No."

"Good."

"It is a cursed haunted forbidden cemetery of PAAAAAAIN!"

"Ermine that."

\*\*\*

They were in the Chamber of High Lords. It was a special room for the Emperor to meet and consult with the High Lords about the most important decisions. If he bothered. The last Emperor didn't and neither did at least four before him. Therefore the High Lords were in the Chamber of High Lords for the first time in their lives.

Dust and cobwebs had accumulated in the chamber over the years. The Master of Ceremony had decided that a bit of cleaning would certainly be needed. Unfortunately, according to the Codex only the Emperor himself could order servants to enter. It seemed unlikely that he'd do that, given the fact that he was quite dead. Luckily, a loophole was discovered. The Codex specifically said that no one but the Emperor and the High Lords can see the interior of the Chamber of High Lords. Because of such a strange wording, the Master of Ceremony decided that servants could be in the chamber if they were blindfolded. As a result of his creativity, the chamber now was looking exactly as if it had been abandoned for about a century, and then cleaned by a bunch of irritated, blindfolded servants ordered around by an old, short-sighted man whose only area of expertise was protocol.

The Master of Ceremony was standing in front of the chair technically belonging to the former Emperor, and the seven High Lords approached their places. Six High Lords and one wife of High Lord Who Is Kept Away From Highlordly Matters to be exact. One of them was dragging a chair.

Duke Thinoak's place was the furthest from the entrance. Since he wasn't going to entrust his extra large custom-made and exquisitely ornamented chair to some blindfolded servants, he ended up dragging it behind him. He wasn't the fittest man around and the chair was dreadfully heavy, therefore he wasn't moving too fast.

The Master of Ceremony waited patiently. He would stand there and wait until the end of the world if the protocol required that. The High Lords weren't that patient, but not impatient enough to help Thinoak. The Duke himself was too proud to ask. So they stood around the table and watched the fat man sweat and gasp and struggle with his chair. Some were yawning, others were sniggering. The Marquis had that absent look of his. Even the annoying sound of the chair scraping the floor didn't get to him.

"Hey, Thinoak, hurry up, will you? I don't want to stand here till you start dropping acorns!" Philigree taunted the Duke, who just muttered something angry and intelligible in response and continued on his way. "What was that? I'd swear you said that you're practicing for the annual chair-dragging contest!" The Duke didn't respond. He usually did respond when someone made fun of him, but this time he was too focused on not passing out. Philigree's singing followed him. "Drag, drag, drag your chair, gently down the floor!" he sang, rather off key, but nobody minded. The other lords were enjoying the show. They were all perfectly capable of hiding their amusement, but there was no need for that. No onlookers here. No need to be civil to each other.

The Duke finally reached his place. His face was red and his breathing was heavy. Too bad it wasn't time to sit down yet. Nobody present would mind seeing him drop dead. Perhaps with the exception of the Master of Ceremony, because a High Lord dropping dead before the election proceedings had even started would surely pose some protocol challenges. Getting blindfolded servants to carry out the fat carcass would be a challenge too, a logistical one for a change.

"Let's get along with it, shall we?" the SemiViscount hurried.

"Very well. Now we shall check whether all desired, required and allowed are present and ready to take part in the proceedings to ascertain the matter of succession after our late Emperor Cessorius the Thirteenth, may he rule for a thousand and three years, who tragically died without leaving a lawful successor and left us like those orphans in a burning orphanage

without door nor window to get out, having to rely only on their wits and wisdom to come out uncharred from the predicament cast upon them by a cruel and unrelenting fate."

"Apologies, but isn't adding the traditional 'may he rule for a thousand and three years' to the name of a deceased Emperor a bit rude?" Earl Blazingtree pointed out.

"Well..." The Master of Ceremony started to reply, but the Count cut him off.

"Yes, and that ridiculous orphanage metaphor! Why did you think that we really needed to hear that?!"

"I love the smell of burnt orphans in the morning," Philigree remarked.

"When I was young, the orphans burnt mornings," the Marquis said.

"Young man, it is not about what do I consider rude or not, out of place or not. It is a matter of protocol," the Master of Ceremony lectured the Earl, ignoring the other distractions. "The proper way to do this was written down long ago, and as the Master of Ceremony I am responsible for upholding this way. If it means I have to use ridiculous orphanage metaphors, then I shall use ridiculous orphanage metaphors. The election proceedings are very important and have to be done correctly. Therefore we will do them correctly." Everyone groaned, some visibly, others only inwardly. Everyone apart from the Marquis, who didn't care. "Let us proceed. Duke Bartholomeus Theodoricus Angus Thinoak, High Lord of the Empire, are you present?"

The Duke was still catching his breath after his ordeal. Just his luck that he had to go first. "Yeah."

"Duke, please, the formal response," the Master of Ceremony insisted.

The Duke stared at the old man. If looks could kill, the Master of Ceremony would be turned into sausages and eaten. They couldn't and the Duke got nowhere. Outstaring someone who wasn't seeing him all that well was an impossible task, and the Master of Ceremony was ready to wait for the proper answer till one of them died.

"Oh very well. I, \*wheeze\*, Duke Bartholomeus Theodoricus, \*gasp\*, Angus Thinoak, \*wheeze\*, am present, \*gasp\*, well in mind, \*gasp\*, and body, \*wheeze\* \*wheeze\*, and ready \*gasp\*..." He paused, because of lack of breath.

"If you're gonna puke, please do it outside." Philigree just loved kicking the fallen. In the head or in the private parts preferably.

"...and ready to participate in these proceedings! \*gasp\* \*wheeze\* \*wheeze\* \*wheeze\*"

"I recognise Duke Bartholomeus Theodoricus Angus Thinoak, High Lord of the Empire. Earl Gevenarius Theosopius Leocadius von Blazingtree..."

And so it continued, with a bit less wheezing. One after another they replied with the formal ceremonial response. It went more or less smoothly until there came a moment all the lords were dreading. Some had seen it coming from quite a long way away and some realised it only when it was almost in their faces, but everyone was equally horrified by this. Everyone apart from Marquis de Shaggysheep, obviously.

"Baron Regedulf Solthyron Asrius Oxrabbit, High Lord of the Empire, are you present?"

The High Lords waited for Lady Oxrabbit to speak. In a very rare occurrence, they were all in a silent agreement that she should succeed. At the same time, they were well aware that success was unlikely.

"I, Baroness Lumilla Sywinge Indolencia Oxrabbit, am present in place of Baron Regedulf Solthyron Asrius Oxrabbit, High Lord of the Empire, well in mind and body, and ready to participate in these proceedings."

"This is highly irregular," said the Master of Ceremony. "What is the reason of the Baron's absence?"

"He is... not feeling well at the moment." It wasn't entirely true, although he would certainly feel bad if he had to sit there. He hated important meetings. They were boring and made him feel like a caged tiger. A rabid and hungry one.

"He seemed all right at the funeral. He gave quite a rousing speech. Did some disease befall him? Where is he now? Is he bedridden?"

The Master of Ceremony wouldn't give up on the Baron's presence so easily. Lady Oxrabbit was tempted to lie, but it was too easy to check. She had a feeling that the old man would insist on checking. "No. He is somewhere outside. Running or something. He needs his exercise."

"So he should be able to participate in these proceedings."

"Oh no, he can't, because..." She didn't know how to argue that, but General Roseduck came to the rescue.

"Because his brain needs fresh air."

"It would get all damp and mushy otherwise!" the Hiwelthadt chimed in.

"We should allow him to recuperate and pray for his well-being," Earl Blazingtree added.

"Nonsense," the Master of Ceremony decided. "He has his duty to the Empire and he should fulfil it unless he is seriously sick. I do not believe he is. I am sorry, milady, but you are not allowed here. We shall continue when the Baron is present." The meeting was concluded by a collective groan.

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"A Heroic paladin, a little bit less Heroic dwarf and a somewhat reluctantly Heroic self-appointed warrior-princess were crossing some nondescript forest on their way to the cursed haunted forbidden cemetery of PAAAAAAIN where they were hoping to meet their current arch-enemy, the fabled Valkyrie Wolf!"

"Alexander, please stop narrating!" Gaduria asked.

"The previous arch-enemy, the vile necromancer, is long forgotten, because it was concluded that the sole purpose of the small undead woodland creatures was to lead us to the rescue of the warrior-princess from the evil clutches of some guys wearing blackened potato sacks!"

"Stop narrating or I'll go warrior-princess on your head with my new dwarf-hitting branch!" Gaduria threatened.

"Sorry."

"So this is how this whole Heroism thing works? You just receive a random quest and then you go and fulfil it? No questions asked?" Over a week passed since she got Heroically rescued, but Gaduria still had problems with understanding the concept.

"It is not random," the paladin replied. "I have a goal that I am striving to achieve, and various quests are just steps to that goal. But yes, I look for quests and I complete them. Each one is there for a reason, even if we do not see it yet."

"Surprisingly, it works out for him," Alexander added. "If I tried that on my own, I'm sure I'd end up lost or killed or eaten or kidnapped by faeries by day two."

"Kidnapped.. by faeries?" Gaduria looked suspiciously at the dwarf. "Why would you expect such a thing?"

"Well, you know, it's like... There are these faeries. They hang around unearthly flowers..." Alexander began to explain, but Gaduria stopped him.

"Unearthly... flowers?"

"Yes, yes, unearthly flowers. You know, those that look like they are out of this world somewhat?"

"All right..."

"So, yes, they hang around unearthly flowers, and stone circles, and enchanted glades possibly. They lure unwary travellers by singing and dancing and card games and pine cone juggling and such. If an unwary traveller approaches, a fairy sneaks up behind him and stuns him by using a combination of fairy powder and a heavy mace. Then they put him into a wooden cage and annoy him with itchy leaves and however else they choose to. Until he goes insane."

"I think you have nothing to fear from them. You are already insane. And you, do you hear what he's saying?" Gaduria addressed the paladin. "There is something wrong with his head!"

"Yes, I do believe he is wrong. Unearthly flowers are more of a kobold place I think."

"How would you know?" the dwarf challenged him.

"I do not know. It seems to me that such knowledge is something that comes with being a Hero."

"And my knowledge comes from my dear old grandma!"

"You are both madmen!" Gaduria exclaimed.

"Oh no! I am a maddwarf!" the dwarf protested.

"Anyway, I have no idea why I am travelling with you!"

"Because it is your destiny," the paladin stated gravely.

"It's not!"

"You could have stayed with Deer Lord, you know," Alexander suggested.

"Yes, I know. His antlers made me uneasy. On the other hand, right now you two make me uneasy too, but it is a bit too late to go back."

"Why do we make you uneasy, oh enchanted flower of heavens?"

"Because you're calling me names like this, for starters!"

"Awkwaaaaaard," Alexander chimed in.

"And because you are always acting so immature!" she turned to the dwarf.

"More awkwaaaaaard."

"I apologise for my vivid descriptions of your person. Unfortunately, your beauty is so overwhelming that I cannot stop myself," Arthaxiom attempted to explain himself.

"So don't look at me if you can't stop yourself from calling me things like a rainbow-haired aether-nymph!"

"Even when I am not looking, I have an image of you in front of my eyes."

"That's probably the one where you have unicorn legs, alabaster hands, rainbow hair, eyes filled with stars..."

"Shut up, you!" Gaduria interrupted Alexander's list of her body parts. He just grinned.

"You should be glad that he didn't say you have mermaid legs, unicorn hands and hair of the majestic bald eagle."

"Very funny. But seriously, Arthaxiom, please try to contain yourself. Your compliments are creepy. I know you mean well, but you sound as if you were hit on the head with a brick."

"With a wooden beam."

"I'm sorry?"

"I was not hit on the head with a brick, but I was with a wooden beam," the paladin said.

"That explains so much!" Alexander exclaimed.

"Don't be silly, it was a metaphor. People don't get stupid from a hit on the head," Gaduria said.

"Actually, it was that hit that made me realise I'm a Hero," Arthaxiom explained.

"It had to be the Holy Wooden Beam of Heroism!" the dwarf exclaimed again.

"Really?" the paladin asked.

"Of course! It is a legendary artefact! And you left it behind, didn't you?"

"Stop pulling his leg!" Gaduria said. "He wouldn't recognise a joke if one fell on his head."

"A joke did not fall on my head. A wooden beam did."

"My point exactly." Gaduria and Alexander both laughed. Arthaxiom didn't see what was so funny.

"This conversation has no sense," he said. "Let us continue on our quest!"

"Excussssse me," something hissed, "but did you ssssay ssssomething about quesssstssss?"

They stopped and looked around. There was a huge serpent coiled around a nearby tree trunk.

"Are you a talking snake?" Gaduria asked warily.

"Ohhh, you are a ssssmart one! Yesssss, I am indeed!" the snake replied.

"So what is that quest of yours?" the paladin asked.

"Yessss, the quesssst. You ssssssee, I have ssssssome mussssshroomsssss. A mussssshroom farm. And there are thessssse badgersssss there, ruining my mussssshroomsssss. If you were to kill, let'sssss say, twelve or thirteen of them..."

"Most certainly not!" Gaduria interrupted. "We are not going around slaughtering badgers!"

"But... but it is a quest!" the paladin protested. "Quests should be fulfilled! This is a job for a Hero!"

"I am a princess and I declare badgers off limits!" Just to be sure, she used her ultimate weapon. She pouted and stomped her foot.

"You ssssstupid woman!" the snake hissed. "Can you not ssssee I'm trying to do ssssome sssslaughtering around here?"

"I'll crush your head, you slithery bastard!" and advanced menacingly towards the serpent. It hesitated for a moment.

"Might I appeasssse you with an apple? It will make you ssssee the thingsssss my way." The offer didn't seem to interest Gaduria. The snake took a good look at the snake-hitting branch she was waving around and slithered away, hissing in irritation.

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This time the Baron was present, much to dismay of five other lords and indifference of the sixth one. The Baron himself didn't seem too pleased either. Only the Master of Ceremony was satisfied. The protocol was maintained.

General Roseduck knew he should be happy. Lady Oxrabbit didn't like him too much, which was nothing unusual. He was unworthy of the title and all that. The Baron on the other hand didn't have such prejudices. Not bright enough for them. Also the Baron's sheer presence would most likely severely slow down the proceedings. Yet, somehow, even being assassinated sounded more appealing to Eneumerius than spending a lot of time around Oxrabbit. He concluded that the damage was already done, so he might as well try to benefit from having the Baron around. Unless his brain explodes. Being in the same chamber with other High Lords already was hard to bear, and now it was going to get worse. Probably much worse.

"I, Baron Regedulf Solthyron Asrius Oxrabbit, am present, well in mind..."

"Doubtful," Philigree murmured.

"...and body, and ready to... do... how's that thing I'll do called again?"

"Participate."

"Right. Thank you. I knew it has something to do with partridges. Participate in these proceedings. Achoo!" The Baron sneezed powerfully. He was a big man, and his sneezes were equally big.

"May the Lord of Light bless thy nose," Earl Gevenarius blessed him.

"Thank you."

"I recognise Baron Regedulf Solthyron Asrius Oxrabbit, High Lord of the Empire," the Master of Ceremony formally accepted his presence.

"Yes, that's me," the Baron said cheerfully. "Achoo!"

"May the Lord of Light bless thy nose," the Earl blessed him again.

"Thank you. I think all this dust doesn't agree with my nose," the Baron observed. "Couldn't some servants clean up this chamber a bit?"

"Servants cannot enter this chamber unless the Emperor orders it," the Master of Ceremony explained.

"I hate to break it to you, but the Emperor is dead, you know," the Baron leaned towards him and whispered conspirationally. Obviously, everyone else heard that anyway. Philigree sniggered.

"Another one?" the Marquis asked sleepily. Nobody answered this one, but the Marquis didn't seem to expect an answer.

"That is the whole point, young man," the Master of Ceremony explained. "The Emperor is dead, therefore nobody can order the servants to clean here. Unless they are blindfolded, but they are rather clumsy and useless in that case."

The Baron didn't seem too happy about that. Having to spend a whole day in a room that disagreed with his nose didn't seem appealing. He also was vaguely aware that the proceedings probably would take more than one day. He wasn't going to give up here. Perseverance was one of his strong points. "Maybe we could vote on that?" he suggested. "Achoo!"

"May the Lord of Light bless thy nose," the Earl said yet again.

"Thank you."

"No, young man, it does not work like that," the Master of Ceremony explained patiently. "You only can vote on the new Emperor."

"The new Emperor is more important than cleaning this chamber. Therefore I should be able to vote on cleaning the chamber too." This was an impressive feat of logic. The other lords watched the duel with interest. An unstoppable, yet somewhat blunt force against a rather aged unmovable object. Sympathy was on the Baron's side. He wasn't liked much, but lately the Master of Ceremony became rather intensely disliked. Letting the Baron in was only one of the reasons. Another one was that nobody really enjoyed sitting in a dirty chamber. The High Lords were used to nice, clean chambers.

"Unfortunately, the Codex does not agree with you, young man." The Codex was the old man's ultimate weapon. The Codex contained the laws. A bit of it contained some silly laws concerning murders or thievery. The vast majority of it contained the laws concerning protocol. Many suspected that the Master of Ceremony knew it all by heart.

"And how about... achoo!"

"May the Lord of Light bless thy nose," the Earl said yet again. The Baron's constant sneezing and the Earl's constant blessing him quite irritated the other lords. The SemiViscount was the first to get annoyed enough to speak up.

"Do you really have to bless him every time he sneezes?!"

"Of course I have to. You may ignore the religious mandates if you wish, but I most certainly will not!" The Earl got quite agitated. "The Holy Book says: thy shalt bless the one who sneezes. It does not say 'unless he does that too often', or 'unless it doesn't irritate some SemiViscount!'"

"So do you say that every time one of your servants sneezes?!"

"Are you out of your mind, man? Why would I bless a servant?!" The Earl was shocked that the Count would suggest something so ludicrous. "They aren't allowed to sneeze around me anyway. They get whipped if they do!"

"Right. Sorry. That was silly of me," the Count apologised in a rare instance of self-criticism.

"So maybe we could partridge the proceedings somewhere else? Achoo!" the Baron returned to trying to provide a better world for his nose.

"May the Lord of Light bless thy nose," the Earl repeated. The Count only growled this time.

"No, we could not," the Master of Ceremony replied. "The Codex clearly says that the proceedings have to be held in the Chamber of the High Lords. This chamber is the Chamber of High Lords, therefore the proceedings will be held in this chamber."

"How about we tell the blindfolded servants to roll around on the floor... achoo!"

"May the Lord of Light bless thy nose."

"Thank you."

"And you," the Count decided to get irritated at the Baron this time, "must you really thank him every damn time?"

"I am being polite, you know," the Baron explained. "You could use some politeness too."

"Arrrrrgh!"

The Count's angry noises apparently brought back the Marquis back to reality, because he looked around and asked "What is happening?"

"Oxrabbit sneezes too much!" the Count complained to him.

"Ah. May the Lord of Light bless thy nose, then," the Marquis blessed the Baron.

"Thank you."

The Count got up from his seat, his face red, his fists clenched, his eyes bulging. Clearly he had enough. Before he managed to say or do anything, the Duke, who meanwhile got his breath back, exploded with anger.

"May the Weasels of Doom defecate on thy face!" he shouted, banging his fist on the table.

"Now that was rude," the Baron remarked calmly.

"Rude is forcing me to listen to your constant sneezing, him blessing you every time and you thanking him!" the Duke continued his complaining.

"Indeed," the Count seconded and sat down again. The Duke got angry enough for both of them.

The Baron didn't take the bait. Instead of arguing with them, he single-mindedly pursued his argument with the Master of Ceremony. "Therefore, as I was saying, we should have the blindfolded servants, like, roll around on the floor to gather the dust and stuff on themselves."

"The Codex does not have anything against that," the Master of Ceremony admitted.

"Hilarious, but impractical, I'm afraid," Philigree remarked. "It won't be too precise. Also, we would have wrap them in the drapes and wipe the walls with them and..."

"All right, I get the point," the Baron interrupted. "The servants are useless. Achoo!"

"May the Lord of Light bless thy nose."

"Thank you. So maybe... you declare some other room as the High Lord Room?"

"Only the Emperor can designate another chamber as the Chamber of the High Lords. I could do that only if the current one is damaged beyond repair."

"Like, burnt down, maybe?" the Baron asked with a smile.

"Yes, for example. Mind you, burning down the Chamber of the High Lords is high treason."

"Weasel damn it." Oxrabbit sighed heavily. "It leaves me only one option." He stood up, put one leg on his chair and posed dramatically with outstretched arms. "I will clean this chamber myself!"

The Duke and the Count got up from their chairs, startled. The Hiwelthadt's opened his mouth in surprise. The Marquis' did too, but perhaps it was only an accident, because he seemed absent from this world. The General swore under his breath. Something about ermines. The lords silently wished all the worst upon the other lords, like being torn apart by a vicious horde of baboons for example, but nothing so cruel as having to clean!

"Are you out of your mind, man?!" the Duke scowled. "You're a noble! A High Lord! And a High Lord is a High Lord... because he is a High Lord!"

"Because he is higher than an ordinary lord?" Philigree suggested.

"Damn right!" Thinoak slammed his fist on the table. "And even an ordinary lord doesn't clean his own chambers!"

"Unless he's retarded a bit," the Count interjected. "I had one uncle, who..."

"Shut up!" the Duke shouted. "The point is, he cannot clean! He'll give us all bad name!"

"Achoo!" Oxrabbit sneezed again while still holding the dramatic pose.

"May the Lord of Light bless thy nose."

"Thank you."

"On the other hand... maybe let's let him clean?" the Duke said with hesitation.

"I would agree here," the Count said.

"Watching him clean might be quite funny," the Hiwelthadt suggested.

"May the Lord of Light bless his broom!"

"When I was young, the Lord of Brooms was blessing lights."

"There is nothing in the Codex forbidding that."

It looked like Baron Oxrabbit would indeed attempt to clean the chamber himself. That would stop his sneezing and relative peace and order would return to the proceedings. General Roseduck was not happy about this. Time to get creative with the protocol. "Let's not be hasty," he said.

"Shut up! We just managed to agree on something!" the Duke tried to quiet him, but the General ignored him.

"You cannot designate another Chamber of High Lords... but maybe you can undesignate one?" he asked the Master of Ceremony.

"What do you mean, young man?" The old man was rather confused.

"Well, does the Codex explicitly say that the Chamber cannot be undesignated?"

"No, it does not."

"Does it explicitly say that there must be a designated one at all times?"

"It also does not."

"Therefore, you can declare that this chamber is not the Chamber of the High Lords. Tomorrow the servants will clean it. Then you can designate it as the Chamber of the High Lords again, since it will be the same room, not a different one, and we can reconvene on the day after tomorrow."

"General, that's... wrong!" The Master of Ceremony used a proper title for the first time. He seemed horrified and impressed at the same time.

"Wrong? We do what is needed to do while still adhering to the rules. Unless you want to listen to..."

"Achoo!"

"Exactly that. May the Lord of Light bless thy nose."

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Many strange and wondrous creatures can be met in the enchanted woods. This man, dressed in strange clothes, wearing a silly hat and armed with bow and arrows was certainly strange. Not so much wondrous, but that probably depends on the point of view.

Arthaxiom approached to greet the man, but he had only managed to open his mouth when he was shushed.

"Ssssh! I'm hunting foxes!" the man whispered.

The paladin remained silent and watched in bewilderment as the man moved in a grotesque way which most likely was supposed to be stealthy. He and his companions followed the hunter at the distance, curious to see what he would do. It didn't seem likely that he would succeed. Mainly because there weren't any foxes around. Amazingly enough, it didn't take him too long to spot a single one, sitting with its back turned.

The hunter didn't shoot an arrow at the animal. Instead he took a canvas sack out of his bag and slowly approached the fox, utilizing the same pseudo-stealthy movement. The fox didn't even flinch when the sack landed on it.

"I have you now, you fwisky fox!" he shouted, lifting the sack high to show his trophy. "This fox eluded me fow a long long time, but now I, Isidow the Explowew, have finally captuwed it!"

"Good for you," said Alexander.

"Yes, congratulations on completing your quest!" Arthaxiom had absolutely no idea what was going on here, but quests were one thing he understood. This man here achieved his goal by skill and perseverance, and therefore was worthy of respect.

"Thank you, thank you," Isidor the Explorer replied. "You have no idea how much it means to me. I'd like to dedicate this fox to my mom and my dad and a cewtain coyote..."

"Sorry to interrupt," Gaduria interrupted, "but your sack seems to be... on fire?"

"WHAT?! NO!" Isidor watched in horror as his trophy burst into flames and the fox jumped out and ran away. In his shock for a moment he didn't register that the flames started to lick his hand too. When he did, he screamed, let go of the sack and stomped on it to put out the fire. Meanwhile the fox stopped, turned around, stuck out its tongue at the hapless explorer and disappeared into the bushes.

"Note to self: the fox can conjuwe fiwe," Isidor said to himself. "Get a fiwepwoof sack. Now back! To the labowatowy!" He departed without as much as a goodbye.

"What a strange person," said Arthaxiom.

"That coming from you means a lot," Gaduria replied.

"What do you mean?"

Gaduria sighed. The Hero's lack of understanding of common phrases was tiresome. "I mean that you are a strange person yourself."

"I am not!"

"Yes you are."

"No! I am a normal person, right, Alexander?"

"I'm with her on this one," the dwarf replied. "Unless by a normal person you mean an armoured madman roaming the countryside, slaughtering wildlife, using big words he doesn't understand, worshipping silly things, rescuing imaginary princesses..."

"It is called being a Hero!" Arthaxiom interrupted.

"Heroes aren't normal," Gaduria pointed out.

"That is true.. but you make it sound like it is something bad!"

"Not necessarily bad. I appreciate you rescuing imaginary princesses."

"And adopting stranded dwarves," Alexander added.

"But some things you do are quite silly."

"Like what?" the paladin challenged them.

"Like your speeches, for example," Alexander said. "These are the worst."

"I disagree," Gaduria said. "They are bad, yes, but challenging random wildlife to duels? Way worse. Not to mention him calling me names all the time."

"Oh. What was that rose thing yesterday?"

"Riveting red rose of Redhaven I believe."

"How dreadful! What's Redhaven?"

"How would I know? Sounds like some sort of city." They both looked at the paladin. He just shrugged.

"I still think his speeches are worse," the dwarf said.

"Maybe that's because he's not calling you a riveting rose."

"Maybe. Hey Arthaxiom, if you were to call me a flower, what flower would it be?"

"I do not know. You are not a fair maiden, therefore I cannot compare you to a flower."

"I see. Well, too bad you are a fair maiden, eh?" the dwarf asked Gaduria.

"Shut up, you rancid rhubarb of Redmond!"

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General Roseduck was somewhat pleased. The first day of proceedings didn't accomplish much. The High Lords were recognised by the Master of Ceremony and managed to antagonise each other a bit, which wasn't any surprise. The Master of Ceremony wanted to do everything properly, Duke Thinoak wanted to get over with it, Baron Oxrabbit wanted to stop sneezing, everyone else also wanted the Baron to stop sneezing, and to get rid of the Baron too, preferably. Philigree threw jokes at everything that didn't run away. The Marquis didn't care. The General wanted the proceedings to continue fruitlessly for as long as possible and it seemed he would get his wish. An unplanned day of break was a nice touch too, and it even had earned him some respect from the Master of Ceremony, whatever good it would do.

On the third day of the proceedings they gathered in the Chamber of the High Lords once again. The Chamber was looking much better this time. The dust was gone, the drapes were clean. The potted plants had been exchanged for some that weren't shrivelled. The paintings were free of dust, so their contents could actually be seen. General Roseduck got interested in a one, which was portraying a big brown dog, probably a pet of one of the past Emperors. The really unusual thing was the dog's facial expression. Roseduck decided that the painting had to be called "A dog who swallowed a frog, got hit by a log, got lost in a fog and was

contemplating suicide". It was a long title, but he felt that only this somewhat adequately described the contents.

"All right, last time we all made fools of ourselves, so be it," the Duke said before even the Master of Ceremony officially started the meeting. "But today let's all be mature and reasonable, let's select our new Emperor and let's get it over with!"

"Achoo!" the Baron sneezed.

"May the Lord of Light bless thy nose," Earl Gevenarius blessed him.

"Shut up!" the Count barked.

"No, you shut up!" The Earl wasn't going to allow the Count to bully him. Especially that in fact he was just a mere SemiViscount. "And stop oppressing my religious beliefs!"

"I SAID," the Duke rose, slammed his fist on the table and shouted, "let's be REASONABLE. IT IS CLEAN HERE NOW WHY ARE YOU SNEEZING?!"

"It was a joke," the Baron said, gleaming with innocence. The Duke shook a fist vigorously at him, which in turn caused Philigree to start laughing hysterically.

"WHAT?!" the Duke shouted again, "WHAT ARE YOU LAUGHING AT?!"

The Hiwelthadt pointed at something behind the Duke and kept laughing, unable to say a word. The Duke turned around, and the other lords left their seats to see better. What they saw was a painting of a cat in a hat.

"I fail to see what is so funny about this!" the Duke complained.

Philigree took hold of himself just for long enough to make a reply. "You were posing dramatically in front of this picture. When you lifted your arm, there was this silly cat peeking from behind you!" He surrendered to laughter yet again.

"What a dreadful painting," the Count judged. "The one who painted it must have been retarded."

"Ah, this must be the famous cat in a hat painting that my grandfather did," the Marquis spoke up. "Nobody knew what had happened to it, and here it is! By the way, Count, it seems you have insulted my dear grandpa. Prepare to die."

The Count was a bit flustered by the fact that he inadvertently insulted an ancestor of a fellow lord, but he quickly got over it. Being threatened had never agreed with him. "Bring it on, old man!" he growled.

"No! No killing! It is not allowed!" the Master of Ceremony shouted, while bravely positioning himself between the two. "Or at least wait until after the proceedings are over!"

"Heh. Don't worry," the Marquis said. "I was joking."

"Not funny," the Count said, looking at him nastily.

"Fooled you, eh? My grandfather would have never painted something that stupid."

"Well I should think so! It is unworthy of someone of this stature!"

"Yes, he painted only ferrets in berets."

"My point exactly, the whole point of being a noble... Wait, what?!" The Count only now realised what the Marquis had said. He couldn't tell if he was joking again or not. The Marquis wasn't available for further inquiries, because he went back to his place, sat down, and his mind left this plane of existence once again. The other lords also returned to their seats, while pointing out various ridiculousnesses in the painting, and the Hiwelthadt was slowly running out of laughter.

When all was calm again, the Duke stood up again. "Now, shall we choose our new Emperor?"

"Not so fast, young man," the Master of Ceremony replied. "First I have to list all the eligible candidates, so that you know who are you choosing from."

"Very well, there can't be that many, eh?"

"Do not worry, young man, only forty-three of them."

"Now that is quite a few. Just list them quickly and we can start choosing. We don't have entire eternity, you know."

"The youth of today, so impatient. For each eligible candidate I need to summarise his biography, biographies of all his ancestors for three generations, and his closest connection to the Imperial Line."

"Three generations?!" the Duke scowled.

"Why, yes, of course. You have to know ancestors of the one you choose, don't you think?"

"He doesn't even know his own," Philigree decided to annoy the Duke even more.

"Shut up, you spineless twerp with a stupid title!" It didn't take much to anger the Duke again. He was standing, red in the face, shouting and pounding the table with his fist. Philigree just shrugged and stuck his tongue at him. Now it was time for the Count to join in the fun. He stood up too, pointed at the Duke and started shouting himself.

"You shut up, you fat sack of whale lard! Who made you the boss here anyway?!"

"Don't you dare disrespect me, you SemiViswhelp!" The Duke quickly redirected his wrath and got creative with the title. "I am the most senior noble here and you all know it!"

"The most overweight, maybe! I'd strangle you if your neck wasn't so thick!"

"A duel!" Baron Oxrabbit shouted and started chanting. "Fight! Fight! Fight!"

"I apologise, but duels between High Lords are strictly forbidden during the election period," the Master of Ceremony said.

"Nobody asked you!" the Count shouted.

"May the Lord of Light forgive your stupidity," the Earl chimed in.

"In fact, I am the most senior noble here," said the Marquis, as he returned to reality for a second, "but I don't mind. Please amuse yourselves."

"Most absent-minded, too," Philigree commented.

"I am very grateful that my mind is able to filter out your silliness," the Marquis replied and phased out again. Meanwhile the Duke and the Count continued shouting at each other.

"Fatass!"

"Peasant!"

"Overweight pig!"

"Good for nothing buffoon!"

"Godless heathens!" the Earl joined in.

"Heatless god-hens!" Philigree mimicked.

"This is jolly good fun, eh Roseduck?" the Baron said, seeing that the General didn't participate in hostilities. "Say something, don't feel left out!"

"Unfortunately, I am not versed enough in lordly ways to fully appreciate the subtleties, not to mention to participate myself," Roseduck replied.

"Yeah, he's a lowborn bastard and he knows it, at least he has enough decency to be quiet," the Duke said, demonstrating that his attention could be split between insulting many people at once. "So be quiet and don't encourage him!"

"At least he can ride a horse." It was the most witty retort the Baron could come up with, but it was enough to infuriate the Duke even more. He got so angry he couldn't say a word, instead he was just shrieking.

"Shut up, Thinoak! Stop spitting on the table!" The Count didn't appreciate the Duke's spittle being all over the place.

"No, you shut up!"

"You both shut up!"

"May the Lord of Light shut up all of you!"

"May the ceiling fall on all of you!"

"Oooh, a bunny!" the Marquis exclaimed. That immediately shut them all up. Seven pairs of eyes were looking at him with horrified surprise. "Oh. Sorry. Don't mind me, gentlemen. Wrong reality."

The Master of Ceremony just sighed.

\*\*\*

It took them quite a few days to reach the cursed haunted forbidden cemetery of pain. It was getting dark when they arrived.

"We're here," Gaduria said. "Any idea when the full moon is?"

"Tonight, obviously," Arthaxiom replied.

"How do you know?"

"I do not. It is logical that it should be. After all, would it not be somewhat silly and unheroic to hang around here for a week or two?"

"Stop it, you two! Aren't we supposed to be scared or something?" Alexander somehow thought they should behave appropriately to the place.

"I am a Hero. I am no good at being scared. Sorry."

"I'm against being scared before anything scary happens." Gaduria was way too practical to shiver in fear just because she happened to be visiting a cemetery. Even if it was a cursed one. "Let's find a good place to wait."

They looked around. The cemetery was potentially scary indeed. Slightly crumbling, yet still distinctly recognizable gravestones. Dead or dying trees between them. Tall grass in which untold horrors could be lurking. Ominous shadows created by waning daylight. A badly notched signpost.

"Keep out," the dwarf read.

"Makes sense. It is a forbidden cemetery after all." Arthaxiom's logic was infallible as usual.

"I am afraid to ask this, but does it mean that we will also find out why is it haunted, cursed and of PAAAAIN?" Gaduria asked.

"I think we may."

"This will be fun."

They waited for sunset. The paladin waited by posing dramatically in the last rays of sun. He posed in front of tombstones, he posed threatening the trees, and his posing was being ignored. He also collected a few morbid flowers for Gaduria, which she graciously accepted and a bit less graciously threw away a moment later. The dwarf quickly got bored of pretending to be scared and started walking around, looking behind gravestones and poking the bushes with his trident. The princess sat on a gravestone and was getting irritated, mainly by the paladin's stupid poses and by Alexander constantly jumping in and out of the bushes. The gravestone she was sitting on wasn't too comfortable and there were no alternatives, which didn't help her mood either. Finally, it got dark.

"We should be quiet now and wait for the wolf to appear," Arthaxiom said. "That also meant you, Alexander," he added. "Could you please stop whatever you are doing and come wait in ambush with us?"

"But I think I found an ermine den!" the dwarf protested.

"What are you doing with that den?" Gaduria asked.

"Ummm... I'm sticking my hand into it... AAAAH! It bit me!" he screamed, got up and started sucking on his wounded finger.

"Serves you well. Why on earth were you sticking your hand inside it?"

"Touching an ermine brings good luck!"

"And being bitten by one brings rabies!"

"Be quiet, both of you!" Arthaxiom got irritated. "We are supposed to be ambushing, not quarrelling."

"I'd quarrel, but I have no crossbow," Alexander replied.

"Oooooooh!" something wailed. "That was a hoooooorrible pun!"

"Zounds! A ghost!" the paladin exclaimed and jumped back.

"No no no," Alexander disagreed. "I think it is a spectre. Spectres go ooooooh, ghosts go more like aaaaaah."

"How do you know?" Gaduria asked.

"My grandma told me. I know all about incorporeal beings. Wights for example go uwaaaaaah and sometimes clank their chains, and wraiths..."

"Sorry to interrupt," the paladin interrupted, "but there is a ghost scaring us right now. Or a spectre maybe."

"Yeeees! Be pooooolite and get scaaaared, will yooooou?" it wailed.

"I was recently almost sacrificed to... something, I guess." Gaduria wasn't really sure what they had been trying to sacrifice her to. "Also I talked to a giant deer, a snake with badger problems, and now I'm visiting an old cemetery with a Heroic lunatic and his hyperactive sidekick and you expect me to be afraid of something wailing at me?"

"I wanted to be scared but I got distracted," the dwarf replied. "Sorry."

"Daaaaaamn," the spectre wailed sadly and floated into plain view.

"You look like a dead man," Alexander said. It did indeed. Apart from being bluish, half-transparent and floating above the ground, it looked like a peasant. Slightly decomposing one. It even had a rake.

"Becaaaaaaause I aaaaam a deeeeeead maaaaan!"

"Ah. Right. Sorry," the dwarf apologised again.

"Youuuuu aaaaaare forgiiiiiven. Leeeeet's geeeeeet tooooo buuuuusineeeeeess noooooow," the peasant spectre wailed again. "Whyyyy doooo yoou distuuuuurb oooooour cemeeetery, moooooortals?"

"We are on a quest to stop the Valkyrie Wolf!" Arthaxiom exclaimed.

"Joooooooooy!" the spectre wailed sadly.

"You are confusing me," Gaduria said. "You sound sad but you say you're happy?"

"Youuuuu tryyyy soundiiiiing haaaaaappy wheeen youuuu're deeeead! Iiii aaaaam haaaappy becaaaaause iiiit's thaaaat daaaaaamn wooolf thaaaat preveeeents uuuuus frooom reeeesting iiiiin peeeeeace! Iiiiit iiiis theeee cuuurse ooof thee wooolf!"

"So now we know why it is haunted and cursed," Gaduria said. "Now only 'of pain' is left."

"It is of PAAAAAAAAAIN!" Arthaxiom corrected.

"Weeee're in PAAAAAAAAAIN!" the spectre wailed.

"YeEEEEEEEE!" other wailing voices confirmed.

"And that ermine bite is quite painful too," the dwarf added.

"Stop being lame!" Gaduria demanded.

"But it is painful! Have one bite you and you'll see!"

"I'm not stupid enough to get willingly bitten by an ermine, thank you very much!"

"You will chase away the wolf by your bickering!" Arthaxiom berated them.

"Doooooon't woooooorry," the spectre wailed. "Heeeee liiiiikes aaaaaudieeeeeenceeee."

"SheeeeeeeeEEEEEE!" the wolf jumped on a nearby tomb slab and sang. She was a magnificent animal, twice as big as an usual wolf. Her silver fur shone in the moonlight. On her head there was a small horned helmet with two blond ponytails coming from underneath it. "I'm a female wo-olf, short and stout, here's my horned helmet, and here's my snout!" the Valkyrie Wolf sang and grinned.

"Noooooooo!" all the ghosts and spectres moaned and floated away. Unfortunately for them, they couldn't float too far away, because they were tied to the cursed cemetery. They knew that all too well, yet they tried to float away every time. Nothing better to do, really.

"Ow! My ears!" Alexander complained. Gaduria wasn't as scarce with words.

"That was the most weaseldamnawful song I have ever heard, and there were only two lines of it!"

"Slightly off-key, but not that bad," the paladin stated. As a Hero he was immune to bad singing. Heroes have to be, just in case some musically-challenged peasants sing about them.

"Why thank you, sweetie," the Valkyrie Wolf grinned at Arthaxiom. "As for the rest of you, I'll let you know I'm still in training. Practice makes perfect, you know! Thank you for being my test audience! Especially the newcomers, I see you came from afar just to listen to me!"

"Don't you see that these poor ghosts can't take it anymore?" Gaduria pointed out.

"Oh, they're just teasing! See how they like it!" The Valkyrie Wolf made a few strange-looking moves that were probably supposed to be some sort of dancing and sang again. "Never gonna beat you up, never gonna chase you down, never gonna eat your face and digest it! Never gonna chew your leg..."

Gaduria and Alexander covered their ears. The ghosts as being incorporeal couldn't do even that. The paladin didn't really mind.

"Kill it!" Gaduria shouted. "What are you waiting for?!"

"I cannot kill a wolf for singing," Arthaxiom replied.

"Kill it for being a wolf then!"

"It is not a good reason..."

"Wolves are evil!"

"It is a female wolf, female wolves are not evil."

"Aaaargh! You have a quest, don't you?!"

"Killing is not the only method of questing."

Meanwhile the Valkyrie Wolf finished her song. The paladin considered his options and got a flash of divine inspiration, or so he believed at least. It might have as well been a completely random thought. "You know, if you want to get even better, maybe you should seek some magical help?"

"Oh, I would, I would, but where to find it?"

"Well, I know a certain hermit, who might know about a certain artefact... and he might be musical himself, you never know! I distinctly remember he unleashed quite a melodious shriek when I surprised him."

"Oh that would be marvellous! Marvellous!"

"He lives in a cave in the Northern Wilderness."

"Splendid! And off I go! See you, sweetie!"

The Valkyrie Wolf vanished into the night like a phantom.

"That was... surprisingly mature of you," Alexander said.

"Thank you, my friend. Heroism has many facets."

"But shouldn't have you given a bit more detailed instructions? The Northern Wilderness is sorta large, you know."

"You cannot expect me to spend all night giving directions! I do not expect the Valkyrie Wolf to get lost. She will find her way."

"All right. But why the hermit?"

"He told me he knows where the Singing Axe of Heavens is. I was not interested, but the Valkyrie Wolf might be. I remember it well, because it sounded like a quest hook."

"Ah. The Singing Axe of Heavens. It is a common mistake. It's really the Swinging Axe of Heavens."

"Oh." Arthaxiom saddened rapidly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. My grandma told me so."

"Even if it is singing, not swinging, how do you expect a wolf to wield it, genius?" Gaduria pointed out. "And what is she supposed to do with it anyway? Sing in a duet?"

"Must you depress me so?!" the Hero shouted in desperation.

"Wooooooorst. Queeeest hooooook. Eeeeeer," the spectre moaned.

"Quiet, you!"

\*\*\*

In the end, the High Lords ceased shouting at one another. It was not because they regained their senses, or because they decided their bickering was pointless. They simply got tired.

"Shall we proceed?" the Master of Ceremony asked. They weakly nodded. They somehow expected the Master of Ceremony to produce a list and read from it, but no. He was doing it from memory. They listened as he went through biographies of each of the forty-three candidates for the most important job around. It was pure torture. They had to sit through not only biographies of the candidates, but also of their mothers and fathers. And grandparents from both sides. And everyone on the line connecting the candidate to the deceased Emperor's family. It also meant that some people were mentioned a few times. The Master of Ceremony didn't have an ounce of mercy and recited the whole biography each time. Because of this, the High Lords had the pleasure of hearing about Lady Arghgagatha Glowinghorse's prize-winning dancing hamsters five times, and about that one time when Lord Themisoeles Roughrat had his left eye pecked out by his own falcon six times. These were among the rarely occurring somewhat interesting events. Most were completely mundane, like births, marriages, deaths, candlelight suppers, mime performances... By the end of the litany the High Lords were barely awake.

Duke Thinoak was half-lying in his chair, his eyes almost closed and a bit of dribble was coming from his open mouth. Count Blueparrot was slumped forward, with his head lying on the table. If he was just tired, passed out or dead nobody could say. He usually resembled a vulture, and now he resembled a deceased one. The Earl held his hands together and appeared to be praying. Philigree was smiling, but it was neither his usual joyful smile, nor his even

more usual sarcastic smile. It was an awful forced rictus, most likely indicating that the Hiwelthadt could snap any second. Baron Oxrabbit didn't want to surrender to boredom, so he amused himself by drawing pictures. As he had nothing to draw with, he used his fingernails, and as he had nothing to draw on, he used the table surface. Roseduck had nothing better to do, so during the speech he had been observing the emerging works of art. The end result was a heart pierced by an arrow. And by a sword. And by a halberd. There was also a huge whale. The General suspected it was the artist's rendition of the Duke. The next element was an after-effect of writing lessons the Baron had had a long time ago: a huge inscription saying 'OXXRABIT WAZ HEAR'. It was surrounded by some random flowers. The final element of the doodles was a rather rectangular moose. It appeared to be dancing, or possibly having an epilepsy attack.

"...and this concludes the presentation of the candidates." In a rare occurrence of unanimity all of the lords suddenly looked a lot happier and a bit more lively. Only a bit, because one simply cannot shrug off all of that in a second. Only the Marquis seemed completely unaffected. He seemed to be able to equally ignore anything, whether it was a bunch of dancing whores or a discussion about differences between types of celery. "If any of you has any questions concerning the candidates and their genealogy, feel free to ask."

All the eyes were pointed at the Hiwelthadt. "What? Do you expect me to ask a stupid question that would cause another hour of torment?" he asked weakly.

"Yes," the Duke simply answered.

"Wrong. I hate you, but I like myself more than I hate you."

"If there are no questions, we can either continue with the proceedings or end them for today."

"End them!" the Count shouted, and the other lords nodded in agreement. Thus ended the third day of the proceedings.

\*\*\*

"The woooooolf is goooooone. Weeeee thaaaaank yooooou. Nooooo weeee caaaaaan reeest."

"It was our pleasure," the paladin replied graciously. Gaduria wasn't that gracious.

"Nothing pleasant about that. My ears were raped!"

"Aaaaas aaaa rewaaaard, we will giiiiive yooooou a maaaaagicaaaaal riiiiing!"

"That's nice," Gaduria replied.

"We graciously accept," the Hero said.

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence.

"Well? Hand it over!" Gaduria was a bit impatient. She wanted to leave this place just in case something else would appear and sing. "We don't have all eternity like you, you know."

"Weeeell weeee areeee soooooort ooof iiiiincoooooorpooooooreeeeeeal, yooooou knoooooow. Noooo gooooood aaaaat haaaandiiiiing thiiiiings ooooover!"

"So how are you going to give it to us?"

"Iiiiiit iiiiiiis iiiiii thiiiiird graaaaaave toooooo yoooooour leeeeeeft."

"Do you expect us to dig it out?!"

"Yeaaaaees."

They walked to the grave.

"Theeeee oooooother leeeeft!"

They walked to the correct grave and the spectre spectered away.

"All right, let's dig!" the paladin said. "Alexander, do you have a shovel?"

The dwarf gave Arthaxiom s strange look. "I left it at home today."

"Pickaxe?"

"As well."

"So you are a dwarf with neither a shovel nor a pickaxe?"

"No." Alexander was beginning to lose his patience. He was being stereotyped. Again. "I am a dwarf-impersonating gnome with neither a shovel nor a pickaxe."

There was a ghastly sigh from behind a nearby tombstone. "Theeeeeere iiiiii aaaaa shooooovel iiiiii theeeee busheeeeees," the ghost wailed. Arthaxiom looked. There was one there indeed.

"It wasn't there when I poked around before!" Alexander complained.

"Iiiiiit gooooot theeeeeere iiiiii aaaaa mysteeeeeeerious waaaaay."

"Fair enough."

The paladin started digging. Gaduria and Alexander were sitting on a nearby gravestone and watching him dig. It was taking him quite a while and even a Hero can get tired of digging.

"Alexander, maybe you could help?"

"No, I could not. I'm cross with you because you stereotyped me!"

"I apologise."

"You apologise because you want me to help. You're out of luck."

The paladin sighed and continued digging.

"By the way, don't you think that digging up graves is evil or something?" Gaduria inquired.

"Not if a ghost tells you to do that," the paladin replied.

"You don't even know if it is this particular ghost's grave."

"Don't be silly, ghosts don't lie."

"Yes, it's not like they have beds," Alexander interjected. Nobody laughed. "Hey, it's a joke! They don't lie! Get it?" There was an awkward pause. "I guess not."

The paladin finally dug out an old wooden coffin. Only then did his companions join him. He opened the coffin, or, to be precise, he tore off the lid. Inside, there was a skeleton. The skeleton was rather ordinary, apart from a ring on one of its fingers. In spite of being inside a coffin with decomposing body and in spite of it being the middle of the night, the ring shone brightly. It was golden, encrusted with red jewels, rubies probably.

"MINE!" Gaduria shouted, pushed the others away and snatched the ring from the skeletal finger. "Mine mine mine! My preciousssss!" She put the ring on her own finger. "Fits perfectly!"

"What does it do?" Arthaxiom asked.

"It is being pretty!"

\*\*\*

On the fourth day the Master of Ceremony finally described how the election process was supposed to work. General Roseduck already knew that, because he did some reading beforehand. He was a bit curious if others did too.

"Each candidate I presented yesterday is eligible to become our next Emperor. Four votes are needed. Every High Lord has a vote. In order to start a vote on a candidate, a High Lord must submit a candidature, and one other High Lord must second it. Each High Lord may successfully submit only one candidate a day and no more than four in every ten day period. After every ten day period there are three days of break."

"What?!" Duke Thinoak got up in anger. "With these rules it will take months!"

"The choice of the Emperor is not one to be made hastily," the Master of Ceremony explained. "Also, I need to note that any High Lord leaving the capital before the election is concluded will be charged with high treason, sentenced to death and executed. No exceptions."

"Nobody would dare to carry that out!" the Count protested.

"Perhaps. But that includes stripping of all titles and possessions. Execution can come later."

"What an idiot devised these silly rules?!" The Duke was rather upset with the rules.

"Venerable Cruytus, the Master of Ceremony of Emperor Cassius the Fourth," General Roseduck said. "Devising rules and regulations was his hobby, and his Emperor was happy to add them to the Codex. His greatest achievements were: the Ferret Fondling Edict of 285, Tower Erecting Guidelines of 287, Limitations of Spring Moat Digging..."

"Shut up, Roseduck!" the Duke snapped at him.

"No need to shout, I was just trying to be helpful."

"I don't trust you!"

"You don't trust anyone!" the Count berated him.

"For good reason!"

"I think he trusts his chair," Philigree joked.

"Trust the Lord of Light," Earl preached.

"Trust the Sword of Might!" the Baron rhymed.

"Shut! Up!" The Duke was losing it.

"Is it your favourite saying now?" Philigree asked. "Or is it still 'Quick, bring more lard'?"

"Bzsgftf!" the Duke gurgled in fury.

"When I was young, we ate lard with lardles," the Marquis said, returning to reality for a second. Sort of.

"SHUT! UP!"

"My great grand uncle once shouted 'shut up' so loud that blood squirted from his ears," the Marquis added. "His wife was not amused."

"Because the blood squirted on her?" Philigree asked.

"No, because he was a really ugly fountain."

"SHUT! UP! SHUT! UP! SHUT! UP! I propose to vote on Menerrick Housegoose!"

"Menerrick is your nephew!" the Count pointed out.

"It is only one of his many virtues, yes."

"Let me rephrase that. I am NOT voting for Menerrick BECAUSE he is your nephew!"

"Good! I don't need your vote!"

"Let me rephrase that again. I am suggesting to OTHERS that they shouldn't vote for Menerrick because he is your nephew."

"I don't recall asking you for opinion. I submitted his candidature!"

"Apologies, but you did not. You need to do that properly." The Master of Ceremony wasn't going to allow breaches of protocol.

"FINE! I, Duke Bartholomeus Theodoricus Angus Thinoak, High Lord of the Empire, submit the candidature of Menerrick Idontremember Hisothernames Housegoose to become the next Emperor."

"The candidature of Menerrick Idonrembur Hisothermus Housegoose has been submitted. Will anyone second the motion?"

"No. He's his nephew."

"He's not holy enough."

"It's not funny enough."

"I don't care."

"I don't know what's going on."

"I second the motion."

"WHAT?!"

"I, General Eneumerius Attilius Buonaparth Roseduck, High Lord Commander, second the motion," Roseduck repeated, surprising everyone. Especially the Duke.

"Very well. The motion passed. All in favour of having Menerrick Idonrembur Hisothermus Housegoose as our new Emperor please raise a hand."

Only hands of the Duke and the General rose.

"Two votes for Menerrick, five votes against. Menerrick is not chosen."

"Why did you vote for him?!" the Duke challenged Roseduck.

"You didn't want me to?"

"I did! But I don't trust you!"

"Here he goes again!" the Count complained.

"May the Lord of Light bring some trust upon thee."

"AAAAAARGH!" Thinoak was reduced to intelligible screaming.

"Don't eat the table! Don't eat the table! We still need it!" the Hiwelthadt appealed.

"I ate a table once. No good," Baron Oxrabbit commented.

"When I was young, tables ate lords," Marquis de Shaggysheep remarked.

"Really?" the Count enquired.

"No. But it seemed like a good thing to say."

"Are there any other candidatures?"

Baron Oxrabbit stood up. "Yes. I propose Eusebius the Sneaky Fox!" he said triumphantly.

"WHAT?!" a few lords shouted in unison.

"Even disregarding the fact that he is not on my list, you should note that Eusebius was a legendary Hero. If he even existed. If he did indeed exist, he died long ago," the Master of Ceremony explained.

"Not a problem! We should elect him, find his body and resurrect him! I will lead the expedition! He's just the man we need! He'd ride them llamas!"

General Roseduck smiled. That would be a perfect distraction. Too bad nobody would agree to that crazy idea. He himself didn't want to, it would be way too blatant. He was pushing it when he voted for Menerrick, but he simply couldn't resist seeing Thinoak go nuts. Again. Of course, it was the Duke who first expressed general feelings towards the Baron's idea.

"Oxrabbit, you're an idiot!"

"And you... you... you are fat!" The Baron wasn't a Master Insulter, but the most obvious ones were perfect for the Duke. He couldn't even deny this one. So he decided to spin it around.

"You are more dumb than I am fat!"

"For that I should challenge you to a duel!"

"Jousting! Jousting!" Philigree chanted.

"He'd break a horse!" the Count objected.

"My point exactly! It would be hilarious!"

"I would NOT break a horse!"

"Because you wouldn't be able to get on it!" the Count jeered.

"He wouldn't even try, it would run away at first sight of him!" Philigree was obviously enjoying himself.

"I've ridden horses before I'll let you know!"

"May the Lord of Light take mercy on these poor animals."

"May the Lord of Light give me patience so that I resist the temptation to smash your head with a chair!" the Count chimed in.

"If not for the Caster of Memory here, I'd smack YOUR head with a chair," the Baron defended the Earl. For some reason, he decided it wasn't threatening enough. "With Thinoak's chair!"

"Leave my chair out of it!" The Duke looked around for something to change the topic. "Roseduck! What are you so happy about?!"

"Just smiling to my thoughts. Don't mind me." He was smiling to his thoughts indeed. Particularly to the one about leaving Vannard for a few minutes with the High Lords. Highlordly quarrels were all fun and games, but the General started developing a splitting headache.

"I will mind you! Stop smiling! I hate you and I don't want to see you happy!"

Roseduck at the point had quite enough. So far he was keeping quiet and letting the proceedings run their course. His goal was to avoid insulting the other lords, no need to remind them that they hated him. But his relationship with Thinoak couldn't get any worse, and he didn't want the others to see him as a pushover...

"So I suggest you pluck your eyes out! Or maybe ask lord Roughrat's descendants if they still have that falcon!"

"Good one, Ducky!" the Hiwelthadt praised. Roseduck wondered if he had come up with that nickname himself or did Vannard get creative in spreading it. Anyway, he wasn't too worried about the rest of the lords using it. They had other names for him.

"I'll pluck your eyes out you swineherd!"

"And eat them?" Philigree was restless.

"Why are you defending him, ugly?!"

"Just to annoy you, fatty!"

"YES I'M FAT GET OVER IT!"

"Surely easier than to go around it."

"When I was young, the fat people went around," the Marquis said.

"Why was that?" Oxrabbit inquired.

"Doorways were narrower back then."

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"Success! The Valkyrie Wolf will no longer threaten you!" Arthaxiom exclaimed.

"Great news, my friend!" the overjoyed Deer Lord shouted. "Great news indeed! From the very first moment I saw you, I knew you'd be the one to free us from this menace! Let us celebrate! Let's dance! Let's have The Great Deer Dance in honour of Arthaxiom the paladin and his brave companions!"

And behold, a great fire was made and a great many deer gathered. They started dancing around the fire with great joy, and Arthaxiom the paladin felt great warmth inside, because the quest he completed brought happiness to the deer. Or maybe he felt great warmth inside because he was standing too close to the great fire. In his full plate armour, of course.

"Dance, deer, dance!" the Deer Lord cheered them on. "Dance and be happy, cause now we can once again use echolocation without fear!"

"Excuse me," Alexander asked, "but what exactly is this echolocation?"

"Oh, echolocation is the ancient art of the deerfolk! If we close our eyes and shriek in a certain way, we hear the sound rebounding from objects, therefore we know where they are and don't need to look where we're going! Unfortunately we were too scared to use it recently. A deer who closed his eyes and focused on hearing got surprised by the Valkyrie Wolf's song and jumped up a tree, startled. It took us a few days to figure out how to get him down. Finally we used a beaver."

"A beaver? How did it help?"

Deer Lord looked surprised by the question. "Well, it ate down the tree, obviously."

"Ah." Alexander saw possible pitfalls of that approach, but he decided not to discuss it. "So, that echolocation thing...?"

"Jimmy, please demonstrate echolocation to our honoured guests!"

Jimmy the deer faced away from the fire, closed his eyes and shrieked. Then again and again. Finally, he started to run. He ran straight into the nearest tree.

"He's out of practice a bit," Deer Lord said.

The deer danced and danced, and paladin and his companions enjoyed themselves. It consisted of basking in glory in Arthaxiom's case and hanging around without a purpose in case of Gaduria and Alexander. Neither of the two was much for basking in glory, nor for watching dancing deer. Watching deer crashing into trees was at least amusing, but unfortunately after a few unsuccessful tries they were quite reluctant to echolocate.

"I wish they'd try again," Gaduria said. "They look so funny when they are staggering and unable to control all their legs."

"Cruel and vicious is the female mind," Alexander stated.

"Hey, it's not like I want them dead or something!"

"Yes, fortunately you don't."

"That's because the dead are no fun. Not moving, not anything. Unless they have pretty rings!" Once again she adored her new grave-robbled ring.

"Maybe Deer Lord will know if it's magical or something?" Alexander suggested. "Ahoy! Deer Lord! Could you come here for a moment and look at this ring?"

Deer Lord approached and looked at the ring. "Ring! She's got a ring!" he shouted excitedly. That got the attention of other deer. They immediately stopped dancing and gathered around Gaduria, pushing among themselves to get a better view.

"Sooo..." Gaduria asked, while backing out slowly to avoid being trampled, "what is this ring?"

"I have no idea," Deer Lord admitted, "but we deer are easily excited by rings."

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The festivities went long into night, but when all was said and done, which wasn't much really, the morning came. And with it a painful realisation.

"So, what will we do now?" Alexander asked. "Wander around again?"

"We might have to," Arthaxiom replied. "I cannot go questless for long. Well, there was that snake..."

"No killing badgers, remember?!" Gaduria reminded him angrily.

"Yes, yes, my apologies. My urge for questing clouded my thoughts."

"Nothing new there," Alexander remarked.

"Are you making fun of me again?"

"I wouldn't dare to make fun of a Hero!"

"Ah. My apologies then. I judged you too hastily."

"Do you even know what sarcasm is?" Gaduria usually was all for making fun of the paladin, but with his absolute obliviousness it wasn't even funny anymore. She decided it was time to teach him some basic concepts.

"I think it is a kind of jam my old grandma used to make..."

"If I might suggest something," Deer Lord interrupted, "maybe you should go to see the Oracle."

"The Oracle! Yes! We should do that!" The paladin was happy to be back in familiar territory. Conversation about eating a slice of bread with sarcasm would have to wait.

"But why?" Alexander inquired. "You don't even know where is the Oracle or what is the Oracle or why should you see it..."

"Uhhhh... because it sounds like something I should do! The Oracle will tell me... things... and stuff..." The paladin wasn't entirely sure what benefits the visit would bring, but one thing was sure for him. Heroes should visit Oracles. That sounded just right.

"The Oracle is a lady of great wisdom and eldritch powers," Deer Lord explained.

"Did you visit her?" Gaduria asked.

"Yes. Yes I did. She told me things... and stuff. I didn't understand half of it, and I misunderstood half of it and a half of it was supposed to be for somebody else, and a half of it was in elvish..."

"Isn't it a bit too many halves?" Alexander asked.

"Oh, she comes in many halves. Sometimes in hexagons too. It may sound strange, but that's how I remember it. You will see for yourselves."

"Is she dangerous?"

"Dangerous? No. No no no. Yes. Maybe. A little. Somewhat." Deer Lord couldn't decide.

"Great. So we go to see an Oracle while having no reason to do so, and she might be dangerous?" Gaduria wasn't too happy about that.

"Where did your adventurousness go?" Alexander asked.

"It echolocated into a tree."

"If you do not desire to join us on this journey, you can stay with the deer," Arthaxiom said.

"It would be our pleasure," Deer Lord said.

"On the other hand, maybe I'd better go with you." Gaduria still felt somewhat uneasy around the deer. "Just in case that's my destiny or something."

"Finally, you are ready to accept that you have a part to play in the Heroic story that is unfolding around me, oh transcendent forest nymph! Ouch!" Arthaxiom screamed in pain when Gaduria hit him in the helmet with her paladin-hitting branch.

"What did I tell you about calling me silly names?"

"I apologise."

"And what did I tell you about using big words you don't understand?"

"I also apologise."

"And what did I say about constantly apologising?" Alexander chimed in.

"I do not remember, but I also apologise."

"And what did I say about apologising for apologising?"

"You're ruining the learning process!" Gaduria berated the dwarf.

"I apologise."

\*\*\*

"Did I hear you right?" Saalteinamariva asked. "You said that as soon as the new Emperor is chosen, you're as good as dead. And now you're saying you know your candidate?"

"That is true," General Roseduck confirmed. "Sooner or later someone will be chosen. I will try to stall as long as I can, but in the end I should try to push the candidate who is least likely to allow me killed."

"That sounds reasonable, I guess."

"Therefore my strategy is to pick someone with an attention span of a forgetful newt, brains of a lazy slug and manners of a drunk enraged baboon. Someone like that can be difficult to be influenced. Difficult to persuade to put me out of office."

"And there goes all your 'for the good of the Empire' and stuff," the sorceress mocked him.

"Not at all. It is for the good of the Empire. Because of the unfortunate successorless death of the late Emperor, as well as his rather distinct lack of siblings, there really isn't anyone who was trained for job. Even more unfortunately, I have to assume that none of the available choices would be any good. Therefore, by means of an educated guess, I also have to assume that the one that is least likely to accomplish anything is the best choice. As opposed to those who might try to do something and get it wrong."

"By, for example, getting rid of you?"

"Yes, that would most certainly be a bad idea. I won't indulge in false modesty. I am the most competent person to lead the army and everybody with half a brain knows it."

"So it's a good thing that brains are so common these days," Saalteinamariva replied. Roseduck just groaned. "Nevermind. Tell me, where did you find someone with an attention span of a forgetful newt, brains of a lazy slug and manners of a drunk enraged baboon and what do I have to do with this?"

"I found him in the Oxrabbit family, obviously."

"Obviously." In hindsight, it was obvious indeed. If someone needed a noble with some serious mental deficiencies, one of the Oxrabbits was a good bet.

"It's Mevrin Oxrabbit, the Baron's nephew. And I'm talking to you about this because you are going to deliver the news."

"Me?! Why me? I'm no good with people! Especially dumb people! I'll put him on fire!" The General sighed. The conversation was going so well, but the sorceress just had to lose her temper. Not that he had expected anything else from her.

"Do you think I'm dumb too? I am well aware that you would put him on fire."

"Good."

"And talking to him wouldn't do any good. Brains of a lazy slug, remember?"

"Right. So, his parents? I remind you that nobles aren't too fond of me."

"Don't worry about that. His father died in a bear-hunting accident. And his mother doesn't want anything to do with him. Can't blame her really."

"Why do I have a feeling that it was a ridiculously stupid accident?"

"As I understand he tried to beat it in a fistfight."

"Wow. Must have been the stupidest Oxrabbit."

"Not really. Just not strong enough. As I understand, the Baron did that multiple times and yet he's still alive."

"A pity. Anyway, I still don't see why do you need me here."

"Well, I cannot really leave the capital now, can I? I need you to speak with Mevrin's nanny."

"About?"

"About preparing Mevrin for the role. Oxrabbits don't learn fast and he needs to memorise some stuff for his coronation."

"Oh. How about I threaten to roast him unless he learns fast?"

"You would roast him."

"Good."

"Not good. There is no other candidate who is that bad. I need him alive and uncooked."

"You're no fun anymore."

\*\*\*

The Oracle lived in a circle of stones. Literally. There wasn't anything else around. No house, no shack, no cave. The group approached cautiously. At least Alexander and Gaduria approached cautiously. Heroes rarely approach anything cautiously, especially something as non-threatening as a circle of stones, therefore Arthaxiom approached it Heroically.

The circle wasn't big. It consisted of tall standing stones, around twenty to thirty feet tall. Inside there were smaller stones, randomly placed, of various shapes and sizes. In the middle of the circle there was a stone tripod, and an old lady was polishing it. "Did you come to see me?" she screeched as they approached.

"Yes, we did," the paladin replied.

"Are you sure?" the old lady screeched again.

"Yes, we are sure."

"Really, really sure?"

"Yes! Why else would we be here?" Gaduria got irritated a bit.

"Well, you could want to see the Oracle instead."

"So you are not the Oracle?"

"Oh no, sweetie, I just clean her circle of stones. I knew you came to her." She sighed.  
"Nobody ever comes to see me." She scampered away.

"So where is..."

"I am here." The Oracle emerged from behind one of the pillars. She seemed somehow removed from reality. She was white. Long white hair, long white dress, very pale, almost transparent face. When she walked, she barely touched the grass. More like floated just a bit above it. "I knew you would come, but I overslept. My apologies."

"Do you..." Alexander started to ask, but she interrupted him.

"Yes, I sleep behind the pillar."

"But..."

"But I would know if something were to attack me at night."

"And..."

"And the rain goes around me."

Alexander got a bit confused. "Are you..."

"Yes, I am."

"Is she what?!" Gaduria asked.

"Answering my..."

"...questions before he finishes..."

"...asking them." This time Alexander interrupted.

"Sorry. It must be..."

"...rather inconvenient..."

"...to you, but for me time is..." She paused, looking at the dwarf. He stared back.

"What?"

"You were going to interrupt to 'give me taste of my own medicine', didn't you? So I paused."

"Yes, but... er... I didn't know how it would end."

"That explains it."

"It doesn't!" Gaduria complained. "I thought you see..."

"...the future? Yes. But I also read minds. I confuse them sometimes. I'll try to stop that for a bit."

"You read the future AND people's thoughts?" The princess couldn't wrap her head around this concept.

"Yes, I do. Part of the job. Nobody would visit an Oracle who doesn't know things and stuff."

"What's up with that 'things and stuff' thing?"

"It's all about being vague. Also part of the job."

"Why?"

"If I told you how everything is going to work out, it wouldn't be fun anymore, would it?"

"You can't tell because you don't know, or you know but you won't tell?" Gaduria challenged the Oracle, but she just smiled cryptically.

"Perhaps I can't tell. For sure I won't tell."

"Perhaps you can't tell?"

"Perhaps. Vague, remember?"

"It's not very nice."

"I'm not the Nice Oracle. She lives elsewhere. She tells people nice things."

"But what if nice things aren't going to happen to them?"

"Then she lies."

"It's not very nice of her."

"It is, for a while. Just not long-term."

"It's definitely not nice, it's misleading."

"If she named herself the Misleading Oracle, nobody would come to see her, you know."

"I am sorry to interrupt this fascinating discussion..." Arthaxiom started, but he got interrupted.

"I know, I know, you want to get to business. This idle conversation is annoying you quite a bit. That's why I'm doing it, you know."

"I think I'm beginning to like you," Gaduria said. "You're a... kindred spirit."

"Why thank you."

"By the way, could you tell me something about this ring?"

"Yes, the ring... It's a beauty, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is... but what can you tell about it?"

"It's gold, encrusted with rubies, and you took it off an old corpse."

"I know that!"

"I know that you know that. You asked what I can tell about it. It's all I can tell about it."

"Because you don't know anything more or because you don't want to tell more?"

"I'm not telling you that."

"Vague?"

"Vague. And mysterious."

"Excuse me..."

"Yes, yes, what an impatient paladin! So full of glory."

"How can anyone be full of glory?" Alexander asked.

"I'm referring to his mind. Nothing but glory. Glory this and Heroism that. I can almost hear the glorious trumpets in his mind. Whatever else was there, got lost in all the glory."

"I am embarrassed now," the paladin said.

"No need. It's natural. You're a Hero, you know."

"I know I am a Hero."

"You suspected. I know. Now I told you that, so you're officially a Hero."

"Hooray!" Alexander cheered.

"I'll better leave your head, you're so full of pride it hurts."

"Can we get to business now?"

"Yes, yes. Take this." The Oracle gave a small bottle to the paladin. "See that rock?" She pointed to a dwarf-sized, smooth rock. "Pour the liquid from this bottle onto the rock and rub it in."

Arthaxiom removed his gauntlets, knelt next to the rock and did as he was told.

"Good. Now lick it off the rock."

"Uhhh..." The paladin was somewhat uncertain about that.

"Do you want to have a vision or not?"

"Yes, but..."

"So lick it off!"

Arthaxiom grumbled something, reluctantly took off his helmet and proceeded to lick the rock.

"Couldn't he have just drank it from the bottle?" Gaduria inquired.

"Yes, I guess he could." The Oracle shrugged. "But that's how it is done around here."

"To teach him humility? To re-establish his connection with Mother Nature?" Alexander inquired.

"Could be both I guess. But primarily to amuse me. Look how hilarious he looks, licking that stone!"

"Fhwt?" the paladin asked.

"Shut up and continue licking!" the Oracle berated him.

"I think I like you again," Gaduria said.

"Of course you do. You approve of me being mean and evil. Unless it's directed at you."

"You know me too well."

"I read minds, remember? By the way, want a stone to lick?" Gaduria didn't respond, just made a face at the Oracle.

"I... I'm not feeling too well..." the paladin muttered. He tried to get up, but his legs failed him and he fell on the ground.

"What's happening to him?!" Alexander shouted.

"He's going on a quest," the Oracle replied. "A vision quest."

"Is he going to be all right?"

"Probably."

\*\*\*

Mevrin Oxrabbit was having dinner. In his case, having dinner consisted of eating food, throwing food, smashing food, running around the table, running on the table, and running with the table. And many other things, depending on his current mood and creativity level. Needless to say, Mevrin was eating alone.

"Mevrin! No tearing off table legs! You need this table! They don't grow on trees!"

"Yes, nanny," Mevrin replied, and instead started gnawing on his chair.

"So what were you saying, dearie?" the nanny asked. She was a big, strong woman. Only such nannies were employed by the family, because one had to be big and strong to handle even a small Oxrabbit. Male Oxrabbits were notorious for being big, strong and unruly. This particular nanny considered herself quite lucky. Mevrin wasn't all that athletic, especially in comparison to her previous charge, the current Baron.

"I was saying that some people think that Mevrin here... uh... could become the next... Emperor." Saalteinamariva almost whispered the last word. She couldn't really believe what she was saying. She knew the boy was troublesome, Roseduck implied that much, but she wasn't prepared for the extent of it. First of all, he wasn't really a boy, at least visually. More like a young man. Behaviour was definitely boyish. Or even mad-hungry-goatish. Even watching him from afar triggered her maternal instincts, which meant that she wanted to put him on fire and drop the ceiling on him. She decided not to watch anymore. Those instincts were bound to take over eventually.

"An Emperor! Mevrin! Yes, he would be a great Emperor!" The nanny was very enthusiastic about the idea. "He's bright and smart and..." A series of crashes interrupted her.

"What was that?" the sorceress asked.

"Oh, Mevrin just hates his vegetables. They are good for him, but he is quite passionate about not eating them. He smashed them with a chair." Saalteinamariva decided not to point out that he could simply leave them. Attacking them with furniture seemed a bit excessive, but it was a good opening to fulfil one of the tasks she was given.

"You know, if the High Lords see him behaving like that, he surely won't get chosen."

"Oh, I know, I know. He's just such a passionate boy, he often forgets his manners. But leave that to me, dearie, I will prepare him," the nanny said. "You better start behaving, young man! The chandelier is not a toy!"

"Yes it is!" Mevrin protested loudly.

"He's a bit headstrong, but don't worry, dearie. I know what to do."

Saalteinamariva watched the nanny hit Mevrin repeatedly on the head with a wooden spoon. She approved of the educational technique. Too bad the spoon wasn't on fire. It would make it even more effective. Still, even without the fire the nanny seemed to have her way. She was patient and methodical with her spoon. If anyone could teach this young oaf something, the nanny could. The sorceress was quite sure about that.

\*\*\*

The scenery had changed. Arthaxiom was standing on a grassy meadow. Only the grass was orange. He looked around. All the colours were strange. The sky was yellow, the sun was pink. Suddenly, he noticed he wasn't wearing armour anymore. It made him uneasy. Instead, he was wearing his old peasant clothes. Sort of. His shirt was intense spring green and his trousers were very, very purple.

"I must be having a vision," he realised. It must have been a vision. Either that, or he was dead. And he couldn't have died, because Heroes don't die. Not before finishing their most important quests. He was pleased to notice that he didn't lose his logical thinking.

Now the most pressing problem was doing whatever he was supposed to do in this strange place. Not having the slightest idea what it was didn't help at all. But something had to pop up sooner or later, he was sure of that. Heroes don't get lost on their vision quests.

A toad popped up. A dark blue one. "Yo," it said.

"Uh. Hello, little frog," the paladin said.

"Who are you calling little?! Am I little?!" the toad got angry.

"You. And yes, you are."

"It's all relative, I'll let you know." The toad pouted.

"Do you know what I am supposed to do here?"

"Insult amphibians, apparently." The toad was resentful.

"Uhh... I... I apologise." He felt strangely, apologising to a frog, but it seemed the only reasonable thing to do.

"Very well. You are supposed to go to a lake."

"Where is it?"

"That way." The toad pulled out a sign out of nowhere and stuck it in the ground.

"Thank you."

"One more thing, before you go..." The paladin looked at the toad, which jumped at his leg and bit him. Very painfully. It had a jaw full of sharp teeth.

"Aaaaaagh!" he screamed. "Frogs do not have teeth!"

"They might, in this place. You should be happy I didn't breathe fire. So long, moron!" The frog jumped away and disappeared into the grass.

Arthaxiom looked at his leg. He fully expected to see a lot of blood, yet there was none. Instead, flowers grew from where the frog bit him. Pretty, yellow flowers. He shrugged. Very strange place. Well, nothing to do but to go and find this lake.

\*\*\*

In a dark and gloomy chamber, on a dark and gloomy throne, a dark and gloomy person was sitting. Gloomily. Gloomy torches were gloomily burning on the walls, hardly giving any light at all. Whatever little they gave was gloomy too. A bit less dark and gloomy person was standing before the throne. It bowed awkwardly.

"You called me, oh Dark and Gloomy Lord?"

"Why do you always ask me this?" the Dark and Gloomy Lord asked with irritation. "You very well know that I did!"

"Apologies, oh Dark and Gloomy Lord." The person bowed again.

"Must you be so formal all the time?!"

"Sorry, Tim."

"That in turn is too informal."

"You know I am no good with conversation, oh Dark and Gloomy Lord."

"Just lord will do."

"As you wish, oh Just Lord."

"I meant lord, without just. And drop the oh."

"Yes, Lord."

"Good." The Dark and Gloomy Lord was pleased with himself. "Who's a smart zombie?"

"You are, Lord?"

"No! I'm not a zombie, you idiot! You are! And apparently still not a smart one."

"Apologies, Lord."

"Accepted. Can't blame you for your brain rotting away I guess. But, to business. Now that the Emperor is dead, is the Empire in turmoil?"

"Uhhh..."

"Yes or no?"

"No, Lord"

"Why no?"

"Because not yes?"

"What I am asking is why isn't it in turmoil?"

"How would I know, Lord? I'm just a zombie. But it seems people don't really care about this kind of thing."

"People always were problematic. Well, never mind that. Was Rodolfo the Lion Tamer apprehended?"

"You didn't order me to apprehend..."

"Not you! Did the Imperial Guard apprehend him?"

"I don't think so, Lord."

"Why not? So many clues are pointing right at him!"

"I don't know, Lord."

The Dark and Gloomy Lord sighed gloomily. "Leave an anonymous mysterious note to one of the High Lords, will you?"

"As you wish, Lord"

"All right, what about the orcs?"

"The orcs were difficult to persuade, Lord, but I succeeded."

"Finally good news! So will they descend upon the Empire like locusts?"

"Yes, Lord, they will!"

"The entire five thousand?"

"Uh-oh."

"Uh-oh what?"

"Uh-oh did you want five thousand orcs, Lord?"

"Yes I did!"

"Uh-oh."

"Stop uh-ohing! What is wrong?"

"I thought you wanted fifty thousand, Lord."

"Uh-oh."

"Exactly, Lord."

\*\*\*

The lake was beautiful. The water was crystal clear. Assuming they were pink crystals. The paladin looked around. He saw nothing unusual. Well, nothing more unusual than the rest of the scenery. Bushes with glowing violet leaves no longer surprised him. "I'm here!" he shouted, but no one answered. So he started walking along the shore. He walked quite a bit, until he saw a strange creature, drinking from the lake.

"Hello there!" Arthaxiom spoke. "What are you?"

"I am an anteater," the creature replied. "Catch!" It breathed water from its snout right at the paladin's face.

"Aaaagh!" he screamed, but then he realised that it was just water. Sweet water. "Hey, it's sweet!"

"Sure is! Might give you cancer!" the anteater said happily and disappeared into the bushes.

"Oh no it won't!" a violet cancer said and wandered away into the lake.

"What a strange creature," Arthaxiom said to himself. "Two of them, even. I wonder what did they symbolise."

"Your stupidity!" a voice said behind him. He spun around, just to see a huge fish burst out of the water. It hung in the air in front of his face. It held a rake in its fin. It was big. It was shiny. It seemed annoyed.

"What are you?"

"A fish, you dolt! A fish of your past!"

"Why is my past a fish?"

"I symbolise your past, you idiot! See this rake? You think I rake bottom of the lake with it?!"

"Well... maybe..."

"No! It is a symbol! Of your peasant past! I'm a peasant fish!"

"Uh... that is nice." The paladin was totally confused now. There was this fish, holding a rake, and floating above a pink lake. It seemed quite upset with him. He had absolutely no idea how to deal with the situation.

"You have nothing more to say?!"

"No, not really," he admitted. "I do not know what to say."

"Do I have to explain everything to you?!" the fish was rather agitated.

"I would appreciate that."

"Oh, very well," the fish sighed. "After all, that's what I am here for, I guess. See, I symbolise your peasant past. A fish of your past. A peasant fish." The fish shook its rake. "You need to face your past! You cannot avoid it!"

"Uh... I have no problem with my past," Arthaxiom replied. "I was a peasant once. Now I am a Hero."

"Yes. A peasant can become a Hero. But can a Hero ever stop being a peasant?! Can he?!"

"Ummm... yes?"

"Yes! But he must face his past! He must face his inner peasant."

"All right. How do I do that?"

"It is difficult. That's why I'm here to help you. **FACE YOUR INNER PEASANT!**" the fish shouted. **SLAP!** It slapped the paladin in the face with its tail. The world whirled around him. **SLAP! SLAP! SLAP!** The hits came from all sides. Water splashed in his eyes. He couldn't see. He tried to protect his head with his hands, but to no avail. **SLAP!** A powerful hit on the back of his head made him fall into the lake, face first. **SPLASH!**

\*\*\*

The Dark and Gloomy Lord wasn't happy. It wasn't just because he was supposed to be gloomy. He wasn't happy because his stupid zombie helper had misheard him and convinced fifty thousand orcs to invade the Empire. His cunning plan called for only five thousand. It was quite a difference. A difference of about forty-five thousand orcs.

"Are you absolutely sure that fifty thousand orcs are going to descend on the Empire?" he asked, while pacing nervously around his throne.

"Yes, Lord. I think some of them might die on the way, because, you know, such a horde would need a lot of supplies and they aren't any good with logistics, you know, and they have quite a bit to travel, you know, so..."

"So... it's not so bad?"

"Well, it depends how you look at it, Lord. Not as many orcs maybe, but the weaker ones will be eaten on the way, and the rest will be extra hungry when they get here..."

This didn't improve Dark and Gloomy Lord's mood. Hungry orcs were definitely more worrying than satiated ones. "No chance you can get back there and convince them not to attack?"

"I don't think so, Lord. They are probably already on the way. Hard to make fifty thousand orcs turn around. Also, they want to eat some brains."

"Brains? Orcs don't crave for brains. It's zombies. You should know that. You are one, after all."

"They do now, Lord. Many were reluctant to go at first, so I had to elaborate on how delicious the human brain is. Now they are quite enthusiastic about having some."

"I don't want to have my brains eaten by orcs!" the Dark and Gloomy Lord cried in despair in a most undarklordly way. Extra hungry orcs would probably eat the inside of his skull as well as the outside of his skull and pretty much every edible part of him and have fries with it too.

"I don't really mind, Lord," the zombie said. "Once you die the first time, it's not as scary anymore."

"Think, think, think!" the lord was saying to himself.

"Do you think it will make your brain less appealing, Lord?"

"No you dumbcorpse! I'm thinking how to prevent this!"

"Ah. I might be just a stupid zombie, but may I make a recommendation, Lord?"

"Go ahead."

"I recommend running away."

"Only when there's no other choice." *Which pretty much is the case*, he added to himself. "Let's try to fix it, shall we? First, Roseduck. Did you order his assassination?"

"Of course, Lord. As ordered, I did it on my way back."

"Any chance you might be able to... call it off?"

"Not really, Lord. The assassin said we'd meet again when he completes his assignment."

"So you must warn Roseduck. It's better to have him as the High Lord Commander than any of those other morons!"

"So why did you want him dead in first place, Lord?"

"I wanted the army to lose against five thousand! Now I want the army to win against fifty!"

The zombie scratched its head. Its ear fell off. "Oh. So, a cryptic and mysterious note, Lord?"

"No. Definitely not cryptic. Mysterious, but blunt and to the point."

\*\*\*

Arthaxiom woke up. He spat water and gasped for breath. He started coughing. There was sand under his hands. He managed to open his eyes and look around. He was on a beach. Probably still next to the same lake, but in a different place. Or maybe it was a different lake, just had the same pink colour? In any case, the peasant fish of his past was nowhere to be seen. He was pleased with that. That fish had beat him up good. He expected his whole face to stink of fish, but it smelled like pretty flowers instead. No complaints there either.

Again, he didn't know what he was supposed to do here. "Anyone here?" he called, but there was no answer. He started walking slowly, looking around, searching for anyone or anything. The only thing he found was a large round rock. He approached it.

There were two lizards on that rock, a white one and a black one. The white one was covered in fur and had wings, while the black one was covered in sharp scales.

"Dude, get out of my rock!" the black lizard said.

"I shall do no such thing!" the white lizard disagreed.

"You have wings, fly and find your own rock!"

"I refuse. I appreciate this one very much."

"Dude, not cool!"

"I beg to differ. This rock is very cool. You cannot deceive me!"

"I'm warning you, dude."

"Could you please stop referring to me as 'dude'? It is rather annoying."

"I'm the lizard wizard, fear my wrath!"

"You are no wizard, you..."

CHOMP! The black lizard bit the white lizard on the tail.

"Please let go of my tail," the white lizard requested.

"Mmmrf gffh mrrrl."

"Could you please stop being so immature?"

"Mffrl grrrf hssss."

"Your attitude is displeasing me, I must say."

"Kffff mffzh!"

"Very well, be like that!"

"Mmmrg gfkhh rrrh!"

CHOMP! Now the white lizard bit the black lizard's tail.

"Mffffff!" the black lizard complained.

"Ghhhk mrrrf ffffh!" the white lizard replied. They had each other's tails in their mouths and made a nice circle.

"Hrrf gmmmfh!"

"Rrrrw!"

Neither lizard was willing to let go and they both only mumbled and growled at each other. Then they started walking in circle, their claws tearing deep into the rock. The rock started bleeding.

"WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?!" a voice boomed behind the paladin. He turned around to see a fish bursting out of the water. It wasn't the same fish as before, but it was quite similar. This one was holding a sword in one fin and a shield in the other. Its scales were gleaming gold. "I am just a minute late and you wander off already?!"

"I was watching the lizards," the paladin explained. "They symbolise... something. Probably."

"No, silly human. It's 'Lizards on the Rock' comedy show. Pretty good, eh?"

"They looked... symbolic."

"Well, maybe they are. Who knows? It's your vision after all."

"But I do not know what they symbolise! Tell me!" Arthaxiom demanded.

"How can I explain your own symbols to you?" the fish asked. "I'm just a fish, you know. What do you expect from me?"

"The last fish I met here slapped me around," the paladin admitted with hesitation.

"Ah, it was the fish of your past. That's a nasty, nasty fish, but it serves its purpose. It beat the peasant out of you, didn't it?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so."

"See, you're making progress. Now it's my turn, for I am the fish of your present!"

"Uhhh... what are you going to do?" Arthaxiom wasn't sure he was looking forward to it.

"Make a Hero out of you, that's what I'm going to do!"

"I already am a Hero!" the paladin protested.

"Well, in your mind, yes. And you have a nice Heroic sword, I give you that. I have it right here, so you can see how well it presents itself."

"Yes, yes it does," he agreed. "It is a good sword."

"But look at your shield!" The fish threw the shield at the paladin. "Do you know what it was used for? Do you know?!"

"No, but..."

"But it was used to shovel horse dung!" the fish interrupted. "Not very Heroic, is it?"

"Well, no, but..."

"And your armour! Hanging in a peasant's attic for years! Looks good until you come closer and notice all the rust, dents and holes! Did it ever occur to you to find a better one?! A more Heroic one?!"

"It serves well."

"Yes, and the shield too, but what did you battle so far?! Some animals. Some goblins. And only by a miracle you didn't have your brains bashed in! What if you face something worse?! And you will face something worse, I guarantee you that! As the fish of your present, my job is to ensure that you survive, and Heroism alone cannot take you all the way."

"I can go back to the hermit and ask..."

"Can you?" The fish was doubtful. "After you sent that wolf to him? Really? You think he appreciates singing wolves?"

"I did not think that..."

"Correct," the fish interrupted again. "You did not think. Happens a lot, doesn't it? It doesn't hurt you much, because you're a Hero. But there might come a time when it will hurt you. Permanently, if you know what I mean."

"Uhhh... I do not."

The fish sighed. "Permanently, meaning it might kill you!"

"Ah. That is bad."

"Understatement of the vision quest. But I think you're beginning to get it. Good. You had your own dumb old self slapped out of you by the fish of your past, and as the fish of your present I encourage you to fill that space with something useful. Now about that armour..."

"I do not know where to get a better one."

"Yes, yes, I know. We will take care of it, I think. At least the shield is here." The fish pointed down. Arthaxiom looked. There was a gleaming, beautiful golden shield lying underwater. "Come and get it."

He did as he was told. He waded into the lake and bent over to get it. SLAP! SPLASH!

"Sucker."

\*\*\*

"General, beware. Dark Lord Abracabrachupacabra sent an assassin to kill you," the General read.

"What a stupid name," Saalteinamariva said.

"While yours is a smart one," Vannard japed.

"Saalteinamariva means 'a very beautiful and intelligent maiden who outshines the stars', I'll let you know."

"And they say that names don't lie."

The General sighed. Then he realised how often he sighed these days, and sighed again. He wasn't happy. While the succession proceedings were unfruitful so far, the meetings with the other High Lords have made a serious dent in his sanity. Serious enough to meet Vannard and Saalteinamariva both in his own chamber. He didn't even care that they could demolish it. And/or burn it down. And/or burn down half of the castle. He would even enjoy the burning castle, as long as the Duke would get caught by the flames. And the rest of the lords as well. And the Master of Ceremony. And many, many more people who got on the General's nerves.

Talking to the assassin and the sorceress wasn't any better. He could be in immediate danger and it made him rather uneasy, but his 'allies' didn't seem to care much. Not that he expected anything else. At least this time they were sitting in their chairs and didn't throw fireballs around. "Can we please focus on that dark lord person that wants me dead?"

"Of course," Vannard replied and did the exact opposite. "Why are you reading 'Alice in Weirdoland'?" He pointed at a book lying on Roseduck's desk.

"That is none of your business."

"It's a good book," the assassin continued, undeterred. "Some of it is even true. I met the cat once."

"We already know you're insane, no need to prove it further," Saalteinamariva said. "And you'll probably claim you killed the cat, too?"

"Actually, it got away." Vannard sounded a bit impressed.

"Could you please stop that?!" Roseduck almost shouted. "An assassin is out to get me and you're discussing a cat from a book!"

"No need to get all that panicky, Ducky."

"Easy for you to say! Unlike you, I can't nonchalantly stab him right in the heart without even noticing him! I need help."

The sorceress shrugged. "It might be a joke."

"Might be. Doesn't look like this, though. It is even on this dark lord's official stationery, with his address and everything. If it's a joke, someone put a lot of effort into it."

"Address?"

"Yes. The castle Kidneystone, which, as far as I know, is abandoned and ruined. It's not that far away, scouts were already dispatched to 'periodically assess its defensive capabilities', so I'll know all about it quite soon. Until then... can I really take risks?"

"No risk, no fun!" Vannard said cheerfully.

"Some risk, I die," the General responded. "I'm not as hard to kill as you are."

"Not my fault."

"Not your fault. But you could defend me."

Vannard wasn't enthusiastic about that idea. "Can't you get some guards or something?"

"I can and I will. But are guards any good against a skilled assassin?"

"Well... no."

"My point exactly."

"You're asking him to be your bodyguard? Are you nuts?!" Saalteinamariva was shocked by the idea.

"I'd be nuts not to."

"I appreciate your faith in me, Ducky, but I'm more of an assassin than a bodyguard, you know."

"So assassinate that assassin who might be trying to kill me. I'm paying triple for this one. If I survive, that is. Just in case you need a reason to keep me alive. Also, a bonus if I get a chance to interrogate him before you kill him."

"Just to be clear on this, you want me to keep you alive and capture that assassin while keeping him alive too?"

"Pretty much, yes."

"Anything else? Should I juggle some alligators in the meantime? Steal candy from monkeys? Make some straw figurines of former Emperors while being on fire?"

"I can help you with that 'being on fire' thing," the sorceress offered.

"I knew I can count on you."

"I'd do everything for you. Everything that might make you dead or at least severely mutilated."

"And I have a special knife just for you. It has your name engraved on its blade. And it's a loooong name."

"You never fail to remind me of that."

"Just making sure you don't forget."

"Sooo grateful."

"Could you stop bickering?!" the General had enough of this. "It's my life that's on the line here!"

"It's yours, not mine, so excuse me for not caring all that much," Vannard replied. "But don't worry, I'll guard you. Unless I get bored."

"So now I should hope that the assassin, if he really exists, strikes as soon as possible?"

"Yes, something like that. By the way, I want five times my usual rate."

"Awesome. And Saalteinamariva, I'd like your help too. Just in case that assassin is a mage or something."

"In this case, I'd like your money too. Just in case I need to spend it or something."

Roseduck sighed. "Good bodyguards are expensive these days."

\*\*\*

The paladin woke up on a rocky shore. It was not a happy awakening. The rocks were poking him painfully. He slowly got up on his knees...

"Get up! How long do I have to wait?!" a voice boomed and a stream of cold water hit him. That made him awake and upward rather fast.

"Hey! That was uncalled for!" he complained, as he faced yet another fish. This one was the same size as the previous ones and also was floating above the water. Yet it was different

from them, because it was kind of... foggy. It seemed a bit insubstantial, and Arthaxiom couldn't quite work out its features. It held something in its fin, but he wasn't able to say what it was either.

"Do you know what I am?" the fish asked.

"Yes. A fish," the paladin replied and backed up slowly. He wasn't too anxious to repeat the experiences he had with the previous two fish.

"But what kind of fish?" the fish insisted.

"Uhh... a giant, floating, misty one?" he hazarded.

The fish seemed disappointed. "Yes, that is correct, but it wasn't the answer I desired. Did you not learn anything? Let's try again. If the first fish was the fish of your past, and the second fish was the fish of your present, then I must be..."

"...the fish of my future?"

"No! The fish of flowers!" the fish exclaimed and breathed daisies at him. The force of the daisy stream made him fall backwards.

"That does not make any sense," the paladin complained, as he got up.

"You noticed that. Well done. You're learning. In truth, I am the fish of your future, and the fish of flowers too. Sort of a side job," the fish explained.

"Why are you so foggy?" the paladin asked. "The other fish were not."

"Duh. Use that object you have between your ears!"

"My nose?" the Hero asked incredulously.

The fish sighed. "Your brain! Braaaaaain! Thiiiiink! You know what you were in the past, and you know what you are now. Do you know what you will be?"

"A Hero?"

"After that."

"An old Hero?"

The fish sighed again. "Hopefully you will be a smart Hero sometime in the future, but right now it doesn't seem too likely. My point is that you cannot know what will happen in the future. And you shouldn't."

"Why should I not?"

"Because if you know what is going to happen, you might act differently than if you don't know."

"I do not understand."

"It is a paradox. Do you know what a paradox is?"

"Uhhh... a big red flower?"

The fish sighed yet again. "No. Never mind. The point is, I cannot tell you what your future will be."

"But you are the fish of my future? Are you not sort of supposed to do that?" This was the most confusing fish so far.

"Yes, but in a limited way. I am supposed to give you some vague forebodings and unspecific general advice."

"Ah." That was more like it. Vague forebodings and unspecific general advice were definitely Heroic. "Now I get it."

"Good. So listen carefully, cause I will say it only once. Which is still one more time than most fish do. You might get help from unexpected sources."

"I do not expect any help."

"Exactly! That's why any help you get will be unexpected!"

"It makes sense, I guess... but does it help me at all?"

The fish sighed yet again. "A difficult one, aren't you? It is to make you expect unexpected help. So that you don't panic when it appears or anything."

"I do not panic."

"Oh well... let's try another one then, shall we?"

"I would be grateful."

"Very well. You have to know when to stay and when to run."

"Is it not obvious?"

"It is now when I pointed it out! Before that you wouldn't have even considered running!"

Arthaxiom pondered this. "Good point. How will I know when to run?"

"I'll show you an example. See that albatross?"

Indeed, there was an albatross circling above them. Not surprisingly, it was bright red.

"Yes."

"Watch it closely."

"I am watching."

SLAP! A powerful hit with the tail made the paladin stagger. "You shouldn't have stayed."  
SLAP! "If you mix up when to stay and when to run..." SLAP! "...then you're screwed."  
SLAP! SPLASH!

\*\*\*

The High Lords were having another meeting. Therefore, the Chamber of the High Lords was surrounded by an enormous amount of guards. There were Imperial Guards ordered there by the Master of Ceremony. There were Imperial Soldiers, ordered there by General Roseduck. There were private guards in employment of each of the High Lords. And now Vannard was there too. He was leaning on a window sill and watching the chamber door from afar.

He was not a specialist in preventing assassinations. He was a specialist in making them happen. Nevertheless, he decided to try to keep Roseduck alive. He wouldn't admit that, but he was quite pleased with the agreement he had with the General. He was given food, housing, a decent amount of money and permitted to kill people as long as they were 'bad' people. Of course, he didn't need permission to kill people, but he rather enjoyed not having to worry about other people upset about the killing. And having to kill them too. He preferred killing when he felt like it, not when he had to. He also preferred killing 'bad' people, as there was more chance that they'd provide some challenge. 'Good' people rarely did.

He was getting bored. He was supposed to be looking for an assassin who might or might not be around, and who might or might not even exist. Given many multiple approaches that such assassin might utilise, a chance of simply spotting him was negligible. There were one thousand and three places in the Imperial Castle where an assassin could hide and even more people an assassin could disguise as. All these guards for example. Every single one of them could be one and nobody would know. Perhaps someone who knew what to look for could recognise one... but definitely not Vannard.

"Found something?" he asked Saalteinamariva when she joined him.

"No hidden mages found. You?"

"Two potted plants and one hundred and twenty-eight guards."

"I asked about assassins, you clown. Stop trying to be funny!"

"No need to be rude, Sally."

"Don't. Call me. That." she said, her teeth clenched.

"Or?"

"Or you will be called 'Hey, that guy is on fire!'"

"Come on then, Sally. I'm bored."

She lifted her hand to make good on her promise, but stopped herself halfway. "Bored? Well, no need to entertain you, then. Anyway, I did what I was supposed to. Enjoy your doing nothing." She turned to leave.

"Suit yourself. In other news, that guy over there is looking at your lower backside."

She looked in the direction he was pointing at. From the distance it was hard to say who was looking where exactly. "You mean the one wearing a pink cap or the one with silly trousers?"

"Both of them, actually."

"Nice try, but I won't incinerate them for your amusement."

Vannard briefly considered stabbing the leaving sorceress, but it was neither the place nor the time for that. He sighed. A few days of this and Ducky will have to manage on his own. He looked around. Nothing interesting in sight apart from some guards. He wasn't supposed to be killing guards, but maybe he could bruise a few? Or at least distress them a bit? All during the search for the assassin, of course.

"Hey there, mister Pink Cap, could you come here for a second? Guarding quality control."

\*\*\*

The paladin woke up. Something was poking him painfully. Again. He searched for the source of that and discovered an inconveniently placed stick. He got up slowly. He was still next to the pinkish lake. This time he got washed ashore into some reeds. As usual, there was nothing of interest in sight. He was getting a bit tired of this. He got out of the reeds, sat down on the beach and waited.

He waited for a long time, but nothing happened. Nothing at all. Even the sun hadn't moved. Finally, he sighed, got up and started walking along the shore. Apparently he still was supposed to see or do something here.

Soon, a seagull landed in front of him. It looked just like a normal seagull. Apart from being bright green, that is.

"Hello there, little bird," he said.

"Why are you talking to a seagull?!" an outraged voice came from behind him. As he turned around, he saw a small yellow meerkat.

"Because I know from experience that animals here can speak," he replied.

"Yes, but seagulls are boring!" the meerkat said.

"Who are you calling boring, you overgrown hamster?!" the seagull protested and launched in the air.

"I have nothing common with hamsters, you... oops!" The meerkat suddenly realised that the seagull was flying towards it. It turned back and started to run, but it was too late. The seagull grabbed it in its beak and flew away. "Let me go! What do you think you are, a weaseldamn eagle or something?!" the meerkat screamed as it was carried away.

The paladin turned towards the lake and wasn't at all surprised when a fish burst out of the water. It was similar size to the previous ones, fiery red, held a sickle and a set of scales.

"Greetings!" Arthaxiom said. "So what was this all about? A comedy show too?"

"No, foolish mortal!" the fish boomed. "You are supposed to learn from this!"

"What can I learn from this? The meerkat insulted the seagull and the seagull grabbed it and flew away with it."

"That's exactly what happened," the fish confirmed. "And the lesson is: do not meddle in affairs of seagulls for they are subtle and quick to carry you away."

"That is a silly lesson," the paladin said.

"Some lessons are," the fish replied. "Do you know what kind of fish I am?"

"No. There was a fish of my past, there was a fish of my present and there was a fish of my future. I think there is nothing left."

"Well, wrong! I am the fish of your future past!"

"What?!" The paladin couldn't make any sense from this.

"Future. Past."

"It does not make any sense!"

"Ah, you've seen through me. I am not really a fish of your future past."

"So what kind of fish are you and why are you here?"

"I am the Flaming Fish of Fury!" the fish roared and burst into flames. "I am here to get rid of you!"

"Oh carp."

"Oh carp indeed!" said the fish and slapped the paladin across the face. This fish was stronger than any of the others. Arthaxiom was screaming, burning and drowning at the same time.

\*\*\*

General Roseduck exited yet another electoral meeting. He was currently experiencing yet another headache. Highlights of the day consisted of the Duke having a moment of inspiration and calling the Earl 'heavenly stupid holy bastard', the Marquis describing how the pigs had been eating the farmers in his youth, and the Baron suggesting that the next Emperor should be female. The General didn't know whether his wife had put him up to this or if it was his own stupid idea, or maybe he had simply done this on purpose to irritate the other lords. He was leaning towards the last one. The Baron was a man of simple pleasures, and infuriating someone was probably the only one he could find at these meetings. He wasn't too subtle about it, but no subtlety was needed to make the Duke drool with fury.

As soon as Roseduck left the Chamber of High Lords, his contingent of guards joined him. They started walking through the corridors towards the exit. Previously he was the least guarded High Lord, now he was the most guarded. It didn't make him feel safer. It made him feel stupid, but he knew that was the right thing to do. He almost hoped that the assassin would appear soon, because he was tired of feeling threatened. He quickly regretted that hope when the assassin appeared.

He simply emerged from behind a pillar and stood in the middle of the corridor, right in front of the General's column. He looked like a stereotypical assassin. Black clothes, black hooded cloak... and a knife in hand. Roseduck didn't like that at all. He realised how badly his guard was organised. The guards were walking in two rows on his sides. No guard was in front of him. That meant that the assassin had an easy shot.

"Happy Emperor's Day!" the assassin said and threw a dagger. Meanwhile Roseduck only managed to lift his hands to protect his face and neck. None of his guards even moved to position himself between the assassin and him. The dagger hit him in the chest.

The guards looked at the General. He looked at the dagger. It fell on the ground with a clang. He pointed at the assassin and shouted. "After him, idiots!" Only then did the assassin realise that he had failed due to Roseduck being unexpectedly armoured. He ran away. The guards ran after him. When the last two were passing by the General, he stopped them. "You two, wait with me! There might be more!"

And he was right. Just as the sounds of pursuit faded away, another assassin appeared out of nowhere.

"Help!" Roseduck shouted and hid behind one of his guards. Knives whirred through the air and suddenly he ended up holding that guard's body, while the other one was lying dead on the floor with a knife in his neck.

*Now that was helpful of them* was what raced through his mind, followed by *Do I have to be sarcastic even in the face of death?* and *He's got another knife now I'm dead!* He tried to cover behind the corpse he was holding, but he knew his chances were next to none.

There was a sound of a knife sailing through the air. There should have been a scream next. Instead, there was a clang and a voice saying "Hey, no killing Ducky, please." Roseduck never imagined he'd be so glad to hear Vannard. He peeked from behind the corpse. Two daggers were lying on the ground. *Has he just hit a knife in mid air?!* The General didn't have time to fully fathom the extent of Vannard's skills, because more daggers were in the air. He barely managed to hide again. Fortunately this time he wasn't the target, at least that's what he assumed from the fact he was still unhurt.

"Keep on ducking, Ducky!" Vannard shouted.

"I'm ducking, I'm ducking!" Roseduck replied. Right now his nickname was more fitting than ever, but what was he to do? He didn't feel like risking a knife in the face.

"Feel free to surrender," Vannard addressed the other assassin. "Or you can continue throwing knives at me, that works too," he added, seeing that he was unwilling to give up.

Each missile was close to target. Extremely close, in fact. But each time Vannard managed to move away ever so slightly.

"Watch out for the pants, I just stole them yesterday," he mocked, as his opponent kept producing more and more daggers and throwing them at him, or rather at the wall behind him.

"I told you to stop stealing pants!" Roseduck berated him from behind the corpse. "I'm paying you more than enough to buy some!"

"Buying is no fun."

Finally, the assassin realised Vannard was unkillable and decided to run away. Vannard waved after him. "You can stop ducking now, Ducky."

"Thank you," the General said, but didn't stop ducking. He peeked carefully.

"Did you soil yourself?"

"I refuse to answer that."

"Ah. How many times?"

"Now can you stop being smug and run after him?!"

"Sure thing, Ducky."

"And I want him alive!" Roseduck shouted after him.

\*\*\*

Alexander was concerned. Arthaxiom had been unconscious for a few hours now. He knew the paladin was still alive, because from time to time he would mumble something barely understandable. Something about Heroic fish usually. At least this in itself didn't worry him too much, it sounded like something the paladin would say normally.

On the other hand, Gaduria and the Oracle didn't seem to be concerned at all. They were mainly arguing whether the Oracle should tell Gaduria about the ring or not and they were also being nasty to each other in process. They seemed to enjoy themselves in a way. The dwarf had no idea if they were becoming best friends or bitter enemies.

"You're not telling because you don't know!"

"Oh I might know all too well."

"Prove it!"

"You don't expect me to fall for this one, do you?"

In some ways Alexander envied the Hero that he didn't have to witness that.

"AAAAAAAHH!" Arthaxiom screamed suddenly.

"What happened?!" the dwarf asked, as he ran towards his friend. Two women approached without such hurry.

The paladin sat up. "Fire!" he screamed. "Fire! I am burning!"

"You're not!" Alexander shouted at him and grabbed his shoulders. "Settle down!"

The paladin refused to settle down. He started flailing his hands instead. "I am drowning, I am drowning!"

"You can't be drowning and burning at the same time," the dwarf pointed out. "Ow!" he shouted, because in response he got hit in the head.

"Let me handle this," Gaduria said. She approached the screaming paladin. SLAP! She slapped him in the face, hard. His head jumped back.

"Ouch!" he said and stopped flailing. His eyes focused on her for a second.

"Am I dead?" he asked. "Am I in heaven?"

SLAP! This time the hit came from the other side.

"Apparently not," he responded to himself.

SLAP!

"Definitely not."

SLAP!

"Can you please stop this? I am awake now, thank you."

"Awww, and I was having so much fun," Gaduria said sadly, but stopped slapping him.

"Do not worry, you will have many more opportunities in the future," the Oracle said.

"Is it a prophecy?" Gaduria asked.

"Might be."

"Might be?"

"Yes, it could be just an educated guess."

"Could you please stop trying to irritate me?"

"No."

"I knew it!"

"Could you perhaps pay some attention to me?" the paladin asked. "I have just returned from a trip to another plane of existence, or maybe to some strange place inside my own mind and yet you do not seem to take any notice of that."

"Hey, I slapped you back into this world!" Gaduria pointed out. "What more do you expect?"

"You could ask what did I see for example."

"I know what you saw," the Oracle said.

"I don't care what you saw," Gaduria said.

"It was probably only for you to see," Alexander suggested. "With you being a Hero and stuff."

The paladin sighed. "Very well. I will not say what I saw."

"That's the spirit!" Gaduria approved.

"I have a quest for you," the Oracle said, "because I just remembered I have this nice shield I could give you."

"The fish is working!" Arthaxiom exclaimed.

"Sure is," the dwarf agreed with him. Agreeing with madmen was always a good plan.

"My fish never worked. So I ate them," Gaduria said.

"A cruel and unusual punishment," Alexander replied.

"And a tasty one."

The Oracle ignored the fish discussion. "The quest is to bring me twenty left eyes of purple toads."

The paladin seemed disappointed. "That does not sound too Heroic."

"You had no qualms about badgers!" Gaduria pointed out.

"Badgers have teeth, you know. They are not defenceless. And I was to simply kill them, not to pluck their eyes out..."

"Twenty left eyes of purple toads for a shield," the Oracle interrupted. "Take it or leave it."

"Very well... where do we find these toads?"

"Here's one!" Alexander exclaimed. Indeed, there was a fat purple toad sitting on a rock. The dwarf slung a stone at it. It got hit, croaked sadly and fell on the ground, dead. Alexander approached the corpse and noticed that the deceased toad was a bit lacking in the left eye department. "Is the..."

"No." The Oracle sighed. "Sometimes I have these silly hopes that I'll be wrong for once, but it never happens. Typical. Just typical. A typical man. Male dwarves included," she added, before Alexander could protest. "The right eye is not okay. Obviously, I have already removed the left eyes from nearby toads. You will find some intact ones in the nearby forest. Also, please refrain from killing them. They manage quite well with only one eye. Oh, and Gaduria, please don't go with them. Trust me on this one."

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Vannard raced through the corridors after the assassin. He was enjoying himself. That other guy was quite decent. Not as good as him, but reasonably skilled. Much better than anyone he had fought recently. He was quite pleased about that. It was a long time since he had some good practice. And he needed to practice, because practice makes deadly.

They ran through chambers, they ran through corridors. The other assassin ran as fast as he could, trying to avoid running into people. Vannard, on the other hand, preferred to push people out of his way. He pushed a cook into a cauldron of his own soup, he pushed a maid with a tray full of dishes down some stairs... No point in chasing each other through a crowded castle without causing random and hilarious damage. And nobody appreciated random and hilarious things, like for example a servant falling head first into a giant vase and getting stuck there with his legs dangling, more than Vannard.

Surprisingly, the chase was going upwards. Vannard assumed that his quarry would go downstairs and try to leave the building. He was wrong. They ended up on the roof.

It was windy up there. They stood opposite each other. Both of their cloaks fluttered ominously. It seemed as if they were on top of the world, although the ludicrously tall Tower of Mages spoiled the effect a bit. Vannard had this weird feeling that he was supposed to say something.

"That was fun, eh?"

"It was indeed," the other assassin replied, while slowly walking backwards towards the edge.

"Not going anywhere, are you?"

"Just a bit."

"You could surrender, you know."

"I'm afraid I cannot."

"Why not?"

"Because... I'm your father!"

Vannard was unimpressed. "I don't think so."

"Well, you're right. Because... I'm your mother!" The assassin was almost at the edge now. Vannard followed him calmly.

"You're not even female. Just give up, will you?"

"No, I am your uncle!"

"Slightly more likely, but still no. I really don't want to kill you. Well, actually I do, but I'm not supposed to. Just give up before I lose my patience. Unless you want to jump, but we're pretty high up here."

"Yes, I do. Was just waiting for a ride!" The assassin jumped.

"Did you consider the wind?" Vannard asked the empty air where his opponent had been just a second ago. Not receiving an answer, he went to the edge to see. He looked down and saw a cart full of hay riding out of the Imperial Warehouse. The assassin was lying right next to it. Looked quite dead and a bit flat. A herd of Imperial Geese was marching through him.

"Ducky won't be pleased about this."

\*\*\*

The 'nearby forest' was indeed nearby and was indeed a forest. The small detail that the Oracle hadn't mentioned was that the forest was a bit swampy. Actually, a bit more than a bit.

"This is somewhat inconvenient," Arthaxiom remarked, wading through the mud.

"You don't say?!" Alexander replied with irritation. Whereas the paladin was knee-deep in the bog, more than a half of the dwarf was submerged. He proceeded slowly, poking the muddy ground with his trident. He couldn't see where he was putting his feet, so he decided to at least stab the place he wanted to step on and see if it stabs back. He really didn't want to fall into some unseen hole or get attacked by something that didn't appreciate being trodden on.

The paladin had no such concerns. He Heroically strode forward, only stopping from time to time to wait for Alexander to keep up. While waiting, he was looking for toads. So far, they were out of luck. There were many things around, like trees, bushes, mosquitoes, suspicious looking logs, mushrooms, mosquitoes, swamp flowers, algae, newts, swamp mosquitoes, vines, dead trees, giant swamp mosquitoes... a toad! Arthaxiom spotted one, sitting nearby on some sort of swamp lily. Without a second thought, he threw himself at it. "Got it!" he only managed to shout before falling headfirst into the swamp.

Alexander abandoned caution and raced to help his friend, but there was no need. The paladin was already getting up, all covered in mud. "Got it!" he repeated, proudly. The dwarf approached to look. Indeed, Arthaxiom was holding something...

"Didn't you... squeeze... a bit too hard?" the dwarf asked as he saw blood oozing from between the Hero's armoured fingers.

"I... might have," the paladin conceded, slowly opening his hand. On the palm of his gauntlet there was something. Might have been a toad few seconds ago, but not anymore.

"Maybe take off your gauntlets?" the dwarf suggested.

"Good idea."

They continued their quest, the paladin now gauntletless. Nothing else to do but to proceed and enjoy the view. The view, which was rather unpleasant. The stench was even worse.

Soon, another toad was spotted. Arthaxiom repeated his diving into the swamp manoeuvre, but this time the toad was faster.

"Are you sure that's the best way to do that?" Alexander asked.

"I did not really think about that," the paladin replied. "Wait, I think there was something down there..."

"Like what, a stone? A log? Some foul creature of the swamp?"

Arthaxiom paid no heed to the dwarf's naysaying. With some effort he managed to dislodge and lift what he found. It was a breastplate, all covered in mud.

"See? Some other wise man who explored the swamp while wearing armour died here. Let's get out of here!"

The paladin ignored the suggestion. Instead, he started to remove the mud from the breastplate. It wasn't damaged and rusty, as one could expect. It was, well, shiny. Heroic even. "It is my size! The fish is working! The fish is working again! We must find the rest of it!"

"Of... the fish?" Alexander was somewhat confused.

"No, of the armour!"

"Ah. What about toads?"

"You catch them! I will look for armour pieces."

So Alexander continued his hunt for purple toads while Arthaxiom walked on all fours in the swamp in search for armour pieces. Soon, a toad was found. This time he decided against slingshotting it. He snuck upon it and hit it with his trident, stunning it. He took it in his hand to examine it. This one still had its left eye.

"Hey, Arthaxiom... how do we remove the eye?"

\*\*\*

Eneumerius Roseduck was pacing in his quarters. He was furious. It usually took a lot to make him upset, but not these days. His sanity was getting thin from the endless meetings with the lords, and the attempt on his life didn't help at all. And now this. He had seen much incompetence in his life, but this was beyond his comprehension. Beyond any human understanding. And to make it worse, he didn't even know who was responsible for that. Probably in the end the responsibility would fall to him and this made it even worse.

"How?! How could this... this..."

"Abracabrachupacabra," Vannard reminded helpfully.

"...make his residence in an abandoned castle in the middle of the Empire?!"

"Well, I guess he just went there and claimed it." The assassin decided to be annoying by pointing out the obvious.

"Yes, I guess he did. Hired some workers. Rebuilt it. Hired some guards. And nobody even noticed!"

"Most people aren't too observant," Saalteinamariva observed.

"Indeed they are not. Even the scouts I sent didn't find anything peculiar about a ruined castle that's not ruined anymore. How could everyone fail to notice that?!"

"Some sort of magic maybe?" Vannard suggested.

Roseduck looked at the sorceress.

"Could be," she said.

"Could be some sort of magic. How helpful of you two!"

"It is there. Why bother how or why?" Vannard had a very practical outlook on life. "Lead an army and wipe out that 'dark lord' and his minions."

"I guess you are right. The problem is that I cannot lead an army, because I cannot leave the capital until the new Emperor is elected. I also cannot send any of my incompetent underlings. Technically, I can, but I won't, because they would fail horribly."

"Send me," the assassin volunteered.

"I cannot make you an army commander and I don't know if I would trust you with an army."

"Who says anything about an army? I go in, I kill mister Ab and everything else I find, I leave."

"Vannard... I know you're good, but maybe not that good. We have just established that this 'dark lord' probably is some sort of a mage."

"I can deal with mages."

Saalteinamariva sneered. "Maybe with a deaf, blind and lame mage."

"Would you like me to disembowel you to prove my point?" Vannard asked pleasantly and smiled.

"Would like me to blow you up to kingdom come?" she replied and smiled back.

"And where would that kingdom be?"

"In your case somewhere inside the ceiling."

Roseduck was hesitant. Vannard's idea had its merits. It had many merits. No need to involve the army, no need to admit to everyone around that a 'dark lord' built himself a castle under the Empire's very nose... On the other hand, regardless of the assassin's boasts, he was somewhat doubtful about his chances to handle this on his own. There was another alternative and even contemplating it made him uneasy, but it was worth a try. If it doesn't get him killed for a mere suggestion, that is. He decided to risk it and interrupt the pleasantries. "I'm sure if you go there together you can handle that dark lord person."

"WHAT?!" they both asked in unison.

"I am suggesting that you two go together and wipe out inhabitants of that castle."

"I don't need her help!" Vannard protested.

"I don't need his help!" Saalteinamariva protested.

"It is illogical to refuse help of a highly skilled person," Roseduck tried to reason with them. Which, of course, didn't work.

"True. I simply don't like her."

"And I don't like him."

"I don't ask you to like each other. I only want you to lay some destruction together for a limited time. I will pay. A lot."

"Her company isn't worth it..."

"And you think yours is?"

That was too much for the General. "Oh for badger's sake! I'm not asking you to marry! Just kill some people together! You're supposed to be good at that!"

"I kill alone."

"Because nobody wants to be near you." The sorceress wasn't one to miss an opportunity to insult Vannard.

"Yes, because they would feel bad about their meagre skills."

"Meagre skills? What do you think you are, some sort of divine killing machine?!"

"More like hellish, but yes."

"You might be good with your knives, but a halfway decent mage can cause much more destruction."

"Random destruction doesn't impress me. Unless it's amusing, that is. But I treat killing like an art."

"You and art? I'd like to see that!"

"Very well. Let's go and you'll see!" Vannard challenged her.

"Oh really? Very well! I'll laugh at your pitiful efforts."

"Hah! Prepare to be overwhelmed!"

"I'm prepared to be underwhelmed."

"How nice that you came to an agreement," Roseduck joined in the fun. "Anything you need before you go?"

"Knives. Lots of knives."

\*\*\*

Yet another electoral meeting was in progress. They were in the third week and everyone had had more than enough by now. Apart from the Master of Ceremony. The old man was inexhaustible. Only the Marquis could match his perseverance, mainly by not being there. This meeting had lasted for a few hours already and the participants' hearts weren't really into it.

"It's your seventh nephew you're proposing, you, you, you very fat thing," the Hiwelthadt said weakly.

"Yes, Thinoak has too many nephews," the Count complained.

"Shut up, Dumbparrot," the Duke replied without much feeling.

"We should exchange his nephews for a barrel of... of... of cavalry," the Baron said.

"When I was young, cavalry came in sacks," the Marquis murmured sleepily.

"May the Lord of Light bless those sacks."

Suddenly there was some sort of commotion outside. Guards were shouting to keep out, someone shouted something about... orcs?

"What's happening out there? We should find out," Roseduck suggested.

"It would be highly irregular to pause the proceedings just because of some shouting outside," the Master of Ceremony replied.

"The very fact that someone tries to disturb our proceedings means that it must be something that cannot wait," the General insisted.

"Whatever," the Duke muttered. "Let's see. It can't be more boring than sitting here."

"True that," the Count agreed weakly.

"It must be really bad if we agree on something," Philigree said and laughed. But it was a sad, forced laugh.

The Master of Ceremony got up and opened the door. "What is the meaning..."

"Orcs! Orcs are coming! Invasion!" a man dressed in a scout's uniform shouted. "Where is the General?!"

"I'm here. How many?!"

The scout just breathed heavily and looked like he was going to pass out just right there.

"Out with it, man! How many?!"

He took a deep breath. "OVER NINE THOUSAAAAAAAAAAAAAND!" he screamed. That awoke everyone.

"Over nine thousand?! That's impossible!" the Count shouted. The Duke tried to get up quickly and fell down with his chair. The Hiwelthadt laughed crazily.

"What do you mean by 'over nine thousand'?!!" the General demanded. "Nine thousand and one?!"

"Well there were so many that we got scared and ran away when we counted about nine thousand of them. And there were more coming."

"Ah. That explains it. Sort of. No need to get that dramatic, though. Well, I guess it means I'm needed to lead the army. Apologies, my lords, but I am needed elsewhere."

"Not so fast, young man!" the Master of Ceremony protested. "You cannot leave the capital until the new Emperor is chosen! This is the law."

"I'm all for upholding the law and all that, but you see, this invasion should take precedence I think..."

"The law is the law is the law!" the Master of Ceremony said. "You cannot go."

"Give him a break, man!" the Duke shouted from the floor. "It's a skunking invasion!"

"What will you say when the orcs sweep through the Empire, get here and tear your limbs off?!" the Count demanded.

"Then I shall die limbless, happy that even in the darkest hour I stood firm and upheld the rules given to us by our forefathers!"

"I'd joke about this, but there is no way to make him look sillier," Philigree said.

"Let's kill some orc!" the Baron exclaimed. "Come, Roseduck! Let us ignore this old fool and ride upon them like the hurricane rides upon small rodents!"

"If you leave the capital, I will declare you traitors! You know I can do it!"

"I'll declare you strangled!" the Baron roared.

"Hit him with a chair! With a chair!" the Hiwelthadt cheered him on.

"There is no place in these walls for such an unholy act!" The Earl positioned himself between the Baron and the Master of Ceremony.

The perspective of Oxrabbit strangling the annoying old man was rather tempting, but Roseduck decided it would be unwise to allow that. Especially that the Earl would interfere and it could only get worse from there. A free-for-all between the High Lords was the last thing they needed right now. Especially with everyone watching. "Let's all just calm down," the General said. "No need for violence." He addressed the scout. "You! Go find the officers! Tell them to start assembling the troops!" Not that these officers were any good, but assembling the troops was something they should manage.

"Yes, General!" the scout ran off in a hurry.

Roseduck closed the door. "Now, let's choose the new Emperor, shall we?"

"This is highly irregular..." the Master of Ceremony started. And all the hell broke loose.

"You are highly irregular!" the Count shouted.

"I'd say he's too regular!" Philigree retorted.

"A regular crazy old fart!" the Duke agreed.

"He's just doing his job, you unholy sack of lard!"

"Your grandmother was a grandhamster," the Marquis said calmly to nobody in particular.

"No time for arguing when orcs are coming!" the Baron said. It was a surprisingly sensible remark, therefore nobody acted on it.

"Best time there is," the Hiwelthadt replied.

"Skunk you!"

"May the unholy carp eat out your eyes!"

"Uncleskunker!"

"May the Lord of Light turns your intestines into eels!"

"Shut up!" Roseduck shouted, but without much effect. Fortunately for him, the Baron was his ally. Sort of.

"SHUT! UP!" The powerful shout filled the room. To drive his point home, Oxrabbit pounded the table with his fist. The table broke with a loud crack. The room suddenly went silent.

"You broke the table..." the Master of Ceremony said weakly.

"Get over it," Roseduck quickly replied. "No more of this bickering. We need a decision and we need it now!"

"Right! I, Duke Bartholomeus Theodoricus Angus Thinoak, High Lord of the Empire, submit the candidature of Menerrick Idontremember Hisothernames Housegoose to become the next Emperor!"

"The candidature of Menerrick Idonrembur Hisothermus Housegoose has been submitted. Will anyone second the motion?"

Silence was only response to the question.

"We're not THAT desperate yet," Philigree said.

"He's as good as any!"

"But we don't want the fat man behind the throne. It could break when you lean on it."

"Why you little sillytitled..."

"I, General Eneumerius Roseduck, High Lord Commander, submit the candidature of Mevrin Dontputit Onfire Oxrabbit!"

The room went silent again. Mevrin Oxrabbit. Nobody had even considered Mevrin Oxrabbit. Not even Baron Oxrabbit himself, mainly because he had been busy submitting candidatures of people long dead and/or ineligible for other reasons.

"The candidature of Mevrin Donupit Onifur Oxrabbit has been submitted. Will anyone second the motion?"

The Baron didn't hesitate. Mevrin, after all, was family. You vote for your family.

"I, Baron Regedulf Solthyron Asrius Oxrabbit, second the motion!"

"The motion is passed. Now let us deliberate in silence for ten minutes. After that, the voting will commence."

Roseduck was nervous. This was his moment of truth. Would he get his awful candidate elected or not? No way to tell. He decided that should this vote fail, he was going to vote for someone else's awful candidate, whoever he might be.

He looked at the other lords, trying to guess what they will do. He had Oxrabbit's vote for sure. Two more needed. But who? Shaggysheep? Squarewheel? Blueparrot? Blazingtree? Surely not Thinoak, but who knows? The Marquis looked as usual, which meant that level of his participation in this reality was unknown. Roseduck suspected that he knew what was happening, but it was no more than a guess. The Duke sat with his fists and teeth clenched. Definitely not happy. The Count seemed deep in thought, as was the Earl. The Hiwelthadt was smiling, no telling what he found funny this time. Roseduck himself tried to look calm. He hoped he was doing a decent job of it.

"The vote will commence now. Everyone in favour of electing Mevrin Oxrabbit as the new Emperor, please rise your hands."

Roseduck and Oxrabbit rose their hands at once. The Duke just sat there looking angry, no vote from him, as expected. Count Blueparrot shook his head. The Marquis lifted his hand, seemingly absentmindedly. The Earl did nothing. The Hiwelthadt giggled. And lifted his hand too.

"The result of the vote is: four in favour, three against. Mevrin Donupit Onifur Oxrabbit is our new Emperor, May He Live For A Thousand And Three Years!"

\*\*\*

They arrived at their destination in the middle of the night. Saalteinamariva got there by a carriage. There was enough place inside for Vannard too, but of course neither of them wanted to travel together. The assassin rode on horseback, only occasionally approaching the carriage to exchange a few insults. Everyone was more or less happy with the arrangement, apart from the driver. He expected to land in the middle of a assassin-sorceress conflict any second. Fortunately, nothing like that had happened. Yet. There was still the way back and he wasn't looking forward to that.

The castle was huge and jet-black. High towers, a deep, wide moat. Fortunately, no lions in the moat. How it could have been missed was beyond understanding. But they weren't here to wonder about that. They were here to seek and destroy. With an emphasis on destroying.

Now there was a question of how to enter. The front gate was guarded, which wasn't that much of a problem, but it would alert the residents of their arrival, which would be ill-advised. Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be any rear entrance of any sort.

"Can you fly us through a window?" Vannard asked.

"Do I look like an *air* mage to you?"

"Not really."

"So that is your answer. Although, I could explode you through a window I think."

Vannard considered this for a moment. The idea of crashing into a castle window at high speed had some appeal. He imagined himself flying through some room, throwing knives at everything that moved. Then the more practical part of him came to voice and he imagined himself crashing into a wall at high speed. The result wasn't satisfactory.

"I think I'll say no to that."

"A pity."

"I know that you'd like nothing better than to splatter me against the wall."

"You know me too well, but never mind that. Looks like now it is time for mister awesome assassin to figure out a way to enter without alerting everyone, don't you think?"

Vannard thought about it for a moment. "Mister awesome assassin figured out a way. Through the front gate. We will ask those nice guards to let us in."

"Oh. I am overwhelmed by your ingenuity."

"I'd ask you to trust me, but that obviously isn't going to happen."

"Obviously."

"So how about you just follow my lead? You're not afraid of those two, are you?"

"Of course not. I'll just put them on fire when you fail."

"If I fail, you mean?"

"I mean what I said."

"Very well, be this way."

They approached the castle on foot. There was a moat in the way. The gate was a drawbridge, and it was raised. Two black-clad warriors stood guard on this side of the moat. At least they pretended they are warriors. Vannard had seen them move and they didn't seem all that warriorly to him. More like peasants hired to pretend that they were warriors. The assassin was often amused by the notion of giving peasants chain mail and halberds and pretending that they were competent guards. Why these ridiculous halberds again?!

As they slowly walked towards the guards, the sorceress contemplated the best way to lower the drawbridge, just in case Vannard's idea failed. She had a bit more confidence in him than she was willing to admit, but she was all too well aware that he was not a people person. If the goal was to kill the guards, Vannard was just the one to do that. He'd probably drown them in the moat just to satisfy his primitive sense of humour. Talking them into lowering the bridge was a completely another matter.

"None shall pass!" one of the guards challenged them as they approached.

"Be a good guardhalberdperson and let us in, will you? Me and my lovely companion here are to have dinner with the dark lord."

Saalteinamariva wasn't too happy about being referred to as a lovely companion, but she decided to play along for now. What would a lovely companion do in such a situation? Smile pleasantly, probably. So she smiled. It came out as an awful rictus.

The poor guards didn't seem to know what to make of this. Two strange people, appearing out of nowhere in the middle of the night want to see the dark lord. Strange. He didn't have visitors before. But if he was to have some, that's what they would look like, probably. They were looking very... darklordly? Somehow threatening at least. On the other hand, they were given no orders to let anyone in.

"I'd better ask the captain," the guard replied.

"Of course."

"Captain! Captain!" the guard shouted, but he got no answer.

"Communication issues?" Vannard asked with a smile.

"Yes, well, uh," the guard replied. "The gate is quite thick, you know." He sounded a horn. After a moment the bridge started lowering. They waited patiently. As soon as the bridge was down, Vannard moved forward. Saalteinamariva followed him. The guards looked at each other. They didn't feel it would be a good idea to stop them, but also didn't want to let them go in on their own. So they followed, keeping a respectful distance.

On the other side there were two more guards and the captain. He was easily recognisable. He had a shinier halberd and a prettier steel cap.

"Please point us towards the dark lord," Vannard asked him nicely.

"He's down in his dungeon, of course," he replied.

"Thank you, good man. Keep on guarding."

"Thanks," the captain of the guard replied instinctively, as Vannard moved past him. "Hey, wait! You can't just walk in here!"

"We're to have dinner with your boss."

"I know nothing about this! I must clear that with AAAAARGH!" he screamed as a small fireball exploded in his face.

"Hey, I wanted to kill him!" the assassin complained, throwing knives at the other guards.

"Too slow!" the sorceress replied and fried another guard. A few more emerged from the guardroom, but they were quickly dispatched.

"That was easy," Vannard stated the obvious and proceeded to recover his knives. "So you were saying that my plan wouldn't work?"

"It worked," Saalteinamariva admitted. "But only because of stupidity of these guards."

"As I recently discovered, people are rather dumb," he said while using trousers of one of his victims to wipe the blood off his knife.

"But you cannot assume they all are!" she protested. "It wouldn't have worked if they had been smart!"

"Obviously. But they wouldn't have been guarding a gate if they were smart. They were simple peasants, and peasants aren't too bright."

"Those two could have been unusually bright! You simply were lucky!"

"I prefer the term 'educationally gessy'."

"There is no such term!"

"You're just upset that I didn't fail."

"Yes I am!"

"And with that established, can we go kill that dark lord person?"

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"You found the armour. Good," the Oracle said.

"You look like you were swimming in a swamp," Gaduria pointed out. Alexander gave her a dirty look. It would be difficult for him to give her any other kind of look, because he was very dirty at the moment. Both he and the paladin were covered in mud, which was drying slowly and falling off.

"The helmet was a nice touch, don't you think?" the Oracle asked.

"Yes. It was rather surprising that it was hanging on a branch instead of being submerged in the swamp with the other parts." Arthaxiom didn't sound too enthusiastic about that.

"Especially that we only found it after a few hours of diving in the mud, when we finally gave up and decided to return," Alexander added.

"The possum nesting inside it was even more surprising," the paladin said and took off the aforementioned helmet. His face looked like he had tried to wear a helmet containing an angry possum, which was exactly what had happened. "You could have told us it was there."

"Or at least that it wasn't in the mud," the dwarf remarked. He was rather unhappy with his swampy experiences. "It would have spared me the pleasures of being molested by a huge swamp lizard."

"It all helps you to become better people. Or dwarves."

"I'd like to learn more about what that lizard did to you," Gaduria added. Alexander stuck out his tongue at her. A clod of dirt fell on it. He spat with disgust.

"Better people? In what way?" the paladin inquired.

"For starters, now you know to check your helmet for possums before wearing it. And now, about those toad eyes..."

"Ah, yes, right..." Alexander seemed a bit uncomfortable with the subject.

"I know you have them still attached to the toads. I can deal with that. Just give me the sack."

The Oracle took the sack full of frogs and pulled out a shield from behind a rock.

"It wasn't..." Alexander started, but the Oracle interrupted him.

"...there before. But it is here now."

Arthaxiom didn't care where did the shield come from. He was happy to put his hands on it. The last part of his Heroic gear. He admired it. The shield was golden, with a fish sticking out of it. A huge fish, standing on its tail, with scales gleaming red and gold. Its eyes were rubies and its head was sticking out towards the enemy.

"The Flaming Fish of Fury!" the paladin exclaimed.

"Swamp gas got to his head," Alexander explained. Nobody took notice of him. Gaduria joined in examining the shield. The Oracle got busy counting toads. Just for show, of course, since she had known how many they'd catch even before she sent them to the swamp.

"Where should we go now?" Arthaxiom asked when the excitement had subsided a bit.

"Skywards," the Oracle replied.

"Excuse me?"

"Go skywards and you will meet your destiny!"

Arthaxiom pondered on this. "Alexander! We need a ladder!"

"Would need to be a skunking long ladder."

"Yes! That is what we need!"

"Stop being silly!" the Oracle berated them. "It's a metaphor!"

"A metaphor? Take cover!"

"No, not a giant rock falling from the sky."

"Oh. Sorry." Arthaxiom stopped covering on the round with his new shield held above his head.

"It means that my answer wasn't straightforward. You are supposed to figure out what I really meant."

"Ah. So, if you said skywards, it means... downwards! Alexander! We need a shovel!"

"Would have to be a skunking huge shovel."

"Yes! That is what we need!"

"No, you morons. Sky. What colour is the sky?"

"Some sort of... greyish?" Alexander tried.

"No! The sky is blue!"

"If you say so... seems greyish to me."

"And it means...?" the paladin asked. He decided not to guess anymore.

"That there is a village called Blue which you would have know about if you had the slightest idea where you are! You should go there!"

"Oh. You could have said that first."

"No. There are rules. I was supposed to let you try to guess even if I already knew you'd fail horribly. Now begone."

\*\*\*

The Emperor was chosen, but the fun wasn't over yet. There were formalities that could not be skipped. Well, they probably could be skipped, but not with the Master of Ceremony around. General Roseduck tried to haste things as much as he could, but it didn't amount to much. Each High Lord had to sign the official proclamation, which was relatively sensible. Then each High Lord had to thank the Lord of Light for the divine guidance that had helped with the choice. This wouldn't be too bad, if not for the Earl, who improvised a bit and started to ramble about some weird religious stuff involving a single combat against the Demonic Cow while armed with a red herring on a stick. Roseduck silently asked the Lord of Light to render the Earl mute, or at least kill him, if muting was too much trouble, but nothing happened. As usual. That was why he had lost interest in this whole religion stuff a long time ago.

After the Earl finished his blabbering, it was time for consumption of the Electoral Strawberries. Each lord had one. That was really stupid, but at least didn't take long. Good thing these weren't Electoral Watermelons instead, although the Duke would probably appreciate that more. Finally, the ritual spitting on the Master of Ceremony's feet ensued. They all enjoyed this part. After that it was all over.

"Time for me to take care of the orc problem. Farewell, my lords," Roseduck said.

"You will miss the coronation!" the Master of Ceremony protested.

"Is it a high treason if I miss it?"

"Well... no."

"Then I'm going. Those orcs won't defeat themselves, you know!" He stormed out of the room.

"Wait for me!" the Baron called and followed him.

"And for me!" the Marquis suddenly came to life and ran after them. That left the rest of the lords speechless. They looked at each other in confusion. Count Blueparrot was the first to speak.

"What the skunk just happened?!"

"Who cares?! If they want to commit suicide it's their problem," the Duke replied.

"It seems that orcs are the only thing that can arouse old Shaggysheep."

"You really are an unholy bastard to make such jokes!" the Earl complained.

Philigree just laughed. "That's me!"

"All right, all right, we had our fun," the Duke said. "But we all know what we all are thinking about, and no point in denying... You're running away too, aren't you?"

"Thinoak, you fat coward!" the Count scolded him. "I'm running away after the coronation!"

"Yes, let's pretend that we're not cowards," the Hiwelthadt seconded the idea and started laughing hysterically.

"At least we're not morons," the Duke replied.

"I am neither," Earl Blazingtree said. "The Lord of Light will protect me."

"So you're not going to run away?"

"Of course not! I'm going to change my location according to the divine guidance I will receive."

"Let me guess... this location will be far away?" the Hiwelthadt inquired.

"I think the Lord of Light in all His wisdom would not want me anywhere near an orcish horde."

"Ah. Well, I think he wouldn't want me anywhere near one either, but I think I won't waste his holy time and just flee on my own."

The Earl gave Philigree a look of the likes usually reserved for excrements stuck to a shoe, but the Hiwelthadt just shrugged and started laughing maniacally.

\*\*\*

The corridor walls were stylishly black, softly illuminated by scarcely placed torches. On the walls there were tapestries depicting fire-breathing dragons, fearsome skeleton warriors, all sorts of demons engaged in all sorts of depravities, and other fun stuff. There were also niches containing full armour sets holding many different wicked-looking killing implements. Someone obviously had put a lot of effort into decorating.

"How romantic," Vannard commented.

"Shut up," the sorceress said. Which obviously caused the exact opposite.

"A perfect location for a date, don't you agree?"

"For an insane maniac like you, maybe."

"You surprise me. I thought you were the one to appreciate such ambience."

"Not enough fire."

"Well, we can remedy that on the way back."

"Also, too many insane maniacs."

"Can't help you with this one."

"Too bad."

They continued in silence. They were deep inside the enemy castle and had neither a map, nor a guide. They both knew where they wanted to go. Neither of them knew how to get there. Neither of them was willing to admit that. Finally, they had to, because they were getting nowhere.

"Why did you have to fry that nice captain before he gave us directions?" Vannard asked reproachfully.

"He was going to raise an alarm, you moron!"

"Yes, so maybe we'd have a few more potential guides..."

"We'd have one if you hadn't killed the last one! Why did you have to kill the last one?!"

"Well... I had a knife... and he was... alive?"

"Bloodthirsty idiot!"

"Ill-tempered pyromaniac."

Fortunately at this point they reached a place where they needed to make a choice. They could go left or they could go right, and neither way looked particularly more promising than the other.

"Split up?" Vannard asked without hesitation.

"Thought you'd never ask."

"In case you miss me, just follow the corpses."

"In case you miss me, just follow the burning and screaming corpses."

"Wouldn't they be running, like, away from you?"

"Exactly. Why would you think I'd like you to find me?"

"You're breaking my heart, Sally."

"I'd fry it if you had one."

"I guess I could cut one out of someone, then you could fry it and we'd share a nice meal."

"So, in addition to being obnoxious and insane now you're disgusting too? Great. Just great."

"Love you too."

\*\*\*

Five castle guards were sitting in their guardroom around a wooden table. They were supposed to be guarding, but they were playing cards instead. They decided that the castle was safe enough without their help. Nobody would break into it. Nobody would steal it. Yet another hand was reaching its conclusion.

"Llama!"

"Llama!"

"Duck!"

"Duck!"

"Goose!"

"Skunk your goose!"

"Don't skunk my goose you gooseskunker! Who lost? Go see if everything is ok."

Thok got up, mumbled something insulting and left the room. It was his turn to pretend to patrol, because he had just an ordinary llama, while Rugh had a bit rarer striped llama. He returned much sooner than his fellow guards had expected. His eyes were wide open and he seemed to be trying to say something, but he failed and just moved his mouth like a fish.

"Thok? Yalright?"

The guard just pointed at the door. Now all the guards were staring at the doorway. The reason for that was simple. The most beautiful woman any of them had ever seen was standing in the doorway. It didn't mean all that much, because they hadn't seen all that much in their lives, but still. She was tall and slender. A keen observer perhaps would notice from

her facial expression that she seemed rather annoyed, but all the keen observers around were busy staring somewhere else.

"Can any of you point me towards that dark lord of yours?" she asked. "Your friend here seems to have forgotten how to talk."

Unfortunately for them, they didn't forget.

"Blzzzst!" one of them blurted.

"I am the dark lord!" the other declared.

"I'm a darker lord!"

"Is it getting hot in here? Drop the robes, baby!"

It was getting hot in there indeed. Mainly because of the sorceress' fury. Unlike other people, who could burn with fury only on the inside, she radiated it outside. She was very, very annoyed. After spending way too much time around Vannard she just ran into someone even worse. A few someones, even. Rude, drooling simpletons.

"Hey, cheer up, cutie!"

This was the last straw.

"DIEEEEEEE!!!" the sorceress screamed, and fire burst from her fingers. She was blind with rage, not seeing what she was doing. She didn't need to. The flames were everywhere. The guards were screaming, the sorceress was screaming, even the walls were screaming. It lasted for just a moment, and then there was silence.

She felt better. Much better. She needed that. She should have done something like that a long time ago. But now back to business. She realised she was lying on the floor with her eyes closed. Time to open them and get up. She did so.

What just a moment ago had been a perfectly good guardroom now was... a perfectly good burned guardroom. Whatever had been flammable, was burned to cinder. Including the guards. The walls were radiating heat. The floor... There was a huge hole melted in the floor.

"Wow. I didn't know I could do that," she said to herself with a mixture of awe and fear. Then she smiled. "I must be some sort of awesome now." She looked into the hole. It led to the lower level. Since the dark lord was supposed to be somewhere in the dungeon, it was the right way to go. A shortcut, even. She jumped down.

\*\*\*

Mevrin Oxrabbitt, or Emperor Mevrin the First as he was now known, was feeling a bit lost. Not long ago he was a perfectly normal young noble: throwing food at servants, throwing servants at food, throwing servants at other servants... Then a message came that he was to be the next Emperor. That was quite a surprise. He had heard something about death of the previous one, it would be rather hard to miss that. He knew nothing about the electoral process and had no idea he was a candidate. In truth, he had been told he was a candidate, but he got distracted by a maid carrying a stuffed albatross and he forgot.

His first question when he got the message was why did they pick him. The answer was obvious. His uncle must have beaten them until they did. The second question was what to do next. Going to the capital to assume the position was an obvious thing to do, therefore it took only about half an hour for his nanny to persuade him to do that. The other thing was more difficult.

"I'm not going to learn any silly oaths!" he said maybe for the hundredth time.

"Yes you are, dearie," his nanny replied patiently.

"No, I'm not! I'm the Emperor and I do how I please!"

"You are not the Emperor yet, dearie. You need to learn the oath to become the Emperor, so be a good boy and learn it."

"No! No no no no ow! Ow ow ow!" The nanny apparently decided that basic persuasion failed here, so she began enhanced persuasion. It consisted of hitting Mevrin repeatedly on the head with her wooden spoon. "Ow! Ow! Stop that!"

"I will not stop until you agree to learn the oath."

"Ow! I'll order you beheaded! Ow! Ow! Stop hitting me! Ow! Ow! All right, I'll learn your stupid oath!"

"Now that's a good boy," the nanny said and stopped hitting him. "The oath and the Virtues of the Good Emperor and the Emperor's Prayer..."

"I'm not learning those stupid five virtues!" Mevrin protested yet again. "Ow!"

"Six virtues, dearie."

"Too many of them!"

"An Emperor needs a lot of virtues, dearie."

"Is beheading nannies one of them?"

Nanny consulted her list. "No dearie. But humility is."

"That carps. Ow!"

"Good manners are there as well, dearie."

"Ow! Ow! All right! I'll learn... uh... whatever number of virtues it was."

"Six, dearie. And the Emperor's Prayer."

"I don't need no stupid prayer! Ow!"

"Yes you do, dearie."

"Why?"

Nanny shrugged. "I don't know. That's just the way it is, dearie. The Emperor needs the Emperor's prayer."

"What good does knowing it do?"

"It stops me from hitting you on the head, dearie."

"Ow! Ow! All right!"

\*\*\*

The dungeon was very similar to the ground floor, just some of the decorations were different. A bit less tapestries, a bit more shackles. A skull here and there. Not as many torches, so it was darker and more foreboding. Saalteinamariva didn't care. She was drunk with her own power.

It didn't take her long to find the door. It wasn't just any ordinary door: big, double-leaf, and plated with metal. Not simply plated either, the metal was engraved with many characters and scenes. The sorceress didn't look at it too much, but she appreciated the burning elephant trampling the burning dwarf. She knew these had to be the door to the residence of the dark lord. It was time to open them. By opening them she meant going few steps back and hitting them with a stream of fire. The door wasn't flammable, but the sheer force of the stream made it open.

She waited a moment. Nobody came out, nobody screamed. She entered.

"You could have knocked," a somewhat raspy and sinister voice said. There was a figure clad all in black lurking in the shadows. Almost all in black. There were a few intensely violet, strategically placed skull sigils on its robes.

The sorceress wasn't impressed. "It was open," she said, disdain in her voice. "Dark Lord Abracabrachupacabra, I presume?"

The dark lord turned around abruptly, as if bitten by an invisible hamster. He looked at his unwelcome visitor. "You!" he pointed at her and shouted in anger. He didn't sound that darklordly anymore.

"Me?" she asked, surprised. Then she summoned a small ball of fire just to illuminate the room. Light fell upon the cloaked man's face. "You!" Her anger returned at once. She recognised the man. She knew him all too well. He was one of the Imperial Wizards. They used to hate each other very much. That didn't mean that much, because the same could be told about her and probably every other Imperial Wizard, mainly because the Imperial Wizards disapproved of female mages, and she disapproved of those who disapproved of female mages.

In this particular case it was more than that. They both were studying in the Tower of Wizards, years ago. Saalteinamariva had been barely accepted in first place. As the first female ever. Unfortunately, what transpired next convinced the wizards that female mages were a very bad idea. Basically, he tried to seduce her. To make it worse, he did it badly, because wizards usually know next to nothing about seduction. After some awkwardness she ended up thrown out of the Tower, and he ended up having his face reconstructed. And here he was now, posing as some sort of dark lord...

"We meet again," the dark lord said, calm and composed again.

"Indeed," the sorceress replied. "After all these years. I've been looking forward to this."

"You were?"

"No, not really. But it sounded like a good thing to say."

"You mean you've forgotten about me?"

"Well, sort of, yes. You know, life is short, and there are so many interesting things to burn down..."

"All right. With pleasantries out of the way, to what do I owe your visit?"

"The general idea was to put you on fire, and I think I'll go forward with that."

"That's what I was afraid of. Guards!" He looked expectantly at the other door. Nothing happened. "Guards!"

The door opened slowly. A guard appeared. He didn't look too lively.

"What is wrong with you?!" the dark lord demanded.

The guard toppled forward. "Surprise! He's dead!" Vannard jumped out of the door and said with fake cheerfulness. "Missed me?"

"I did not," the sorceress replied.

"Your boyfriend?" the dark lord asked. That question startled both of them.

"Not really," Vannard responded. "But we have an interesting hate-hate relationship."

Saalteinamariva sighed. "Let's end this absurdity, shall we?"

"Not just yet. Emergency guards!"

This time the call was answered. Yet another door opened and two dozens of guards emerged. They were armed similarly to those they met before, but Vannard noticed that these moved somewhat differently. More like seasoned warriors than like simple townsfolk with spears.

"Fire!" the dark lord shouted. The guards fumbled for their bows and arrows.

"You want fire? I aim to please," Saalteinamariva said. Flames erupted from her hands.

\*\*\*

The coronation was a sad affair. It was being held in the Grand Hall, as the funeral had been before, but this time the Hall wasn't even filled in half. The news about the orcish invasion had already spread and most of the townsfolk were bright enough to know that the capital was one place that the enemy was unlikely to pass. Furthermore, the Imperial Castle was a place in the capital that the enemy was unlikely to pass. On the other hand, some came to a different

conclusion. The Imperial Castle would be the most heavily guarded place around. They went to see the coronation with hopes to hide somewhere afterwards. Or during. Or before.

The soon-to-be Emperor seemed dazed and confused by all of this. He had no idea why hardly anyone was cheering. He knew there was supposed to be a lot of cheering at the coronation. A lot of shiny things too, and... why was that peasant trying to squeeze himself inside a vase?!

Strange activities of some of the spectators weren't Mevrin's only worry. He had some wardrobe trouble too. He wore a splendid purple cloak, but it was giving him a nasty itch and he was fidgeting and scratching his neck. He wore a gold necklace with which he was playing all the time. To make it even worse, his jewelled shoes were too big and that caused him to stumble quite a bit when he was moving around. Overall, he didn't look too Imperial, but that was far from the worst thing about this coronation.

Three High Lords were missing. Four were present, but they weren't dressed nearly as splendidly as they normally would on such occasion. Their clothes and behaviour somewhat gave a hint and they might run out of the hall any second. Or wobble hastily in the Duke's case. Additionally, Philigree was giggling like a madman all the time, which got him some annoyed looks from the Master of Ceremony. He made nothing of it. The Duke and the Count were either arguing or pretending the other one wasn't there. That still wasn't the worst part.

The worst part was the High Priest. When the news about orcish invasion got around, some decided to run. Some decided to hide. Some decided to wait and hope for the best. And some decided all was lost and decided to enjoy themselves. The High Priest was one of them. In his case, enjoyment meant heavy drinking. He looked as if he had passed out in a henhouse and then someone dragged him out and forced to do the ceremony. It was almost true. For some unknown reason, he had passed out in the Imperial Pigeonhouse, and after a long search was found there by one of the servants. The Master of Ceremony himself dragged him out just in time. The Codex said that the High Priest had to be the one to perform the coronation, so the High Priest was going to do that. No leeway in this matter. No option for a last-minute substitution, no option to fire him and get a new one. High Priest was chosen for life. In view of that, the Master of Ceremony briefly considered murdering the current one. It would certainly be a breach of protocol, but having the coronation performed by someone covered in pigeon crap was surely an even bigger one. It was certainly tempting, but finally the Master of Ceremony decided against it, if only for the reason that finding an eligible candidate and anointing him at such a short notice was next to impossible.

The High Priest was in place, although a bit wobbly. The Emperor-elect was in place, although a bit fidgety. Some High Lords were in place, although a bit restless. Some public was present, also rather restless, but nothing a few nice threats couldn't solve, at least temporarily. The show could start...

"Whattar we doin again? Marriage?" the High Priest whispered. At least he thought he whispered.

"Abortion," Count Blueparrot said in a rare display of morbid humour.

"Virgin birth," Earl Blazingtree seconded. They had no sympathy for the High Priest. The Count basically had no sympathy for anyone, and the Earl felt that the High Priest was disgracing his holy office. Philigree was pleasantly surprised that he won't be the only one

making fun of the priest, but then he felt he couldn't allow himself to be outdone by these amateurs.

"You're to marry him to a goat!"

The High Priest looked around in confusion. "Derez no goat!"

"You are one!"

"Please stop that," the Master of Ceremony requested. The drunken wretch deserved all the insults as far as he was concerned, but not during the ceremony. "It is a coronation. Don't listen to them."

"Yeah, carry on!" the Duke said. "Some of us have... fish to catch."

"Yes indeed! We're all going to catch some trout afterwards!" The Hiwelthadt started laughing uncontrollably.

"Shut up!"

"Coronate me, you fool!" impatient Mevrin shouted at the priest.

"Nudsoloud please," the priest murmured weakly. All this shouting made his head hurt even more. "Gimme sum crown and lets do it."

"What about the prayer?" the Master of Ceremony insisted. He didn't even mention the Imperial Mimes, because they had all run away. In a very artistic way, of course. Neither did he mention the psalms. Having the High Priest sing in his current state didn't seem like a good idea. Mimes and psalms were optional in any case, but the prayer wasn't and the Master of Ceremony wasn't going to give up on that.

"Right, right... uh... oh, lurdoflight who... uhhh.... shines... idunremmbr."

"What do you mean you don't remember? You're the High Priest, you have to remember that prayer!"

"Tss not like I do coronashun evrrday. Myheadhurrtrz."

"I can do this," the Earl volunteered.

"This is highly irre..." the Master of Ceremony started, but the Duke interrupted him.

"Want the prayer or not? Let him do it!" The Master of Ceremony nodded reluctantly. "And don't dawdle! We don't have all day, you know!" Ever since the news about the orcs Duke Thinoak was rather jumpy, which generously contributed to the amount of holes in the corridors of the Imperial Castle.

Earl Blazingtree stepped up and took a deep breath. "Oh Lord of Light who shines on us day and night week and month every year since the dawn of time here we stand your humble servants on this great day!" He gasped for breath. "Please in your great wisdom and general knowledgeablebleness grant that man who will be made Emperor on this glorious day some of that wisdom so that he will be a good one as opposed to bad one and maybe a bit better than

the average one!" Another gasp. "We beg you make his reign long and fortuitous without flood nor famine drought nor tornados locusts nor vermin giant frogs nor reindeer and most certainly not enormous man-eating albatrosses!"

"Certainly not albatrosses!" the crowd replied.

"Cannui coroborobonate now?"

"Yes. Bring the crown!"

A servant appeared. He was holding a red pillow, upon which the crown rested. He seemed a bit overwhelmed by his task. He stepped on the dais and froze, not knowing what to do.

"Bring it here," the Master of Ceremony urged him on. The servant tried to do that, but he apparently couldn't decide which leg to move first and he fell down. The crown rolled on the ground.

"Clumsy oaf!" the Duke roared.

"Have him beheaded!" Mevrin seconded.

"Can't get decent servants these days," the Count complained. The servant stuttered some sort of apology, backed out and ran away. Meanwhile Philigree grabbed the crown.

"Hey, look, I'm the Emperor now!" He laughed crazily and put the crown on his head. Upside down.

"Stop fooling around!" the Duke berated him. "Give the crown back and let's end this farce!"

"This is highly..."

"Irregular, yes, I know." The Hiwelthadt laughed again. He took the crown off. "Hey, priesty, catch!"

The crown flew towards the High Priest. He tried to catch it, but fumbled horribly. It fell on the ground again, and he with it.

"See what you did!" the Count complained.

"Yeah, nice going, newtbutt!" the Duke agreed.

"Will someone coronate me?!" Mevrin wasn't sure what was going on, but was getting quite upset. He suspected that people shouldn't be throwing the crown around and falling down. The Master of Ceremony picked up the crown and helped the High Priest to get up.

"Gonna puke," the priest muttered. The Master of Ceremony paid no attention to that. He handed him the crown.

"Don't drop it! Coronate him!" He pointed him in the direction of the Emperor.

"In the name of Lord of Light and for the glory of the Empire, I declare you our new Emperor!" High Priest said surprisingly intelligibly and put the crown on Mevrin's head.

There was some cheering. Mevrin waved at whoever cared. The High Priest went to the side, bent over and puked.

"As my first edict, I sentence that priest guy to be kicked in his butt for puking during the coronation!" Mevrin declared and promptly carried out the sentence. The High Priest fell into the puddle of his own vomit. The Emperor turned around, hoping for some applause, but all he got were a few giggles from the guards. The public had already scattered in search for good hiding places and the High Lords were nowhere to be seen. Only rhythmic thumping was being heard, as if someone very overweight was attempting to run.

\*\*\*

The dark lord wasn't too keen on getting burned alive. He used one of the most basic spells, which at the same time was one of the most useful. Magic shield. In theory, it could deflect just about anything. In practice, its effectivity depended on the caster's power. Abracabracupacabra's spell was strong enough. The flames roared around him, yet he was unharmed.

"KILL HER!" he screamed above the noise, apparently unsure how long his arcane protection would last.

The guards fired at the sorceress, but that wasn't too bright on their part. The arrows burst into flames from the heat before even getting close. Upon seeing that, they spread around the room to aim from a less heated angle. Meanwhile five of them approached Vannard, swords in their hands.

"Fry, you bastard!" Saalteinamariva screamed. The dark lord so far wasn't complying, but he was under some strain.

Vannard smiled at his opponents. "Hi!" Two knives left his palms simultaneously. One of the guards fell backwards with a knife in his eye. The other one managed to dodge, but that made them hesitate. The assassin didn't wait. He ran towards the door the sorceress had entered through. When he was behind her, he grabbed her by the right hand and pulled her after him.

"What are you doing?!" she shouted angrily just as some arrows hit the wall, exactly where she had been standing a second ago. "You saved my life!?" she asked incredulously, while being dragged down the corridor and still shooting flames from her left hand.

"I did. Thought that would annoy you," he replied, turning a corner.

"You thought right. You can stop dragging me now!"

"Aww, and here I was enjoying myself," he replied, but let her go.

"Do you think they'll come after us?" she asked, running on her own now.

"What are you waiting for?! After them! Don't let them get away!" a voice came from the distance.

"Yes, I think they will," Vannard replied. "That's nice."

"Nice?! We're running away from them!"

"Yes. They had advantage in the open space. Here they don't. You can now turn around and fry them."

"Oh. Right."

The guards might have been skilled, but they lacked foresight. Their logic was simple: if enemies were running away, it meant that they were weak, and it also meant that they would be defeated if caught up with. The dark lord himself also fell victim to that simplified thinking and he urged them forward. What they didn't consider was the fact that in the chamber they could have fired at the sorceress from multiple angles, and also that she was focused on trying to turn the dark lord into a human torch.

The result of this tactical inability was a corridor filled with guards and also filled with fire. The guards underwent some rapid changes, first turning into burning and screaming guards, then into guards deep fried in armour, and finally into smouldering corpses.

"Very nice," Vannard said.

"What would you have done without me?"

"Killed them one at the time, I guess. Maybe not as efficient, but way more fun."

"Speaking of efficiency... let's go get that bastard before he runs away!"

The bastard didn't run away. Apparently the screams of the burning guards didn't give him a hint.

"So, you defeated my guards. It matters not. You are strong, but you are only the master of fire."

"And what was that supposed to mean?" Saalteinamariva asked.

"That I am the master of water. Water beats fire." The dark lord lifted his hands and a stream of water erupted from them.

"Hey! It's not my bath time yet!" Vannard complained as he moved away.

Saalteinamariva on the other hand didn't move away. She struck back. Water and fire collided in mid-air. Hot steam filled the chamber.

"If you wanted to go to a sauna, you could have said so!" the assassin joked.

"I want roast chicken!"

"Oh. Clever."

The dark lord's magic was clearly not up to par. His water evaporated quickly, yet the flames refused to be extinguished. He ended up crouching on the floor, trying to protect himself with his magic shield once again.

"Enjoying yourself, mister Roasty?" Vannard asked.

"I'm not dead yet! Emergency zombie guards!"

A portion of the walls opened and a bunch of zombies armed with swords stepped forward. Or slouched forward to be exact. Very, very slowly.

"Zombies? Seriously?" Vannard approached the lead zombie and knocked its sword out of its hand. And pulled its head off.

"Muuuuurgh!" the zombie head complained. The assassin threw it at another zombie's head, which also fell off.

"Headshot!"

"Stop playing with zombies! They are enemies, not toys!" Saalteinamariva berated him.

"You always spoil my fun!"

"That's because I hate you! Now get rid of them or I'll burn them!"

"Oh very well. You just keep frying lordy here."

"No worries. I like them overcooked."

Zombies attacked the assassin, but they were dreadfully slow. Why would anyone choose for guards things that moved in slow-motion and occasionally lost body parts was a mystery. Vannard grabbed another zombie, tore off its hands and proceeded to beat the rest of the undead with them.

"That's not the fastest way to get rid of them!" the sorceress complained.

"You're right, unfortunately. My arms seem to be broken." He threw away damaged zombie arms, grabbed a sword from another zombie and efficiently sliced the rest of his opponents into pieces. "Done. Still playing with your food?"

"Actually, I want to interrogate him."

Vannard sighed. "Stop frying him, then." She did. The dark lord was lying flat on the ground and sweating profusely. The duel tired him out. It didn't seem like he was willing or able to do anything, but the assassin hit a few of his sensitive spots, just in case. Or just for fun. "So, why did you want him alive?"

"I think it would be interesting to know why an Imperial Mage is playing some sort of an evil dark lord." She looked at the defeated man expectantly. The only thing he produced were some noises indicating that he was in pain.

"I SAID," she repeated louder, "that it would be interesting to KNOW, why were YOU playing that Abrasomething person!"

"I was bored..." he said, weakly.

"I'm bored, too," Vannard said.

"Better tell the truth before he gets really bored. Or before I get angry."

"The Archmage... told me to do it... to show how weak the Empire is... so he could... save the day... and take over."

"Now that's just silly," Vannard said.

"I think he's saying the truth," the sorceress said. "It would be a way too stupid lie."

"He could think you'd think that," the assassin pointed out.

"And you think too much. We should bring him to Ducky."

"What for?"

"So he can question him too. He's better at this."

"True. Oh well. What if he tries to escape? I'm no good with prisoners."

"Knock him out, duh. Then drag him out and put him in the carriage."

"I'm too lazy to drag him all that way!" Vannard complained.

"If you cut some bits off, he'll be lighter."

"Now that's an idea! Wait... what's that smell?" They looked around. The smell was coming from... their prisoner.

"Erm, oops," the dark lord said apologetically.

"That settles it. I'm not riding with this stinker!" the sorceress decided, visibly disgusted.

Vannard shrugged. "It was you who wanted to lug him with us anyway." A dagger flashed in his hand. At the same moment fire erupted from Saalteinamariva's fingertips.

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Emperor Mevrin the First was sitting on the Imperial Throne, wearing the Imperial Crown and the Imperial Cape, holding the Imperial Sceptre and trying to be as Imperial as he could. One thing he was lacking were Imperial Advisors. They had all run away. So did the High Lords. He was left with a few guards, servants and such. Those too dumb or too loyal to run away, and not useful enough to go with the army. He also had the Master of Ceremony, his nanny and a castleful of commoners trying their best not to get thrown out of there.

"So, tell me, why there's nobody around?" he asked.

"The army went to fight the orcs, Highness," the Master of Ceremony replied, "and many people decided to leave. They were too afraid of the orcs to stay."

"Did I order them to?"

"No, Highness."

Mevrin considered that. He didn't like it. What does an Emperor do when the people don't do what he wants? Ah. Simple. "Order them beheaded."

"No need to be like that, dearie," the nanny said.

"Shut up. You, get on with the beheadings," he told the Master of Ceremony.

"It is difficult to behead them if they ran away, Highness," the Master of Ceremony pointed out. He wasn't too happy about this entire thing. "I can prepare a proclamation."

Mevrin had no idea what a proclamation was, but it sounded important and official. "Good enough. Now, why aren't there more guards around?"

"Most went with the army, some ran away, and only a few are left, Highness."

"The army? What army? Why?"

"General Roseduck, Baron Oxrabbit and Marquis de Shaggysheep left with the army to fight against the orcish invasion," Master of Ceremony explained. Again. The new Emperor's memory wasn't good. Probably it had to do something with him being an Oxrabbit.

"Ah. If uncle is there, they'll win," the Emperor decided. "But meanwhile, we need more guards. Hire some."

"I'm sorry, Highness, there aren't many people left to hire, not to mention we will be hard-pressed to pay the army if it is victorious."

"When it is victorious," the Emperor corrected. "Not enough gold? Well, then we should... What's it called?"

"Highness?"

"You know, do that thing... that peasants don't like?" Mevrin hazarded.

"Peasants don't like many things, Highness," the Master of Ceremony replied, but he already knew where this was going. He was probably the most loyal person around, but it took him very little time to have quite a few doubts about this new Emperor.

"The one they hate the most. Heard my mother speak about that. They hate it when you... train pixies? Raze foxes?"

"Rise taxes?"

"Yes, that's it! Let's do that, and we'll hire more guards. And servants. And..." he hesitated. "And whores! Do we have any?"

"No, Highness, not really..."

"Shame on you, dearie!" the nanny spoke up. "Why would a decent young man like you want whores?!"

"Shut up, woman!" the Emperor shouted. "Ow! Ow! Ow!"

Enraged nanny produced her wooden spoon and started hitting Mevrin the First on the head. He stood up and tried to cover his head with his hands. His crown fell on the ground and rolled away.

"Guards! Guards!" he shouted, and two rather scrawny and scared guards entered.

"Raise the taxes, will you?! Hire whores, will you?! Bad Emperor! Bad Emperor!"

The guards tried to pull the nanny away, but they weren't doing a good job. They were the sort of guards that are left behind when everyone else goes fighting. They were supposed to overpower a woman hired to babysit young Oxrabbits. There was pushing, shoving, screaming, but it wasn't really a contest until reinforcements arrived. It took six guards to pull her away from Mevrin. They all received some vicious spoonwounds in the process.

"Take her to the dungeon!" When the nanny was dragged away, the Emperor picked up his sceptre and looked around for his crown, which had fallen down during the scramble. It was nowhere to be seen.

"Seen my crown?"

"I'm afraid not, Highness. My eyesight isn't too good."

Mevrin sighed. Where could it be? The only place in the chamber he could think of was under the wardrobe. He knelt on the floor and looked under it, and fair enough, there it was. In the corner, too far to grab it. Fortunately he had already mastered the basics of being the Emperor: delegate problematic tasks to other people.

"It's under the wardrobe. Get it out."

"Apologies, Highness, but my back isn't what it used to be..."

"Must you be so useless?! Call some servants!"

"They are dragging that... lady... to the dungeon, Highness."

"Those were guards!"

"They are on double duty since we don't have enough people."

Mevrin sighed, grabbed his Imperial Sceptre, knelt again and started fishing for his crown. The Master of Ceremony sadly shook his head.

"And about those waxes, see to it, will you?" the Emperor asked from the floor.

"Five percent increase, Highness?"

The Emperor considered this. He had no idea how much was that. It was just a number, and he wasn't good at math. He knew that ten is more than five, and he didn't really know what goes after that... "Ten persons."

"Percent, Highness."

"Whatever."

\*\*\*

General Roseduck led the army. Finally. It felt so natural for him. He studied and practised his entire life for this. Yet he couldn't help being nervous. It was going to be his first real battle. So far he had only faced some stray bands. This time he had an entire invasion on his hands.

His army consisted of many, many people who had a few things in common. They were male. They were brave. They were stupid. They were stupid in many ways and for many reasons. Stupid enough to think they could be Heroes. Stupid enough to believe they would return in glory. Stupid enough to believe that risking life for their country was their duty. Stupid enough to believe that death was something that happened to other people. Roseduck deeply appreciated stupid people. If not for them, he wouldn't have an army to command.

The General himself wasn't so delusional. He knew very well that merely by being in the vicinity of a battlefield he was endangering his further participation in this plane of existence. Of course, as the commander, he would be in much less danger than the rest of his troops, but in danger nonetheless. It didn't stop him. Going to battle against a great big horde of orcs was like a dream come true. Too bad it could go horribly, horribly wrong should the horde be just a little too big.

The lack of mages amongst his troops was worrisome. The General had tried to enlist some before marching out, but to no avail. Most of them locked themselves in their tower. He tried to ask the Archmage for help, but he wasn't even let inside the Tower of Mages. The mage at the gate was rather rude. He told the General that the Archmage had forbidden the mages to join the army. Fair enough, although rather puzzling.

Upon further inquiry, Roseduck was told to skunk off. He didn't appreciate it, not at all. Maybe he should have the insolent bastard killed when he returns. If he returns. In any case, with the Archmage being uncooperative, he was stuck with only one mage. The very same one who saved the day at the Battle of Some Bunch of Trees. Not the most powerful one as mages go. Still, better than none. He regretted sending Saalteinamariva to deal with that dark lord person. She'd love the smell of burning orcs in the morning. Or whenever.

The General didn't have mages, but instead he had some High Lords. He'd gladly trade them even for a few lowly conjurers, but there was no such option. Whether he liked it or not, Baron Oxrabbit and Marquis de Shaggysheep now were a part of his army. Roseduck always prided himself on predicting and taking into account whatever was possible to predict and therefore he wasn't that much surprised by Oxrabbit. The man wasn't too bright and had some Heroic inclinations. If he hadn't been born a lord, right now he'd probably be among the ranks as a common soldier. On the other hand, Shaggysheep was a total surprise. Roseduck didn't mind much, whatever his reasons were. The worst that could happen was the Marquis riding into the battle absentmindedly and dying horribly. The General wouldn't cry at night should that happen.

While the Marquis rode quietly and it was easy to forget he was even there, the Baron made sure nobody overlooked him. He rode up and down the column, shouting some nonsense that he most likely considered to be encouraging. To Roseduck's surprise it actually was. Oxrabbit was looking impressive and his words were just perfect to reach the hearts and minds of the soldiers. Probably because he was saying what he himself would like to hear. It was well suited for simple minds.

"Have no fear, valiant warriors! The orcs are nasty and ugly and, you know, like, smelly and stuff, but we shall prevail! Because we're brave and strong, and courageous and the like!"

"YEAH!"

"And we have sharp swords! And sharp spears! And... uhh... bows! That are, like, bowy and stuff!"

"YEAH!"

"Our horses are sharp too! And hoovy! And they bite! And do... naughty things!"

"YEAH!" The soldiers were cheering indiscriminately at whatever the Baron was saying. It made him say more silly things. It made the soldiers cheer even more. Neither party seemed to tire. Roseduck was feeling suicidal.

"When I was young, naughty things bit horses," the Marquis mumbled absentmindedly.

"How naughty were they?" the General asked.

The Marquis woke up and looked at him intently for a few seconds. "VERY naughty," he said, with emphasis on very, and dozed off again.

Unlike his predecessor, Roseduck was a strong believer in scouting. Scouts were regularly deployed in all reasonable directions and even a few unreasonable ones. He wanted to know about everything.

The reports said that orcs outnumbered the humans at least four to one. It didn't bode well. Also there were no natural defensive positions between them and the capital, like a big river for example. Roseduck would love to have a nice big river. Some forests and a few hills were all he had. Less than perfect for a battle against superior force. He pondered briefly about viability of hit and run strategy at this point. Other option was a great big battle, which was unadvisable, or retreating and defending a siege, which could doom everything apart from the Imperial Castle. But it was not time for a decision yet. Things were just about to get interesting.

"General! There is another army nearby!"

"What army?"

"I don't know! It consists of armed peasants and..."

"And what?"

"I don't know how to put it, my lord..."

"Why all you people have a problem with stating the obvious? Out with it!"

"Deer."

"WHAT?!"

"Deer. Like, woodland creatures. With antlers and everything."

"Ah. How many? Who is commanding?"

"About two thousand peasants and five hundred deer. Some sort of a knight seems to be in command."

"Describe him."

"Well, a knight. Big guy. Full armour. A fancy sword. A fancy shield too. Everything nice and shiny."

"That's... interesting. Where are they? Where are they going?"

"It seems they are moving towards the orcs. Will meet them about a day before us."

"Unholy carp! We need to make haste."

\*\*\*

"It's a nice tower," Vannard said.

"Yes, it is. If by 'nice' you mean ridiculously tall and full of misogynistic morons wearing stupid dresses."

"More or less."

Vannard and Saalteinamariva were standing on the courtyard of the Imperial Castle and looking up on the Imperial Mage Tower. It was the tallest building on the castle grounds. It was also the tallest building in the Empire. Its height could be describes only by words like 'ludicrous' and 'insane', or phrases like 'carp that's tall!' and 'where did they get so much stone from?'

"I never understood the wizards' need for such tall towers," the assassin said.

"How do I put it... You know about people with small feet?"

"What about them?"

"They build tall towers."

"Ah."

They stood in silence for a moment.

"Ducky's away," the sorceress stated the obvious.

"I don't miss him."

"Neither do I. What I meant was that only the two of us know about the Archmage's plot."

"If Kidneyrock Fried Chicken back there didn't lie."

"I don't think he did."

"Still, do you care? Sally, Defender of Peasants?"

"Don't be a moron. I just need a reason to kill him."

"No you don't."

"Yes I do. As opposed to you, I kill for a reason."

"Silly Sally."

"Being called names is a reason."

"At least you aren't picky."

"Never said it has to be a good reason."

Some more silence.

"So, let's go kill him, shall we?"

"We? What's in it for you?"

"Killing, obviously. And he sounds like a challenge."

"You're no match for him."

"If I had a pig for each time this was said to me..."

"Then what?"

"Then I'd have the biggest pigsty in the world I suppose."

"What for?"

"For catapulting the pigs into people and or buildings, obviously."

"Obviously."

Even more awkward silence.

"So, where is he?"

"His quarters are at the very top."

"Now that is just stupid. Why doesn't that old turnip live someplace closer to the ground? Doesn't he get tired from all these stairs?"

"He's the Archmage, you fool! He probably levitates. Nobody really knows."

"Ah. We're going after a target of unknown capabilities. How unprofessional. I'd better take my antimagical sword."

The sorceress was shocked. "You have an antimagical sword?! Why didn't you take it when we went after that dark lord?!"

"I guessed it wouldn't be necessary to kill someone with such a stupid name. On the other hand, it might have been a good occasion to test it. I only have a word of someone I killed some time ago for its antimagicity."

"Your stupidity has reached new heights."

"It will go even higher as I climb up that tower."

"No doubt. Also, we should leave a message for Ducky. Any stupid idea how to do that?"

"Indeed, I have one. A homing pigeon."

"Brilliant. Too bad we don't have any."

"So let's find some."

\*\*\*

Saalteinamariva didn't bother with subterfuge. She'd be recognised anyway. Vannard on the other hand pretended he was some sort of a mage by wearing a black robe. Because anyone in a robe is obviously a mage or a priest, and priests don't wear black. This particular robe used to belong to the late dark lord. The assassin didn't mind. He was a firm believer in taking useful things from people he killed. It's not like they needed it anymore. And it was a good robe. It even survived Sally's flames, unlike the wizard's face. Would have been a shame to let it go to waste. He cut off the fluorescent skulls, though. Not really his style.

The plan was simple. Go in, go up, kill the Archmage. Nobody would ever suspect that. It was simply inconceivable. Nobody tried to assassinate the Archmage. Ever. Nobody was that suicidal. A small army would be needed for that, or at least so it was assumed. It didn't worry them. Vannard assumed he was a small army. Saalteinamariva assumed she could burn down a small army. If it was kind enough to position itself in a nice, easily ignitable row, of course.

"State your business," the mage guarding the front door demanded.

"We have a meeting with the Archmage," Saalteinamariva replied calmly.

"And what would the Archmage want with the likes of you?" the mage sneered. Disdain for female practitioners of magic was common amongst the inhabitants of the Tower.

"None of your business. Let us in, or I'll turn you into a newt."

"And you won't get better," Vannard added with a smile.

The mage didn't seem to be concerned by the threats, but he let them in anyway.

"Follow me, abomination, and you, her servant," he said and led the way.

"Remind me to kill him on our way out," the sorceress whispered.

"Magewhore!" some mage shouted as they passed.

"And this one too."

"Why bother? Just kill them all," Vannard whispered back.

The corridor was a spiral going upwards from the front gate to the very top where the Archmage's private quarters were. There were chambers on both sides. The higher they were, the more important the chambers. They passed servants' quarters, classrooms, lower mages' quarters, laboratories... Everything was clean and gray. Their guide sometimes looked back discreetly, hoping to see them tire. No such luck. More than a flight of stairs was needed to tire the assassin. Sorceress wasn't that resilient, but rage kept her going. Insulting remarks, disapproving glances and even the sheer presence of male wizards only fuelled her rage. Vannard's presence didn't help either. She needed all her willpower to stop herself from burning her guide to ash and then continuing to put everyone and everything on fire.

It could be said that the climb took forever, but it would be incorrect. Still, it was quite a bit longer than most stair-climbs. After passing many uninteresting chambers and many uninteresting but hostile wizards they reached a metal door. A plump mage was guarding it. He seemed very bored. His job was to protect the top part of the tower, where the living quarters and laboratories of the most powerful mages were. It was very important that nobody unauthorized would enter. And nobody unauthorized ever tried, so whoever was on guarding duty felt like he was wasting his time instead of doing something useful. Like, for example, dabbling in things he didn't understand.

"What do you want?"

"They say they have a meeting with the Archmage," their guide said.

"I know nothing about that," the guard replied. "I'll go and ask."

"Hah, I knew it!" the mage sneered. "The Archmage wouldn't even speak with the likes of you. So why are you here? Wanted to see the Tower one more time? Yes, I know who you are, Saalteinamariva. Everyone knows. Everyone remembers what you did to poor Thimanageriamus. Yet another proof why women shouldn't be mages! Many healers spent many hours putting his face back together!"

The sorceress grinned widely. "Wasted effort. I met him again recently. He cannot be put together this time, I assure you."

"You think I'll believe you? He's far more powerful than you will ever be," the mage replied. "Don't look at me like that. You'd like to fry me, I'm sure. Don't even try. You are no match for my protective spells... ACK!"

"And you are no match for a knife," Vannard told the mage and removed a dagger from his back.

"Why are you educating corpses?" the sorceress asked.

"Everyone needs a hobby." He dropped his robe and unsheathed his sword. "That idiot didn't lock the door behind him. It's dead wizard time!"

The wizards didn't see it coming. Each one was very powerful in his own right. Only the strongest and wisest were inhabiting the top of the Tower. Every single one of them had spent countless years practicing magic and learning arcane secrets. Unfortunately for them, none of

these secrets concerned handling a surprise attack by a sword-wielding madman inside their own tower.

Vannard ran. He didn't look back, he didn't look to the sides. He ran forward as fast as he could and cut down everyone in his way. These were no peasants, inept bandits, or even trained warriors. These all were highly skilled wizards, each one wielding enough power to turn the assassin into a speck of dust. If he gave them a chance. A small mistake on his part and it would be over. He rarely had that much fun.

The sorceress did her best to keep up with the assassin. While he removed anyone that would stand in their way, she made sure they wouldn't get followed. Her idea to accomplish that was to throw a ball of fire into every room she passed. Right through the open door, or right through the closed door. It didn't matter whether some unfortunate wizard got hit or not. The rooms were full of flammable items. Magical books and scrolls burned, releasing unharnessed energies. Vials with mixtures shattered. Wands overheated and exploded, or just fired randomly all over the place.

She had no time to examine what damage or destruction she had happened to inflict, but what she saw and heard was enough to make her all warm and happy inside. Flames, explosions, screams, eerie voices from mysterious dimensions... A few tentacles burst out from one of the chambers and some surprisingly feminine screams were heard from the inside.

They reached the next door. This one was leading to the very top. To the Archmage's private chambers. The door was heavy steel, covered with runes, and most likely would be very difficult to get through. If the gatekeeper wizard hadn't left them open, that is. They got inside and closed the door behind them. There was a lock on the inside. Vannard made use of it. Nobody was following them yet, but they soon would. As soon as they stopped screaming, put out the fires and sent the eldritch creatures back to their respective dimensions.

"Stand back!" the sorceress shouted. "I'll fry them shut!"

Vannard knew better than to stand between her and something she wants to fry. The flames engulfed the door. Metal on the edges started to liquefy. "That will stop them!"

"It would, if you could freeze it back," Vannard pointed out.

"Shut up. At least the lock melted."

\*\*\*

Whereas the rest of the Tower seemed rather ascetic, the Archmage's private chambers weren't. Everything was covered with carpets. Not just the floor, the walls and the ceiling too. Pink, fuzzy carpets. It was very disconcerting.

"Is he colour-blind?" Vannard asked.

"I don't know. Focus! We don't have much time! We need to find him!"

"Settle down, Sally. There's always time to appreciate interior design." And it was a thing to appreciate indeed. Apart from the colour pink, the Archmage apparently liked cute fuzzy toy animals. And rainbows. Saalteinamariva wasn't impressed.

"There's always time for you to be stupid I guess. Let's go."

They moved to the next chamber. There was no Archmage there, but they surprised some other mage. This one was tall and buff, unlike most mages.

"Who goes there?!" he asked. And instead of waiting for an answer, he lifted his hand and cast a magic missile. Vannard swatted it back with his sword. The mage fell dead with a nice hole through his chest.

"Nice. The sword works as advertised."

"If you are feeling suicidal, you only need to ask."

"If you weren't blind as a mole with a bad monocle you would have noticed his aim was off. It would hit the wall. By the way, who was he?"

"How should I know? A butler, a bodyguard, a plaything? I don't care as long as he's dead. A good wizard is a dead wizard. What are you doing?!"

"Just... decorating." He took a pink unicorn toy from a table and put it into the hole in the body, horn first. "Look! The horsey got him!"

"You're an idiot."

They went through more chambers. They were pink, they were fuzzy, they were Archmageless.

"Where is he?!" Saalteinamariva was getting nervous. The other wizards were surely trying to open the door by now. It also suddenly struck her that there was no way out. She didn't think that through. At all. She realised that in her willingness to kill the Archmage she had forgotten to answer some rather simple questions, like 'How do I get out of there afterwards?'. Well, it was a bit late for that.

She looked at Vannard. He seemed as serene as if he was feeding the ducks by the pond. This wasn't a metaphor. The only difference was that there weren't any traumatised ducks around.

"Here, Archmage Archmage Archmage! Here, Archmage Archmage Archmage!"

"What the skunk are you doing?!"

"I'm luring him."

"Stop it! It won't work!"

"You're right. What's his name?"

"No idea."

"Oh well. I'll call him... Waldo. Here, Waldo Waldo Waldo! Here, Waldo Waldo Waldo!"

"Shut up! We'll lose the element of surprise!"

"To lose it, you'd have to have it in the first place," a raspy voice said. The Archmage was standing in a corridor. The mage who had been by the door was by his side. "Dany here told me you were coming. I thought I'd get a report about your untimely death, but I am quite surprised to conclude that I was wrong. And it probably cost me some mages..."

Saalteinamariva wasn't much for small talk. She was in a hurry. She was annoyed. And she hated the Archmage very, very much. A stream of fire flew from her fingertips.

Vannard got out of the way. Getting between two mages intent on killing each other was a bad career move. He ran out of the chamber with the intent to find another way, get behind the Archmage and stab him while he was distracted.

"Yawn," the Archmage said, instead of really yawning, and with a move of his hand redirected the stream of fire to his side. That was to indicate how little he cared about the sorceress' puny efforts. It had an unfortunate side effect. Unfortunate for Danedarius the mage, because the stream swatted away so casually hit him right in the face. With the Archmage standing next to him he hadn't bothered to shield himself, therefore he fared just as well as could be expected. That is, he was dead.

"Ermine that, I forgot he was there," the Archmage swore.

The sorceress didn't care. Another dead mage was a nice bonus, of course, but it didn't matter. Only the Archmage mattered. She gathered all her strength, all her rage, to channel fire like she never had before. She felt all her insides burn, even such remote ones as the spleen. And some she never even knew she had. Everything was on fire. And she let it all out.

"How tiresome," the Archmage said calmly and with a flick of his wrist silenced the inferno. With another wave of his hand he turned Saalteinamariva upside down and sent her flying. Shocked and confused that her fire was gone, she felt herself moving backwards. There was a vague thought in her mind about a wall. She managed to cast a magic shield herself just in time. Yet instead of stopping on the wall, she broke through it. And instead of slowing down, she accelerated.

She screamed. Yet, despite being flown through the wall upside down she didn't lose focus and maintained her shielding. It was a good thing that she did, because she flew through another chamber and broke through another wall. And another one. And suddenly she wasn't in the Tower anymore.

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The village of Blue was in turmoil. Peasants were running one way or the other, carrying things, dropping things, picking them up again, loading things onto donkeys, unloading things from donkeys, chasing the donkeys and swearing, chasing the sheep and swearing, chasing each other and swearing, or just swearing without doing anything in particular. It wasn't all that surprising that nobody paid any attention to Arthaxiom and his companions. Even if they arrived on deerback.

"Ho there, good man!" the paladin addressed the nearest peasant, who was attaching a table to a goat. "What is going on?"

"We're running away!" the peasant responded.

"Why?"

"Orcs are coming!"

"When? Where? How many?"

"Now, duh! They'll be here any day! They're coming from..." The peasant wasn't good with directions. He decide to get help. "Oi! Dag! Where da orcs come from?"

"Dataways!" Dag pointed with his hand.

"Aight! Dataways!"

"And how many?"

"Dunno. Oodles."

"Bajillion!" Dag helped.

"Weasely ermining lot!" an old peasant swore.

"So we run away."

"We'll never get save all our stuff!" the peasant complained. "Can't get this stupid goat to carry anything!" The goat didn't appreciate being called stupid and was rather annoyed with the attempts to attach a table to its back. It bit the peasant and started running away. The table fell down, but it was still attached to the goat by a length of rope, so it ended up being dragged after it. The peasant swore and ran after the animal.

"We'll never make it in time," the old peasant said gloomily. "And even if we do, they'll catch up with us."

"Maybe they'll go after some other village?" another peasant suggested.

"There's enough of them to go after all the villages around!"

"Maybe the Imperial Army will get here in time?"

"Maybe. Even if they do, can they beat oodles of orcs?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. That's a lot of oodles there, or so they say."

An invading army of orcs. The paladin saw it clearly. That was why the Oracle told him to go to this village. He had to stop this invasion! But how? He was just one, against oodles and oodles of orcs! Well, not one, there was also the dwarf. And the princess too. But that was not enough. He needed an army! And what he had were some deer and a lot of peasants...  
Peasants!

"No need to flee! We can fight them off!"

The peasants didn't seem to keen on that.

"You want us to get killed?!" one asked.

"You are out of your mind!" another shouted.

"There's not enough of us!" yet another one complained.

"There are other villages! We can get people from there too!"

"Still, we'd need a miracle."

Alexander decided to help the paladin. "Hey, we're riding deer! Isn't it a miracle?"

The peasants were unconvinced. They whispered between themselves. "If these were talking deer..." one of them said, and the rest made some approving noises.

"Sup," the Deer Lord said, emerging from the nearby bushes. That aroused the peasants quite a bit.

"A talking deer!"

"He wants soup!"

"Bring out the soup!"

They scattered in search for soup.

"Hi there," Alexander said. "How did you know you were needed?"

"And why did you ask for soup?" Gaduria asked.

"I'm here because the Oracle sent me a cryptic message," Deer Lord replied.

"Oh, how quaint," Alexander said. "What was the message?"

"It was 'you'd better be in the village of Blue when that armoured dumbass gets there or I'll be very cross with you.'"

"Oooh, cryptic and threatening!"

"It was indeed. The word 'very' was written in italics. And the message was attached to a rock which hit me on the head." Deer Lord bowed a bit, displaying a bump on his head. "I hate the squirrel mail."

"I don't get it," Gaduria said. "What exactly is cryptic about this message?"

"I couldn't figure out who did she mean by 'armoured dumbass'."

"You're not very smart, are you?"

"Hey, I'm a deer. It's a miracle I even talk. And by the way, about the soup... Isn't that a traditional greeting of lower class humans?"

"No."

"Oh well. Still, can't say no to free soup," Deer Lord said, as two women with a steaming bowl approached him.

"Here's your soup, talking deer." They put the bowl in front of him.

"Thank you." Deer Lord tasted his meal. "That's quite good. What kind of soup this is?"

"It's a goat soup," the peasant woman replied.

"Yes, from that goat over there," the other woman added and pointed at a grazing goat with a chair tied to its back.

"Excuse me, but if you made soup from it, shouldn't it be dead?" Gaduria pointed out.

"If we killed a goat every time we wanted soup, we would run out of goats rather quickly, don't you think?"

"But if we put the goat in just for a little bit, it lasts for long."

"Oh. How silly of me. Enjoy your hot water with whatever was on the goat," Gaduria told Deer Lord.

"Thank you," Deer Lord replied. He didn't seem to mind and continued eating.

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Vannard ran as fast as he could. Corridor, door, chamber, door, another chamber, a servant, a dagger in his throat, another corridor... He knew time was short. He had to get in position before the end of the duel. If he didn't, well, he would have to face the Archmage in fair combat, which seemed like a bad idea. Or he would have to face gloating Sally. He didn't come all the way up there and not be the one to kill the Archmage.

He made it just in time. Just in time to see Saalteinamariva fly backwards and upside-down through several walls. He had never seen anything like that. He might have disliked her, but he knew how strong her magic was. Seeing her being handled like that said something about the Archmage's power. One might have considered a tactical retreat. Vannard didn't. He threw two daggers in full run and charged at the Archmage.

Despite having his back turned to the assassin, and despite Vannard not making a slightest noise, the Archmage wasn't taken by surprise. The daggers simply stopped in mid-air. The Archmage threw a ball of fire over his shoulder. Vannard barely managed to stop in time and dodge it.

"You really expected this to work?" the Archmage asked mockingly.

"Couldn't hurt," Vannard replied.

"Oh yes, it could. And it will, I can promise you that." The Archmage turned around and advanced slowly. He had all the time in the world. The assassin didn't and they both knew it. No sort of door can stop a bunch of wizards for long. Not that the Archmage expected needing their help.

Vannard drew his sword and waited.

"Not running away, eh? How brave of you," the Archmage mocked him. "So, how do you wish to die? Ice? Fire? Lightning perhaps?"

"Lightning, please."

A bolt of lightning left the Archmage's hand just to be reflected back at him by the assassin's sword. The Archmage absorbed the lightning back into his palm. "Impressive. An interesting sword, but it won't save you." He raised his hand. Vannard prepared to deflect whatever might come his way, but nothing did. Instead, an invisible force hit his sword and made him fly backwards. He hit the wall with a grunt.

"A really remarkable toy you have there. It will be a fine addition to my collection. Without it, you would be quite dead, and in several pieces possibly. Still, there will be plenty time for that."

"True, no need to hurry. Why don't you take a nap, hug that cute little llama over there and dream about rainbows?"

"Oh how funny you are." Another invisible missile was aimed at the assassin. He had to guess where exactly it was going to strike by observing the Archmage's hands. This time he managed to dodge. He dropped to the floor and rolled away from the corridor entrance, out of sight of his opponent. He ducked behind a table and waited.

As soon as the Archmage emerged from the corridor, Vannard quickly got up and kicked the table at him, immediately following with two knives. The Archmage just laughed. The assassin barely managed to escape his own projectiles going the other way. The table crashed against the wall, demolishing a picture of a pink flamingo with a rainbow beak.

"You can't do this forever, you know," the Archmage said as Vannard somersaulted above yet another magical attack. The wall gained yet another hole, this time in the rearside of a dancing capricorn.

"I'm doing this just to ruin your place a bit," Vannard replied and ducked under another blast. He ceased trying to attack back, it was pointless. Yet he still hoped that his opponent would make some sort of a mistake. After all, everyone can be killed. It was one of Vannard's core beliefs. Then he heard people running and shouting. The wizards got through the door. Time to get out. He got up and raced into a corridor. The Archmage tried to blast him, but the assassin anticipated that and caught the beam on the sword he held behind his back. That propelled him forward, away from danger and a bit into a wall.

"Don't let him get away!" the Archmage shouted when other mages came in running. The first one to follow the assassin ended up with a dagger in his face.

"Watch out for his knives!" the Archmage warned. Another wizard fired a lightning bolt, which was promptly returned, frying the shooter. And one of his colleagues too. "Use force beams only!" The Archmage sighed. Amateurs. At least this pesky assassin would be help with natural selection. Many wizards were way too incompetent for the Archmage's taste.

Vannard ran without any idea where he was going. He always chose the path of least wizards. They were slower than him, but there was just too many of them. They also learned on their

colleagues' mistakes: they shielded themselves and used those damned invisible force beams. He couldn't reflect them back. He had a hard time dodging them. Fortunately, these were much weaker than those that the Archmage had used. Still, being repeatedly thrown against the walls was unpleasant to say the least.

The assassin reached a chamber with a large window. It was the first window he had seen in the tower. He had just a moment to consider options it gave him. With the mages coming in from every direction, he decided to use it. He broke the glass with his sword and climbed on the windowsill. He looked down. It was a long, long way to the bottom. He'd never make it.

He thrust his sword into the stone above the window and pulled himself up. It was all he needed to get on the roof. It was steep and conical, with a heptagon on a stick at the very top. He briefly considered going back into the Tower, but it was hopeless. He already heard screams from below indicating that they knew he was on the roof. If there were any other windows, they would be guarded now. And even if he managed to get back inside, it would hardly improve his situation. He pulled out his sword and climbed up.

He reached the heptagon and held himself against it. He was on top of the world, this time for real. The Imperial Castle was way way below and looked ridiculously small from here. He briefly considered jumping down, but from this height he had no chance to aim for anything to cushion his fall. And even if he did, not even a nice fat merchant would be enough. Maybe if he fell on Duke Thinoak...

He noticed a head peeking over the edge. He threw a knife. The head wasn't there anymore and he heard a long scream, growing more and more distant. Yet another silly mage who didn't realise that seeing the assassin also meant that the assassin saw him too, and that the assassin could hit with a dagger pretty much everything in his sight. Too bad there were still lots to go.

Vannard didn't delude himself. Not every mage would be that stupid. Eventually, they would get to him. He didn't waste time wondering how. He would know soon enough and deal with it. Or not. Since he had a moment, he moved a few of his daggers from hard to reach pockets to more handy ones that were already emptied. Even with his talent to store knives on his person, his supply was starting to run dangerously low.

He didn't wait long. A mage was levitating up to him. He threw a knife at him, but it didn't do any good. He didn't expect it to, really. He drew his sword.

"Oh please," the mage said. "I understand persistence, but you're pushing it."

"Nobody ever won by giving up," Vannard said with a smile.

"True. You and your friend did a lot of damage, I give you that."

"She was not a friend. But she was good at putting things on fire."

"Details. Anyway, I'll let you know that I am Termisteriusus, the Second Mage. It is an informal title, but it means that I am second in power to the Archmage only. I am telling you that so that you realise that you have no chance with me. Whatever tricks you may have left simply won't work. Surrender."

"Surrender and what then?"

"I don't know. The Archmage will decide. But if you don't, you'll die here."

Vannard considered this. "Yes. Fair enough." He sheathed his sword.

"I'd really prefer if you put it down instead. And your knives too. I can sense them, you know. You have quite a number of them on you, I must say."

"Why thank you." Vannard crouched, pulled out two daggers, put them down and let them slide down, where they stopped on the edge of the roof. And another two. And two more. And then he himself started to slide down on the soles of his boots, while holding two more knives.

"What are...?!" Termisteriusus asked, but he received an answer long before he finished the question. The assassin used every bit of momentum he had and launched himself from the roof, towards the mage.

He barely made it. His outstretched, knife-holding hand just barely managed to break through the distracted wizard's magic shield and stab him in the leg. Vannard tried to hang on to him. Not that it made any difference, because the wounded mage lost his concentration and now they were both falling down.

"Fly!" he shouted at the wizard. "Fly, you fool!"

The mage was waving his hands and screaming something incoherent. Vannard had no idea if he was trying to cast some spell, or if he was simply screaming because he was falling to his death. He fervently hoped it was the first option. It was indeed, but it wasn't exactly the spell he had imagined. Below them a dark red, swirling vortex had appeared. Some sort of a portal, probably. Not too inviting, but better than cold, hard ground. Not that they had anything to say in that matter.

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The cavalry barely made it in time to witness the meeting of Arthaxiom's deersant army and the horde of orcs. The rest of Roseduck's army was proceeding on foot as fast as possible, but there was no way they could reach the battlefield soon enough.

The forces were placed behind a conveniently placed hill, so that they wouldn't be spotted. Fortunately, the other two armies weren't scouting. As far as the peasants were concerned, scouts were silly people asking silly questions. As far as the orcs were concerned, scouts were snacks.

The General wanted to see what was happening with his own eyes, so he positioned himself in a handy bunch of bushes overlooking the soon-to-be battlefield. It wasn't the best hideout ever, but with the two armies interested mainly in each other he decided it would be good enough. Along with him he took his only mage, who had a few spells handy for the occasion. A few messengers were waiting below, in case he needed to give orders to the troops quickly. The Marquis and the Baron came along too. Roseduck would have preferred to get rid of them, but they were High Lords, so he couldn't just order them to go away. At least he was able to leave his officers behind. Useless bunch, good only for relaying orders.

They saw the two armies. The orcs were numerous. Very numerous. They came in a variety of shapes and sizes, with ugliness being the common theme. Other themes were claws, fangs and

drooling. Roseduck estimated twenty thousand of them, give or take a few thousands. The exact number didn't matter really, as they outnumbered the other army about ten to one. Would be five to one if Roseduck's cavalry was included. The orcs were armed with all sorts of weapons, from decent, steel stuff to crude wooden clubs and stone axes. Basically, whatever they had put their claws on. Same with armour: from good, blacksmith-made stuff, most likely looted from someone, to self-made clothing produced from some unlucky animals.

The peasant army looked like, well, peasants. Peasants armed with various farming implements or old and rusty weapons they had dug up in their attics or cellars. They had next to none armour. Even if the two forces were equal in number, Roseduck knew he'd put his money on the orcs. Deer, on the other hand, were a mystery. Why were they there? He had no idea if they were any good in a fight. Even if they were, the General didn't think that they would help the peasants' cause much. There just wasn't enough of them.

The Hero was another matter. No mistaking him. Tall, powerful figure in shining full plate armour, holding a gleaming silvery sword and a golden shield. Just one man, but his sheer presence could cause things to unfold in unexpected ways. Roseduck learned that from fairy tales. He was anxious to see if it would happen in the real world too.

The Hero stepped in front of his army and started walking towards the enemy. Behind him there was a much shorter person carrying a white flag. *Parley? Is he crazy?!* Roseduck chided himself in his mind. *Of course he is crazy. He's a Hero.* "Magnify this," he said to the mage.

The mage murmured a spell and before the General appeared a magnification of the scene. It was a bit hazy, but clear enough to see what was happening. Still, he couldn't quite make out what kind of creature the other fellow was. It could be a very short human, but he doubted it. He decided to make some use of his companions.

"Do you know what is he?" he pointed at the flag bearer. The mage and Marquis just shook their heads.

"Some sort of a... gnome?" the Baron suggested.

"What sort of a gnome?" the General inquired.

The Baron shrugged. "A flag-bearing gnome, obviously."

Roseduck groaned. He didn't know what he had expected from Oxrabbit. The Baron was predictably unhelpful. He went back to observing Arthaxiom.

The orcs saw the two approaching. It was evident because of all the pointing and laughing and jeering. A group of twenty orcs rushed to meet them, and their hostile intent was rather obvious. The rest cheered them on. Roseduck wondered why only twenty. Well, it made a bit of sense, because it should be more than enough. On the other hand, why not more?

The horde of orcs reached the paladin. One of them was ahead of the others. It got promptly beheaded and then the fun began. The General didn't know as much about small encounters as about large scale battles, but he knew that multiple weaker fighters could easily succeed against a single strong one if they swarmed him. Orcs surely knew that too, it wasn't exactly trebuchet science. Yet they didn't do that. They encircled Arthaxiom, but didn't rush all at once for some reason. Instead they approached in smaller groups. Some also tried to get him

from the rear, but the assumed gnome proved to be a trident-wielding one too and guarded the paladin's back well.

The two armies were cheering their sides. Roseduck and Shaggysheep were watching intently, in silence. Oxrabbit also was watching, but silence wasn't much of his thing. Fortunately nobody could hear him above all the uproar.

"Shield! Shield! Now stab him! Your left! The other left! Watch out for the ugly one! The other ugly one!"

Soon the fight was over. All orcs but one were dead and the two fighters weren't even scratched. The last orc was defeated, but it didn't seem like the paladin was going to finish it.

"Can you get the voices?" the General asked. The mage could.

"Go tell your chieftain I want to parley!" the paladin was saying. The orc just grunted and nodded and quickly ran back to his ranks. Soon some other orcs went to meet with the paladin. These ones were larger and looked much more dangerous. Only when they met, Roseduck was able to see just how big they are. The largest one, apparently the leader, was over a head taller than the paladin, and wider too. Its companions weren't much smaller. The General was sure that they could simply wipe the Hero and his little friend off this plane of existence, but he wasn't at all surprised that they didn't.

"Want to surrender?" the orc leader asked.

"No. As per ancient custom, I challenge you to a duel!" This didn't need to come through the spell. The paladin said it so loudly that everyone could hear. The orcs were laughing like mad. The peasants were cheering. Roseduck was shocked. There was no way that the big orc would agree. No way. He had nothing to gain. Anyone with half a brain could see that.

"Good thinking, that man!" Baron Oxrabbit shouted enthusiastically.

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"He did WHAT?!" Gaduria asked. She knew very well what he just did, but she asked anyway. She was watching the scene from afar, accompanied by Deer Lord and a few deer. Deer Lord brought the army of deer in return for Arthaxiom's Heroic getting rid of Valkyrie Wolf, but he wasn't going to fight himself, on account of being 'too old'. Gaduria wasn't participating either, on account of her being a woman and a princess, or the other way around. The paladin decided that the battlefield was no place for her, and for once she agreed. The orcs reminded her too much of her brothers, cousins, and wannabe boyfriends.

"He has just challenged the orc leader to a duel," Deer Lord explained patiently. "It's an ancient custom for the commanders to duel before the battle commences."

"I never heard about such custom."

"That's how ancient it is."

"Oh. Anyway, that ugly doesn't need to agree, does it?"

"Well, given that it probably doesn't know that custom, and that there's no one to enforce it, no. But it will agree anyway."

Gaduria gave Deer Lord a look. One of those reserved for people claiming that pigs can fly, and also for those trying to prove such claims with a catapult. "Why would it? With an army that big?"

"Because nobody refuses a duel against a Hero!"

"Even when it doesn't make any sense?"

"Especially then!"

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Amusement among the orc group died down. Apart from one orc, who just couldn't stop laughing.

"Shut up!" the leader roared and hit the laughing orc in the face. The hit launched it in the air. It flew a small distance before falling to the ground, barely conscious. The General cringed. That big orc sure packed a punch. He definitely wouldn't like to fight him.

"I accept your custom," the orc spoke again. "You accept mine. Fight two on two." The orcs burst into laughter once again, pointing at the Hero's companion. He in turn was looking scared and uncertain. Roseduck was a bit surprised and a bit impressed. Even though the duel looked hard to win, it still gave better chances than a battle. Not that a victory would necessarily prevent the battle. A pity there was only one Hero. Alone against two enormous orcs. Neither this gnome, nor any of the peasants seemed up to the task. Maybe a deer would be a bit better, but only a bit. Wouldn't stand long without armour. Roseduck briefly regretted Vannard wasn't here. He'd send him down there without hesitation. Unfortunately, he had no homicidal assassins on hand.

"Baron, what are his chances?" he asked. After all, the Baron was interested in that sort of thing. Stupid as he might be, in this particular case he could be considered an expert. Yet the Baron did not answer. "Baron?" The General noticed that Oxrabbit was no longer with them. He was so focused on watching the paladin that he missed him leaving.

Then he saw him. He was riding his horse. Towards the battlefield.

"What is he doing?!"

"Volunteering, I think," the Marquis replied.

"Is he mad?!"

"You mean you didn't notice that before?"

As the Baron approached the battlefield, they could hear his shouts. "PICK ME, PICK ME!"

The paladin turned towards the approaching figure. And then back towards the orcs. "We accept."

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Otto the peasant was watching his pear tree. It was a good tree and he liked watching it. He did it for an hour every day. It was common knowledge that a pear tree grows better when it is being watched. Otto in his watching career had seen many different things. He saw birds sit on it, sing, and defecate. He saw squirrels climb it, chirp and fornicate. He saw a goat trying to eat its bark and he chased it away with a rake. On the other hand, he had never seen a star fly over it. Until now.

A flaming star fell from the sky and crashed with a bang just over the nearest hill. Otto didn't ponder on that long. He had heard many stories about legendary Heroes having swords made from starmetal. Metal from a star. Or basically from a rock that fell down from heavens. The stories weren't clear on details, but Otto didn't really need details. Something flaming that fell from the sky meant material for an awesome sword, and material for an awesome sword meant a lot of gold. As simple as that. He hurried to get his most prized possession: a donkey and a cart. He threw a shovel, a pitchfork and a length of rope onto the cart. He had no idea how big that thing would be, and he wanted to be prepared.

As he neared the place of the crash, he saw a hole in the ground and smoke coming out of it. He looked around. Nobody else was there. Good. He was first. Now to get the starmetal and get out. He approached the hole. What he saw there made him stop. There was a dead woman inside. She was wearing something red, or at least what was left of it. It was smouldering. She was smouldering, too, but miraculously she wasn't charred at all. In fact, the only reason for Otto to assume that she was dead was that she just couldn't have survived falling down from the sky. Only when she moved he realised he was wrong.

"What are you staring at?" she said, weakly, but somehow in a threatening manner. Or maybe it only seemed threatening, because she was still alive and speaking while she should have been stone dead. Or even falling star dead.

"Urm," he said.

She stood up with effort and staggered a bit. She looked around.

"Where I am?"

"Uh... in the Empire?"

"Good." She regarded Otto and his donkey cart. "Take me to the capital."

"But it's at least a week of travel!"

A week! Skunking Archmage exploded her quite a bit. Annoying. Very, very annoying. She didn't like being annoyed. The fact that the Archmage proved to be much more powerful than she annoyed her even more. She was going to fry that old goat. Somehow. As soon as she gets back.

"Take me there," she repeated, "or I will put you on fire."

That was a proposal Otto simply couldn't refuse. He didn't say even a word of complaint when she climbed out of her landing site and lied down on his cart.

"Move."

Otto reluctantly propelled the donkey forward. It wasn't how he had imagined this day at all. Instead of returning home with a precious chunk of starmetal he was going to the capital with some sort of insane, dropping from the sky, burning woman. Some sort of sorceress, most likely. He would like nothing more than to get rid of her. Somehow.

"Do wish to go to a healer? Or to get some clothes?"

The sorceress examined herself. She was in a lot pain. Especially her left leg, probably broken. A few ribs, too. Apart from that, she was pretty much unharmed. Her magical shield withstood the impact. Quite remarkable. Her dress was in a somewhat worse shape, with quite a lot of it rather charred, but nothing of strategic value was uncovered. It would do for now.

"No. Straight to the capital. Try anything and I'll put you on fire."

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"Here we stand, mighty warriors, ready to fight for our cause! I am paladin Arthaxiom the Great..."

During the paladin's introduction the orc leader was picking its nose, and the other orc was yawning. Presumably. This, or it wanted to swallow its opponents. In either case, the orc leader didn't pass up the opportunity to flick whatever it dug out into its companion's open mouth. It didn't seem to mind. Also, both orcs didn't seem to care much about the Rainbow Sturgeon and the Joyous Beige Dragon.

"...Turquoise Spearman of Heavens, Sword of Justice in the Gloom of Uncertainty!"

"I am Baron Regedulf Solthyron Asrius Oxrabbit, High Lord of the Empire!" Compared to Arthaxiom's titles, this seemed a bit underwhelming. The Baron decided to improvise a bit. "Beater of Sheep, Defeater of Bulls, Dreaded Beaver Hunter, Amazing Armsman of Ancient Antioch, Fearsome Fist Fighting Foreign Foes!"

Arthaxiom nodded with approval. "What are your names, worthy opponents?" he asked the orcs. In response, the orc leader got a violent attack of coughing, and the other orc burped.

"I asked..."

"That our names. We fight or what?" The orcs weren't ones for lengthy introductions. They seemed only interested in fighting and killing.

"Yes!" Arthaxiom shouted enthusiastically. "Now we shall have a glorious battle as champions of our respective peoples! Or orcs, in your case! Battle between Arthaxiom and Regedulf on one side, and Aghaghagh and Braaagh on the other! A battle that generations of bards will compose songs about! A battle so epic in its grandeur that the whole world will hold its breath! It will be the battle to end all battles! The battle of... where are we, exactly?" The paladin looked around, but got no answer. Oxrabbit just shrugged, so did Aghaghagh. Braaagh threw up a bit in his mouth and spat it out on the chief's shield.

"Boring Plains!" one of the peasants called out.

"The Battle of Boring Plains!" Arthaxiom exclaimed.

"Yes!" the Baron chimed in. "Here we are, like... horses in the... horsery, you know, like badgers in the... badgerery, like newts in... in... in the pond! Yes! Newts in the pond, you know! And now we shall see who is the bigger newt, the meaner newt, the newt with most spots on the back, the newt..."

The orcs suffered through the introductions and through the paladin's speech, but that exhausted their patience. Enough was enough. They weren't willing to hear out Oxrabbit and learn what kind of newts they could be if they win. Braaagh swung its club at the Baron. The double-duel had begun.

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Roseduck didn't have much time to come up with a plan. And he needed two plans. One for a victory in the duel, and one for a defeat. The plan for defeat was easier to come up with. It contained two words: run away. A third one could be added as well: fast. The deer would run away too, if they know what's good for them. What were they doing on the battlefield in the first place, he had no idea. The peasants would get slaughtered. Not much he could do about that.

Now, what to do in case of victory? The rest of the orcs might attack anyway. On the other hand, they might not. Should their leader die... Roseduck had no idea how orc leadership worked. Would they get disorganised? They already were disorganised quite a bit, but it didn't make them any less dangerous. Would they fight or would they flee? Hard to say. He knew that the only thing he could do is to try to provide them some incentive to run away. Something scary. Like, an overwhelming force, for example. The problem was that he didn't have one. His cavalry was not enough. Not even close. A messenger was dispatched to tell them to prepare for an attack anyway. Two thousand horsemen and one mage would have to do. Somehow.

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Braaagh aimed a powerful blow at the Baron's head with its giant two-handed club and let out a roar to intimidate its opponent. This would have worked against a lesser man. This would have also worked against a smarter man. After all, the orc was big and strong and ugly. Scary. But Baron Oxrabbit wasn't one to be intimidated easily. He didn't even know the meaning of that word. He caught the blow on his shield. It made him stagger, but he paid no heed. He roared back. He wasn't going to get outroared!

Meanwhile Arthaxiom engaged in swordfight against Aghaghagh, the orc chieftain. This fight was more symmetrical, with each combatant carrying a sword and a shield. The orc had the advantage of size and reach, while the paladin had the advantage of being a Hero and having all his Heroic gear. The fight was even so far. They evenly failed to cause harm to each other.

The orcs, instead of using the opportunity to do some slaughtering, were cheering for their leaders. Probably. The dreadful sounds they were producing could have been a great many thing. An invitation to dinner, maybe, or a promise of a painful death. Or perhaps a poem about a picturesque waterfall, unlikely as it would seem.

The peasants, instead of using the opportunity to do some running away, were cheering for their champions. The cheering consisted of shouting various phrases that might or might not had anything to do with the ongoing battle. It didn't matter. The main goal was to be louder than the orcs. Unfortunately they weren't doing well. No amount of effort could overcome superior numbers and natural talent.

The deer, instead of using the opportunity to do just about anything else, were grazing peacefully.

Baron Oxrabbit wasn't one to stay on the defensive. After blocking a few blows with his shield he charged at his opponent. Poor Braaagh never before had an opportunity to fight defensively. Usually whatever it hit with its club fell down and didn't get up again. This one refused to. Even worse, this one pressed on the attack and the orc suddenly realised that parrying sword strikes with a giant piece of wood wasn't a good idea. To make it even worse, the Baron also bashed it with his shield. And screamed "BAD DONKEY!" right in its face. Braaagh gave ground quickly.

Arthaxiom didn't fare all that well. He and Aghaghagh were evenly matched. They circled around each other trading blows, but so far they didn't even manage to draw blood. The paladin occasionally tried to attack with a Heroic speech, but his opponent countered with bloodcurdling screams.

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"Yo, Hraaagr, wai dey fite?" an orc asked another orc.

"They orcs, duh!"

"Aye. But we orcs too, no? Wai we dun fite?"

"We, like... like..." Hraaagr was actually uncertain why, but it felt some strange need to explain. "We, like, wait for... them to end fite?"

"Trufax. But wai?"

"They do duel!" another orc shouted. "Duduel!"

"Quaduel," an educated orc corrected. "Tis thra-dush-uh-nhaaaal!"

One of the orcs was still unconvinced. "Dunno but thradushunhaaaal quaduel. Let's slaughter us some peasant! Wat ye say?"

They said nothing. Instead they beat up the overzealous orc and went back to screaming at the quaduelists.

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As the fight went on, the Baron's advantage was getting more and more visible. His opponent was already bleeding from quite a few wounds. Nothing critical so far, but definitely unpleasant. Especially that the orc was more used to being the one inflicting the wounds.

"I'll beat you like a green-furred alpaca! You will be eating berries from below!"

Braaagh couldn't help but wonder what did the human mean. What exactly was a "green-furred alpaca" and how is one beaten? Of course, it was the least of its worries at the moment, with the biggest one being dangerously close to getting killed. Thinking about Oxrabbit's random gibberish was probably an unfortunate side effect of having its face bashed repeatedly with a steel shield.

The other half of the duel wasn't going that well for the human side. Arthaxiom had hoped to fight a Heroic duel all his life, or at least since he had been hit on the head, but now that he was fighting one, he didn't really know what to do. He expected that they would dramatically exchange blows for some time and then the orc would falter and die, and maybe do a defeated villain's speech too. It would be quite fitting. Too bad the villain was an orc, and not a very articulate one at that. Unlikely to do a decent speech. Unless... he had one prepared. Every major villain should have a speech prepared in case of meeting demise by the hands of a Hero!

The paladin got so engrossed in wondering whether the orc would make a speech or not that he somewhat forgot that he still had to win the duel. He continued to fight, but in his mind he was already victorious. He didn't consider that Aghaghagh could actually hurt him. Or that he could stumble on something. Like, for example, a small rock that had just appeared out of nowhere.

Arthaxiom fell on his back. Both crowds held their collective breaths and for a few seconds only the deer chewing grass could be heard. Then the orcish war-cries redoubled. Aghaghagh wasn't one to pass such a chance. After all, all the Hero could do was trying to hide behind his shield.

The orc leader threw away its shield, held its sword in both hands and tried to overwhelm the paladin's defences. It could have gone for the legs, in which case Arthaxiom would be unable to do anything. Apart from screaming and bleeding profusely. Instead, for no good reason, Aghaghagh started hacking at the paladin's shield. With each hit the shield was lower and lower, but it wasn't the best approach. It gave the Hero a moment to do something. Giving a Hero a moment to do something is always a bad idea. Very often the last idea ever.

Arthaxiom looked towards the Baron. He was winning, but not quickly enough to help. The paladin was on his own. The situation was desperate. He did the only thing he could. He prayed. He prayed to Rainbow Sturgeon and to the Joyous Beige Dragon and even to the Mythical Archpegasus, but it was neither of those that answered his plead for help.

*"Look how useless you are!"* a voice boomed in his head. It was somewhat... fishy. And somewhat irritated. *"You were given the shield, you were given the armour, and now you lie in the dirt like a worm! Shame!"*

"Please help me in this hour of trial," the paladin whispered.

*"More like the minute of fail!"*

"I am sorry!"

*"You should be, not that it changes anything. Do I really need to perform an inexplicable act of higher power to save your sorry butt?"*

"I would appreciate it very much," the Hero replied as yet another strike hit his shield.

*"You are a disappointment, but unfortunately it is necessary for you to survive. I, Flaming Fish of Fury, will show you how it's done!"*

Meanwhile Aghaghagh was being the angry orc of fury and kept trying to break through Arthaxiom's defence. It didn't even notice that the eyes of the fish sigil started glowing. On the other hand, it most certainly noticed when flames erupted from the fishes' mouth and hit it straight in its face. The orc leader dropped its sword and covered its eyes. It was a bit too late for that. It stumbled around, shouting and screaming in pain. Arthaxiom quickly got up and put it out of its misery. The orcs fell silent, the peasants started cheering again.

The Baron saw the orc leader fall. He thought that it would be rude to keep the Hero waiting, so he redoubled his efforts. The giant orc simply couldn't keep up parrying the sword strikes, while being bashed with the shield at the same time, not to mention being compared to a giant mouldy peach. Finally it fumbled and got killed without any further drama. Nobody was paying attention to this sideshow anyway.

\*\*\*

The fight was over, the human side stood victorious. The peasants cheered. And sounded their horns, because for some inexplicable reason at least one in ten peasants had a horn with him. They also had pieces of paper to throw, funny hats and drums. Only the raisins were missing. Arthaxiom had always wanted to have raisins thrown at him, but no luck yet again.

The orcish horde on the other hand was in shock. Their leader had fallen. A great big orc like that wasn't supposed to die. Not in a fight against some puny human. A great big orc was only supposed to be killed by an even greater and bigger orc in a dispute about the leadership. Or by some sort of freak accident caused by doing something stupid. Stupidity was a common cause of death among the orcs since, like, forever. It was as if evolution had given up on them.

Faced with an unusual situation, the orcs didn't know what to do. Basic instincts took over. Fight or flee. So they fought or fled. The smaller orcs tried to flee. The bigger ones wanted to fight. At this point they didn't really mind who they were fighting, orcs or humans. Deer were fine too.

\*\*\*

The General was pleased so far. The Hero proved to be Heroic indeed, almost dying before his shield breathed fire at the very last second. Just like in fairy tales. Still, two dead orcs didn't change matters much. Even if these were the biggest two of the bunch.

The horde split up. Some of the orcs were running away from the battlefield. Some were running towards the peasant army. Some weren't running anywhere, instead they remained in place and attempted to beat the carp out of each other. It wasn't exactly like in fairy tales. They were all supposed to run away. Maybe they only needed some encouragement?

"Forward!" he shouted. "Do your magic," he told the mage.

\*\*\*

Rhugh the orc was having a bad day. And it had started so well. There was some slaughtering to be done. Slaughtering at that point was more of a long-term plan. They didn't expect to meet a lot of humans that early. But then again, they weren't doing much expecting. Go, slaughter, eat brains. Rhugh wasn't entirely sold on that brain-eating idea. Couldn't hurt to try, yes, but good old-fashioned slaughtering was more its thing. And then, suddenly, it appeared that there was an army in their way. A small one. Orcs weren't good at counting, but the difference between very many and not so very many was glaring. Hooray for unexpected slaughter! Or more like GHRRRRAAGH! for unexpected slaughter.

Then that idiotic duel happened. Rhugh had no idea why the leader had agreed to that. Just killing them would have been simpler. It didn't protest though, it didn't want to end up hit in the face like poor Groogl there, and like countless other orcs throughout the ages who had dared to disagree with a bigger orc. Anyway, two on one should have been easy. The small gnome thingie was just a snack. Then that screaming maniac appeared out of nowhere. And now both Aghaghagh and Braaagh were dead.

Now the humans were cheering. Infuriating. Stupid. Very many minus two is still very many! Stupid stupid humans not knowing their math. Rhugh wanted to point out the errors of their ways. By slaughtering them, of course. "KILL THEM ALL!" it roared. And got hit in the head.

"Run away! Dark magic!" the one who hit it shouted. It was Jhagh, the snivelling coward. It saw dark magic everywhere! Rhugh knew only one way of dealing with both snivelling cowards and dark magic. It hit Jhagh back.

\*\*\*

Arthaxiom was elated. Defeating a great big orc in a single combat was the fulfilment of his dreams. Perhaps not all of them, but some at least. Pure Heroism. Maybe not including the part where he had been lying on his back requesting a divine intervention to save him, but still, challenging that orc was definitely Heroic. Now, there still was the rest of the orcs... The paladin didn't really think about them earlier. Somehow he had expected them to simply vanish as soon as the duel was over. That obviously didn't happen.

Well, if they didn't vanish... He knew only one way to deal with orcs that refused to vanish. "For glory of the Joyous Beige Dragon, forward!" And he ran towards the nearest orc.

The peasants stood still, not knowing what to do. Glory of the Joyous Beige Dragon didn't concern them much. On the other hand, it confused them quite a bit.

"CHAAAAAAAAAAAAARGE!" the Baron screamed and ran after the Hero.

This was a much more reasonable battle cry. Quite an impressive one, too. Oxrabbit had a voice like a seven waterfalls, or possibly some other silly metaphor. Still, the peasants weren't really used to charging into battles. But then the bravest of the bunch, or maybe the stupidest, decided. "Huzzah!" he shouted, for no good reason, and rushed forward while waving his rake wildly. The others followed a bit behind, so that they wouldn't get raked in the face, shouting nonsenses of their own.

"Timber!"

"Banzai!"

"I have a flu!"

"Death to the stinkers!"

"I wish your cows stop giving milk and your sheep get bald and your asses bite you in the asses!"

Only one elderly peasant stayed behind. "Are you sure this is a good idea? There's an awful lot of them," he said to nobody in particular, because all the other peasants were way ahead of him. Realising that, he shrugged, grabbed his scythe and ran after them.

"It's harvest time!"

\*\*\*

Alexander the dwarf felt a bit left out. With all of this fighting going around he wasn't really needed or useful. He just stood there. He saw Arthaxiom and his new friend going into the thick of it and slaughtering orcs, but they were big and strong, and, well, Heroic. He wasn't. Then he saw deer entering combat and it gave him an idea. He waved at them.

A moment later a squad of deer led by a dwarf on deerback started wreaking havoc among the orcs. That was more like it. Alexander felt tall now. The orcs were so short. And so impaled on his trident.

"Keep it up, gnomey!" the Baron cheered him on.

"I'm not a gnomey!" he shouted back, but unlike the Baron, he didn't have a powerful voice. He couldn't be heard over the sounds of dying orcs, so he just shrugged and returned to impaling. He also admired the various ways the deer had for killing orcs. Trampling, kicking in the face, stabbing with antlers... He decided that he should never ever annoy a deer.

\*\*\*

The victory was total, unquestionable and utterly ridiculous. The General had no doubt that the battle should have been lost. Mostly because the orcs were numerous enough to slaughter every human and deer on the battlefield. The duel was simply silly, and the orcs running away from his horsemen... Horsemen, most of whom were awfully foggy and a bit transparent. Mainly because they were illusions, and poor ones at that. There also wasn't really that much of them, they were just spread out nicely. Overall, it was like the silliest strategy ever. But it worked, that was the important part. Enough of the orcs got fooled and started a stampede. Those who tried to stay and fight got killed by friendly-trample.

Ridiculous or not, Roseduck wasn't complaining. A bit of ridiculousness sure beat getting slaughtered. And now it was time to talk to the Hero. Well, as soon as he'd get back from wiping out the unfortunate orcs that weren't running away fast enough, that is. Roseduck remembered that the paladin's supposed quest was to defeat the Empire of Evil. The orcs most likely weren't the Empire of Evil. Most likely the Glorious Empire of the Falling Star of Questionable Smell was. Not that many Empires around after all. He couldn't help but notice that he was in command of the army of this particular Empire. He needed to persuade the Hero that he wasn't 'evil'. A failure to do that would end very badly. Alternatively, he could run away. Still, running away from Heroes... If fairy tales were any indicator, it was a hopeless endeavour.

And there he was, accompanied by the gnome and some girl. Now, how to start a conversation with that sort of person?

"Hail and well met! The day is ours!"

"The day is ours indeed! A glorious victory worthy of a song!"

"And who will they sing about?"

"Ah, my friend, you're speaking to paladin Arthaxiom the Great..."

Roseduck had already heard these titles. He didn't need to hear them again, but he didn't have much choice in this matter.

"...Turquoise Spearman of Heavens, Sword of Justice in the Gloom of Uncertainty! And you, friend?"

"I am General Eneumerius Roseduck, High Lord Commander of the Awesome Army of the Glorious Empire of the Falling Star of Questionable Smell."

This declaration somewhat dampened the paladin's mood, but not exactly because of too many ofs. "The Empire of Evil?" he inquired with suspicion.

"Not really, no."

"But you just said you are from the Empire!"

"Well, yes, but it isn't evil."

"They fought the orcs, didn't they?" Alexander pointed out.

The paladin scratched his helmet with his gauntlet.

Roseduck saw his chance. "Exactly! If we were evil, we would ally with the orcs!"

Arthaxiom appeared to be considering that. "Very well. I believe you. You have an honest face."

"WHAT?!" Gaduria scowled. "You believe him just because you like his face?!"

"I do indeed."

"And what kind of face you wouldn't believe?!"

"Many types are evil. A goatee, for example. I would never trust a man with a goatee."

Roseduck quietly thanked all the supernatural entities he didn't really believe in for the inspiration to shave off his goatee. Had this all happened a year ago, he'd end up killed because of facial hair.

"Very well. So what happens now?"

The Baron had the answer to that. "He's a true Hero! He saved us all! We should declare him our new Emperor! He won't fall into a moat with lions!"

The peasants cheered. The soldiers cheered too. Roseduck actually cringed at Oxrabbit's words. No better way to start infighting in the troops. But no. Not even one voice of dissent could be heard. The General was stunned. This must have been part of this whole Heroism thing. No other option really.

"Wait! Wait! I cannot become an Emperor. Being an Emperor is evil!"

This time the crowd booed. All the euphoria died down. They really wanted the paladin as their Emperor.

"So become a King instead!" the Baron shouted. The cheers started again.

"King Arthaxiom! King Arthaxiom! King Arthaxiom!"

"Are they mad?!" Roseduck whispered.

"Are you asking me?" the Marquis replied and smiled. "If so, I say yes. And I wouldn't worry."

"That sort of thing is perfectly normal around him," Alexander said.

"What, he drives people mad?"

"Yes. And dwarves too."

\*\*\*

The peasants went back to their villages, the deer went back to their forests, and the army, with the addition of Arthaxiom, Gaduria and Alexander, was returning to the capital. Scouts were still following the remainder of the orcish army, but it seemed that the orcs had absolutely no intention on turning back. Roseduck was very happy about that. Some of the dumber soldiers weren't, but it was their problem. If they wished to get themselves killed there were many other ways, most of them more fun. The orcs were no longer a problem, but there were more problems at hand. The most immediate one was Arthaxiom the paladin and Baron Oxrabbit trading Heroic stories.

"...and I tried to wear this helmet, but lo! and behold! There was a possum inside!"

The General sighed. He had no idea if crowning Arthaxiom was a good idea. Surely he couldn't be worse than Mevrin, but would he be any better? In some of the stories he had read the Hero indeed became a king, but none of them said anything about what happened next. 'They lived happily ever after' and that was it. What did that mean exactly? Were they good rulers? He would most likely find out quite soon.

His other worry was whether the people would accept Arthaxiom as their King or not, but it wasn't a big worry. This paladin seemed to have a way with people. People were willing to follow him for some reason. The army was the first test. Not a single soldier expressed any

dissent. And soldiers complained just about anything. Some thought they were going too fast, some thought they were going too slow, some didn't like the food... but everyone liked the Hero. Everyone. Absolutely nothing negative was being said about him. They were talking about how brave he was and how strong he was and so on and so on... Nobody even mentioned that he would have been killed if not for that flame-breathing shield of his, whereas Oxrabbit simply bashed that other huge orc to death. Yet everybody talked about Arthaxiom, and nobody about the Baron.

He needed to speak to someone about the situation. The only reasonable candidate was the Marquis. He rode next to him. "So, what do you think about our new King?" he asked.

The Marquis appeared somewhat absent as usual, but this time it wasn't the case. "Seems like a decent lad, doesn't he?"

"Yes. Yes he does."

"But you're not convinced?"

"It's like... we just chose Mevrin..." Roseduck couldn't verbalise what felt wrong to him about the whole situation.

"We did. Do you really think he will be a good Emperor? I heard he once had tried to ride a pig in his father's hall."

Roseduck hadn't heard that particular story, but he wouldn't put it past Mevrin. "Well... not really..."

"Don't think I don't know that you picked the candidate least likely to be controlled by one of the lords. A pity it meant the dumbest, although I don't think others were that much better."

"You voted for him too. Why?"

"We had to choose someone anyway and I wanted to go fight orcs."

"Why? Why did you suddenly decide to come with me?"

"Ah well, I might as well tell you... When I was young, a madwoman told me that someday I would save the Empire. I thought this might be it. Something to do with the orcs. Apparently not."

Eneumerius would laugh at believing in ramblings of a madwoman, but in the current situation, well... everything could be possible if it had something to do with the Hero. "That's why you spent all these years as a High Lord?"

"Yes. That, and none of my heirs is competent enough. I don't know how I could have sired such morons."

"Oh well. Happens to all of us." He suddenly realised it really had happened to all lords. To those that had children, at least. The current generation was as dumb as swamp toads. Some even as dumb as particularly unintelligent swamp toads. "Maybe your decision to vote for Mevrin saved the Empire?"

"Maybe. If so, it was quite anticlimactic. Worst foreboding ever."

"Right. So what now? Will Mevrin just step aside?"

"Let's ask his uncle maybe? Hey, Oxrabbit, come here for a second!"

"Yes?"

"So if we have a King now, what about the Emperor?"

"Ah, yes, don't worry. I'll tell him to go away. And just between us," he lowered his voice conspirationally, "he wouldn't make a good Emperor."

"And why is that?" Roseduck could come up with a dozen of reasons instantly and many more if he thought about it, but he was curious what the Baron's reasoning was. He expected it would be surprising and he wasn't disappointed.

"You know, he cannot, like, knock out a cow with a single blow. Needs at least two. Still better than the rest of the bunch probably, but he's not the one we need. This Hero guy can do it in one, I'm sure."

"Right."

"Indeed."

Suddenly a messenger arrived. It would be quite a bit less sudden, if anyone had been paying attention. A young man on a horse. He was terrified, as if a horde of demons was after him. Not one of the regular messengers. Roseduck was sure he'd seen him somewhere. A stable boy?

"General! General! The Archmage summoned the orcs!"

One of the characteristics of a good messenger is delivering the message to the proper recipient and not to everyone within earshot. The General would chide him for that, but first of all the man wasn't a professional in first place, and secondly, the damage was already done and now there were other things to take care of.

"Traitor!" the Baron roared. "That old goat is a traitor!" All the soldiers followed his lead.

"Do not worry! I shall free you from that evil tyrant!" Arthaxiom declared. The soldiers cheered.

Roseduck sighed. They just jump to conclusions like that. Neither one asked important questions, like, for example, 'How do you know that?' or 'Are you sure?'. Eneumerius decided he should ask some of these questions, although he wasn't quite sure what for, since the course of action had been already decided. While everyone else was shouting and cheered he took the messenger aside.

"Who sent you?" he asked the boy.

"Ah, General, they were terrifying!"

Well, that wasn't a good start. From the very beginning he had a nagging feeling about who was behind that and now he was almost sure. "Please elaborate."

"There was that guy in black and this lady in red. He seemed... creepy. And she was very angry. They told me to give you this message as soon as possible or else."

"Or else what?"

"I was too afraid to ask."

Yes, Vannard and Saalteinamariva at their best. "What exactly did they say?"

"They said something about some dark lord being a mage and that the Archmage wants to take over and that they summoned the orcs and then they scared the carp out of me that if I don't get this to you bad things will happen."

"Ah. Did they by any chance say what were they going to do?"

"I think they wanted to kill someone. Not sure who. Just hoped not me."

"They wanted to kill the Archmage!" Roseduck exclaimed. "What else was I expecting?" he added after a moment.

"I don't know," the messenger replied, somewhat confused.

"Well, neither do I."

\*\*\*

The army was approaching the capital. They picked some more bad news on the way. Apparently, the new Emperor had raised taxes, locked up some people in the dungeon, and did some other not very nice things. People weren't too happy about that. As a result, making them shout about 'King Arthaxiom' didn't take long.

"Do not worry, good people! I will cease the senseless burdens being thrown upon you! This Emperor cares not for the well-being of his people, therefore now I truly see that my decision was a correct one! A new rule shall be established, rule of what's good and right and shiny! No more bending of peasant backs with too many rakes! No more using soldiers for building moats! No more feeding old people with mice!"

"King Arthaxiom! King Arthaxiom! King Arthaxiom!"

Roseduck groaned. "I didn't know that part of being a Hero is speaking like Oxrabbit," he said to the Marquis.

"Oh no, my boy. You might have already forgotten, but Oxrabbit is way worse."

"Worse how exactly?"

"I'm not sure, but I need more rabbits jumping in my head during his speeches to stop caring." He smiled. "Anyway, I think he's going to prove my point."

Indeed, Baron Oxrabbitt also wanted to address the troops. "Soldiers! Before you, you see a man, who is a man, because he's a man! And a Hero! Yes! That man who is a Hero will soon be our King! We need such King! So even if he falls into a moat full of lions he'll emerge victorious!"

"Fall into a moat full of lions?! Is this man mad?!" Gaduria asked.

"Actually that's how our previous Emperor died. But apart from that, yes, he's quite mad," the General replied.

"Now he'll free us from the dark evil of taxes! From mages and their orcs! And from, like, locusts, and such, you know! Because he's the Heroic man who is our King now, well maybe not just yet, but any day now, yes indeed!"

"King Arthaxiom! King Arthaxiom! King Arthaxiom!"

"And when he becomes the King, he will, like, smash the enemies with his mighty hooves and stuff, because he's the Hero! Yes indeed! Turn their legs to jelly, he will! And eat them! Like, like... like them very small fruit thingies! Because that's all they deserve! Long live the King!"

"Long live the King! Long live the King! Long live the King!"

"They... liked it," Roseduck said weakly.

"They sure did," Alexander replied. "It's like magic. He must have borrowed some from Arthaxiom."

"Long live the King," the Marquis repeated absentmindedly and dozed off.

\*\*\*

Duke and Duchess Thinoak were running away. In their particular case it was more like being carried away. In a carriage. Pulled by six horses. Four weren't enough. The Duke was very worried about the orcish invasion. He had serious doubts about Roseduck's chances to fend them off. Therefore, like other non-crazy High Lords, he decided to leave the capital. But whereas the other lords fled to their respective castles, the Duke didn't. Castles gave good protection, but were obvious targets. Distance gave a better protection than stone walls.

The problem of orcs was left far behind, but there was another problem. They were lost. What had started as a road some days ago was no longer a road. It was only a patch of dirt slightly smoother than all the other dirt around. At least the captain of Thinoak's personal guard hoped so. Either that or he was hallucinating from staring into the dirt for too long.

The Duke's personal guard was down to about a dozen. It was a lot less than they had started with. Many guards snuck away at various points during the trip. They decided to try their own luck instead of following the Duke on his journey to nowhere. The few who stayed did it because of loyalty or some other kind of stupidity.

Now that they were lost, the Duke decided to solve the problem. His solving mostly consisted of urging the captain to find out where they were exactly. The captain on his part urged his men to find out where they were. They did no such thing, because they didn't know how. As a

result, the Duke and his escort kept moving forward along something that may or may not have been a road.

After a few days of that, a village was spotted on the horizon. It could be a good place to get some information about their current location, and also to resupply. They badly needed to resupply, because soon the Thinoaks would have to choose between eating the guards or eating the horses. Or possibly eating the carriage. Unfortunately, the Duke didn't take into account the fact that they weren't inside the Empire's jurisdiction anymore. Not in a real sense at least. The Empire had claimed a lot of wastelands as their own just because nobody else did, so technically this place might have still been within the borders.

The huts were somewhat different than the ones usually found within the Empire. Circular, not rectangular. The roofs were thatched with some sort of reed. Thinoak didn't take any notice of that. Neither he took into account that the inhabitants were somewhat different too. The most striking difference was that they were rather thin. As if they didn't have enough to eat.

As the caravan approached the centre of the village, more and more villagers stopped whatever they were doing and followed. The guards could see that many of them were looking at the horses and licking their lips. It made them uneasy.

The Duke's carriage stopped in the middle of what seemed to be the village square. It was a circle of slightly less dirty dirt right in the middle. Thinoak decided to do the talking himself and stepped out. As soon as he did, the whole village froze. All the eyes were on him. He should have realised something was terribly, terribly wrong. He did not. He was, after all, a High Lord. "Greetings, good people!"

"Food!" one of the villagers shouted and pointed.

"How kind of you to offer..."

"Food!" another villager chimed in. And another one. And many, many more. And suddenly the Duke realised that they weren't pointing at the carriage, or at his guards, or at their horses. They were pointing at him. He felt cold sweat. At this very moment, the Duchess decided to see what was happening.

"Food! Food! Food!" Another series of shouts erupted. The villagers were pointing at both humongous Thinoaks. They were getting closer. The carriage was encircled. The Duke's forces were badly outnumbered. The natives weren't well armed, but they had sticks and stones. A lot of them.

The captain of the guard noticed that his men didn't know what to do. He didn't blame them, he wasn't sure himself. The situation wasn't good at all. He estimated that an attempt to charge and fight through was doomed to fail. The only bright side was that the villagers weren't pointing at him, nor at his fellow guards, maybe because they were too skinny. He was always a believer in making use of whatever he could in order to survive. "Food!" he chanted and pointed at his employer. Probably former employer at this point.

"Men, protect me!" the Duke shouted, but it was no use. Most of them followed the captain's lead. Only two decided to draw swords and protect Thinoak, but they were quickly overpowered. The guards who joined the choir were left alone. The Duchess screamed as multiple hands grabbed her and dragged her away from the carriage. The Duke tried to fight,

but to no avail. Suddenly a giant cauldron was brought from somewhere. Thinoak briefly wondered where did they get it from.

"You cannot eat me!" he shouted in one last attempt to save himself. "I'm a duke!"

They could.

\*\*\*

The army was marching through the capital. The sun was shining brightly, as it was befitting the Hero's triumphant arrival. The soldiers' weapons and armour were gleaming in the sunlight. There was a lot of shouting and cheering. 'King Arthaxiom' was the most popular cheer. Many of the townsfolk ran away at the news of the invasion earlier and didn't come back yet, but some were still there and they joined the cheers. They had absolutely no idea who that 'King Arthaxiom' was, but they were quickly enlightened. There was no mistaking him, riding on the biggest steed available, shining the brightest, smiling at everyone and everything. He was the one to lower the taxes again and that was good enough for most people.

Riding next to Arthaxiom was Baron Oxrabbit, shining just a bit less, drawn to his glory like a moth to a flame. He was smiling and waving his hand and waving his sword and waving whatever or whoever he grabbed. And people cheered him too, because, well, he looked like a good person to cheer.

Then there was Gaduria, now commonly known as the princess Gaedhurienne. She had tried to explain to people she was no princess, but one word from the paladin had made all her efforts futile. If the Hero said she was a princess, then she had to be one. So in the end she decided that resistance was futile and resigned herself to being a princess. She even upgraded her name to something a bit more appropriate. In truth she didn't really mind being a princess, she was only a bit concerned that people might get upset. Sort of 'kill the evil royalty impersonator' upset. Oh well, in the worst case, she'd have a knight in the shining armour to save her. She had a nagging thought that he would even enjoy that.

There was also Alexander the dwarf, now known as Brave Gnomey, the Deer Rider. He didn't mind the Brave part, after all, he didn't run away or anything. He didn't mind the Deer Rider part. He rode a deer in battle. He wasn't sure why was it so important, but he did, so it was all right. On the other hand, he was really annoyed by the 'gnomey' part. He was a dwarf. His father was a dwarf and his mother was another dwarf. He declared that to everyone who listened and also to those who didn't, but they didn't care much. He tried to intervene with Arthaxiom, but the paladin said he still wasn't really sure about his dwarvenness. So for all practical purposes he was now a gnome. In spite of that, he waved his trident at people and tried to enjoy himself.

Marquis de Shaggysheep also waved at people, if a bit anaemically. He enjoyed himself too. He took part in the biggest battle in recent history. Well, was near it at least. It was more than Thinoak and those other cowards could claim.

General Roseduck on the other hand didn't wave at all. He tried to be as inconspicuous as he could, which wasn't too hard thanks to him being vertically-challenged a bit. He was somewhat upset about having no control of the situation. None whatsoever. He didn't feel like

that since the times before he became the High Lord Commander. He could only watch and hope for the best.

The column moved through the city and then upwards, towards the Imperial Castle. The soldiers were still cheering, but Roseduck got tense. He felt that the difficult part was still ahead of them. Meeting Mevrin the First. Meeting the Archmage. Putting the reigns of both of them to end. It could get messy.

\*\*\*

Emperor Mevrin the First was sitting in his throne room. His castle was even more empty than when he had first sat on his throne. One of the reasons for that was that he had grabbed whoever he could find and sent them as messengers to announce his tax rise. In the meantime he just wandered around his new castle looking for something to entertain him.

Sometimes he ordered something moved around or thrown away. Sometimes he ordered some randomly met person to do something silly, like attempt to replicate a mating call of a swamp fox while juggling lit candles. During meals he was throwing food and other things at those few remaining unfortunate souls who were tasked with serving him. Unfortunately, they got quite good at dodging rather fast. And all inhabitants of the castle got quite good at not being where the Emperor was rather fast.

Being the Emperor wasn't as fun as he had imagined. Activities he had found enjoyable in the past weren't so anymore for no particular reason. Something was lacking. He wasn't sure what. So he tried riding a horse indoors. In his younger days such attempts gave him a lot of joy. Especially the part where he was being chased and screamed at. This time the only thing he got were a few bumps on the head when he forgot to duck in doorways.

Saddened by that, he stuck with demolishing for now. This always cheered him up. And there was one other thing he had found amusing. Searching for the people hiding in his castle. It was like a game to him. Whenever he grabbed one, he called the guards and sent him down to the dungeon. What he didn't know about was that the guards were also playing a game. One consisting of letting those people go, so they could hide again.

The Master of Ceremony dutifully followed the Emperor around. He didn't use to do that with the previous Emperor, but the previous Emperor had known his stuff. He wasn't perfect or anything, but he did his job decently. The current one... well... The Master of Ceremony used to feel bad just because of having negative thoughts about the Emperor or his decisions. The Emperor is always right because he's the Emperor. Now he was beginning to doubt that.

Communication with Mevrin was difficult. Short attention span coupled with general lack of knowledge made it extremely hard to explain even the most basic concepts to him. Like, for example, that the mere act of raising the taxes won't bring the gold immediately. On the other hand, when Mevrin got something into his hand, it was impossible to dissuade him. As was the case with the aforementioned taxes. And also with attaching stuffed animal heads to suits of armour.

This day was like every other one. Mevrin had just ordered a helmet from armour suit standing in a corridor replaced with a giant stuffed moose head from the Hunters' Chamber. The Master of Ceremony wasn't convinced that it was an improvement, but one does not

argue with the Emperor. Suddenly they heard cheering. Also sounds of hoofs hitting the road, and sounds of soldiers marching... the army was returning!

Mevrin hadn't heard that the army was victorious. Nobody had bothered to tell him. He himself hadn't been worried about that. His uncle was there. He was good at hitting things until they stopped moving. No better man to take care of battles and stuff. And now it would be the right time to greet him imperiously. He decided to go to his throne room to accept the news about glorious victory.

He did that. He sat on his throne, and sat, and waited, and nobody came.

"Where are they?!"

"I'll find out, Highness."

"No, I'll find out myself!"

The Emperor strode outside. He hurried, and the Master of Ceremony couldn't keep up. Outside he saw some sort of a knight facing the Archmage. His uncle and few others were behind the knight, and there were lots and lots of soldiers standing in respectful distance.

"What is the meaning of this?!" he demanded.

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Arthaxiom was pleased with himself. He felt like a true Hero now. He accomplished something. Something big! He saved countless human lives from an orcish horde! He duelled and defeated a fearsome orcish chieftain! Now he was going to face the one responsible for all that. He looked at the Tower of Magic. It was huge, but he was determined to tear it down stone after stone should need arise. It did not arise. When he approached, the gate opened and a person came out. Had to be the Archmage. Certainly looked like one. Maybe apart from all the ribbons.

"A Hero, eh?"

"A Hero indeed," Arthaxiom replied. "I, paladin Arthaxiom the Great, will end your reign of evil..."

"Yes, yes, yes," the Archmage interrupted him. "You'll do all of that, yes, of course, all Heroes do. How about we fast forward to the part where I explain my plan? I'm too old to listen to Heroic speeches."

"Very well. Speak what you will, before I swipe you from..."

"Skip it!"

"Ah. Right. Sorry, you evil, scheming... err... you know."

The Archmage sighed. "I know. I'll make it short too, no need to bore everyone to death. My evil plan was to have orcs attack the Empire. The army was supposed to be left with nobody

competent to lead it and fail horribly. Everyone would see how weak the Empire is. Then I would deal with the menace and take over, for the good of the people of course..."

"What is the meaning of this?!"

\*\*\*

Marquis de Shaggysheep was standing a bit to the side. Observing. The future of the Empire was being decided right now. That was enough to keep him awake and interested. The Hero was facing the Archmage. They were talking... well, trying to talk. The Marquis assumed that that was what they were supposed to do. Declare their intentions and then have a go at each other or something. Should be interesting, although he wasn't sure how even the strongest warrior could withstand the most powerful magic user in the Empire.

He heard a voice next to him. Young Mevrin, the one they had elected as new Emperor, came out of the castle and demanded to know what was going on. Shaggysheep felt that interrupting the Archmage's speech was a bad idea. Indeed, the old man stopped and turned to the Emperor.

"Don't get in the way," he said, with malice in his voice. He raised his hand.

Time slowed down for Marquis de Shaggysheep. With perfect clarity he remembered the prophecy that a madwoman gave him many, many years ago. That he would save the Empire. With perfect clarity he knew that in a second some sort of spell would emerge from the Archmage's hand. A spell aimed at the Emperor. Killing him most likely. The Marquis was standing a bit too far. He knew that. He knew that he would be unable to push his ruler aside in time. But instead he could get in the way and throw himself in front of Mevrin the First. Protecting him from the killing blow, possibly. Dying in the process, most certainly.

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The donkey cart was rolling through the streets of the capital. Townsfolk dancing on the streets and cheering were getting in the way. Saalteinamariva had to put a few on fire. Townsfolk running around trying to put themselves out didn't get in the way as much.

Otto the peasant was happy. Sort of. He wasn't happy about having to ride all the way to the capital. He wasn't happy about being threatened to be put on fire every fifteen minutes or so. He also wasn't happy about the sorceress using her magic to keep both him and his donkey awake, alert and able to function. No sleep for them. The magical fire inside him was invigorating, but also weird and disconcerting. In fact the only thing Otto was happy about was that they were almost at their destination and that soon he'd be able to start his journey back home. After a good day's sleep of course. Or maybe three days.

"Unholy carping skunking weasel!" the sorceress swore. Otto felt the temperature around him rise. She was getting angry again. "We need to get up there! NOW!"

A very loud noise came from the castle. A lot of shouting followed.

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Saalteinamariva wasn't feeling well. Her leg was broken and probably a few ribs too. Fire couldn't heal that. Only thing she could do was to keep the peasant and his donkey going. Of

course, she could have also searched for some sort of a healer, but she had no time for that. She had a sense of urgency. To get back to the capital as soon as possible. She wasn't quite sure why. As she was getting closer, she started feeling something. Not sure what exactly. Some... magic. Strange magic. Just as she crossed the capital, she understood what it was. She also felt something else. A powerful spell being cast. This wasn't good. She shouted at the peasant to hurry.

The effect of the spell could be heard by ears of normal people, but for her it was much stronger. She felt it inside. Otto muttered something about a tired donkey, but she was having none of that. She needed to be up there, and 'now' wasn't an exaggeration. She focused on the donkey. This thing still could run, it just needed a bit more fire...

The donkey eeyored and accelerated. The peasant started screaming. The sorceress grabbed onto something. The cart buckled on the uneven road. The donkey was going faster than a racehorse could. As they approached the castle, another problem emerged. The gate was packed with soldiers and the magically enhanced donkey had no brakes.

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"Don't interrupt," the Archmage said, lifted his hand, and a beam of light fired towards the Emperor. Mevrin screamed. The Marquis didn't even flinch. He calmly observed Mevrin the First getting hit in the chest with a loud bang and subsequently being composed into the castle wall. There was a lot of shouting and screaming.

"Now that this is done, let's finish it before there are more distractions, shall we?" the Archmage said calmly, but somehow was heard above the commotion.

"Very well, evildoer!" the paladin boomed. He unsheathed his sword, he raised his shield and he moved towards the old mage.

The Archmage shot another beam of light. The paladin caught it on the shield. The shield held, but Arthaxiom was held in his tracks. Another beam made him go a step backwards.

"Hey, mister Hero? Something wrong?" the Archmage taunted him.

"I'll cut your head off, you wretched seed of destruction!" Arthaxiom shouted and charged. The Archmage yawned ostensibly. Some invisible force crashed against the paladin and hurled him backwards. He tried to stay on his feet, but the inertia made him sit.

"I'm actually surprised you're still alive," the Archmage said. "Must be one of those Hero things. But time to finish this, don't you think? It's not like you're going to hurt me or something." Arthaxiom got up. "Oh please, just give up and die, will you?"

\*\*\*

The donkey was unable to stop on its own. Soldiers were too busy watching the scenes happening inside to take notice of some panicked screams coming from behind. Otto the peasant saw what was going to happen, so he jumped off the cart. Saalteinamariva also saw what was going to happen, but she didn't consider jumping off an option. There was another way.

The cart and the donkey crashed into the crowd of soldiers. There was a lot of blood, screaming and cursing. And the cart exploded. The sorceress was thrown in the air. She sailed above the crowd gracefully as a cat launched from a catapult. Flailing and screaming.

She landed in the courtyard, just where all the fun was. It actually was more like a semi-controlled crash, but she managed not to harm herself any more than she was already. She magicked some more fire into her broken leg so that she could stand upright, at least for a moment. Her sudden meteoric arrival made the two combatants postpone the hostilities for a moment.

"More distractions... Didn't I already kill you?" the Archmage asked pleasantly.

"I got better," the sorceress replied. She tried to sense her surroundings. There was the Archmage, obviously. A lot of mages in the Tower, also obviously. Out of sight, but she felt them watching. This armoured man here, he felt strange. Was this that Hero that Roseduck was talking about? Had to be. But there was something else... where was it exactly...?

"So what do I owe the pleasure? Do you think you can defeat me this time?" he mocked.

"Yes," she replied. She strode towards the bystanders and approached Gaduria. "Give me that, will you?" she asked, as she took the surprised princess' hand and pulled off her ring before she had a chance to answer.

"Hey! That's mine!" Gaduria shouted, but Saalteinamariva ignored her. She turned back towards the Archmage.

"Prepare to fry." She put the ring on her finger.

The Archmage just laughed.

\*\*\*

Roseduck felt very, very uncomfortable. While technically still in charge, he had no authority anymore. The troops responded to 'King Arthaxiom'. And King Arthaxiom was intent on removing the Archmage. Because he had summoned the orcs. Supposedly. No proof needed.

The General wasn't really sure if challenging the Archmage to a duel was a good idea. He tried to explain that to the paladin, but to no avail. Furthermore, he had even more doubts about filling the courtyard with soldiers. Should the mages start an all-out battle, having all the targets in one place kind of played into their hands.

He somewhat hoped that that Archmage would be already dead. That Vannard and Saalteinamariva had managed to kill him. But apparently they didn't, because the Archmage was alive and well. He even came out of his tower. Alone. To duel with Arthaxiom. Must be that Hero stuff again, because the Archmage wasn't supposed to be stupid. Of course, they had to talk first. Roseduck already knew or guessed most of the Archmage's plan. The part about it being for the good of the people amused him a bit. Well, it would, if it was followed by some ridiculous explanation, instead of the annihilation of the Emperor.

The duel commenced. It was looking quite bad for the paladin. Roseduck wondered if he should order the soldiers to swarm the mage, but he decided against it for the moment. The

Archmage couldn't have overlooked that many. If he came out despite them, it meant that he had some sort of a plan for dealing with them if need be.

Then there was a bang, a scream, and a somewhat dishevelled sorceress landed on the battleground. That was a surprise. Roseduck assumed that if the Archmage was alive, she had to be dead. She seemed somewhat... distracted. He watched in surprise as she approached them, as she took the ring...

Roseduck realised that another duel would commence in just a second. A purely magical one. Being in the vicinity of one would be inadvisable. And the entire army was in the vicinity. "Run!" he shouted. Nobody did. They simply couldn't hear him, there was too much noise. He elbowed Oxrabbit. "Tell them to run away!"

The Baron noticed that the General was rather agitated about this. He didn't argue. "RUN AWAY!!!"

\*\*\*

The distressed donkey ran out first. Soldiers were right behind it. They didn't argue with the order. If Baron Oxrabbit wanted to run, they wanted to run too. Oxrabbit was not someone one would expect to run away. So he probably had a good reason. No sense in waiting to see what it was exactly.

There was a lot of shouting, trampling and screaming, but given the circumstances the retreat was quite orderly. A few trampled to death, but not as many as one could expect. Roseduck stopped at the gate. He reckoned he would be reasonably safe there and he wanted to see the fight. He was joined by a few others. Oxrabbit, who didn't want to completely run away. The Marquis, who didn't care about his own safety that much. Alexander, who didn't want to abandon the paladin. Gaduria, who didn't feel like running any further.

\*\*\*

Arthaxiom the paladin was in trouble. It was difficult fighting someone he couldn't reach. His usual approach consisted of using his sword to hit the opponent. Repeatedly. Until he dropped dead. Inability to hit the Archmage basically prevented any dropping dead on his part. It was worrying.

Something else dropped instead. A woman in red. Very strange. Women shouldn't fall from the sky like that. And they shouldn't get up that quickly afterwards. Apparently she was acquainted with the Archmage and not on the best terms with him. He didn't think about it much. The duel was a more pressing concern. The pause was nice, but the fight was only delayed a bit. He tried to think what to do when it starts again, but he couldn't come up with anything else than charging and sword-waving once again.

"RUN AWAY!!!"

"Heroes don't run!" was Arthaxiom's first reaction. He heard Oxrabbit shout, he witnessed the stampede. And he remembered what the fish had told him. *Sometimes running away is a good idea.* Maybe it was right. Especially that everyone else seemed to be doing that. And that he was unable to hurt the Archmage anyway.

Of course, he didn't plainly run away. He commenced a tactical retreat while Heroically protecting the rear. That's what Heroes do.

"So, what do we have here?" the Archmage asked. "You miraculously survived and now you return just in time for the big fight, eh?"

"Indeed," Saalteinamariva replied calmly.

"And you get some sort of... a magical artefact? From a random bystander? One that I didn't sense?"

"You didn't?" She had wondered about that too. There was a powerful ring right under the Archmage's nose and he hadn't snatched it? There could be only one reason for that. Well, actually there could be quite a few reasons, but she chose the one that would be most annoying for him. "Female only." She smiled nastily. She felt the ring's power. Soon the Archmage would turn into a pile of ashes. She savoured the moment and let the Archmage gloat one last time.

"Yes, yes, surely female only. Everything at the right place and at the right time to save mister Hero's backside, eh? Don't you think it's a bit silly?"

"It's Heroic!" Arthaxiom shouted from distance.

"I just said that, didn't I? Silly."

"I'll fry you silly!"

Fire erupted from the sorceress' hands. It engulfed the Archmage. Well, the area around the Archmage. There was some space between him and the roaring flames. He was smiling condescendingly. "This is all you have?" he asked, not loudly, but somehow he was heard perfectly despite the storm of fire. He waved his hand. The flames died out, and he was standing unharmed in the middle of the scorched courtyard.

"Oh dear oh dear, it appears that your new toy didn't help your spells at all," the Archmage mocked her. "How sad. Or maybe it's just part of the drama? So, what miracle will happen next? More cavalry to save the day? A rain of some unlikely creatures? Or maybe I'll simply explode, eh?"

"Let's see." Saalteinamariva pointed the ring at him. He simply exploded.

"That was anticlimactic," the Marquis remarked. A smouldering wizard's hat fell on his head. "On the other hand, quite impressive."

"You don't say?" the Baron said. A pelvis hit his helmet with a clang.

The gates to the Tower of Mages opened. A rather upset mage emerged. "You killed the Archmage!" he shouted.

"You bastards!" another mage exclaimed. More of them ran out. Twenty, thirty, forty...

"Die." The sorceress pointed the ring at the lead mage. Nothing happened. "Damn. One use only? This skunks."

The mage smiled. "You die."

\*\*\*

Most people would react sensibly when faced with a few dozens of hostile mages. They would run away. Arthaxiom the paladin wasn't most people. He ran towards them.

"For the glory of the Rainbow Sturgeon, CHAAARGE!!!"

The mages hesitated. In addition to the sorceress who had just exploded their Archmage, they were now faced with an armoured, sword-waving madman. Their recent experiences with sword-waving madmen weren't too encouraging.

"Recall the troops!" Roseduck shouted. He wasn't too sure about that, but having their new king magicked into little pieces would be definitely bad.

"TURN BACK!!!" Oxrabbit roared after the fleeing soldiers. Some of them listened, but they were quite far away already. The Baron didn't wait for them. He ran after Arthaxiom. He had always wanted to punch a wizard.

"Blast them! Aaaagh!" the mage screamed, because a corpse fell on him.

\*\*\*

Vannard fell into the vortex. Swirling colours engulfed him. He was still falling. He thought so, at least. Not sure which way. His companion was still screaming, which somewhat annoyed him, so he stabbed him. It worked. As usual.

So now he was falling with a dead mage. How fun. And falling wasn't really falling. More like... floating. Because there was nowhere to fall from and nowhere to fall to.

Red swirls around him slowly turned into purple. How interesting. Not knowing where he was and where, if anywhere, he was floating to, annoyed him a bit. Getting bored annoyed him a lot more. With nothing better to do he floated towards the deceased mage and rummaged through his pockets. A piece of string, an amusingly shaped piece of candy, a talisman shaped like a two-headed weasel. Nothing interesting. He stole the talisman anyway, because, well, why not? Meanwhile the swirls turned blue. How quaint.

He stabbed the dead mage a few more times. Nothing better to do really. He tried to sing. He wasn't a singing person, but he still had nothing better to do. Unfortunately, the inside of this vortex didn't have good acoustics. He tried juggling knives, but they didn't fly. They floated. He gathered them back. The swirls turned yellow.

Well, wouldn't it be amusing if he starved to death here? He tried to amuse himself with that thought, but it wasn't really that funny. He'd eat the mage first anyway. Then he realised that he wouldn't, because in fact he would die of thirst first. Now that was amusing.

The swirls turned orange. Vannard had no idea how much time passed since he fell into the vortex. Couldn't be too long. He didn't get hungry yet, nor thirsty. Nor he needed to use the potty. That last one could get messy. Unless one didn't need to do that in this place. He hoped it was the case. The alternatives weren't amusing.

After some time the colour changed again, this time to beige. Seems somewhat ancient. Before Vannard had a chance to ponder on that, the vortex suddenly disappeared. And he was back where he started. About two-thirds of the way down. At least he felt that stupid vortex slowed him down a bit. Only a bit. In any case, something changed. Now there were people below.

"FAT!!!" a voice came from above. The most corpulent of the mages looked up. He wasn't as fat as Duke Thinoak, but well on the way there. Of course, he had always claimed he wasn't fat, and of course he reacted to the shout to berate the one insulting him. It didn't matter. Someone fell on his chest, knocking him down and stabbing him in the eye a blink of an eye later. At the very same moment, a corpse squashed the mages' new leader.

"Hi! Deus ex assassina!" Vannard's sudden appearance unpleasantly surprised the mages. Now they were faced with a homicidal maniac in their midst. Quite a few of them had met that very homicidal maniac a few days before and that made it even worse.

When suddenly faced with something unexpected and scary, a lot of the mages instinctively tried to do what they did best. Blow it to pieces. Unfortunately for them, the target of their spells was extremely good at dodging. Friendly fire ensued. As well as friendly lightning, friendly magic missile, friendly enchanted stream of surprising venomous flowers and whatever other spells were being cast.

The distraction was enough to allow Arthaxiom to close into melee range and proceed in his customary Heroic way, which was hacking them to pieces while shouting nonsenses. Meanwhile Saalteinamariva was attempting to put on fire everyone wearing a robe. That inconvenienced quite a few of the mages, as well as one heavily hung-over priest who had wandered in the way for some reason.

As soon as Baron Oxrabbit joined in the fun, followed by soldiers pouring back onto the courtyard, the mages surrendered. At least some of them did. Those who were fast enough to do that before getting killed and lucky enough to be standing next to someone who cared.

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The Grand Hall was full again. Another coronation was in progress. It was a very unusual one for quite a few reasons. Obviously one of these was that it was a King being crowned instead of an Emperor. A less obvious one was connected with the Master of Ceremony. For the first time ever he was improvising.

The Master of Ceremony was reluctant at first to crown Arthaxiom. Roseduck took it upon himself to persuade the old man. He pointed out that the paladin had the people behind him. He pointed out that he looked the part. He pointed out that there was no Emperor alive anyway. He pointed out that there weren't enough High Lords around to choose a new one, and in any case, a new one probably wouldn't be any better than Mevrin. Finally, he pointed out that in case of refusal, the Master of Ceremony might die. Violently and painfully.

Not long ago the Master of Ceremony would say that he'd rather die than go against the Codex. It wasn't the case anymore. After experiencing the short and pointless rule of Mevrin the First he was willing to admit that going by the Codex wasn't necessarily the best idea. Unfortunately, the old man had asked Arthaxiom himself for some pointers and got some interesting notions from him. Even more unfortunately, he had an excellent memory.

"Dearly beloved lords and ladies, soldiers and wives of soldiers, townsfolk of both genders, peasants and female peasants! We have gathered here today to crown paladin Arthaxiom the Great, Deliverer of Light, Slayer of Evil and Wicked, Guardian of the Ancient Secret of the Holy Mysterious Summoning of the Mythical Archpegasus, Apostle of the Rainbow Sturgeon, Holder of the Hidden Antique Malodorous Anvil of Ancient Knowledge, Thirty-ninth Warrior of the Joyous Beige Dragon, Crushing Flame from the Eerie Enchanted Eastern Island, Turquoise Spearman of Heavens, Sword of Justice in the Gloom of Uncertainty as our rightful King!"

The crowd cheered. Excessively. Arthaxiom was standing in front of the former Imperial Throne, now the Royal Throne. He was still in his armour. It was not required for coronation, but he refused to acknowledge that. At least he agreed to wear a nice royal cape. He waved at the cheering crowd until they settled down. That took quite some time.

"If anyone knows any reason why this man cannot be crowned let him speak up now or remain silent forever!" This part was added to make it clear that this coronation was indeed the will of the people. The Master of Ceremony didn't really expect that someone would speak up. He was wrong.

"I know one reason."

A murmur went through the crowd as Vannard stepped forward.

"And what would it be...?" the Master of Ceremony inquired.

"I want to kill him." The crowd got agitated. Nobody expected that.

"Vannard, no!" Roseduck shouted.

"Shut up, Ducky."

"Why do you wish to kill me, evildoer?" the paladin asked. He didn't seem concerned.

"You are a Hero. I want to try to kill you. Also, I failed to kill the Archmage. I'm told Sally did. That hurt my ego. And... Wait, what am I doing?" Vannard realised he wasn't feeling all that well. Explaining himself? He never did that. At least not honestly. "I'll kill you simply because I can and I want to!"

"Very well. I accept your challenge. Nobody interfere, please. Make us room. This won't take long."

The Master of Ceremony abandoned his post. The onlookers stepped back dutifully. Nobody seemed particularly concerned. After all, one of the combatants was a Hero. Their Hero. Their soon-to-be King. He could not lose. Not to this... nobody.

The only concerned people were General Roseduck, who, unlike the crowd, knew what Vannard was capable of, and Gaduria, who thought the idea of duelling was silly. He should just call the guards and be done with it. But no, dumb Hero had to fight himself. Those stupid orcs back there did exactly the same thing, and it ended quite badly for them.

Roseduck quietly approached Saalteinamariva. "Please kill him. You can do it, can't you?"

She had been wondering about that herself. She had a good aim at Vannard's back. He was focused on the paladin, surely he wouldn't notice a nice little fireball before it was too late...? A normal person wouldn't, but Vannard was definitely not a normal person.

"I can, but I want to see how it plays out."

"I pay tenfold..."

"No."

The paladin was still in his suit of armour. Alexander approached with his helmet, sword and shield."

"Do you require armour?" Arthaxiom asked the assassin.

"Don't be ridiculous." Vannard was wearing his usual black clothes. His only visible weapon was the black sword he was wielding. "Just let me know when you're ready. But please don't take too long, I'm really eager to kill you."

"Don't do that! It's stupid! Have someone else kill him!" Gaduria protested loudly while the paladin was preparing.

"Do not worry! He'll emerge victorious!" the Baron replied.

"Yes, it will work out," Alexander said. "It always works out for him."

"I am ready now."

"Good. Let's have fun!"

\*\*\*

This time Arthaxiom had all the advantages: size, armour, Heroism... It was all worthless and he didn't even know it yet. He was a Hero, but his opponent was an insane homicidal maniac. An insane homicidal maniac who was suffering from bruised ego to make it even worse.

"Catch!" Vannard shouted. The paladin didn't even flinch. A dagger hit his helmet and fell down on the floor. The assassin shrugged. He didn't really expect to succeed. Daggers were good for lesser enemies. He had to use sword for this one.

"Withdraw while you still..." The paladin tried to reason with his opponent, but stopped. He realised that reasoning wasn't going to solve this, mainly because the assassin was running towards him. This shouldn't be too hard, no armour, no shield... He swung and he missed. Vannard ducked under his blade in full run and crashed into him. Arthaxiom gave ground despite being bigger and armoured. He tried to push Vannard away with his shield, but the assassin already retreated a bit and tried a vicious strike aimed for the head. The paladin barely parried. The crowd cheered.

"You have him now!" Baron Oxrabbit boomed, while it was apparent that the paladin was far from 'having' him.

"Hit him in the nadders! In the nadders!" someone else shouted.

"Tear his face off!"

"His mother was a lady with an ermine!"

Having all the onlookers against him didn't worry Vannard. He didn't care. He also didn't mind that everyone seemed to think that the paladin had the advantage. He was focused exclusively on the fight and he was enjoying himself immensely.

Arthaxiom tried to cut down his opponent, but he couldn't. However he tried, Vannard just wasn't there. Instead he was somewhere else, striking in unexpected ways, never pausing, never hesitating. The paladin could barely keep up, and at the same time he had this gut-wrenching feeling that he was being toyed with. He was an amateur, a talented one mayhaps, who was facing a skilled artist. One who had been practicing all his life.

The fight continued. It was getting more and more one-sided. The Hero, badly encumbered by his armour, was getting tired. The assassin was getting bored. The crowd wildly cheered the paladin despite him clearly losing. Arthaxiom knew it wasn't going well. He tried praying. That had always worked before...

*"Need another miracle, do you?"* a fishy voice mocked him in his head.

"Yes please!"

*"You're out of luck!"*

"Just one little flame..."

*"And you really think it will help you? Against him? Very well. Point the shield in the right direction, will you?"*

Arthaxiom did as he was told. The fish sigil was pointed directly at the assassin. Flames erupted from the fish mouth. The assassin fell on the floor backwards. The stream of fire flew harmlessly above him and hit the wall on the far side of the hall. Some tapestries started burning.

"Nice! I want that shield!" Vannard said. The paladin tried to hit him while he was down. His sword hit the floor. The assassin was too fast once again. He rolled aside and got up before Arthaxiom managed to swing again. Now it was time for him to stop fooling around, because he really didn't want to experience any other Heroic surprises.

Vannard pressed on and Arthaxiom simply couldn't keep up. One awkward parry, a little flourish by the assassin, and the Shining Slaughtering Sword of the Silver Sun was smoothly sailing towards the stony surface. The spectators went crazy.

"I win," Vannard said simply and moved in for the killing blow. He tried to, at least. He couldn't for some reason. Something held him back. He turned his head. There was a swirling red vortex pulling him in, not unlike the one he had fallen into not long ago. The pull was increasing. "So, I was deus-exed just to slaughter those mages? How inconvenient and degrading," he said calmly, before getting sucked in.

The portal collapsed. Everyone went silent. Only Saalteinamariva spoke up. "Inattentively cast temporal displacement spells often have some unforeseen delayed after-effects." It didn't clear up the confusion.

"Magic gone bad," Roseduck translated. The crowd murmured with understanding.

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Order got restored, the paladin recovered a bit, and the ceremony commenced.

"Is there anyone else who has something against crowning Arthaxiom the paladin?" the Master of Ceremony asked, his tone of voice indicating that he would be very cross with such a person. "No? Good. You are now King Arthaxiom the First!"

The crowd cheered. Now it was time to put a crown on the King's head, but since Mevrin's crown got disintegrated and there was no spare, there was a problem with that. Fortunately, Baron Oxrabbit was up to the task. He took a simple wooden chair, tore off the backrest and beat a hole in the seat. "It's temporal," he said. The crowd cheered some more.

The King looked doubtfully at his new crown. Even he knew that wearing a chair on his head was a bad idea. On the other hand, he was supposed to wear it. After a moment of hesitation, he put his left arm into the hole. The crowd cheered even more.

"Thank you, thank you! I would like to thank you all for coming here! It is a great day for me, and a great day for you, and a great day for the Empire, because it's a Kingdom now!"

"King Arthaxiom! King Arthaxiom! King Arthaxiom!"

"I would also like to thank all the people and other beings that helped me to become what I became! I would like to thank my mother and father who delivered me upon this world, though I do not really remember them because I got hit on the head!"

"King Arthaxiom! King Arthaxiom! King Arthaxiom!"

"I would like to thank whoever was responsible for hitting me on the head!"

"King Arthaxiom! King Arthaxiom! King Arthaxiom!"

"I would like to thank my sidekick and companion, Deer-Riding, Trident-Wielding, Stone-Slinging, Brave Dwarf-Impersonating Gnome Alexander!"

"Gnome Alexander! Gnome Alexander! Gnome Alexander!"

Alexander sighed. "I'm officially a gnome now, I guess," he said quietly.

"Could be worse," Gaduria tried to cheer him up. "At least you're not a kobold."

"Guess so..."

"For his invaluable contributions to the just cause, he will be named the Royal Counsellor of Equal Racial Opportunities!"

"Gnome Alexander! Gnome Alexander! Gnome Alexander!"

"Hooray," the new Royal Counsellor said weakly.

"Congratulations," Gaduria said.

"I would like to thank the Four Imaginary Fish for their advice!"

"Four Imaginary Fish! Four Imaginary Fish! Four Imaginary Fish!"

"This is getting ridiculous," Roseduck whispered to no one in particular.

"I would like to thank the nice man he brought me an army just in time, Marshall Tulipgoose!"

"Tulipgoose! Tulipgoose! Tulipgoose!"

Roseduck held his face in his hands. Every soldier in the Empire knew his name. Now they were all repeating the paladin's mistake like sheep. The Master of Ceremony whispered something in Arthaxiom's ear.

"Ah, sorry, I meant General Roseduck of course!"

"Roseduck! Roseduck! Roseduck!"

That was better, but still... he could have named him Dungeagle and the crowd would go with it.

"General Roseduck in recognition of his service will remain commander of the army! And I will promote him to a marshall anyway!"

"Roseduck! Roseduck! Roseduck!"

"I would like to thank Baron Oxrabbit for his Heroism in the duel with very big orcs!"

"Oxrabbit! Oxrabbit! Oxrabbit!"

"In recognition of his service, he will also become commander of the army! Because two commanders are better than one!"

"Oxrabbit! Oxrabbit! Oxrabbit!"

"Weasel damn it," Roseduck said.

"At least you're not a gnome," Alexander said. "Hey, Gaduria, didn't he skip you?"

Gaduria wasn't too sure that he did. Definitely not an accident. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"I'd like to thank a person who helped me on my journey! He was a mage, a hermit, or a wise man possibly!"

"Wise hermit-mage! Wise hermit-mage!"

"And also Deer Lord, who gave me a quest and some battle deer!"

"Deer Lord! Deer Lord! Deer Lord!"

"And finally, the brave and beautiful princess Gaedhurienne!"

"Gaedhurienne! Gaedhurienne! Gaedhurienne!"

"Please come forward!"

She did, somewhat reluctantly. She feared what will happen next. She dreaded it. Yet somehow she knew.

The paladin knelt on one knee. "Will you marry me?"

The crowd held its collective breath. The hall fell silent. Someone farted from excitement, and nobody laughed.

After a few heartbeats, she replied. "Yes." The crowd went mad.

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As a result of the engagement people started crying, laughing, screaming and running around for no good reason really. Alexander approached Gaduria.

"You said yes?" he asked, clearly surprised.

"I did."

"But you said he's dumb and all that..."

"Yes, he is. Most men are, and he isn't the worst-looking one. And I'll get to be a real Queen instead of an imaginary princess!"

"Ah. That explains a lot."

Meanwhile, details of the marriage ceremony were being discussed.

"So, when will the wedding happen?" the Master of Ceremony asked.

"Right now!"

"This is highly irregular..." he started, but then remembered he was talking to the King. With the chair on his arm and all that. "...but of course it can be arranged."

"Splendid!"

"There surely is a dress fitting for the princess somewhere in this castle. Also a best man will be required..."

"ME!" Oxrabbit shouted. The paladin nodded.

"Hey!" Alexander protested. "Why not me?"

"Uh... sorry, but... best MAN," Arthaxiom said.

"Oh. Right." He saddened. It was one of the rare moments when he regretted pointing out he's not a man all the time.

"You can be a bridesdwarf," the princess Gaedhurienne said.

"That I can be." He smiled. He would be the best bridesdwarf these lands had ever seen.

"Last one to the cathedral is a donkey bottom!" the Baron shouted and started running towards the exit, pushing people aside and causing a commotion. Many spectators joined him in his mad dash. Roseduck wondered when would they all realise that the Great Hall doubled as the cathedral.

\*\*\*

A suitable gown was found. It was long, white, and covered with an incredible amount of glitter. Just perfect for a royal wedding, as long as nobody told the bride that it really was one of High Priest's robes.

The best man returned, people trampled to death in the stampede were scraped off the floor, an altar was brought in and put on the dais and the ceremony could be started. The Master of Ceremony was also leading this one. The High Priest was misplaced again and after his last performance nobody bothered to look for him.

The usual blabbering commenced, but it was unusually short for such an occasion. The bride, the groom, the best man and the bridesdwarf all insisted that it would be best to get over with this before anything more dramatic happened.

"If anyone knows any reason why these two cannot be married..."

"...then Baron Oxrabbit will hit him. With a chair," Marshall Roseduck said.

"Damn right I will!" the Baron agreed.

In view of such a threat nobody dared to raise any objection.

"Do you, King Arthaxiom the First, with all your titles I will not list here because I am supposed to keep it short, want to marry Princess Gaedhurienne?"

"I do."

"Do you, Princess Gaedhurienne, with all your other names you probably have, from some place I probably never heard about, want to marry King Arthaxiom?"

"I do."

"Good. I declare you King and wife, and husband and Queen! May the Lord of Light, the Flaming Fish of Fury and all of the other ones bless your union! You may now kiss the bride."

"No he may not! He needs to have a bath first! And get rid of that ridiculous chair hanging from his arm!"

## EPILOGUE

Jaddo the peasant was very excited. He had never been so excited in his entire life. Well, maybe excluding that one time when he found a shiny rock, and that other time he saw a baby bear, and a time soon after that when he almost got eaten by an adult bear, and also that one time... In truth, Jaddo was a very excitable peasant. It didn't change the fact that he was unusually excited this time. There were changes. Big changes. He had to share them with his wife.

"Dara! Dara! You won't believe that!"

"What will I not believe this time?" Dara asked. She was much less excitable and much more down to earth than her husband.

"We are no longer the Empire!"

"Ah. So what are we now?" she asked, calmly.

"A Kingdom!"

"And the difference is...?"

"The Emperor is no more! There is a King now!"

"That's nice..."

"Arthaxiom is his name! He fought and won a glorious battle! He duelled mages and orcs and monsters and demons!"

"Good for him."

"He did it for us!"

"For us? For you and me?"

"No, silly! I mean, yes, for us two too, but for all the peasants!"

"He fought a glorious battle for the peasants?" Dara was somewhat confused by what Jaddo was saying, but she was used to it. Her husband often had trouble with expressing himself.

"Yes! For our freedom! We are no longer slaves! We will no longer be oppressed! No more servitude! We are free now!"

"Ah. So... What you are trying to say is that some other guy now rules in the capital and that everything will be better for us now?"

"Yes!"

"So, I no longer have to milk the cows every morning?" she asked, cautiously.

"Well..." Jaddo hesitated. "I think you still have to do that."

"And you no longer have to feed them?"

"I think I might have to do that too..."

"No more pulling out the weeds, then?"

"We still have to do that too I guess..."

Dara gave her husband a look. "So, did anything change, really?"

"Well, when you put it like that..." he shook his head sadly. "I'll go pull out some weeds."

**THE END**

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